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PAULA
QUINN

RULERS
OF THE
SKY
BOOK ONE



SCORCHED

BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE SKY,
THERE IS A MAN AND HIS DESTINY

SCORCHED

RULERS OF THE SKY SERIES
BOOK ONE

BY
PAULA QUINN



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CHAPTER ONE

The Twenty-first century

The cliffs above the North Sea

MARRKIYA OF THE *ELEVENTH* crouched low beneath a cool slab of the cave's dark interior. His slow, steady breath fell softly upon his claws, heating his scales to a deeper, jade-green. With the patience of an ancient hunter, he watched the small group of men with their meager torches lifted high over their heads walk right past his enormous nostrils. He knew why they were here. He held his breath, careful not to exude even the slightest whiff of methane.

Tomias of the *Eleventh* and Zakarr of the *Ninth* walked among the intruders, all, in human form.

"I smell him," Zakarr whispered. He paused and squinted his eyes into the obscure shadows surrounding him on every side. "He's close." He stretched his torch outward and continued on deeper into the cave.

"Pray we don't find him, Zack."

Lowering his great, scaled lids to avoid the eye-shine from the torches, Marrkiya slid his eyes toward Tomias the White. He knew this man. He'd known him for centuries, since the days of the Drakkon.

"He'll kill us if he finds us here," Tomias went on. "We'll die a gruesome death. I fear his transformation will not be an easy one. He could be the last of our kind—"

So, they came to transform him, did they? Marrkiya had known it was only a matter of time. But Tomias...they were once friends. How could Tomias come for him?

"Our kind?" Zakarr sneered, his voice low. "We're no longer Drakkon. We're men now. We belong to the human race."

At Zakarr's proud declaration, Marrkiya's spiked brow dipped low over his eyes in a deep, furrowed scowl. Once, long ago, these two men standing

before him were majestic Whites, proud and beautiful with snowy white scales and salient, hoary eyes.

Before Padgora of the *Sixth* had discovered the Phoenix Amber, the magical gem that held the power to transform Drakkon into men. Zakarr and Tomias had once possessed wings almost as wide as Marrkiya's own. He had flown with Tomias and hunted with him. But everything had changed in the last ten centuries. Reds, Greens, Blues...every genus of Marrkiya's mighty race had chosen to trade their treasures for skin, solid bone, and... Marrkiya's heart hardened while examining the men, that horrendous hair on their heads. They sickened him.

He wondered, aching to lick his chops, how a pair of transformed Drakkon would taste against his palette. He would eat Tomias first for the betrayal that hooked Marrkiya so deep.

"We had a choice," his old friend was saying. "He doesn't."

Zakarr shrugged his shoulders, oblivious to the darkness that had grown more foreboding in the last few seconds. "In the end, it *will* be his choice."

"He's an Aqua," Tomias reminded his companion. "Surely several hundred years has not dulled your memory enough to forget the arrogance of his color genus. He fought over a hundred Reds and received nothing but a slightly scorched tail. He'll never choose to live as a man. He won't turn over the treasure—"

"Which is exactly why Patrick wants him altered as soon as possible."

After all his threats, Padgora, or Patrick White as the world knew him, had finally sent men to alter him. After the first transformation in the twelfth century, Marrkiya had traveled into every land, making himself known to every man, beast, knight, or mercenary who thought to come against him. He'd feared no one and no thing. He still didn't.

Bigger than two mountains, with cerulean scales as dazzling as the heavens before man was put on the great earth, he'd become a force no human could withstand. Witnesses to his devastation claimed he'd swooped down from the clouds like a falling star to ransack and char anything in his path.

Marrkiya hated Padgora for destroying his race, and his hatred was fed like dry tinder to a fire over the long years he had spent alone. Each time another Drakkon transformed, it broke Marrkiya's heart. He hated his own

race for becoming men, for succumbing to the changing world where the once revered Drakkon had become nothing more than hunted monsters.

We'll have his treasure whether he hands it over or not. Zakarr's silent thought rode upon the air like a charge of energy, making Marrkiya's eyes darken in the shadows. Let them try to take his treasure.

"Careful with your thoughts, Zack," Tomias said, hearing his companion's unspoken words, as well. "If he's here, you will alert him to our presence. You know he can hear even better than we can."

These men, Marrkiya thought, careful to harness his contempt, still possessed the Drakkon power of telepathy, as well as near-immortality—if one was not eaten or charred to a crisp, that is.

"Patrick is a fool to believe Marrkiya will give up his treasure."

"It is not complex," Zakarr said aloud, keeping his voice to a bare whisper. "Marrkiya either obeys the law of the Council or he dies. We have enough golden arrows to send him back to the stars."

Tomias shook his head, then gasped at the scent beginning to burn his nostrils but it was already too late. The heavy odor of methane filled the dark, dank cave an instant before the wall directly to his left rumbled to life. Tomias leaped to his right, rolling beneath a jagged canopy of sharp stone in time to avoid the billowing blast of fire issuing forth from Marrkiya's huge, gaping mouth. Marrkiya deliberately let him flee. For now.

Zakarr was the first to perish, barely able to produce a scream before he was engulfed in flames hotter than molten lava, his flesh singed to ash.

The rest of the men screamed in terror, while Tomias stood paralyzed while the light from the fire brought Marrkiya into full view. The monstrous beast rolled his head from side-to-side, turning his cave into a blazing inferno. He watched Tomias close his eyes and await his death. Marrkiya wanted to kill him but memories invaded his thoughts. Instead of eating him now, Marrkiya stared at the once majestic White with disgust and sadness slanting his blue-green eyes.

"Tomias," he growled low, his voice rumbling through his deep chest.

Tomias opened his eyes and rubbed them.

Warm wisps of smoke curled around Marrkiya's leathery nostrils. When he opened his mouth, Tomias recoiled, holding his hand before his face as if such a meager tool could ward off the beast hovering over him.

“Pye jora kiihoit ’n evorta sime adorna, Tomias?”

The sound of his melodious ancient language spoken aloud nearly broke Marrkiya’s heart all over again, for he had neither spoken it nor heard it spoken in centuries.

Tomias coughed and gagged from the methane gas drifting across his face. He stammered in terror over his human, and far more awkward speech when he opened his mouth.

“I-I can no longer understand the language, Marrkiya.”

Marrkiya grimaced with disgust before he spoke again. *“Pye jora hittu lmaie sike ’n dyrtre fra Lacodanay.”*

“I don’t...”

You have given up much to become a man. The words were spoken using the old ways of telepathy. The Drakkon could speak any language, modern or otherwise, using their ancient power. But it had been centuries since a pure Drakkon had used telepathy on Tomias. So much stronger was the meld than that of a mere man, that Tomias doubled over clutching his belly.

Now I shall ask you again. Mercilessly, Marrkiya’s voice thundered through Tomias’s skull. *Have you come to steal my treasure, Tomias?*

“No! I...” Tomias looked around the smoky cave where small fires now burned. A tear spilled down his face and washed away the burning singe of Marrkiya’s wrath.

“We came to deliver a message to you, Marrkiya. You didn’t have to kill them. Two were not even Drakkon.”

’Twas a quick death, human. Marrkiya arched a spiny brow and Tomias looked away from the amusement that glinted the Drakkon’s huge, piercing eyes. *Would you have preferred it if I ate them?* Those deadly eyes raked over Tomias in the next instant, weakening the man’s knees. Pathetic. *What is your message to me? Make haste, before I make you my next meal,* he thought, growing bored at his cat and mouse game.

Tomias rose to his feet. Marrkiya waited, sensing his thoughts and the great amount of courage it took the human to face him. Tomias was a member of the High Council of Elders, and if his long life were about to end, Marrkiya would allow him to die standing. Tomias had once been a peace-loving White and had gotten along well with the more aggressive Aqua during his time as a Drakkon.

“Marrkiya.” Though the man had to crane his neck to look into the Drakkon’s ruthless eyes, he did his best to keep his gaze steady as he delivered Padgora’s message. “Since the beginning of the Great Transformation, we have lived peacefully among mankind. We were hunted as Drakkons, killed for sport. But now, our only threat is you.” Tomias stopped. “Are you smiling? Yes, we’re afraid of you, Drakkon. Does that satisfy you? You’ve burned many of our homes. You’ve made many of our lives a living hell for the last eight centuries, having to hide our families from you.”

Something wicked passed over the cold surface of Marrkiya’s eyes when he sent his next thought to Tomias. *Tell Padgora his first daughter was no virgin. She tasted foul going down.*

Tomias paled, but bravely continued on. “You’ve defied every law, and now Patrick is going to transform you himself.” He backed up slightly when Marrkiya rose up on his haunches. “You have seven days left as a Drakkon and then he’ll use the Phoenix Amber to end your reign of terror. You will still have use of some of your power, as we all did after the change. You will remain immortal. Your fire will be gone, of course, but your wings will remain for a few months. You must exercise caution using them though, for you will be living in man’s world.”

Marrkiya angled his head as if contemplating how Tomias might taste and then turned away. He lumbered toward the cave opening where he could smell the fresh, briny air coming from the sea below. He swished his great, arrow-tipped tail in a wide arc that would have splattered Tomias into the wall if he hadn’t leapt out of the way.

I am the last Drakkon, Tomias. Would he end our race so easily, this man you follow?

For more minutes than Marrkiya cared to count, his visitor remained silent and kept his mind clear. Marrkiya sensed he was hiding something. Then, “He wants something he thinks you have.”

And what might that be?

Tomias swallowed and looked up. “A treasure. A very special treasure.”

Marrkiya probed Tomias’s thoughts but found nothing but a murky image of a large golden stone. *What makes you believe my hoard is not special, Tomias?*

“A thousand hoards cannot compare to what this treasure is worth,” Tomias told him.

Marrkiya turned his powerful head to paralyze Tomias with a gaze as penetrating as any weapon. *What is this treasure and where do I find it?*

“I will tell you after you transform. You have my word.”

Marrkiya lowered his head to Tomias’s and exhaled his gaseous smoke in his face. No treasure was worth the extinction of his race. He would never transform. Just the thought of it enraged him. *I’ll never transform, human. As for this special treasure, I shall find it myself. You can tell Padgora that I’m going to consume him. Now be gone from me or I will kill you.*

When Tomias left him alone, Marrkiya stepped out over the narrow ledge of a precipice hundreds of feet above the ocean. This wasn’t about any mysterious treasure. Padgora wanted *his* treasure, *his* hoard, for it was greater than any Drakkon’s before him. It had taken him centuries to collect his jewels. Crystals as crimson as a drop of blood on a fair virgin’s skin, as green as the pastures of ancient Erie, and blues that rivaled the farthest sea. Not to mention his stones of purple, amber, and aqua, many created from the essence of a virgin. He cherished every one, craved what they contained, as every Drakkon did—the only thing unattainable for his kind. Purity.

Some desired it more than others. Men like Tomias had given up their ancient Drakkon blood, trading their scales for flesh, seeking the innocence of one reborn. Marrkiya preferred the purity of his own blood. His beautiful scales, just as brilliant and iridescent as they had been hundreds of years ago. His claws—he held them up to examine them while he thought of their many attributes—long and sharp, able to rip whole trees from the earth. He was a lord of the air, a true king among beasts. Who could defeat him? Padgora? He would have laughed if it were possible. No, he would rather die than become a man. Puny, foul diseases upon the earth that they were.

He let his gaze drift over the horizon and wondered if seven days was enough time to find Padgora and eat him.

CHAPTER TWO

SAMANTHA MONTGOMERY PLACED her hands on her hips and surveyed the holes in the bailey's north wall. It was almost in as much disrepair as the dilapidated drawbridge and the crumbling battlements above her. She'd known the condition of the castle before she bought it four months ago. She just hadn't thought about how she was going to repair it.

It wasn't that the place *had* to be repaired. Not like the gaping hole in the roof of the old great hall that she had to hire three men from the local village to fix a week after she moved in. That had cost her a bundle, the remainder of her savings to be exact. But it was either spend the money or dine in a river every time it rained. That was another thing about England that she hadn't bothered to check out before moving here from New York. It rained here almost every day.

She sighed and chewed on her fingernail while she stared at the holes in the wall. They didn't *need* to be fixed, but this was her home now and she liked the things in her life to be tidy and neat.

Her home. Just the thought brought a smile to her face, no matter how broken down it was. She owned a castle for goodness sakes! So, it was small. It was hers. She pinched herself for the millionth time since she'd landed at Heathrow, leaving her old life, and a cheating fiancé behind.

A product of the New York State foster care system, she'd never had a real home or a family. But she had plenty of dreams and one hell of an imagination that eventually launched her into a career as a writer. Six years and five bestsellers later, she'd saved enough to purchase her dream. A small castle on the northern borders of England. It was the first thing she'd ever actually owned in her life. She loved it with every fiber of her being, crumbling walls and all.

Maybe here, she could find the happiness missing from her life. She'd written so many stories about knights that she almost believed she could

meet one here in England where knights were born. At least there were no Raymond's here.

"I brought you some tea, dear."

Turning, Samantha smiled at Eleanor Sinclair. Ellie was the first spark of sunshine in her new life. She owned an antique shop in the local village and took a liking to Samantha the first time Sam stepped into her shop two months ago. Ellie reminded Sam of Agnes Andrews, her social worker at foster care. Agnes had been in Sam's life from the beginning. She was the closest thing Sam had to a family. She died two years ago at the age of eighty-three.

Ellie was more like a grandmother than a friend. A grandmother was just what Samantha needed since leaving the states to come to a country where she didn't know a soul. Ellie called her courageous, but the truth of it was that Samantha was scared to death. But she was also happy. Really happy for the first time in her life.

"How many stones do you think we'll need to fill it?" she asked, taking the piping hot cup of tea from Ellie's chubby fingers.

Eyeing the wall through her specs, Ellie calculated silently. "Twelve should do it."

Unfortunately, Samantha had counted the same. Even if she could afford twelve stones to match the size of the missing ones, she wouldn't have enough money left to hire anyone to set them. She bit her lip one last time, then raised her cup to her fortress.

"I guess it's a good time to learn how to be less of a perfectionist. I'll have to live with it for now." Her gaze shifted to the corroding battlements. "And those too. Just don't walk under them for a few months, Ellie."

"Come, dear," Ellie comforted. She took Samantha's hand and led her back to the castle. "It's getting late. Come inside and I'll make you some supper before I leave."

They had just reached the one working castle door, when a thunderous crash and the sound of splitting wood shook the foundations around them.

"What in blazes was that?" Ellie almost tumbled upon turning, her eyes darting upward in the direction of the frightening sound.

Samantha looked up at the thick, charcoal clouds drifting closer to the castle. For a moment, her blood went cold. While England suffered many

storms, none of them, not since she'd arrived anyway, had made the countryside look so ominous, so bleak. She hugged herself and scanned the courtyard. Nothing seemed amiss.

"Maybe it was thunder," she suggested.

Together, they checked the entire perimeter of the inner bailey and when they found nothing, they checked the drawbridge. Everything was intact...or as intact as it would remain until Sam could get it repaired.

From where she was standing, Samantha could see the stables over Ellie's shoulder. She narrowed her eyes as her mouth fell open. "Oh great! Just great."

Ellie turned to see what Samantha was looking at and took a step back. One side of the roof belonging to the old stable was caved in, jagged wooden splinters pointing every which way, as if a giant bird had crashed through it. "What in the name of the saints happened there?"

Sam's first reaction was one of disgust that another piece of her property was in need of repair. But as she listened to Ellie's breathless query, it dawned on her that something had fallen into her stable. Something big.

She took a step forward to investigate, but Ellie held her back, placing her hand on Samantha's. "We don't know what it is."

Sam stopped and stared at the stable for a few minutes. When no sound was heard, she shook her head and continued on her path. "Come on, Ellie." She called over her shoulder. "It could have been a meteor or something. They give you money for space rocks around here, don't they?"

Yielding to the slight shove of her fingers, the stable's wooden door creaked and groaned with age when Sam pushed it open. She peeked inside, but all she saw were empty stalls, bales of old, dried hay, and a beam of fading light from the hole in the roof. She walked toward the light cautiously, holding her arm back to keep Ellie behind her. A small dormouse skittered across a wooden beam directly in front of her and Sam squeaked, swallowing a scream. She moved closer to the dim shaft of light, clutching Ellie's sleeve behind her.

And then she stopped dead in her tracks. If it hadn't been for Ellie pushing past her, Sam was sure she wouldn't have budged for another week. She had never seen a dead person before. The man lying in the pile of loose hay certainly looked dead to her. He was as big and as naked as a newborn

babe. His right leg was twisted behind him in a grotesque position. The muted gray light that fell on his form bathed him in an eerie glow and showed the exact direction from which he'd fallen. Up.

"He's alive." Ellie was leaning over his body with two of her fingers on his throat. She turned to look at Sam still standing dumbstruck behind her. "He must have fallen from a plane."

"Then he should be dead," Sam whispered, surprised that any words came out of her mouth at all.

She stared at him and then looked up through the hole in the roof. She shook her head. It was impossible that he was alive. And why on earth was he naked? Averting her gaze from his groin, she finally took a step forward and squatted next to his face. Since he wasn't dead after all, she reached her hand out to touch him. He needed help and she needed to quit gaping at him.

But holy smokes, he was extraordinarily beautiful in a huge, ridiculously virile sort of way. Inky black hair fell in glossy tresses around his face and over the flare of his shoulders. His raven lashes were long and lush, smudging his pale cheeks. His nose was straight and slim, perfectly shaped for his angular face. His lips, relaxed and slightly parted in slumber, were full and so lusciously carved, that Sam found herself staring at them, breathless. The rest of him was just as glorious.

His arms were corded with thick, sleek muscle, not the kind of muscle a man gets from too much time in a gym, but tight, lithe, naturally sculpted sinew. She couldn't make out the swirling markings on the back of each arm, accentuating his strength. They looked like tattoos that went around to his back. His chest was broad, his belly flat and corded with more muscle. His flesh was ice-cold.

"He's freezing," Sam said and sprang to her feet to retrieve a woolen blanket thrown over one of the stalls. Swiping away the cloud of dust that arose from the disturbed blanket, she bent to her knees and placed it over the man's naked form. "We need to get help, Ellie. Where's the nearest hospital?"

She pulled the blanket up to his neck and tucked it gently around his shoulders. He moaned, and Sam leaned in close to his face. "It's all right." She kept both hands on his shoulders and soothed him in her gentlest voice.

Her gaze swept over his face, suddenly unable to move away from him. The man was flipping gorgeous, chiseled like some ancient warlord carved in stone.

He inhaled a sharp breath, startling her. He whispered a word in a thick, lilting accent, a word Sam had never heard before. Moving closer, she raised her hand to his brow and smoothed the heavy locks away from his forehead. “We’re going to get you help.”

She was about to turn to Ellie to tell her to go back into the castle and call an ambulance when he spoke to her. *No, no help.*

Sam blinked and straightened her back, moving away from him. She stared at him, unsure of what had just happened.

“Sam?” Ellie touched her shoulder and Sam almost jumped out of her skin. “What is it?”

“I think he’s awake. He just spoke to me.” Sam gave him a gentle nudge. “Hello? Can you hear me? You need help. You fell from a...” She looked up again and shook her head. “...from something. I think your leg is broken so don’t move. Though, how you’re alive, is beyond me.”

“Samantha, he’s unconscious. What are you doing, dear?”

Sam glanced at Ellie over her shoulder. “He must be coming to. He just said he didn’t want help.”

“He doesn’t want help?” The older woman intoned quietly. “Why on earth wouldn’t he want help?”

“He must be delirious. He doesn’t realize what’s happened.” Sam returned her gaze to him. “We need to call—”

Do not go.

The command was potent, rumbling from deep within his chest and...inside her head! Sam sprang back from her haunches and fell onto her bottom, then struggled feverishly to her feet. Her eyes were wide with confusion and disbelief.

“What’s the matter, child?” Ellie paled, catching Sam before she stumbled backward. Ellie had to shake her by the shoulders twice before Sam could take her eyes off him. “What is it?” she asked again when Sam finally looked at her.

“I thought...” Sam stared down at him, wringing her hands together to stop them from trembling. “I thought he...” She trailed off and laughed at

herself. "I've been worrying about this place too much. I need to de-stress. For a crazy minute, I thought he spoke to me in my mind, like telepathically or something. They were my own thoughts, of course, but it sounded so real."

Ellie smiled at her, her huge powdery-blue eyes soft and grandmotherly. "Samantha, dear, let's go back inside. We will get some help for the wretched man and..."

Sam shook her head. "He doesn't want any help." Even when she said it, she knew it was crazy.

He had fallen out of the sky and into her stable, his leg was obviously very broken and he was unconscious. She was simply imagining things. He hadn't spoken to her. And even if he had, of course he needed help. He needed to be in a hospital. Without taking her eyes off him until she left the stable, she ushered Ellie back to the castle.

Her heart sank when Ellie clicked the telephone receiver over and over.

"It's dead."

"He probably hit the wires on his way down," Sam said, cursing herself for not having a cell phone. She had no one to call but Ellie, and she couldn't afford the added expense.

"Down from where?" Ellie asked, lowering her spectacles and looking toward the direction of the stable.

"I don't know." A tremor trickled down Sam's spine. Even now she could feel his presence, as if he was probing her mind with his finger, trying to talk to her.

Her overactive imagination was in full swing. That's what she got for not sleeping a solid eight hours in the last two weeks. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she hurried to her room, pulled the thick quilt off her bed, stuffed some candles under her arm, and met Ellie on the way back down the stairs. "We can use the quilt to wrap him up and take him to the hospital ourselves."

"No, his back could be broken," Ellie pointed out. "I don't think we should try to move him. Besides, he's too big for the both of us. We probably can't budge him."

Sam nodded. "You're right. Go home and call the hospital from your phone, El. I'll be okay. I'll keep him warm till help arrives."

“Samantha, come with me. It will take more than an hour for help to get here and I don’t want to leave you here alone with him.”

Sam smiled at Ellie reassuringly. “He’s unconscious and his leg is badly broken. I don’t think he’s any threat to me. I was imagining things earlier. Go. Please. Get him some help. I’ll be fine.”

Ellie walked her back to the stable and checked to make sure the man was still unconscious while Sam lit the candles. The old woman shook her head in pity before she covered him with Sam’s quilt.

“I don’t think he’ll be waking up anytime soon. He does need to be seen by a doctor. I’ll make the call as soon as I get home and see you in the morning.”

Nodding, Sam threw her friend a quick smile, bidding her farewell. She barely heard Ellie leave the stable, or the old truck start and drive over the rickety drawbridge. The stable was quiet and the mental probing she was sure she felt had stopped. She settled down on the hay-strewn floor to stare at him in the soft candlelight.

She wanted to laugh at herself for thinking that he had spoken to her inside her head. She wanted to, but she didn’t. Had he somehow managed to convey his thoughts to her? She’d felt him, like a gentle touch of pressure on her brain. Did the mind work differently when the body stopped functioning?

She realized, with a measure of guilt and shame, that she was staring at him and thinking about how utterly handsome he was. He looked like the kind of man who could have stepped out of her medieval books. She wondered what color his eyes were beneath those sooty lashes. He was tall judging by the length of him, probably 6’2 or 6’3. Built...extremely well.

Looking up at the hole again, she shivered wondering what had happened to him and how he’d come to crash naked through her roof. Poor man, whatever had happened, he was in bad shape, that much she was sure of. Unconsciously, she hummed a song while wondering how long it would take the ambulance to get here. She rested her elbow on her knees and planted her chin in her palm.

Was he a psychopath? Maybe he escaped from some London loony bin. That would certainly explain his lack of clothing. She felt safe for the time being. Even if he woke up, it wasn’t like he could chase her or anything with

his leg all mangled. She leaned closer to him, wanting to lift the quilt and take a look at the injury for herself. “Poor thing,” she soothed. “You’re going to hurt when you wake up.”

Samantha.

She shrieked and scrambled away. It was him! She was sure of it! His voice sounded like a low, sultry whisper in her mind. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t even fluttered his lids. Yet, she’d heard him. Her hands trembled and her heart beat furiously. She knew she should run for her life but she couldn’t. He looked too helpless lying there.

Cautiously, she moved closer again and gaped at his motionless face. “Are you...talking to me?” she asked with a quivering voice.

Sing some more.

His voice was an intoxicating blend of huskiness and raw force. “God help me, you *are* talking to me!” It was impossible. It had to be her imagination. Then another thought crashed into her mind, making her swoon a little.

Maybe he was an angel. Wonderful! She was as insane as he was! She looked up at the hole again and shook until her teeth chattered.

Sing, Samantha. It pleases me.

CHAPTER THREE

SAMANTHA CLOSED HER EYES and breathed deep trying to gather her wits that felt like they were on their way to Bermuda. She decided that while the ambulance was taking him away, she would beg the paramedics to get her to a shrink, and fast. She opened her eyes again and looked at him. He certainly was beautiful enough to be an angel.

“What...what are you? Are you an angel?” She felt ridiculous even voicing her thoughts, but since she was hearing him...and he was still lying there like a rag doll...

I am Drakkon.

She repeated the word over in her mind. What the hell was Drakkon? Is that what they called fallen angels these days? Oh, she was losing it. *Drakkon*. It sounded German, which would explain his accent and that foreign word he'd uttered earlier.

You are a virgin.

Her blood drained from her face. Oh, this was more than telepathy. Maybe he *was* an angel—an angel privy to her most intimate secrets. Either that or he was an amazingly gifted psychic who could not only read her mind but see into her past. No one knew she was a virgin. It wasn't something one trumpeted around at twenty-six years of age, especially living in New York. But a virgin she was, and a virgin she would remain, at least until she found a man worthy of her virtue.

So far, there hadn't been one. She had thought Raymond was her knight in shining armor, but when she walked in on him screwing his secretary on top of his desk, she was glad they had practiced abstinence and left the son of a—

Samantha.

His beautiful voice shattered her thoughts of her ex-fiancé. She waited a moment, hands shaking at her sides anticipating his next words, but he was

silent. And then his eyes shot open and Sam gasped. She had the sudden and insane urge to cover her eyes the way she used to when she was a little girl alone in yet another strange house, afraid to face the night in a bed that wasn't her own. But she wasn't a little girl anymore and this was her castle. If he was an escaped maniac, he was about to find out that New Yorkers didn't die without a fight. She looked around the stable frantically for a weapon to club him over the head with. When he groaned, her gaze slid slowly back to him.

He'd come awake and lay staring wide-eyed directly above him at the gaping hole in the roof. His chest rose and fell beneath the heavy quilt so forcefully, that Sam feared he would hyperventilate. He looked as frightened as she was, and the sight of him realizing what had happened to him, that he had apparently fallen almost to death from only God's knows what, broke Sam's heart.

"It's okay. You're safe," she whispered for want of anything else to say to comfort him.

His head snapped up and when his eyes found her, he looked surprised, like he had no idea she was there at all, despite his speaking to her all this time in her thoughts. The eyes she had wondered about turned out to be the most startling shade of blue-green she had ever seen in her life. Ringed by raven lashes and a dark foreboding brow, they pierced her very soul. His expression turned dark and deadly, and then he opened his mouth and hissed at her.

As if stunned that blowing his breath at her hadn't scared her witless, which in fact, it had, he lifted his hands and looked at them. Horror distorted his features, followed by fury.

Sam finally found her footing, scrambled to her feet and hid behind a wooden beam.

He was groaning, staring at his hands. Sam was sure it was the most pitiful sound she'd ever heard. Slowly, he brought those same hands to his face, touching and feeling the contours of his strong, sculpted jaw as if he'd never felt his own skin before. *Loony bin.*

He spoke. Not in her mind this time, but with his mouth. The words were deep, masculine, and laced with such poignant sorrow, that even

though Sam could not understand what he was saying, she wanted to rush back to his side. He tried to sit up but fell back into the hay wincing in pain.

“Don’t try to move,” she called from her hiding place. He wasn’t speaking English, so Sam suspected he had no idea what she was saying. Still, she was concerned enough to try. “You fell from...” *Right*. What had he fallen from? A plane? Heaven? Another planet? She shook her head at the lunacy of it all. “You had a great fall and your leg is broken.” Her mouth snapped shut when he turned his head in her direction again. The fury in his expression was gone now, replaced by something far worse. Terror, pure, unadulterated terror.

“What happened to you?” she asked, feeling terribly sorry for him. “Where did you come from?” She had to know.

For a moment, he just stared at her with those huge, extraordinary cerulean eyes, then he tilted his head curiously. “*Va hevita.*”

“What? Heaven?” She wanted to laugh, and right after that, she would have herself committed. She took a reluctant step away from the beam.

The sky. She heard his voice in her mind.

Running her sweaty palm across her forehead, which was beginning to throb, she said a quick prayer for her sanity and her life and then eyed him warily. “Is that you I’m hearing in my head?”

He nodded.

“How?” she asked quietly, stunned. “How are you doing that? And why can I understand you that way and not when you talk with your mouth? Am I nuts? Are you nuts? Have I finally cracked like the walls outside my—?”

But he wasn’t looking at her anymore. He was staring at his hands again. He looked like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Sam took another cautious step closer to him. She looked at his hands, too, and wondered why on earth they frightened him so. They were big hands, strong with long lean fingers.

“What happened to you?”

I am a man. His voice played like a soft, tormented melody in her mind. “*Fra semer lacodanay,*” he repeated aloud, just as sorrowfully.

“Of course, you’re a man.” Sam looked at the raven locks falling around his head, the strong contour of his jaw. He was a man all right.

She blinked her thoughts back to reality and suddenly realized that he wasn't stating what gender he was. He was telling her, and himself as well, that he was a man. As in human. Normally, Sam would have written him off as a psycho. Part of her was screaming it already, but he looked so wretched that he couldn't be feeling anything but true emotions. And God help her, but her imagination was flying right out of that hole in the roof. "Are you an angel...Drakkon?" she asked breathlessly, using the name he had given her.

Once again, he tore his eyes off himself and looked at her, this time with something akin to pity for her, as if it were she who was the crazy one—and right now she had to agree with him. "*Fra seme Drakkon.*"

"Drakkon," Sam repeated and he nodded. "Your name is Drakkon, I got that part."

He closed his eyes and Sam was uncomfortably aware of him probing her thoughts. "Stop that," she demanded, but then she heard him. *My name is Marrkiya. I am Drakkon.*

An image of a fabled dragon tearing up the heavens with wings as infinite as her imagination invaded her thoughts. The creature was almost beautiful in some majestic, terrifying way, covered in shimmering sea-colored scales and a great spade-pointed tail swooshing the clouds behind it. It opened its mouth and fire streamed out of its great jaws as wide across as a Sequoia tree. The man in the hay nodded at her.

Sam began to laugh. She had to, it was all so insane, and his insanity was somehow finding its way into her mind. She shook her head and gave him her most pathetic look. "You're telling me you're a dragon?"

Drakkon.

"Okay." She was getting out of here, and getting out of here now! "Marrkiya, the Drakkon, you just rest now and I'm sure tomorrow you'll be a dragon again." She turned quickly on her heel to escape, but when she heard him cry out in pain, she spun around.

He was sitting up, the quilt and the blanket had slipped down his chest and were crumbled at his bent, whipcord-waist. He lifted the end of both coverings to expose the rest of him, along with his twisted leg, then placed both hands on it.

Sam almost ran to stop him from touching it, horrified he would damage the bone beyond repair. "Don't!" she shouted at him.

He wasn't listening. With his jaw clenched and his eyes squeezed shut, he bent the knee joint into its correct position. And then, chanting more unknown words, he ran his large hands over the broken limb.

Sam watched, awestruck and stunned to silence as his leg righted itself, healed before her eyes. No longer broken and twisted but strong and muscular.

"How...?" Eyes wide with staggering disbelief, her gaze followed him as he rose to his feet. 6'4.

For a heart-racing moment, she couldn't look away from him. He had muscles where men were supposed to have them, carved like granite slabs into his arms and broad shoulders, all along his six-pack belly and down. She was able to lift her gaze to behold him while his dark hair fell over his shoulders, a striking contrast to the immense power in his aqua-colored eyes.

He swayed a moment, then steadied himself, arms outstretched. He met her gaping expression with cool, hooded eyes. He sniffed the air. His lips hooked into a decadent smile.

And then Sam ran.



WOOD AND HAY spun in nauseating circles before Marrkiya's eyes, making him forget the girl. Padgora had done it. He'd altered him. Marrkiya vowed then and there to eat him. He reached out to grab hold of a beam that looked closer than it actually was. He missed it and tumbled to the floor. Dazed, he lay splayed in the dry straw for a few minutes and then tried to get up again.

Bloody hell, how did men do it? How could one balance on two small pads barely long enough to keep him upright? He felt heavy, weighted down, and then he remembered that men, cumbersome beings that they were, had solid bones rather than hollow like the graceful Drakkon. The thought of actually being a man made him want to cry out again. It could not be so. The Council would not have truly done this to him against his will.

But they had done it, and by the stars they would pay. Resolved toward the worst kind of revenge, he dragged himself to his knees, took a deep

breath, and began to rise again. He attempted to put one foot before the other, flailed his arms wildly to grab something, lost his balance, and fell flat on his face for the second time. Finally realizing that he had no idea how to walk on two feet instead of four, Marrkiya of the *Eleventh* crawled out of the stable.

The brisk night air whipped across his face as he sat back on his haunches and gazed at the indigo sky. He longed to take flight. He cursed the earth, man, and the Drakkon with them. Why hadn't Padgora simply killed him? he raged gazing down at his puny hands. Padgora had taken everything from him in the blink of an eye and left him with this pathetic body.

His beautiful scales were gone, replaced with paltry skin he was sure could not even stop a bird if one flew into him. His terrifying claws had turned into fingers too weak to even swipe one sheep out of his way, let alone ten. He drew in a deep breath and then blew it out again—nothing but air. Padgora would pay for taking his fire. Aye, he would suffer bitterly for that transgression.

His belly rumbled.

But first he would eat.

He looked around, satisfied at least, that he could still smell a virgin. Ah, but her fragrance was enticing. Where had she run off to? It had been so long—too long—since he'd tasted the sweet essence of innocence. Alas, the world had changed much in the last century. He gave his shoulders a slight shrug, hating the fact that he had them to shrug at all. He would find her, eat her, and then hunt down Padgora. Let the coward try to kill him, he didn't care. Living as a man would be worse than death anyway.

He sniffed the air like a wolf on the hunt. She had sung beautifully. Her jewel would be flawless. *Samantha*, he probed and turned his head toward the castle to his right. He thanked the heavens that he still possessed his powers of telepathy and of healing himself. What else could he still do?

Samantha, he probed again. Her scent was mesmerizing, hypnotic, dragging his thoughts away from Padgora. First, he would ravish her thoughts, then he would ravage the body she offered up to him, taking her pure virgin essence. He glanced down between his legs and shook his head with utter disgust. How was he supposed to ravage virgins with that feeble thing? Padgora the White would pay for taking that from him as well.

He rose to his feet again and closed his eyes, letting the wave of nausea pass over him. His hands shook and so did his knees, but he fought for control with every ounce of strength he possessed. When he finally felt sure enough just standing, he took a step, and then another.

The world spun around him, so he spread his legs and braced himself. Then he smiled. It worked. He took another step until he was walking. Now, if he only had a destination.

He practiced stumbling around the bailey, his naked body illuminated only by the silvery glow of the moon. *Samantha*, he called and tilted his head toward a window high above him. *Don't be afraid*. He scowled looking over his shoulder. How the hell was he going to get up there without his wings? He had to find a way. He was starving. Suddenly, he remembered what Tomias had told him about his wings. He smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM HER HIDING PLACE inside the castle, Sam watched the strange man from the window. He looked like a toddler taking his first steps, arms spread out, legs stiff and unsteady. She would have thought the sight funny if he hadn't terrified her by healing himself and rising to his formidable height on a leg that should have been shattered beyond repair. Who was he? What was he? She couldn't take her eyes off him.

Besides walking like Frankenstein, he looked like some mythical god all naked and sculpted to perfection beneath the pale hue of the moon. She blushed, looking past his groin. She'd seen naked men before, but none as well-endowed as this fruitcake. And she had no doubt he was exactly that, a nut, a kook, a madman.

He thought he was a dragon, for crying out loud! Pity he was so damned good looking. It was just her luck, though. A man falls through her roof like he was sent to her from God, and turns out to be a flipping lunatic. A lunatic who could read her mind.

She narrowed her eyes on his back just as the blaring headlights of an ambulance filled her bailey. She thought she saw something move along the tattooed skin on his back an instant before he tilted his face upward and looked directly at her. His powerful gaze darkened and seared straight into her.

She felt him probing her thoughts and suddenly her vision was filled with flashing images of his hard, sleek body atop hers. She closed her eyes, gasping while he invaded her mind. His mouth, so hungry and hot, ripped away her meager protests while his body plundered hers with smooth strokes and driving thrusts that tilted her world on its axis. He burned her with fire, raging scorching flames that singed her from the inside out, until she exploded in a wildly thrilling climax that left her dying in his arms.

Crying out, Sam's eyes shot open. She staggered back, away from the window, away from the torrid images coming from the man in her bailey. Her heart pumped blood to her veins so feverishly, she thought she might pass out. Beads of perspiration dripped down her neck. She lifted a shaking hand to wipe it away.

A moment passed in absolute silence, the night sky outside her window illuminated by the whirling ambulance lights. Against her own will, but drawn by both curiosity and an insane desire to see him again, she stepped toward the ledge of the window. Were they taking him away wrapped in a straitjacket?

She almost reached the edge when the light went dim, blocked from her vision by enormous slow-flapping, leathery wings that were the same color as his eyes. Sam swallowed the terrified scream welling up in her throat but was unable to move away as the man from her stable filled her window frame. He landed like a great bird crouching on his haunches. The two giant wings behind him folded against his back and disappeared.

Paralyzed with fear, Sam stood gaping at him while he leaped into her room with the grace of a tiger. His naked body shimmered against the backdrop of moonlight and spinning artificial light that made Sam's head reel. He took a step toward her, his gaze pinning her in place. He spoke her name, and the sound of his husky voice made her bones quiver. He was a demon, she decided somewhere deep within her clouded thoughts. She would have run from him if she could move her legs. Her gaze dipped to his heavy arousal. Her mouth went dry with terror, but her gasp was cut off when he moved in a blur of speed and hauled her into his arms.



THE FEEL OF her trembling body against his drove Marrkiya mad with desire. He wanted to tell her not to be afraid but he didn't know how. The scent of her fear was beginning to mask the blessed fragrance of her purity. He groaned, gazing deep into her eyes, and then bent his face to the quickened pulse at her throat and inhaled deeply. He opened his mouth and grazed his teeth along her flesh. But the urge to eat her suddenly dissipated. He kissed

her pulse instead, whetting his primal appetite with a taste that fevered his blood.

I would have you.

She tried to squirm free of his embrace, but his low, languid words scored across her heart like a brand. When he lifted his face to look at her, she searched his gaze, her eyes wide with terror. "Please don't," she whispered.

Marrkiya blinked, and when he did, his gaze softened on her. She wasn't the first virgin to plead for her virtue, but she was the first to do so while he was a man. Something in her eyes, her voice, touched his heart. And he cursed it. Had he been Drakkon right now, he would have felt no pity but satisfied his longing without care. He knew in that instant that he could never live this way, so pitiful and pathetic.

He wanted his fire back. He wanted his size, strength, and the protection of his hard, steel armor. Protection against what? This mere whiff of a girl? Damn it to hell, but he was already as pathetic as the others if he would allow his next meal to give him pause about his most basic instincts. But even if he wanted to eat her, which he did, how was he to do so when his mouth was no bigger than hers?

"Please, don't hurt me."

Marrkiya clenched his teeth. Her terror covered him, made his weakened body tremor with something he rarely felt as a Drakkon. Pity. He did not want to hurt her. Damn him to dust!

He looked deep into her eyes. Their beauty struck him full in the belly. They were wide with fear, as dark as charcoal, and as deep as the sea. Her lips were plump and a pleasing shade of coral, parted with her labored breath. He had the urge to touch them with his new fingers, to feel if they were as soft as they looked. Her skin was as pale as the mists that hovered about his cave in the early morn.

He could feel her blood coursing madly through her veins, her small heart pumping hard against his chest, her scent raging through his nostrils, making his groin throb. He released her with a shove, hating the way she affected him. Let Padgora have his treasure. He could not live this way. Not for six months. Not for another day.

Without a word, spoken or otherwise, he let her go, turned, and then leaped out her window. Unfurling his great, gleaming wings, he set his gaze toward the north.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARRKIYA THE AQUA was coming. The Council of Elders assembled within the great Cuillin Mountains to await his arrival. They'd gathered from the lowlands of Scotland and all the way from the Shetland Islands. They were mostly Whites, arriving by helicopter, but there were also some Purples and Blues among the Elders. All of them feared Marrkiya and they would have preferred to stay at home rather than face his wrath at being transformed.

It was their duty to see that all had gone well with his alteration, and also to stop him should he try to kill Padgora, which they all agreed, was likely to happen. Marrkiya might be a man like the rest of them now, but his wrath still terrified them.

"Any sign of him yet, Aldric?" Thomas White, known formally as Tomias, paced a worn, ancient path in the black gabbro beneath his shoes.

"Sentries report the skies are clear."

Thomas pulled an onyx the size of an apple out of his jacket pocket and ran his fingers over the polished gem. The others seated on the stones around him watched while he peered into the onyx and then looked up. "He's coming. He's just passed the Grampian Mountains."

Thomas slipped the stone back into his jacket and took up his pacing. He lowered his smoky silver eyes to the ground where he walked, worn into a shallow trench from centuries of his same pacing as a Drakkon. How many decisions about his own genus, as well as others, had he made in this very spot? He remembered when Sir Edward of Shrewsbury had killed Anberine of the Red, and the Reds wanted to wage war against mankind. It was he and Jarakan who had kept peace that day, explaining to their general, Simion Red, that destroying any race, be it Drakkon or human, was not natural, not the way of the Ancients.

But wasn't that what the others believed they had just done by ending the reign of the last Drakkon? Doing his best to conceal his apprehension and his thoughts from the others, he turned to the rest of his brothers, who had long since transformed their scales for skin in order to survive. Their years passed slowly now. They led ordinary lives with families who depended on them. He himself had passed his centuries as a man with more wives than he could remember. The existence of the Whites had always been peaceful, both as Drakkon and as humans. And while Thomas understood the need for the change in the present world, he also knew the sorrow that came with the extinction of such a magnificent race such as theirs. But it wasn't too late.

I will never forget your betrayal, Tomias.

Thomas spun around to face Marrkiya standing behind him. The White smiled, genuinely happy to see him and relieved that at least Marrkiya could speak to him now using telepathy without causing him excruciating pain.

You have always been excellent at landings, Marrkiya, he replied silently, ignoring the murderous glare Marrkiya flung at him. *I'm pleased to see your humanness has done nothing to daunt that skill. No one even saw you arrive.*

Thomas looked him over, not surprised to find that Marrkiya had managed to find some clothing since his alteration. Centuries of eluding the Council and finding ways to keep himself hidden from humans had taught him well about survival. He also wasn't surprised by the size or muscular build of the newly transformed Drakkon. Marrkiya had always been a bit larger than the others.

The change is not so bad, is it?

Marrkiya stared at him, his eyes hinting at the fury smoldering just beneath the surface. *'Tis worse than I ever imagined.*

A pair of blue jeans that fit you properly might remedy that, along with some shoes, Marcus, Thomas added with a gentle smile he hoped would soothe the beast flapping his wings closer toward him.

Tomias, if you call me Marcus or probe me again, I shall toss you over the side of this mountain. Tempt me not.

Folding his great wings behind him, Marrkiya took a step forward. "Treca Padgora?" He asked aloud, passing Thomas without another word and looking around at the others. He raked his eyes over each member, letting them feel the power of his hatred.

“Baseta, fracina lacodan,” he spat at them.

“Marrkiya,” Thomas said. He came up behind him and spoke quietly. “We can no longer understand the language. You possess the power to speak like us now. All you have to do is think about what you want to say.”



MARRKIYA PIVOTED SLOWLY to face him. He would have cursed Thomas in a thousand languages, but the bastard was still smiling at him.

“You have much to say, friend. I would like to hear it and understand.”

Nodding, Marrkiya thought hard about the words and they came to him from somewhere he did not know. “If you hadn’t changed me, you would be nothing but a pile of ashes right now. You are not my friend.”

He turned away from the utter discouragement in Thomas’s expression. It was as if those were the words the White had never wanted to hear from him. He didn’t care. Not anymore, not as he did when they were in the cave and Marrkiya let him live.

“Puny, worthless men,” he voiced, turning to face them.

“Man, as you are now,” someone replied. “And your name from this day forth is Marcus Aquara.”

Marrkiya knew the voice and with one swift, lethal movement, spun on his heels and snatched Padgora by the throat. His fingers closed around his neck before any of the others could make a move to stop him. He squeezed and one corner of his mouth curled into a deadly grin while Padgora clutched wildly at his throat. “But I am neither weak nor puny, am I, Padgora?”

“Marrkiya!” Tomias took a step forward. “Please,” he implored in a soft voice.

But Marrkiya was Drakkon. He didn’t know mercy, so he impaled his most hated enemy with a gaze that pierced Padgora’s soul. He wouldn’t kill the elder now. He wanted him to see what would become of his family when Marrkiya was done with them. He mentally probed deeper until he saw the women in Padgora’s life. He smiled at the thought of one in particular.

The elder closed his eyes, breaking their contact. When he opened them again, he clenched his teeth. "Marrkiya, if you harm my family—"

"What?" Marrkiya urged, ruthless in temptation. "What will you do, man of peace?"

"Enough!" Jarakan of the *Ninth* shouted. Boldly, he approached the Aqua and faced him fully. "Marcus, we are prepared to destroy you. 'Tis something we have avoided at all costs, but if you continue on your path toward carnage, you will leave us no choice. We have sentries at the ready."

"You think you have not destroyed me already?"

Jarakan shook his flaxen head. "We did what we had to do."

"You destroyed the last of the Drakkon, fool!" Marrkiya glared at him. "You let Padgora annihilate our race for his own greed. The Drakkon are no longer."

Just saying the words made Marrkiya want to retch. He hated every one of the cowards before him, especially the one still clutched in his hand. Newly altered, he still possessed more Drakkon strength than they did. He let Padgora go with a shove. He would have charred them had he any fire in his poor, useless body.

"Not necessarily and you know it," Jarakan said.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Your reign of terror is over, Marcus." Padgora said rubbing his throat. He was the oldest among the Whites, though with his white-blond hair tied into a neat queue, he looked no older than a man of forty years. "You are no longer a threat to us."

The gleam in Marrkiya's eyes was no less lethal than it had been as a Drakkon. "Change me back, or I promise the end of your days, along with your family's, will come quickly and mercilessly."

"And if I do, what is to stop you from coming after us with your fire?"

"Patrick," Jarakan stepped forward. "You swore on the Amber that you would restore him after he turns over the treasure."

"Ah, my treasure," Marrkiya growled. "You are a greedy whoreson, Padgora. You do all this for my hoard."

A thought, elusive and guarded, passed across Tomias's mind, drawing Marrkiya's attention. What was it? What was he hiding that frightened him so?

Padgora raised his head and arched an eyebrow at Marrkiya. The smile that laced his lips made the newly transformed man wish he had his claws just for one more moment. "On the contrary. Your hoard will be combined with ours. How else do you think we have survived all these years? We need riches to live in this world, to provide for our many families."

"Very well," Marrkiya conceded on a strangled groan. "Take mine then, and live your meaningless existence here."

"I fully intend to take it, and to keep my promise to return you to your natural state," Padgora told him. "But your hoard is not enough."

Marrkiya felt his blood scoring his veins. He stared at Padgora, wanting to kill him.

"You think me a fool, Marcus? The instant you breathe fire again we will be dust. I want more than your hoard to ensure your compliance to leave us alone. I want what you treasure most."

Marrkiya turned and aimed his most lethal glare at Tomias. Tomias had warned him. "Aye. The treasure you believe I possess. The treasure worth more than a thousand hoards."

"We want it," Padgora told him.

"I don't have it."

"We know you do, Marcus. Hand it over and be changed back. Refuse and remain a man."

Fury rose up in Marrkiya like bile, but he did not strike this man he hated. He wanted to kill them all, but even without having to look around him, he knew there were sentries along the cliff edge, probably armed with arrows aimed straight at his heart. Besides, the thought of taking revenge on them, especially on Padgora, was too sweet. *You have taken everything from me. What else do you want?*

I want what you hold most dear, Drakkon. I want you to know and understand that should you seek revenge once you are given back your true form, I will destroy that which you value above all else.

The murderous snarl lifting Marrkiya's mouth sent terror through every Council member. *Then I will give you nothing*, he told Padgora telepathically. Aloud, he said, "If you desire my hoard, then find it." He unfurled his wings and hovered over the small congregation. "But know this, Padgora, I will take that which *you* value above all else. And someday, whether I am a man

or Drakkon, I will return and kill you. You will not be gathered back to the stars as the Drakkon have been for centuries. You will rot in the ground, receiving neither heaven nor hell as your place of rest because you are neither Drakkon nor man.”

For a moment, Marrkiya saw true fear in Padgora’s eyes, but it was replaced quickly with a look of harsh, satisfying revenge. “Marcus, you are hereby banned from appearing before this Council again until you are ready to relinquish your treasure to us.”

“You will have lost all by then,” Marrkiya vowed. He flapped his mighty wings and disappeared into the clouds.

CHAPTER SIX

AMANDA WHITE LAY in her bed, absently curling a long wheaten lock of her hair around her finger while she watched Marcus stand up and pull his snug black jeans over his hips. He was, she'd confessed to him all night, the sexiest, most brutally handsome man she had ever encountered in all her life. Her body still ached from the almost terrifying passion he called forth when he made love to her.

She moaned, thinking of it. He cut those wicked aqua-colored eyes her way, smiled, and winked. Her body craved him, craved being ravished every way possible by a beast with little mercy in bed.

"Do you have to leave, baby?" Her heart palpitated merely watching him zip up his jeans. Her gaze rose to his bare, upper body crafted of stone.

"Do you want your husband to find me here?" he asked, sitting on the bed again and reaching for his Gucci trek boots, one of her many gifts.

Amanda shivered at the thought of being caught, but her lover's thick, sultry voice burned her flesh. His glance mesmerized her. She wanted nothing but to give in to him, to give everything she had to him. She'd met him a month ago, while jogging in a park just outside of Aberdeen. He was an artist, and asked if he could paint her.

Never in her wildest dreams did she think she'd be sleeping with him that same night. But God help her, he had lips sculpted for the most wicked of pleasures and he used them in ways that made her want to leave her husband, her life, everything she knew. He was worth every penny she'd spent on him.

And she had spent a fortune. True, it was all her husband's money, but he had plenty to spare, while poor Marcus was a struggling artist with no cash of his own. The least she could do was dress him well. She leaned up on one elbow, swept his hair off his shoulders, and ran her fingers over the swirling tattoos on his back and arms while he slipped his feet into his boots.

“Where is the Armani sweater I bought you?”

“Brought it back,” he answered vaguely, then stood up and looked down at her. “I finished your painting, Amanda.”

Her green eyes opened wide. “You did?” She sat up, covering her bare breasts with the sheets. “Where is it?”

“Downstairs. Wait until I leave before you look at it.” His smile was almost boyish, softening the smoldering heat of his eyes when he traced his thumb over her cheek, then bent to kiss her. “What a treasure you are, Manda,” he whispered and swept his tongue over the seam of her mouth. He withdrew just enough to peer into her eyes and set her heart tumbling over and over within her ribs. “Know that I have enjoyed you thoroughly. But now I must go.” He tossed his hair and the long, black overcoat she’d bought him over his shoulders and turned one last time to look at her. “Tell your husband that the Drakkon thanks him for his riches.”

He left her room without another word, his flowing coat tails snapping around his calves like the wings of a menacing bird.



MARCUS STEPPED OUT of the house and looked at his Rolex. He waited a few moments and then began to walk. He felt a rush of adrenaline course through his veins knowing he had timed everything perfectly.

His smile inched into a wide grin when he saw Padgora pull up in his driveway.

The White’s silvery eyes grew to such horrified proportions when he saw Marcus, that Marcus almost laughed. And then Patrick White of the *Sixth* looked at his house and paled to a sickly white that matched his hair. He didn’t stop Marcus, but hurried to his front door.

The flavor of her passion still lingers on my tongue, Padgora. Would that I could have taken her essence, but it seems there were at least five other men before you.

I will see you charred if you’ve harmed her, Marrkiya!

I’m called Marcus now, if you remember. I am a man after all. Just ask your wife. Marcus smiled at Patrick’s blasphemous response pounding through his head.



PATRICK WHITE WALKED slowly into his living room where his young wife, whom he adored, knelt before an enormous painting. He fell into a chair behind her, weak in the knees and sick to his stomach as understanding tore like sharp talons at his soul. He stared, mute and heartbroken at the painting of an Aqua Drakkon flying against the velvet, star speckled night sky, it's great iridescent wings carrying it higher and higher. Clutched within its enormous claws was Patrick's beautiful Amanda.

"He doesn't love you and he isn't coming back," Patrick told her in a voice now void of anything but sorrow. She spun around, shocked and pale to see him there. "You were revenge against me and nothing more."



REVENGE. IT WAS just as sweet as a man as it had been as a Drakkon. Marcus removed his Rolex and shoved it into his pocket, then slipped his overcoat off his bare shoulders and tied the sleeves around his waist. The muscles in his back constricted and the dark markings along his spine and arms shimmered before his wings unfurled behind him. Not caring who saw him, he flexed his muscles, flapped once, and lifted himself off the ground.

Soaring above the clouds, he let the wind break over his victorious smile. He was free when he flew, with no boundaries such as gravity to confine him. He still longed for the power of his original size and he missed the way his tail had sliced the air behind him. But at least he still had his wings. For now. And he had to admit after living as a man for the past month and a half, that skin, in certain situations, was a bit better than scales, though far less beautiful.

Still, according to Patrick's delectable wife, Marcus was not hard to look at, and not as lacking in his nether regions as he'd first feared. He'd known the moment he'd met Amanda that he would have taken her even if she hadn't been Padgora's wife. The desire to eat her had vanished as sure as his scales had, but the need to ravish her tender body had remained as strong as it was when he was a full-fledged Drakkon.

And having her, driving his human body into hers, was even better than chomping his teeth into the virgins of old. Aye, the sensations that skin provided delighted him. Ecstasy was not a Drakkon emotion, but the powerful instinct to mate, to dominate and conquer, was. Marcus smiled, ecstasy and mating complimented each other quite nicely.

Loneliness was not a Drakkon emotion either. A solitary race, Drakkons could remain alone for centuries without ever feeling lonely. Not so for man, Marcus had discovered. At first, he didn't understand the emptiness gnawing at his innards when he walked among the men and saw them holding hands and laughing with their women, but as the weeks passed, the emptiness grew like a diseased sore until it pained him. Taking Amanda eased that pain a little, but he still felt lonely.

Marcus clenched his jaw, deciding that being a man had more drawbacks than advantages. The need to shave his face every other damned day had nearly driven him mad. So, he'd stopped. Thanks to Amanda, he sported a short, well-groomed stache and beard. He hated the constant hunger for food and having to rely on others to provide it.

He'd sold everything Amanda had bought him, save his Rolex, Gucci boots, and a few other things, and pocketed the paper. It was flimsy currency to be sure, but necessary to the daily, dreary routine of living. Why men put such value in something that could be torn to shreds, burned, or lost, he didn't know. Nor did he care. He knew he could live quite comfortably by retrieving his hoard from where he'd hidden it from the Council, and selling a few of his jewels. But he would part with none of them, especially knowing now that they were not enough to pay for his transformation.

How could they not be enough? Taking them from him would be almost as cruel as altering his body. He'd kill anyone who tried. Had becoming men turned the elders into such black-hearted beings that they sought to strip him of his very soul? He hated them, and would take what *they* treasured most, one-by-one until they agreed to turn him back. He'd just proven to Padgora that he could do it as a man as easily as he could as a Drakkon. Next, he would concentrate on Jarakan.

He veered off to the right and up above the clouds to avoid being seen by an airplane.

A strange, familiar feeling swept through his veins making him look down. From this height, he could barely make out the shape of the castle below, but he vaguely remembered falling...falling into the roof of a stable and waking up a man. It was, for all intents and purposes, his place of birth. He would have flown right by it, having no desire to remember such a woeful day, but he remembered something else. A virgin. A virgin who sang like an angel.

He tilted his body, folding his wings back at an angle that would give him greater speed, and dove toward the earth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SAM LOOKED UP from her garden as a shadow passed over her head. She saw nothing but the clouds rolling lazily across the autumn sky and went back to her planting. She hummed while her fingers worked the soil, tilling the small patch of garden she had labored over. “You guys better grow next spring,” she ordered the hyacinth bulbs while she covered them with soil and patted the mounds with her hands. “I need to see some kind of improvement around here.” She wiped her brow with the back of her hand and turned to cast the hole in her bailey wall a fed-up look. Something huge and draped in shadows landed beside it. Was that a bird—?

The scream that welled up in her throat choked her until a slight squeak popped from her parted lips. He was back! Oh no! She’d convinced herself that he’d been a dream and then was afraid to fall asleep for almost two weeks. She fell back, her rump landing in her meticulously cared for garden. He had to be a dream. But there he was in all his glory, wearing nothing but black jeans, boots, and a long overcoat tied around his waist and swaying around his ankles. He took a step toward her and those silky, raven waves she dreamed about fluttered behind his neck.

“Greetings, Sam,” he said with a seductive smile that painfully reminded her he was something more than normal. His voice hypnotized her and made her blood burn.

“Stay away!” She held up her dirty palm to ward him off. “I mean it. Don’t come any closer.”

But he did, and he grinned as if daring her to run. She would have done just that if the terror she felt wasn’t rooting her feet to her garden as securely as an ancient oak tree. She squeaked again when he squatted beside her just as gracefully as a falcon landing on its perch.

“Nothing lands with more grace than Drakkon,” he corrected her, reading her thoughts and angling his face close to hers. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her scent. “You haven’t changed.”

“What?” She barely breathed watching the sooty sweep of his lashes as they fell, and the slight flare of his nostrils. But it was when those lashes lifted again and she found herself gaping into the deep wells of his eyes that her breath completely halted. She remembered those eyes, could think of nothing but them for the last six weeks. And now, in the bright light of day, they shimmered with color even more dramatic than she remembered.

She blinked, feeling lightheaded, then lowered her gaze away from his. She quickly learned what a mistake that was when her vision fell to the lush fullness of his lips. “What are you?”

His gaze moved over her face, brooding, moody, with a hint of menace. “I’m Drakkon, remember?”

“Oh, dear God!” She covered her eyes with her hand, hoping, praying that when she looked again, he wouldn’t be there. “Please go away. Please go away,” she chanted. “Oh, please, please go away.”

She felt his large hands cover her much smaller one and froze as he pulled her fingers gently away from her face. “I will not hurt you,” he promised in that sensually husky, sorcerer’s voice, a voice that had plagued Sam since he had disappeared.

He swept his gaze over her face and then her wispy, chestnut locks secured to her head by various little clips in haphazard places. “I did not realize how fair you were when I first saw you, Sam.”

“You’re not real.”

“But I am.”

She shook her head. “I dreamed of you.”

His smile set her heart pounding.

“Why...why did you come back?”

He tilted his head upward and the sun sparked his eyes with dazzling shades of blues and green, shot through with shards of pale violet. “I remembered falling.” He brought those incredible eyes back to her and effortlessly captured her gaze. “And then I remembered you.” He released her hand and wiped a smudge of dirt off her cheek. His mouth quirked into a slow, sexy grin that made Sam swallow three times in a row.

"I really wish you hadn't come back," she told him, afraid of how looking at him made her feel. This guy was a nut...or something worse. Much worse. Who cared if he had broad shoulders and a belly harder than a washboard, or large, beautiful weird-colored eyes that could melt Mother Teresa's kneecaps?

"Do you want me to leave, Samantha?"

And damn that musical, baritone voice, too, and the way his tongue peeked out from his lips when he said her name. "Yes, I do. Right now, please."

He stood up and the folds of his coat swished around his boots. Sam wouldn't look up at him.

"I'm going," he told her.

She nodded, looking anywhere but up. "Thank you, and goodbye."

A great gust of wind blew her hair around her face, clips and all. She heard the sound of one tremendous flap and looked up in time to see the man who'd put a hole in the roof of her stable hovering in the air over her castle looking down at her. For the space of a breath, Sam's heart completely stopped beating in her chest at what she saw in the bright light of day. Those were wings. They were real. And then she fainted dead away in her garden.



SAM DREAMED OF an angel with wings as wide and as blue as the ocean, with eyes to match. He hovered over her, bare-chested and wearing Gucci boots. Or was he a demon who could probe her mind and read her secret thoughts? Either way, he was so magnificent she smiled in her sleep.

He'd swooped down from heaven and gathered her in his arms, drawing her close to his body. She could feel the beating of his heart in her darkness as if his heart were her own. He was warm and so very strong, and Sam felt safe clutched to his chest. When he spoke to her, his words were music reaching her somewhere in her thoughts, giving wings to thousands of butterflies in her stomach. He called her name and she danced to ancient songs. He beckoned her to fly with him, and she would have, but then who would repair the blasted castle?



SITTING BESIDE HER on her bed, Marcus probed Sam's dreams, where she flew with him to music. Ancient music. He knew what it meant. How was it possible? She was human and he barely knew her. He tried to think clearly, but the scent of the virgin engulfed him, making his ancient instincts ache to take her. He'd been a man long enough to know now that eating her was no longer an option—depending on how one looked at it. But Drakkon blood still fired his veins and her beguiling fragrance and sweet face made him want to ravage her beyond anything he'd done with Amanda White.

There was an innocence about Sam that called to his most ancient desires. He liked the way she looked, the way she looked at him, and the thoughts she had about him that made her cheeks grow pink. He'd felt her fear, and while he found enjoyment at the idea of others fearing him, he didn't like it in Sam. Oddly, it made him want to protect her, to comfort her the way she had tried to comfort him the first night he'd changed into a man. He hadn't forgotten her gentle, soothing voice on the worst day of his life.

Looking at her lips while she slept made his heart accelerate. It made him reluctant to fly away and anxious to possess her as tenaciously as he did his hoard. The urge to touch her stole over him. He hadn't felt this way about Amanda. Patrick's wife had been nothing more than a means of revenge. Sam was different.

He lifted his fingers to her face and ran the back of his knuckles along her cheek. Hell, she was soft. Her face was round, like that of a cherub, as were her eyes, round, dark, and alive with terror of him. Her nose was a small button he wanted to kiss. He felt the Drakkon need to take her, and it was strong. He whispered her name and watched himself sweep her off her feet in her dreams. "Sam." He whispered again, "I'm staying with you this time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAM ROSE SLOWLY from a dream, passing through thick, fading layers of memories so filled with joy, she came awake with a smile on her lips. She opened her eyes and cuddled deeper into her pillow trying to remember what made her heart sing. She'd been so content, so happy. A man had been holding her, promising to stay with her... She sat bolt upright. He had wings!

She sprang from her bed and ran straight to her window to search the skies. When she saw no sign of a great winged man, she leaned her forehead against the windowpane, unsure if she was relieved or disappointed.

Her eyes drifted downward, and it was then that she saw him. Two sections of his rich, black hair were pulled back at each temple and tied into a tail, while the rest fluttered softly against the cool autumn breeze. Crouching before her broken wall in nothing but jeans and boots, he pressed a trowel to a stone and set it in the gap.

Sam looked around the bailey, pleasantly stunned. Almost every hole had been filled. How...? Where had he gotten the stones?

She felt his eyes on her and glanced at him, then moved back, afraid to look closer, longer. Why had he come back? What was he? He said he was a dragon, but he couldn't be. There were no such things as dragons. But, he had wings! She'd seen them. His image marauded her thoughts. He had wings—and what awesome wings they were, shimmering with every color of the sea. Wings she'd never seen on any bird. They were massive, the size and length of a freaking pterodactyl!

She shook her head to scatter his image. She'd been obsessing over him for the last month and a half! Her body still reacted to the memory of his touch, burning, fevered, alive with need... He had told her his name that night in the stables and she hadn't forgotten. Marrkiya. He was all she could think about, and she fought it like a woman pushing out her first baby. Just when she'd finally convinced herself that he was a nut who'd escaped from

the nearest crazy house and she needed to forget him, he showed up in her garden.

After a few minutes of biting her fingernails, she gathered enough courage to look out the window again.

He was working. She hadn't hired him in her delirium, had she? He looked quite at home, like he had every right to be there. The muscles in his arms bunched and glistened sleek with sweat, though the day was cool. Her eyes went immediately to his shoulders, looking for some sign of where he kept those giant flappers. Her gaze traversed over the broad flare of his back and those odd, tribal-looking tattoos. Were they magic markings, concealing folds in his flesh? She narrowed her eyes, but could not tell from her height.

Some mad part of her rejoiced that her wall was finally being fixed. What did she care if he had wings? God help her, his madness was rubbing off on her. Did she dare venture down there to talk to him...to thank him? Would he ask for her soul as payment? She squeaked a whimper of indecision and stepped back again. She paced her room and tried to decide if she was going insane or not. Still undecided, she returned to the window.

It's about time you woke up, Sam.

She squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears with her hands. Not again, she prayed hearing his voice in her head. It was almost an intimate experience, talking to him in such a profound way. She had never been close to anyone before, and she didn't want to begin now with a total stranger who was missing a few brain cells and trying to take hers.

She blushed and bit her lip when he suddenly stopped his labor and turned to smile up at her. She realized he'd just read her thoughts and found them quite amusing.

Come down here and speak to me. Do not be afraid. I will not eat you, though damn me, it is not an altogether unpleasant thought.

Pig. Sam tossed at him.

Drakkon, he corrected, widening his grin. *I thought we'd already established that.*

Whatever you are, go away.

Come down here to me, Sam.

No, go away. And stop talking to me in my head.

Come down, or I shall come up.

She wasn't sure if he meant to sprout his wings again or pound up the stairs. Either way, he would end up in her bedroom. "I'm coming down!" she called out from the window.

She ran her fingers through her hair, giving it back some form and smoothed out her T-shirt and jeans before leaving the room. By the time she stepped out into the sunlit bailey, she had convinced herself that she was as mad as he was. What girl in her right mind preened herself for a kook? Sam's steps almost faltered when he saw her and rose to greet her. She couldn't think straight. He was so incredibly graceful and lithe, sinewy muscles rippling as he stood to his full height.

"Why do you think you're a dragon?" she demanded before he had a chance to open his mouth.

He stared down at her, letting his gaze drift over her features. "Because that is what I am."

Damn it, it was difficult trying to concentrate with him giving her his full attention.

"All right." She gathered up the remainder of her mettle. She was going to need it. "If you really expect me to believe all this, you'll have to explain how you came to be a man."

"Can we talk over some lunch? I am starving." He rubbed his flat belly and Sam looked up at the clouds, denying the ache she felt to watch him.

When she turned to lead him to the castle, she was sure he leaned over behind her and inhaled a whiff of her hair. His warm breath along her nape made her trip over her own feet, but she caught herself before he did.

She studied him over two roast beef sandwiches and three full glasses of milk. She realized how much she was enjoying watching him when he looked up from his plate to slant his smile at her. After that, it was easier to envision him as another kind of being. He told her of his past and how some guy named Padgora, who also used to be a dragon, had transformed him with some rock. When he paused in his tale to wolf down a chocolate brownie, groaning with sheer pleasure, and then shoved down four more, Sam couldn't help but smile. Whatever he'd been before, he was a man now.

"So, this Padgora changed you knowing you didn't want to be a man?" Sam thought she must one day thank Padgora for his greedy deed.

"Aye, he wants my hoard."

“Your...hoard?”

“My treasure,” he explained, licking a few chocolate crumbs off his fingers. “It is very great.”

“Right,” Sam said, thinking what a shame it was that someone who looked like he did was missing so many marbles. But he did have those wings...

“He’d agreed to transform me back once I surrendered it, but he went back on his word and demands more.”

Sam’s heart sank and she didn’t understand why it would. Why on earth should she believe him or care if he turned back into a dragon and flew out of her life?

“What more does he want?” she asked, wondering suddenly if he’d come here to rob her blind. Well, the joke was on him. She had nothing to take.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged and rose from his chair. “He has already taken what I value the most.”

Jeez, how could he turn her suspicion into sympathy in twenty seconds flat? It was so hard to believe him, but part of her did, and that part couldn’t begin to fathom what he must be going through. She remembered the night she found him in her stable, when he woke up and the sorrow in his eyes when he’d looked at his hands. She was about to ask him what she could do to help when his eyes darted to the window.

“Someone is coming.”

He was gone before Sam could tell him it was only Eric. Oh no, she’d forgotten all about her riding date with the pediatrician. She’d met Eric Pembroke a few weeks ago at Ellie’s shop and he seemed like a nice guy. Even though Sam had no time for a man in her life with all her repairs and a new manuscript giving her so much trouble, she had accepted Eric’s offer for dinner. Of course, he didn’t have glossy black hair that caressed his neck like a lover’s tender whispers or eyes that made her blood sizzle when he looked at her. But she hoped he might help her forget the man who did.

Not wanting to leave Eric out there alone with Marrkiya too long, she grabbed a jacket, tidied up her hair, and hurried out the door.

By the time she reached the bailey, Eric was already out of his saddle and talking to her uninvited, yet helpful guest. Sam could tell by the look on Eric’s face that the god of all men did not please him. But what got her heart

pounding and her feet moving, was the way her dragon-man was sizing up her date. Good God, he actually moved closer to smell Eric's throat. Either smell it or take a chunk out of it. She quickened her pace and reached them in time to hear Eric ask Marrkiya who he was.

"He's...um...fixing my wall, Eric," Sam said hastily, smiling as she reached him. She had to be crazy to accept Marrkiya's help, but she felt sorry for him and his tale was so intriguing. As a writer, she wanted to hear more of it. "I hired him this morning."

Eric turned to her none the happier by that bit of news. He gave his belt a yank, pulling his jeans higher up on his waist. He looked like he was literally pulling himself together. Sam suppressed the urge to giggle at the thought, and then glanced at Marrkiya, wondering if he had just read her mind. Apparently, he had. She blushed when he gave her a slow, rather lecherous wink.

"Ahem." Eric cleared his throat, severing Sam's gaze from the hired help's.

"How long do you think you'll be here, ehm...?" Eric's voice cracked when Marrkiya raked his eyes over him from foot-to-crown.

"Marcus, and a few months, at least," he answered succinctly, then smiled when Eric's upper lip twitched. *You are not serious about this mouse.*

Sam eyed both men nervously, secretly wanting to kick Marrkiya...Marcus? in the leg.

Marcus, he corrected.

"Are you ready, Sam?" Eric asked her. Even his horse seemed eager to leave.

"Tell him you're not going anywhere with him," Marcus said, picking up his trowel again and slopping more cement onto her wall.

"Excuse me?" Sam turned to gape at him. He was joking, right?

"Tell him you're not going," he repeated, unmoved by the sudden frost in her voice. He turned to meet her eyes, willing her to defy him.

She tried, drawing up her lower lip with the effort. Finally, she had to turn away from the power in his potent gaze. The moment she did, she offered Eric her sweetest smile. "Let me get Drak..." Her eyes swung guiltily back to Marcus. "...my horse."

You named your horse Drakkon?

So? She could hear the humor in his voice. *I liked the name.*

When did you get a horse? There were none in the stable when I was here last. I would have remembered, for I was quite hungry that night.

That's disgusting, Marcus. And if you must know, Eric gave Drakkon to me from his stables.

How thoughtful.

Yes, it was.

You're not going, Sam.

Watch me, she answered audaciously in her head and stalked toward the stable. Who did he think he was to land into her life and tell her what she could and could not do? Raymond had made the mistake of thinking her weak-spirited and needy, but her childhood hadn't been a cushy one. No one, not even a dragon, was going to boss her around.

When she realized what she was talking to herself about, she threw her hands to her head. Was she mad for playing along and having whole conversations in her mind? What she should be doing, rather than entertaining this arrogant loon, was riding into the nearest town and leading Scotland Yard straight to his feet.

My little innocent has some fire in her after all. His velvety voice licked her spine. Fire, and a decadently enchanting sway to her hips.

Sam blushed to her roots and stumbled into the stables trying to still the "sway to her hips." She would ignore him and hope he would go away like a bad dream. She didn't need this in her life. Not now. She hadn't been able to write since he'd landed in her stable. Deadlines didn't wait. *Just ignore him*, she chanted to herself while she saddled her horse and led him outside.

Having returned to his work on her wall, Marcus barely looked up at her when she reached him. Perfect. After a brief struggle, she mounted Drakkon and glared at the two men who hadn't offered their assistance. Eric was busy replacing his riding gloves to his perfectly manicured fingers. She wasn't really surprised by his lack of chivalry, but for some silly reason, she had expected Marcus to help her.

Maybe it was because he looked like he belonged here in a castle, but not in the twenty-first century. He was bigger, harder, and so less tamed than any man she knew. She could easily imagine him wearing spurs and a sword, his silky black hair whipping over his shoulders as he thundered his war

horse off to battle. While Eric, his sandy hair neatly cropped and donning a Polo shirt and an expensive leather jacket, would never dream of getting his hands dirty.

She looked down at her wall-fixer while he continued to cement as if she and Eric had already left. Ignoring him had worked, then. Well, good. She was happy. When he started whistling, she kicked Drakkon and trotted out of the bailey.

“Be a good horse, Drakkon.” Marcus called over his shoulder, and Sam did not miss the way he dragged the horse’s stupid name off his lips to finish her humiliation. His next words were spoken telepathically. *Don’t let Sam fall off or you’ll be a gelded Drakkon come the morn.*

Apparently, poor Drakkon the horse could hear Marcus’s thoughts as well—and understand him. For the stallion slowed his pace just a bit. Sam wondered if dragons really ate horses.

Aye, we do. But they taste wretched.

Go away, you psycho, Sam admonished him, digging her heels into her anxious horse’s flanks and crossing the rickety drawbridge ahead of Eric.

Who would repair your walls?

Sam shook her head as if it would get rid of him. “This is too weird.”

“What?” Eric called out behind her.

“Nothing.”

You do not have emotions for him, do you? Look how he trails after you like a lowly worm.

If you’re asking me if I like him; yes, I do. And he’s not a worm. He’s a pediatrician.

And pediatricians are better than Drakkons? His smug chuckle chimed in her head, setting her heart pumping and her teeth grinding. *I think not, Samantha.*

She almost laughed at his gigantic ego, then caught herself and brought her hand to her head. “My God, I’m as insane as he is.” Why wasn’t she screaming and pulling her hair out of her head by the roots? There was a man who could fly in her bailey, talking to her telepathically. Why wasn’t she galloping off to the closest asylum instead of to O’Malley’s for lunch with Eric?

Because you like me. I can see it in your eyes. You have very expressive eyes, Sam.

Get out of my head, Marrkiya!

Call me Marcus while I am stuck in this body.

Whatever.

He was quiet, and Sam relaxed in her saddle. A few moments later though, she heard his voice again, a bit softer this time, but no less demanding.

Don't be gone long, Sam.

Don't be in the keep when I return, Marcus. You can sleep in the servant's quarters.

She didn't hear from him for the rest of the day, which, she decided while Eric talked about himself non-stop, was a miserable way to spend her afternoon.

After lunch and a little shopping in town, she practically raced Eric back to the castle, and that was not an easy feat to accomplish since her horse had no intentions of becoming a gelding and fought her every step of the way home. She refused Eric's request to come inside for a cup of wine and just about tossed him into the empty moat when he tried to kiss her. Inside the castle, she shut the massive door, bolted it, and leaned against the cool wood to breathe a sigh of relief.

God's teeth, Sam. Marcus exited the great hall wearing nothing but a pair of snug boxer briefs and a chicken leg shoved in his mouth. *You only had to ask me to dispose of him for you. You needn't have put yourself through such hell today.*

"I told you to sleep in the servant's quarters."

"I'm not a servant," he called back. He never slowed his pace toward the stairs, not even to stop and smile at her.

Part of her screamed to wake up from her insanity. The man was a total stranger, a possible escapee from...somewhere. Unbidden, another sigh escaped her while she stared at his broad sculpted back and then at his firm buttocks when he began climbing. Damn him, but he had a nice ass and firm, muscular thighs. He couldn't be a dragon or anything else when every part of him declared with trumpets that he was a virile, powerful man.

Marcus.

He turned halfway up the stairs and looked down at her. She hadn't meant to call to him. She was thinking of his name, but when he turned to

her, she finally allowed the truth of it to sink in. As crazy as it was, he could hear her. She shivered at the intimacy of sharing thoughts with someone else. “Thank you for fixing my wall.”

The chiseled contours of his face softened into a heart-rending smile. “You’re welcome, Sam.”

CHAPTER NINE

SAM STUMBLED DOWN the stairs in her flannel pajamas, almost tripping over her bunny slippers. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and inhaled the wonderful smell of bacon that wafted through the castle. She smiled and lifted her nose to follow the scent. Dear Ellie never missed a Sunday morning to cook her breakfast. She was probably making waffles too...

Sam skidded to a halt remembering Marcus. Her eyes opened wide for the first time that morning. He was probably beaten over the head with a frying pan by now, as unconscious as the first time she saw him. She raced down the rest of the stairs, narrowly missing a fall over a floppy rabbit ear and burst into the kitchen just in time to catch the sound of Marcus's laughter.

The sight of him standing beside her friend, his head tossed back in mirth and spilling black hair over his shoulders, both frightened and enthralled her. Would he hurt Ellie? How could a possibly dangerous man look so absolutely magnificent? He wore black jeans and a black T-shirt that fit perfectly over all that finely-honed muscle he'd tortured her with yesterday.

Sam wasn't sure if it was the sight of him or the sound of him that drew her hands to her chest. His laughter was deep, like his voice, but while one was lilting and musical, the other erupted like thunder, hearty and robust. When he saw her, his wide grin slanted into a darkly sensual smile. His eyes ravaged her and made her quiver somewhere deep within her belly. When he gazed at her slippers, his smile deepened.

"Oh, good morning, dear." Ellie turned from her frying pan, flashed Sam a grin, then mouthed the word, 'wow'.

Wow? That's all the normally feisty terrier had to say? This was the same woman who refused to make Eric a cup of tea until after Sam had gone out with him four times. But how could Ellie, or any other woman for that matter, not be seduced by those vivid, intense eyes, that wickedly rakish grin

and chiseled jaw? Sam rolled her eyes when Marcus, apparently reading her thoughts, laughed again, more softly this time.

Get out of my head, Marcus. It isn't fair.

"Sam," Marcus sang her name, "Why didn't you tell me Ellie would be here this morning? I frightened her half to death." He left Ellie's side and pulled a chair out from under the table. With a swift twist of his wrist, he spun the chair around and straddled it, facing her.

The image of poor Ellie unlocking the door and finding a fire-breathing dragon perched on the staircase popped into Sam's head. She frowned at Marcus, wondering if he put the thought there.

"I didn't know I had to tell you." She padded toward the refrigerator cursing the four matted bunny ears that made her feel like she was two. "Do you want an itinerary of my entire life?"

Her sarcasm was not lost on him, but he only flashed her a devastating half-smile. "No, I enjoy surprises. It keeps the blood rushing," he said the last word with enough gusto to make Sam's toes curl in her slippers. She realized it was the way his lips puckered when he pronounced his *R*'s that made her go weak in the knees. She blushed thinking of kissing him and almost spilled her juice while she poured it.

"You only frightened me for a moment, Marcus," Ellie mused while she flipped the bacon. "You were very sweet afterward. Sam, did you know that Marcus has never been to the cinema? I told him he looks like a young Robert Taylor, only a lot rougher 'round the edges, and he had no idea who I meant." Ellie giggled. She giggled! "It was a good thing I was here, eh, dear?"

Sam wasn't sure to whom her friend was speaking, so she simply nodded...numbly.

"He was bent on waking you up two hours ago."

"I was lonely for you." Marcus was sizing her up in her pajamas when she turned to him.

"Liar," Sam said arching a brow at him.

Blush again. I like it.

Unable to control herself, Sam blushed as she crossed to the table. *You shouldn't be here in my head*—She sat across from him with her juice and

stomped a bunny into the floor.—*Or in my house. There are plenty of inns you could stay at. Who said you could—*

“It’s so kind of Marcus to fix the wall, isn’t it, Sam?”

Marcus smiled at Ellie for the reminder of his usefulness, then back at Sam, and waited smugly for her to continue.

“Ellie,” Sam said as her friend leaned over her with a plate of eggs, biscuits, and bacon and then handed it to Marcus first. “This is the guy who fell through the stable roof!”

“Yes, I know.” Ellie’s pale blue eyes softened on Sam through her spectacles.

“And it doesn’t strike you as odd to see him back here?”

“No, dear. Should it?” Ellie asked merrily, heading back to the stove for Sam’s dish.

Sam’s laugh bordered on hysteria. She was sure of it.

Marcus wolfed down another biscuit, seemingly oblivious to everything around him but his plate.

“He could be an axe murderer!”

Setting Sam’s breakfast before her, Ellie laughed and took her own seat. “Oh, what drivel. If he were an axe murderer, you would be dead by now.”

Sam wanted to yank off her slipper and smack it across Marcus’s head when he laughed, not so oblivious after all.

“Besides, you’re from New York. You wouldn’t let someone into your home that you didn’t trust. I like Marcus,” Ellie said, blushing slightly when he looked up and winked at her. “I had to cover him up though. I had a shirt at the shop, but I promised to take him shopping next week.”

Sam sipped her juice and shook her head. It was hopeless. She’d stepped into the rabbit hole and poor Ellie had gone in right after her.

“So,” Ellie said nonchalantly while she drank her tea. “Marcus tells me he used to be a Drag...Drakkon.” She threw him a soft smile, correcting the proper name for what he claimed to be.

Sam choked on her bacon. Ellie leaned forward to pat her back.

“You mean you believe him?” Sam gaped at her. So much for Ellie trying to protect her from Mr. Wrong.

“Well, of course, I didn’t at first, but he didn’t get those wings from flight school, my dear,” Ellie gave her a pointed look over her specs.

Sam's eyes opened as wide as her mouth as she turned to Marcus. "You showed her your wings?"

"Aye."

"Nearly sucked the life right out of me when I saw them," Ellie chuckled, patting Sam's cheek. "But there was no other way the poor man could prove that he wasn't a psychopath."

Sam still wasn't convinced that he wasn't. "Marcus, you can't go around whipping those things out to everyone you meet!"

"Why not?"

"Because they'll lock you up!"

"And then you would miss me." The amusement dancing across his eyes proved that he was thoroughly enjoying her squeaky little outburst of concern.

"No, I'd probably celebrate!"

He grinned at her, then bit into a slice of bacon and closed his eyes as something akin to ecstasy rushed over him. "If I had known how good cooked meat tastes, I would have breathed my fire on all those pigs before I ate them."

"Oh!" Sam groaned. She pushed out of her chair, rubbed her aching head and practically ran out of the kitchen.

So much for a quiet, neat little life.

CHAPTER TEN

“DOES SHE HAVE an affinity for pigs, then?” Marcus asked Ellie with the most innocent of expressions when Sam was gone.

The old woman sighed and set her cup on the table. “I think this might be a bit much for her to swallow.” When he frowned in confusion, she went on. “I’ve seen many things in my life that can’t be explained, including the evil in a person’s heart. It’s easier for me to accept things. Even something as wildly strange as this. Sam has lived a very sheltered life with no firm foundation. When she bought this castle, I think she was hoping for a knight, not a dragon.”

“Knights, ha!” Marcus’s scowl was fierce. “They were nothing more than snacks, and foul ones at that. They were no match against me.” He folded his arms across his chest and tilted his chin. “I am Drakkon. Why would Sam prefer a mere knight when she could have the strength of a Drakkon at her side?”

“Oh, you are delightful.” Ellie leaned across the table and patted his hand.

Ellie thinks I am delightful. He sent the thought to Sam upstairs.

Be quiet.

“More bacon, dear?”

Marcus thrust his plate into Ellie’s waiting hands and resisted the urge to lick his chops.

Why did you run off, Sam?

I have work to do.

What kind of work?

Writing. And you’re distracting me.

Marcus smiled at his plate piled with crispy, sizzling decadence. *What are you writing?*

A book.

What kind of book? He closed his teeth around a slice of pork and groaned deep in his throat.

Marcus, please stop eating bacon in my head. When do you think you'll be done with the wall?

Soon. What are you writing about?

A castle. Really, I can't concentrate with you asking a million questions and moaning like you're making...

Sam? he asked a few moments later when his head remained silent. *Like I am making what?*

She didn't answer and he glanced at her friend sitting across from him. "She's a stubborn wench."

"Who, dear?"

"Sam." He angled his head and brooded at the ceiling where Sam worked somewhere above, ignoring him. "She refuses to answer me."

Ellie dropped her specs and eyed him narrowly. "You really can communicate with her telepathically?"

With anyone, he told Ellie silently, swinging his gaze to hers.

"Oh, my!" The old woman pushed back in her chair, startled to hear his voice in her head. "What else can you do?"

"Not much anymore," Marcus chomped into his bacon wishing it were Patrick White's throat. "But I plan on remedying that."

"Really? How?" Ellie dipped her head to get a better look at him over her specs.

By force, if I have to, Marcus thought to himself, keeping it from Ellie. "Padgora wants something priceless before he will change me back. A treasure like no other. I don't know what it is yet, but I plan on finding out."

"Then the legends are true," Ellie said. "Dragons really do hoard their treasures."

"Drakkon," he corrected mildly. "And aye, we are possessive of what belongs to us."

"Don't you already have a treasure then? Give it to him and get your life back."

"I tried to do just that," he told her miserably. "He wants more, greedy son of a whore that he is. He wants something from me that I don't have."

"Where will you find this treasure?"

He clenched his jaw with frustration. He had no idea how he was to find it. Then he remembered that Tomias had promised to tell him of it after he transformed. What could it be? Would it be enough to satisfy Padgora? Marcus would have to speak with Tomias about it, but it would have to wait until the desire to kill his old friend for betraying him wasn't so strong.

"I do not know." His sigh sounded more like a snarl. "I have lost much of my Drakkon abilities."

"Well, in the meantime, you'll just have to learn how to do new things. More tea?"

He shook his head, then glanced up at her when she rose from the table. "I can paint. Mayhap I will paint a castle for Sam."

"That would be lovely, dear," Ellie tossed over shoulder and poured herself more tea.

"She writes about castles, no?"

"Yes, she's a romance novelist."

Marcus stopped chewing briefly and looked up. "Romance?"

"That's right. Historicals." Leaning against the countertop, Ellie held her cup in both hands and closed her eyes. Marcus watched as pure delight washed across her pudgy features. "Ask her about A Quest for Honor and Sir Tristan."

His next slice of bacon paused at his lips and his eyes darkened a shade beneath his drawn brow. *Sam, are there knights in your castles?*

Yes. Ssh!

Dropping his bacon, Marcus rose to his feet. Was the woman daft? She had a Drakkon sitting in her kitchen and she was lost in a world of knights? Hell, anything but knights! They were nothing but over-exaggerated icons of war. Only one had ever stood up to him.

"I must speak to Sam." He pushed his chair away and without another word to Ellie, left the kitchen.

I want you to stop writing about knights this instant, he demanded as he pounded up the stairs.

Sure. Anything you say.

They are not worthy of your quill!

I'm typing, Marcus. No one's used a quill in a hundred years. You're getting on my nerves. Seriously.

Marcus followed her voice to a door on the second landing and plunged inside. "Sir Edward Bartholomew led a score of his own men into my lair and stood aside while I scorched the flesh from their bones. Knowing I had exhausted my fire, he cleverly avoided my claws and proceeded to jab me with his sword until day became night. *That* is getting on one's nerves."

Sam turned from her computer and stared at him. For a moment, Marcus thought she was going to laugh at his comparison. But then her eyes widened, making her look even sweeter, even more innocent.

"What did you do?"

His shoulders squared and he raised his chin. "I ate him. What do you think I did?"

"And you're proud of that?"

The way her expression turned to one of disgust told him she did not approve. "What choice did I have?"

She thought about it for a moment. He watched her, transfixed by the way uncertainty quirked her brow and pursed her mouth. She had a delectable mouth, he decided, confounded to find himself enchanted by such a fragile thing as human lips. He wondered how it would feel to have Sam's plump mouth around him. In the same room as her, her scent washed over him like a deluge, exhilarating, enticing him beyond his control. He took a step forward and Sam bolted from her chair.

"Back off," she warned, holding her palm up to stop him. "I don't like that look in your eyes."

"What look?" he paused and asked innocently.

"Like I'm your next meal."

The smile curling one corner of his mouth was harmless enough, but the smoldering hunger in his eyes blazed with nakedly male intent. "I only want to kiss you, Sam." His voice dipped to a low, gravelly whisper as he picked up his steps again and moved toward her. "Don't be afraid," he coaxed gently when she backed around her desk. "I'm told I kiss rather nicely."

He was surprised when he sensed her fear turn to irritation. The stars have mercy on him, but her mouth was even more alluring when she pouted with displeasure.

"Well, I'm glad you haven't wasted any time adjusting to your new body."

“I’m a swift learner.” He was close enough to touch her. And he did. Slipping one hand behind her nape, he caressed her warm flesh while gazing into her eyes.

She didn’t pull away. He would have been surprised if she did, for no maiden could resist the uncontrollable power of a Drakkon. With the slightest bit of effort, he drew her mouth to his, watching as her lips parted to receive him, her thick sable lashes lowering over her dazed eyes.

His mouth covered hers gently at first, molding the sweet softness of her lips to his. But tasting the innocence that so beguiled him snapped his last ounce of control. He yanked her closer, using nothing but his hand, and opened his hungry mouth to take her more fully.

Swiping his tongue across her palette, his muscles hardened with the need to ravish her completely. He drank, heady with the taste of her purity. She arched her back, trying to escape the full evidence of his arousal nestled between her thighs. He bent over her, breaking their kiss only to drag his tongue across her mouth, then over the hot pulse of her throat. She trembled against him, setting his nerve endings on fire, making his cock shudder with a need so painful he thought he might tear through his jeans.

“Give yourself to me, Sam,” he ground out a rough whisper and dipped his mouth to her nipple, erect and jutting upward through her pajama shirt and begging to be sucked.

Before he could stop them, images of himself, both as man and beast, flooded his thoughts and hers. He took her hard and slow, reveling in her virginity before he consumed her in fire and captured her essence.

“No!” Sam broke away from him. Though her cheeks were flushed, her expression was one of terror. “What was that? What did you do to me? Is that why you’re here? Because I’m a...Oh, dear God, it is, isn’t it? You’re a dragon and I’m a virgin!”

“Nay, Sam.” He moved toward her, reaching for her again. This time, to stop her from fleeing from him. He hadn’t meant to frighten her. He hadn’t meant for her to see. “I...” He clenched his jaw, unsure of what to say, and not liking that he had to say anything at all. “It is who I am.”

She hugged herself, appearing to his sorry eyes, like a child, alone and afraid. The sudden desire to protect her washed over him. He was better, stronger than any knight. Why couldn’t she see that?

“Cast away your knights,” he commanded. “You have me to be your firm foundation now.”

“After you take me against my will and burn me to ashes? No, thank you.”

He frowned at her. “I am incapable of such a thing.”

“Oh really? Then what would you call...that?” She waved her finger between them, indicating what she’d just seen in her thoughts.

“Every virgin I took came to me willingly,” he assured her, careful this time not to puff himself up too much. Clearly, she did not appreciate his vanity. If he was going to remain here, it was something he’d have to get used to. It would be difficult. All Drakkon were vain, and justifiably so.

“You’re a nut if you believe that, Marcus.” She ducked around him and scooted out of his path. “Why would any woman give her life willingly?”

“To save her village mostly,” he said matter-of-factly. “There were some who came to me for other reasons.”

“Depraved ones, I’m sure.”

His expression on her darkened and his nostrils flared. It was the first time since he met her that she angered him. “I take insult to that, Samantha.”

She laughed, but the sound held no mirth. Her hand shook as she raised it to her forehead. “Oh, God, let me wake up. This can’t be real.” She closed her eyes and Marcus watched her curiously, tilting his head. When she opened them again, she looked at him and groaned. “You need to go back to wherever it is you came from.”

“I cannot,” he said gravely. “I told you, the Council—”

“I mean back to wherever you were a few days ago.”

He shook his head. “I cannot do that either, Sam.”

“Why not?” She turned toward the window and looked out. Her slender shoulders slumped making Marcus want to go to her and vow he’d never hurt her the way he could as a Drakkon. “If you’re planning on having sex with me, you can forget it.”

“Can Eric forget it as well?” He had no idea why he put that question to her, or why the thought of Eric putting his hands on her made him want to snap Eric’s neck like a dried twig.

She pivoted slowly and Marcus knew he was in trouble by the fact that she was already glaring at him.

“How dare you ask me that? Who do you think you are, anyway?” When he opened his mouth to answer, she cut him off and moved toward him. “You scare me to death after you destroy my stable, then you come drifting back here like you own the place, and me with it! What I do with Eric is my business!” She looked up and poked him in the chest. “Got that? I must be insane to let you stay here!”

Marcus breathed her in and closed his eyes. “Damn it, woman, you smell good.”

“Out!”

His eyes opened at her command and found her pointing stiffly to the door. His mouth crooked into a smile and he lifted his thumb to trace it across her lower lip. “I like when you blush, but I like it even more when you push up this lip,” He reached out to touch her lower lip, “ready to fight.”

She heaved him toward the door, not giving him a chance to kiss her again. “Make yourself useful if you want to stay here. There’s plenty to do.”

When he reached the other side of the door, Marcus turned to smile at her. “Does this mean you want me to stay, Sam?”

She slammed the door in his face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAM SPENT THE MORNING recovering from the effects of Marcus's kiss. Whoever told him he kissed rather nicely had grossly understated that assessment. He didn't kiss—he pillaged with a hot, searing passion she had never known. Laying waste to Sam's senses, wreaking havoc on her mouth, her thoughts. Her thoughts...good for nothing ever again, but remembering the perverse pleasure of watching him, feeling him make rough, passionate love to her.

It took her almost an hour before her heart rate slowed and twice the time to cool the burning in the pit of her belly. Good thing she also remembered what he had become while he took her. His sleek flesh becoming scales, his eyes sparkling with a need she would never understand, and the fire that destroyed her.

But he wasn't a dragon anymore.

She had to stop thinking about him. She had work to do and she refused to let Marcus the dragon-man drive her deeper into the crazy chasm. Pushing him out of her head, she replaced him with Sir Robert of Glastonbury.

The afternoon went by more quickly and Sam didn't even mind the constant hammering coming from the bailey outside her window. Things were getting fixed and she finally finished chapter six. It was proving to be a good day.

Grinning at her monitor, she clicked 'save' and reclined back in her chair. Sir Robert had been as difficult to mold into her story as trying to fit a cinderblock into her stone wall. But she'd done it. A little patience and some chipping deeper into his character and the plot was really starting to come together. She should celebrate. Maybe with a slice of Ellie's truffle cake.

I don't like it.

Sam's smile vanished, along with her good mood. *What?*

Your story. I don't like it.

Why not?

Too many knights, for one.

She closed her eyes and cupped her forehead in her hand. The thorn in her otherwise perfect garden. It wasn't his voice intruding on her private thoughts when she least expected it that made her want to pack up and move back to the States. But the fact that she was growing accustomed to it, found herself waiting for him to pop in. Maybe they would take her away with him, lock them both up in the same padded room.

And your Robert is too arrogant, he went on, sounding far more superior than all her knights put together. Were I in your tale, he would have been toast after chapter one, and I would have won the heroine.

She didn't know why his words made her belly flip, imagining him as the hero.

Well, you're not in my tale, and I don't remember asking for your opinion.

She waited for more, damn her, then shook her head and kicked the leg on her desk when he remained silent. Did he finally take the hint? Hating herself for doing it, she left her chair and peeked over the deep casement of her window to see what was keeping him so busy.

He was standing with his back to her at the foot of her rickety drawbridge, examining it with his arms folded across his chest. His bare chest. Damn him.

Sam was careful not to think about how good he looked shirtless—or in a shirt, for that matter. Still, she noted the slight tilt of his head, as if he could sense her presence behind him, a couple of dozen feet up.

Readers don't like weak-minded men, she told him, defending her latest hero, and to keep her mind off the way the sun spilled over the hard slopes and valleys defining Marcus's shoulders.

I can see then why your writing is so difficult. Having to conjure up strong-minded men is a great challenge.

From her window, Sam pondered his stubborn repugnance toward mankind. If that Padgora guy had really changed him into a man against his will, and unfortunately, she had no reason not to believe him after seeing his wings, then she guessed she could sympathize with his anger. But what made dragons so much better than men? They ate people!

Only when it was necessary.

She ignored that comment. So, you never met a man you liked?

No, Sam, I do not like maggots.

Men are not maggots, Marcus.

Compared to me, they are.

She drew out a long sigh. Trying to talk to him about anything other than himself was useless. *Were you this conceited as a reptile?*

He turned his head slowly and frowned up at her. Sam could feel, rather than see on his face the insult she caused him. She took a step back expecting him to sprout his wings, fly to her window, and strangle her.

Drakkons are more than simply reptiles.

Sorry.

And I wouldn't hurt you. You are not my enemy, so stop being afraid of me.

It's not easy. You used to blow fire and eat virgins.

Used to, he pointed out, the sting of bitterness reaching deep into Sam's awareness.

She felt sorry for him. She knew it was madness, but was it any more so than letting him stay here? She didn't know him or what he was capable of—though after his kiss this morning, she knew he was dangerous, at least to her virtue. He was repairing her castle for free, but that wasn't why she hadn't called the cops.

There was something she liked about him, besides looking at him. Something she suspected Ellie felt as well. He was tactlessly honest, had an easy smile, and he possessed the raw virility of a team of rugby players. Who wouldn't want him around? Maybe dragons had the ability to make people do what they wanted. He could read her thoughts, why not mold them like she did to her characters?

Because you were given a free will and even Drakkon cannot interfere with that.

She quirked her brow at him as he bent to retrieve his hammer from the ground. *What about all the virgins you ate? Was it their free will to become your dinner?*

Nay, they all had a choice to lose their purity before I caught them.

Before you...caught them? Sam asked with a horrified little gasp. *I thought you said they went to you to save their villages or because they wanted to.*

He shrugged, tucking the handle of his hammer beneath the waistband of his jeans. *Some did want to, but I thought feeding those ridiculous tales of virgin sacrifices being offered up would be easier for you to accept.*

Anger and disappointment coursed through her, making it difficult to reply right way. A place in her heart she didn't even know existed went cold, as if a light of hope just went out. There were no knights in shining armor coming to sweep her off her feet. There were only men like Raymond. No matter what species they were. Why did she think Marcus might be any different?

So, you're a liar then, Marcus?

He looked up, concern marring his features. *I would not call it that. And I would like to speak to you about this Raymond. He enters your head often.*

Sam stepped away from the window. She didn't want to hear anymore, or talk to him, or see him for the rest of the day, or think about it, or...

The transformation worked well, Marcus, she flung at him on her way down the stairs. You've truly become a man.

When she reached the working door and yanked it open, Marcus stood on the other side waiting for her, ebony hair tousled from the hand he just finished raking through it.

"That was a cruel thing to say, Sam. I would not have expected it from you."

He looked so affected by what she'd called him that she almost apologized. "You don't even know me." She pushed by him instead, deciding it was better if he hated her. She'd been mad to let him stay. She'd taken in a few stray cats in the past; not having the heart to leave them to their own defenses on the busy streets of Manhattan, but Marcus was no freaking cat!

I know you better than Eric or even Raymond.

His voice in her head, and the name he spoke inside it proved the truth of his words and stopped her in her tracks before she reached the stables. He could read her mind, know her most private thoughts. No one knew of Raymond, not even Ellie. It mortified her that he knew what a fool she'd been, how willing she'd been to trust that lying bastard.

He was more the fool than you, Sam.

She didn't want to talk...or think about this. Not with a man she'd just met. Not with anyone. Covering her ears, she hurried toward the stables.

Growing up, she'd learned to keep her feelings to herself. She'd had to, for there was no one to share them with. It was why she wrote, to express herself without truly revealing who she was. A lonely, twenty-six-year-old virgin who believed in happily-ever-afters. Marcus was right, even Raymond didn't know her deepest dreams...not the important ones.

"Tell them to me." A tender sigh across her thoughts. No, he was here, speaking aloud, standing just behind her.

She closed her eyes and called upon every shred of sheer will she possessed to keep from turning around. His warm breath mingled with the rich elegance of his voice along her nape tempted her to obey his request.

"You already know them," she accused, fighting his allure. She stepped away from him and reached for her saddle.

"No, some you keep hidden too deep for even me to see."

"I'll tell you and then will you leave me alone?"

He nodded, watching her saddle her horse.

"It's simple," she told him, fitting her foot into the stirrup and hoisting herself up. "I want someone who's going to stick around. And he isn't you."

With a snap of her wrists, she led her horse out of the stable, and then out of the bailey.

She didn't need this. She was just beginning to settle comfortably into her new, neat little life complete with a sweet old grandmother and a levelheaded pediatrician for a boyfriend. The last thing she wanted in it was a dragon!

Levelheaded is not what you need, Sam.

Damn it. You promised to leave me alone.

But I am a miserable liar.

Go away. And don't tell me what I need.

You need passion.

Sam felt the gush of wind, heard the flap of huge wings behind her head and turned. There was no time to scream, though still she tried, as Marcus swooped down and hooked his arms under hers.

"Can a man do this?" he asked softly, pressing his mouth to her ear as he lifted her out of her saddle and into the air. "Don't be afraid," he coaxed in a sorcerer's whisper, looping one arm around her waist and dragging her spine

up against his chest. He crossed his other arm over her collarbone and coiled his legs around hers. "I've got you."

She was going to throw up all over her poor horse below. "Marcus, please..." She couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded like a drum beneath his hands. Any second now, she was going to start screaming like the lunatic she'd become.

"Relax, Sam. I'm not putting you down."

With one mighty flap, they rose another hundred feet. Sam squeezed her eyes shut so tight they hurt. The little air she managed to suck in was suddenly snatched from her lungs as they shot forward. She risked opening one eye and looked down at the blurring treetops below.

"Every time we speak, you run from me."

She heard his voice in her ear but she was too terror-stricken to reply. She dug her fingernails into his arms, clutching him for dear life. She was dreaming. That's what this was, a terrible dream she would wake from soon enough. Maybe a meteor *had* fallen through her stable roof that day and hit her in the head. Maybe she was lying in a hospital bed, safe and sound, and in a coma. Above her, she heard Marcus sigh deeply.

"Stop sniveling, Sam. Never have I met a woman so determined to pretend I am not what I say."

Sam opened both her eyes and this time she saw red. Sniveling? Was he joking? She was captured in the arms of a man with wings and being flown across England at a velocity that made her head and stomach spin. He was complaining about her sniveling?

"Enjoy the ride," he said so close she wasn't sure if he spoke or thought the soft command. "Not many humans experience England from this viewpoint."

"Yes, they do! Only they do it from the safety of a plane!"

"And what is a plane but a thoughtless metal beast with wings? Why, I've knocked a few of them out of the air as if they were made of mist. I tell you. I am safer."

"God, help me," she groaned, feeling ill.

She prayed against the thunderous flapping above her and didn't stop until she felt the ground beneath her feet again. She opened her eyes, ready to kiss the dirt as Marcus released her. What she saw made her want to close

them again. She stood at the entrance of a cave, and not just any cave, but an enormous gaping black chasm that reeked of sulfur and methane.

The thick rock walls on either side of the opening were scarred by deep, slim gouges, as if something huge had used the jagged surface to sharpen its talons. As the harrowing clarity of where he'd brought her settled in, Sam turned around, certain she would find a real, people-eating, fire-breathing dragon crouched behind her.

Her knees buckled under her when she saw Marcus up close and the two massive, blue-green wings completely blocking out the sun behind him. Light bounced off sparkling aqua scales that matched the color of his eyes exactly a moment before his wings folded neatly and disappeared behind him.

Was she dreaming?

"Now we shall speak with no more running." He stepped around her, heading for the entrance and leaving Sam to gape over the side of a cliff hundreds of feet above the ocean.

She backed up slowly, turned, and ran straight into his arms. His mouth slanted in victory and she had the sudden urge to slap him.

"I swear I won't be as easy as your other victims," she vowed, staring terrified into his eyes.

"You've already proven that," he drawled, his eyes glittering with challenge as he tightened his hold.

She smacked his hands away, though it took enormous effort, adding to her suspicion that he possessed some sort of inexplicable sexual charm that rendered women helpless against him.

His smile on her softened, proving to be even more dangerous to her will. Luckily, he turned away and sat down against the wall. "I have no intention of hurting you, Sam. When will you understand that?"

"Maybe when you stop scaring the hell out of me?"

He shrugged lazily. "You frighten easily."

Her fingers rolled into fists and her lower lip pushed outward. Oh, she was about to prove to him that he was a man when she kicked him where no man wanted to be kicked. Obviously, still reading her thoughts, Marcus smacked his knees together, but the slow curl of his sinful mouth revealed how thoroughly he was enjoying her fire.

He liked her resistance, unable to conceal that part of him that craved taking her with complete dominance. Sam severed her gaze from his and looked around, her lip sinking as she took in the full magnitude of her predicament. There was nowhere to go but down. She was trapped with a man who could have once been an honest-to-God dragon with a hunger for virgins, or with a scientific experiment gone horribly wrong. She took a deep breath to calm herself, then stared down into his eyes, proving to herself that she could resist whatever supernatural charm he possessed. "What do you want from me?"

An image scored her brain that made her feel flush. He was atop her, naked, hot, and rock hard. His eyes impaled her as deeply as the rest of him, tearing away her fears, her control just before his hungry mouth sank to her throat, his teeth grazing her pulse.

"I just want to talk."

Sam blinked and stared at him sitting there looking up at her innocently. The misty air cooled her sweaty brow and the surge of heat coursing through her veins. "Fine. Then talk."

"Are you this cold to Eric?"

"I don't want to talk about him."

"Is it just me you're afraid of?" he pressed on boldly. "Or is it all males?"

Sam tossed him a scathing smile. "Why on earth would I be afraid of men, Marcus?"

"Because they have torn away at your hopes of ever having what your heart truly desires."

Her smile faded. She blinked back the sudden stinging burn behind her eyelids. "If you know that already, why are you wasting my time here?"

"I want to understand this quest of yours, Sam. I'm not familiar with your human emotions. What is so extraordinary about this love for which you are saving yourself?"

Growing up, she'd had so little control over things in her life. Her body was the one thing she could control, all that was hers alone, and she wouldn't hand it over to just anyone. But what did she know of love? Nothing. And why should she bother to lie when he could look right into her and see the painful truth? She shook her head, baring all of herself to him. "I don't know."

He looked away for a moment at a hawk soaring beneath the clouds. "Neither do I. Mayhap," he added, returning his gaze to hers. "It is not so extraordinary at all."

"It is," she assured him, captivated by the sheer beauty of a face no mere man could possibly possess. If only she could find it with him. Oh, God help her, what was she thinking? It was the altitude sapping her of her wits. The guy was a snake. Literally! He was the last thing she wanted in her life.

"It is." She strengthened her resolve one more time. "When I write it, it is."

"Ah, you want a man like your Sir Robert then?"

"Someone like him, yes," she told him despite the mocking tilt of his mouth.

He shrugged and began to rise. "I am not a knight, Sam."

"I know." She didn't mean to sigh so miserably.

It wasn't Marcus's fault that he was born to wreak havoc on probably every woman he came in contact with. She certainly didn't expect from him what she hadn't yet found in any man, because he wasn't one. He was trapped somewhere in-between.

"Look. We clearly want different things," she sighed, swiping her wind-blown tresses behind one ear. "You want sex, and I want a man who can make a commitment to me and keep it. We have nothing in common, so why don't you just return me back to my ordinary life and fly off into the sunset?"

He shook his head, but it was more a gesture of disbelief than of refusal. "How can you be so satisfied with ordinary? Do you truly want to live out your life with a mundane creature like Eric in a run-down pile of stones that vex your every waking moment?"

"My pile of stones is a home, Marcus. It's mine and it's permanent. Something I've never really had before. And Eric seems dependable enough."

"Enough for what?" he argued, coming toward her. "To bore you to tears? You could not even stand to spend an afternoon with him once you met me."

"My goodness, you're conceited." She wanted to laugh but damn it all to hell, he was right. She took a step back as he advanced. Her heel teetered at

the edge of the precipice and she flailed her arms, too panic-stricken to breathe.

Marcus caught her in the crook of his arm and pulled her against his chest. “Why do you resist me when I can offer you so much more than any man ever could?”

His thick, rich voice covered her like a silken veil, clouding her good judgment. His eyes bore into hers with the promise of decadence so tempting she suddenly knew how Eve felt in the garden.

“What makes you think I want what you offer?” she asked, trying to free herself from his embrace. She had to. He was too dangerous to more than just her virtue. “The moment you had me, you would become a memory even worse than Raymond.”

She pushed at his chest, finally breaking his hold, but she was too close to the edge and lost her footing. Her scream echoed off the jagged cliffs and then stopped abruptly against the hard thump of Marcus’s chest.

The strength of his embrace would have been awe-inspiring if Sam’s heart hadn’t left her body a hundred feet up. He whispered gentle, soothing words she didn’t understand close to her ear so she could hear him against the thunderous flapping just over her head. Her heart slowed.

“Stop running from me, Sam.” He cradled her closer, his face inches from hers.

She felt the pull of his enchantment, certain now that he did possess such a power. The compelling lure of a sorcerer’s whisper, making her ache to be kissed. It had to be some sort of dragon magic, she told herself staring into his radiant eyes. She could feel his heart against her chest, beating as forcefully as her own. She could feel every part of him, every muscle, every limb, pressing into her, his breath warm and ragged against her neck.

She lifted her arms and slipped them around his neck. Her entire body warmed in his embrace as heat engulfed her, and yet she shivered, felt small and insignificant against the mighty power that held them suspended high above the earth.

“No,” she whispered on a ragged breath as his mouth descended on hers. She was too afraid of losing what was left of herself. If he kissed her again now, clutching her life in his arms, he would doom her to a life of nothing but haunting dreams.

“Please, stop.” She arched her spine, turning her face away. “You aren’t human. You don’t love, and I want love.”

He muttered a curse and folded his wings back, letting them both plummet back to the earth. Sam cried out and buried her face in his neck, clutching his shoulders, but Marcus didn’t slow his descent. A moment before they would have smashed into the hard flagstones lining of her bailey, he slowed, prying her off him.

“Mask that damnable scent of yours, Virgin. Or next time I will ravage you beyond your comprehension.” He landed, released her, and took a step back, folding his wings until they disappeared.

For a moment, Sam could only stare at him, suspended somewhere between anger, hurt, and revulsion. Virgin. He hadn’t tried to hide what he wanted from her. Not once. But hearing him say it... She was simply something yet to be defiled, a conquest yet to be won—just like the many virgins before her. Well, this was one virgin he wasn’t going to get.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MARCUS CLOSED HIS EYES as he flew toward his cave. If ever he missed his fire, it was now. He wanted to char something, to open his mouth and release the scorching fury that blazed his insides. He had no idea why Sam's words angered him. He wasn't human, and he was glad for it. But, he wasn't Drakkon either. If he was, he would not be brooding because his not being human repulsed Sam. He would have had his way with her despite her heart's resistance. He knew that taking her would grant him no reward, but that didn't matter. He wanted her with an ache so ancient it pained him.

He wanted to strip her slowly, while he basked in her delicate beauty. Aye, there was another thing he didn't understand. He had never found a human female's body to his liking. It had always been her scent alone that drove him to conquer. But he liked looking at Sam. He liked her eyes, the shape of her face, the curve of her rump. He wanted to stroke his tongue over every delectable inch of her and kiss that sweet, soft mouth until she surrendered herself fully. He wanted to spread her legs and sink deep inside her—the first to claim her. The first and only to ever possess her.

That tantalizing victory was nowhere in sight and it was beginning to drive him mad. And she was wrong about him not loving anything. He loved his hoard, his fire, and his freedom to soar above the earth and the paltry beings inhabiting it. He loved his claws, his scales, his teeth...

Landing silently on the perch before his cave, he sank back on his haunches and contemplated his dilemma. He was neither human nor Drakkon. His instincts still burned strong within, but now they were tempered by new ones. Strange desires to see Sam smile, to understand her, to be a part of her life, and to keep other men out of it. Namely, Eric the maggot.

What he claimed was his, and his alone. He wanted to take what Sam had given to no other man, but it would not stop her from sharing her body with another. Amanda White had already proven that when she let him take what belonged to her husband. And by the stars, just the thought of Eric's hands on Sam tempted him to kill the worm. For ten centuries, any challenge with which he was met was promptly burned to a cinder. He couldn't burn Eric.

But there was another problem that vexed Marcus's human heart. Sam was afraid of him and he hated it. Afraid of his wings, of what he was, and of what he could never give her. Love. He'd never needed anything besides his wings, his claws, and his fire to be happy. He didn't know if he could ever feel what she could.

Hell, she was forcing him to think like a man and he didn't know where to begin, or if he even wanted to. He wanted to possess her, but once he did there would be no more reason to take her. The scent would be gone, and so, most likely, would he. At least until he found a way to gain back his true form. He couldn't leave her before then, since most of his hoard was cemented into her walls. He doubted the Council would find it, but he'd have to remain close just in case they did.

"The moment you had me, you would become a memory even worse than Raymond."

The memory of her words raided Marcus's thoughts and brought a frown to his lips. Why would his memory be worse than Raymond's? From what he'd been able to read from her, Raymond's memory was a foul one, indeed. Marcus did not want to cause Sam that kind of pain.

He spread his gaze across the sky. Why did he care? He'd left Amanda White without so much as a fleeting thought. And why did the thought of leaving Sam make him feel so alone? Was it because she was the first woman he'd laid eyes on as a man? Was it the sense that she needed protection... needed him?

He stood and looked into the opening of what had been one of his lairs. His markings, gauged into the walls, had warned other Drakkon before he became the last, not to enter. But now, he felt as if he didn't belong here anymore and fought the urge to toss back his head and wail until the heavens shook. He didn't want to need anyone. He wanted back his

indomitable strength, his impenetrable armor, and his uncompromising heart. But how? He possessed nothing so valuable that it would keep him from killing Padgora once he was changed back. His greatest treasure was his pure Drakkon blood—and Padgora had already taken that.

But there was something else. Some great treasure worth more than a thousand hoards and Tomias White knew where it was. Marcus had to find him.



THOMAS WHITE BROUGHT his shoulders to his ears as the second crash sounded in his halls. “Tabitha?” he called out. “Please keep him in the playroom.”

After a moment of silence, he continued to look through his onyx. The images of Marcus were sometimes murky, but today, Marcus had been exceptionally bold and flew with the girl.

Thomas wanted to go to him. He’d wanted to go to him the instant he’d transformed. But Marcus wouldn’t have been ready, and the treasure was just too precious to take the slightest risk. He had to wait, certain that when he made his move, Marcus wouldn’t resist or harm any of them.

He worried that the Aqua would kill him when he found out that Thomas had the treasure Patrick so desperately wanted.

Another crash outside his door. It sounded like his most priceless vase. He wasn’t angry. He loved the cause of havoc that swept through his home from the day he found the egg and watched it hatch.

“Garion,” he called out. “Come in here and speak to me please.”

A pause and then a whisper from Tabitha. Finally, Garion entered on the soft, slow flap of his leathery wings. His gold scales glimmered against the soft light of Thomas’s study. His long-spaded tail swooshed and almost knocked Tomas’s books from their shelves. The boy was growing.

“Come here, son.”

He smiled, watching the child fly toward him using more caution.

“I thought we agreed,” he said when the little Drakkon transformed effortlessly into a child and stood before him, lifting his huge golden eyes to Thomas, “that you would only fly in the playroom.”

“I want to fly outside.”

Thomas shook his head but his heart broke. The poor child only wanted what was natural to him. But Thomas couldn’t let him fill the skies without someone—an adult to fly with him. “Soon, Garion. As soon as it’s safe.”

The child nodded, popped his thumb in his mouth and walked out of the study, his free hand tucked into his nurse’s hand, his two human feet on the floor.



TWO WEEKS PASSED and Sam had not seen nor heard from Marcus. He’d come and gone, just like everyone else in her life—parents, friends, fiancés. She should be happy about it. She *was* happy! Now, if she could just get him out of her mind, things could go back to normal.

She hadn’t typed a single word since he left. How could she think about knights when a dragon was invading her thoughts? He hadn’t spoken a word in her mind, but he was there, in her memory, every day, haunting her with his seductive smile and his vibrant cerulean eyes.

Every time Eric kissed her, she wished it was Marcus’s passionate mouth covering hers. She had plenty of experience at harnessing her own desires. She hadn’t even given in to her fiancé, but Marcus possessed a raw sensuality that made her want to yield all. It was better that he’d left. She was nothing to him but some kind of ritualistic conquest.

Still, he didn’t have to fix her wall. Stones of that size were expensive. She’d never asked Marcus where they’d come from. Where would a dragon get money? It didn’t matter. Fixing her ruins was just another way of seducing her.

Ellie wasn’t helping matters. Much to Sam’s astonishment, her friend was angry with her. Ellie had found the whole crazy thing romantic in some distorted way. She even grumbled and huffed when Eric showed up to take Sam to dinner a few nights ago.

“What’s come over you, Ellie?” Sam asked her one Sunday morning over a breakfast of poached eggs and fresh smoked sausage. “I thought you would be happy that I’ve found someone to care for me.”

“Are you happy?” Ellie looked up from her eggs. “Well, are you?”

“Yes!”

“Oh, pah!” Ellie huffed. “How can you be happy with a man who can put you into a mild coma the moment he opens his mouth? He has the intelligence of a worm.”

Sam looked up slowly from her plate. That was an odd thing for Ellie to call him.

“Marcus had some life to him, at least,” her friend continued and sipped her tea. “I think he would come back if he thought you wanted him to.”

“Do you?” Sam asked her, narrowing her eyes on Ellie’s pudgy face as the older woman shrugged her shoulder.

“I do. And the battlement walls still need fixing, as well as the drawbridge, and don’t forget the roof.”

Oh, he wouldn’t! Sam wanted to slap her palm down on the table. She looked around the kitchen, wondering how close Marcus had to be to communicate silently with Ellie. And Ellie! In cahoots with him! She almost refused to believe it. Then again, stranger things have happened lately. Well, there was only one way to find out for certain.

“Eric has offered to hire men to finish the drawbridge.”

Sam’s suspicions proved correct when Ellie shifted in her chair, blushed to her silver roots, and then coughed into her hand. Oh yes, Ellie was hearing him all right, and he obviously wasn’t pleased. Dragons, Ellie had told her, were quite possessive of what they *thought* was theirs. Marcus must believe that because she was a virgin, she was free for the claiming. Arrogant snake, she thought, hoping he was tuned in.

“That’s good of Eric, dear,” Ellie said, feigning a pleasant smile. Clearly, she had no intention of repeating Marcus’s reply.

“Yes, it is,” Sam smiled back pleasantly. “He’s also asked me to go to London with him next week for a conference. I was reluctant because he only booked one hotel room, but...” She was going to hate herself tomorrow for putting Ellie through this, but she and Marcus deserved it. “...I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

When Ellie’s hand shook as she lifted her tea to her lips, Sam pushed out of her chair. “Where is he?” she demanded, bolting to her feet.

Ellie looked up at her over her specs and blinked as if she had no clue what Sam was ranting about. “Who, dear?”

“Oh, don’t give me that, Ellie. You know perfectly well who. He’s talking to you right now, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know what—”

“Marcus!” Sam called into the air, cutting Ellie off in mid-sentence. She would deal with her later. “If you have something to say, say it to me and stop yelling in Ellie’s head, you coward!”

“Oh, I’m quite used to it by now,” Ellie defended him and then dipped her gaze to her teacup when Sam shot her an angry glance.

“Fine then,” Sam bit out and turned on her bunny slippers. “Tell him that after next week there won’t be any reason for him to ever come back. I’ll fix the damn battlements myself!”

“Sam, don’t be angry with him. You’ve no idea...” Ellie called out to her as Sam stormed out of the kitchen.

Of all the sneaky, underhanded things to do! Sam fumed on her way up the stairs to the battlements. Using her friend to manipulate her into asking him to come back! She hadn’t truly planned on sleeping with Eric. She knew it would incite Marcus’s temper and possibly draw him out from wherever he was hiding. But now that she thought about it, it *was* the one thing that would keep Marcus away. Only, and God help her, she didn’t want him to stay away. She missed the way he smiled like the sun had just burst through the darkest recesses of his soul when he saw her.

She plunged through the archway out of breath and afraid that she’d completely lost her mind. He was a freaking dragon! Or, at least, he used to be. A creature of fables, a freak of nature. And she was nothing more than a virgin to him. Maybe it was the thought of her virginity that always seemed to be lurking around her mind, that made her conjure up images of their bodies entwined, naked, sweating in the throes of her unveiling. Or maybe it was just Marcus sending those thoughts to her.

“Sam?”

She spun around, so clearly disappointed that the voice was not Marcus’s that her smile felt more like a scowl. If Eric noticed, he didn’t say.

“Ellie, let me in on her way out,” he told her, stepping out onto the narrow ramparts. “She said you were up here searching for dragons.” He smiled, reaching her and took her into his arms. “You’ve no need to fear dragons, my darling, for your knight has arrived.”

A cool chill swept across Sam's nape and she glanced up nervously, expecting to see Marcus swooping in on them to toss Eric over the wall.

"What on earth are you still doing in your pajamas?" he asked her, when she shivered in his arms. "It's freezing."

She shrugged, keeping one eye on the skies as Eric drew her in closer. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned sleeping with Eric, after all. "Just thinking."

He didn't ask her what she was thinking about, but ran the back of his fingers over her cheeks. "You're flushed. You'll catch your death."

"Well, I..."

He caught the rest of her words with his mouth and kissed her.

It could have been her imagination, but Sam was sure she heard the sound of great wings flapping somewhere overhead. She pressed her palms against Eric's shoulders and struggled against him. "Eric, you're right, it's cold and windy up here." She broke away from his embrace. "Maybe we should go inside. I'll make us some tea."

"Brilliant," Eric curled his fingers around hers and headed for the archway. "I could use a cup after the wretched morning I had on the phone with the mother of one of my patients. She insisted I prescribe something for little Stanley who'd come down with food poisoning..."

I could put him out of our misery right now, if you like.

The sudden invasion of Marcus's voice in Sam's head quickened her heart so fiercely, she gasped, looking around the parapet for him. A movement caught her eye to her right—a whisk of black coattails disappearing around the western wall. She stopped as the aching need to see him overwhelmed her good senses.

"What's wrong?" Eric tugged her gently and began to turn toward her.

"Food poisoning?" Sam snapped to attention and practically leaped in front of him to pull him forward. "Poor Stanley. Eric, go on down. I'll be there in a moment."

The pediatrician narrowed his coffee-colored eyes on her. "Sam, I don't think you're well. You've looked dreadful for weeks."

Far less dreadful than he's going to look after I fling him down the stairs.

Heaven help her, how could a voice sound so elegant and completely ruthless at the same time? Sam gulped and yanked her boyfriend forward.

"I'm fine, Eric, really. There's something I forgot to do. Please, go on. I'll be down shortly."

"All right," he conceded. "But don't be long. I'll start the tea."

"Thank you." She smiled, battling the urge to slip her gaze over his shoulder to look for Marcus.

When she was finally alone, she did. She would only stay a moment, just long enough for her to tell him what she thought of him for his little game with Ellie in her kitchen.

But when she saw him perched on her eroding castle wall like a gargoyle...or a hauntingly beautiful fallen angel, his elbows resting easily on his bent knees, her anger vanished and a thread of fear fluttered across her heart. How much longer could she resist him? He turned to look at her and his raven hair blew across his face. She took a step toward him, arms stretched out as if to catch him. "You'll fall, Marcus," she called out, forgetting that he could fly.

Her insides melted to a boil when he grinned as though he'd never seen anything brighter than the sight of her. With one smooth leap, he landed directly in front of her and dipped his face a fraction closer to hers.

"I like your concern for me." The thick cadence of his voice caressed her like loving fingers. "Did you miss me, Sam?"

She shook her head, hoping he wasn't reading her thoughts. She had to stay focused. He wasn't dangerous. He was deadly. She knew it by the way his nearness made her feel so reckless, how the sound of him tempted her to abandon her hopes and fall, lost in his arms.

He brought her hand to his lips, but before he pressed his warm kiss to her knuckles, he inhaled the scent of her skin and closed his eyes as if breathing in something vital to his existence.

"How many of us have you deflowered since you left?" Sam pulled her hand away, remembering what he was and why he was here.

The sting in her words was diffused by the ripple in her belly when he lifted his head and scorched her with eyes that burned with a single purpose. To have her. Her breast rose and fell heavily. His gaze dipped there for a brief moment before returning to hers. His mouth hooked into a slow half-smile that sought to slay what was left of her will.

“There are very few of you left. And I believe I have found the diamond.”

Sam didn’t care what he was talking about. His mouth was too close to hers, his breath, too hypnotic. She closed her eyes and parted her lips, remembering the fire in his kiss and wanting to feel it again.

But he moved away, barely touching her.

“Why did you come back?” she asked, angry with him and at herself for succumbing to his otherworldly wiles.

“You know perfectly well why, Sam,” he said, turning back to her. “I cannot let you go off alone with that worm.”

“Then you *were* listening.” Strengthening her will, she met his potent stare with a tilt of her chin. “Ellie is my friend, Marcus. You used her to get to me.”

“She was willing to help me.”

“Sure, because she has no idea what you really want to do to me.”

“And what is so terrible about that?”

She had to laugh, but there was no humor in the sound. The worst part was that he was serious. “I want something more.”

“I don’t know if I have more to give.” The flagrant arrogance that usually pulsed his rich voice was tempered by a sharp hook of regret as he gave in to the inevitable. “Drakkons are ancient beings with eons of knowledge and centuries of experience. But everything I know is meaningless as a man.”

Suddenly, Sam saw him in a whole different light. Despite the intense virility seeping off him in waves, Marcus knew as much about being a man, especially a twenty-first century man, as an extraterrestrial who’d just been dropped off on planet Earth.

“Ellie has been trying to help me.”

“Help you what?”

“Be better at this, though she insists that I’m as good as it gets. I figure if I’m stuck like this for a while, I might as well do it right. I should have been hunting someone who can help me regain what I lost, but instead, I spent my time with Ellie.”

He wasn’t going to stay a man. He didn’t want to stay like this. Where would that leave her?

“She has been dragging me to a dozen shops,” he continued, looking every bit as horrified by shopping as any other man. “I find *today’s fashion* miserably confining.”

An image of his naked body flashed across her thoughts, a body that had never left her memory since the day she’d found him unconscious in her stable.

“But,” he continued on, thankfully oblivious to her secret musings, “she insists that you will grow weary of seeing me in the same garments day-after-day.”

Sam’s head was spinning. Did he care what she thought of him? Why would he? How long exactly would he be around? Sam didn’t want to think about it.

“How did you pay for new clothes?”

“I sold my Rolex,” he told her happily. “As it turns out, the watch was worth more than I thought. I was able to buy everything I’ll need to fix this place up, including your drawbridge.”

She blinked. He sold his Rolex and used the money on her castle? It was the most thoughtful thing—Where did he get a Rolex?

“Ellie has also been reading your story of Sir Tristan to me,” he said, interrupting her thoughts, “and while I find your affinity toward knights rather irritating,” He tossed her a scowl, proving how difficult the past two weeks must have been for poor Ellie. “I think I now have a better understanding of what you desire in a companion.”

“Do you?” The thought of him sitting through her weepy love stories turned Sam’s heart soft. No guy had ever wanted to understand her that bad. But before she had time to contemplate the advantages or consequences of this man crawling any deeper into her psyche, he moved toward her, temptation incarnate, all dark and dangerous and weakened by his need for her.

“Send Eric away.” His warm breath danced over her lips as he bent toward her and cupped her cheek in his palm. “And let me show you what I have learned, Sam.”

The teasing caress of his mouth was enough to get her moving. To hell with his unnatural powers of persuasion—if he possessed them. He’d gone the extra mile to get to know her. He’d paid for the materials needed to fix

her home. All that and suffering through Lord Tristan's tale had earned him a few hours alone with her.

"I'll be right back," she said, stepping out of his reach. She might be a virgin, but she knew how to cast a teasing smile a man's way. She realized an instant after she forgot where she was going that Marcus was far better at it than she was.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

T*ELL HIM THE thought of him near you makes you want toretch.
Stop that, Marcus!*

Still on the battlements, Marcus smiled at Sam's admonishment coming from below. By the stars, but he'd been in a foul mood these last two weeks. He didn't even look for Thomas so consumed was he with thoughts of Sam. But now, being with her again, he found his humor fully restored.

Tell him his kiss was emptier than Padgora's bank account, and viler than a boil on the ass of a White.

A white what?

No one to concern yourself with, Sam. Is the dimwit gone yet?

If the worm was still here in ten minutes, he would go down and dispose of him himself.

Here was yet another human emotion Marcus was unfamiliar with. Jealousy. But he told himself as he looked out over the battlements and let the cold breeze whip his hair away from his face, that he wasn't actually jealous. At least he didn't think he was. He simply didn't want Eric anywhere near Sam. She was his, for now anyway—or, she would be once he won her heart the way Lord Tristan won the fair Lady Patrice.

While he waited for her, he pondered what it would be like to mate with a virgin as a man. Would it be the same as when he ate them as a Drakkon? The thought of consuming Sam if he'd had met her as Marrkiya darkened his features. He never would have had the chance to look into her dark, luminous eyes and see, for the first time as a man, fear, awe, concern...innocence. If he had been a Drakkon when he met her, he never would have noticed the elegance of her fingers when they tucked her wispy brown hair behind her ear.

"Marcus?"

Or the dulcet sound of her voice speaking his name. He turned, and seeing her beneath the archway, smiling at him, set his heart to pounding. How could simply looking at a woman give him such pleasure? She had tiny shoulders and skinny wrists. A brisk enough wind could whisk her off her feet. He found himself moving toward her, drawn by the need to take her in his arms.

“All your talk of retching gave me an idea,” she told him a bit out of breath. Had she hurried to return to him? “Eric has a queasy stomach and the moment I told him that I felt sick enough to hurl all over his five-hundred-dollar leather boots, he bade me farewell and made a hasty departure.”

“Well done,” Marcus said, reaching her and conquering his most base desire.

He did not want to push her too quickly. Ellie had assured him that if he behaved more like Sam’s knights, no matter how fiercely he detested them, he could steal her from Eric, mayhap even discover for himself if this love she sought so desperately was as powerful as her tales promised. Mayhap he could even use such a power as a Drakkon. But her scent pulled him to her against his human will. He wanted her like a scorched tongue wanted water. And she knew it. She could see it in his eyes—the wicked, needful greed of him.

A breath away, he could smell the nectar pulsing through her veins. His ravenous gaze dipped to her mouth. He yearned to kiss her, to taste her first breath of anticipation. To cradle her in his arms while she surrendered to his touch. But she was an innocent, a maiden with as little experience in the art of mating as he had. He wanted them to share the pleasure of learning together.

“The worm was correct about one thing,” he said quietly, cupping her cheek in his palm. “Your skin feels like ice.”

Without another word, he bent and swept her into his arms. She did not protest as he cradled her close to his chest, but he could feel her heart thrashing against his like a frightened rabbit. He clenched his jaw at the way her body felt so small and soft in his hands. He had been a tremendously big Drakkon, and he’d always been aware of the power of that size, but never like this.

Right now, he felt larger and stronger than any beast of legend. He wanted to protect her from everything he knew was wrong and dangerous in her world. Odd he should have such feelings toward a human, but here he was gazing down at her as if just the sight of her was enough to slay his mighty heart.

He carried her to the solar, brooding fiercely at the shields and tapestries she had hung on its walls depicting knights in battle. He set her down gently on her feet. "I'll feed the hearth fire." He looked around for more wood and when he found but one log, he turned back to her with a frown. "Didn't you know winter was coming? You have one log, Sam." He waved it at her, then tossed it onto the dying flames. "It's a good thing I came back. It's obvious how much I am needed here."

"I was going to..." her voice trailed off, but Marcus hardly took notice as he sighed at the weak golden blue flames. He had the urge to part his lips and breathe his mighty fire. But that part of him was gone, and he was losing more of himself every day.

"Can you still do it?" Sam asked, pulling his anguished gaze to her.

"Do what?"

"Breathe fire?"

"No, Sam, I cannot."

"Do you wish you could?"

Yes, yes, he did. He wanted it all back. He'd known who he was then—a cold, uncaring beast with nothing more pressing on his thoughts than what would be his next meal. But he couldn't tell her that. How could she understand what he'd lost?

"You love to write, don't you?" he asked her instead.

"Yes."

"If you woke up one morning and you could never write again, would you wish you could? Would you miss telling your stories?"

"Yes, I would miss it very much, Marcus," she answered him quietly.

He crossed the solar and took her hand in his on his way to the sofa. When he sat, he pulled her down gently into his lap and closed his arms around her.

"You have no reason to fear me. I'll prove to you that I'm not a monster." He traced the full contour of her lips with the pad of his thumb

and she trembled in his arms. “Nay, ssh,” he soothed gently. He whispered her name on a soft, needful breath. Her body fit neatly atop his thighs and his hand moved up her back to her neck, supporting her while he leaned in closer to kiss her.

He made her breathless and weak. He could sense it, feel it coming off her in waves. She watched his lips coming closer. She sighed as his eyelids slowly closed, ready to capture her mouth. Her lips were warm beneath his, her mouth firm and sweet tasting. While he kissed her, his fingertips fluttered over her eyes, her nose, and then her lips. He broke the kiss to look into her eyes, luminous coal in the golden firelight.

He felt her fear and heard her inner thoughts. She was afraid that if she gave herself to him she would never be the same again. She was drab and unexciting, happy in her little world of broken walls and poorly kept gardens.

“Stop thinking.” He smiled down at her, then covered her mouth again to aid his request.

He fought to control the passion in his kiss, the desire to release her and then himself from the confines of their jeans and guide his throbbing erection deep into her. He wanted to tell her, while she straddled his taut body and rode him hard and fast, that she wasn’t unexciting, that she fired his blood like no other female before her. But she would not be satisfied with lust alone. She wanted romance, and he wanted to give it to her.

So, he kissed her slowly and feathered his fingers over the pulse beat of her throat. He struggled to think, to find his reason, but he felt dizzy with a want that seemed nothing like the animal urge so easily satisfied as a Drakkon.

“I’ve missed you,” he told her, withdrawing to look into her eyes.

She looked surprised but then smiled. “I’ve missed you, too.”

He smiled, flashing his teeth. “I’m glad.”

The scent of her purity devoured him, fed his hunger like oxygen to fire.

Bending to the small table to his right, he plucked a small book up in his fingers and handed it to her.

“I like the part where Patrice throws a rock at Tristan’s head and then realizes that he loves her. Read it to me.”

She took the book and her smile widened into a grin that made him forget what they were talking about. "You want me to read my book to you?"

"Aye."

Smiling back at her like a merry dimwit, she found the scene he meant and began reading.

"Patrice's laughter faded gazing up into the cool, beautiful eyes of the only man she had ever loved. He took her breath away. He was staring at her the way he used to, as if his very life depended on drinking in the sight of her face. There was no lust in the eyes that swept over her features, but a hunger, a longing need for something neither of them understood."

She stopped reading and glanced up at him. "That is a pivotal scene for them. They began to trust each other after that."

"I know."

He wanted to kiss her adorable mouth and stare into her eyes for the next century.

"Why did you leave?" She dropped the book and stared at him. "I thought you weren't coming back."

She thought he was exactly who she suspected.

"I was angry." No reason to tell her she'd hurt him. "And conflicted." Aye, that was better. "I thought a lot about being a man and being a Drakkon. And I thought about you." *All the time. Every waking moment*, he thought to himself.

When she slid closer and pressed her cheek to his chest, he closed his arms around her.

"I'm glad you came back."

Just one more kiss. One more touch. He could resist her, couldn't he? Should he? Why was he denying himself? She felt so damned good in his arms, like she'd always belonged there. Should he kiss her again?

What would the blasted Sir Tristan do?

She lifted her head and laughed softly. "What?"

"What?"

"Are you trying to behave like Tristan?"

He looked at her like another head just popped out of her shoulder. "Absolutely not!"

“It’s very endearing.”

“It is?” he asked, his good mood restored.

“Yes, but I’ll help.” She rose up off him, kissed his nose, and stepped away. “I like the romantic Marcus.”

He looked at her rather broodingly. “I hate his guts.” He looked at her standing there dressed in her baggy pajamas with her bunny slippers and slapped his hands on his thighs. “I need to rebuild a wall or something.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, as he left. “You kiss extremely well if it’s any consolation.”

“It is,” he told her, laughing softly as he went. “Up until a few months ago, I didn’t even have lips.”



SAM SPENT THE REST of the afternoon at her computer catching up on chapters that should have been completed weeks ago. She was thrilled to be writing again and had the man hammering away at the ruins of the roof above her to thank for her newfound dedication to Sir Robert’s plight. Marcus’s dark, wounded soul provided hours of inspiration, though he insisted, breaking through her thoughts, that little could wound a Drakkon’s soul. His unabashed arrogance was also quite helpful in shaping the lord of Glastonbury.

Why did Lady Isobelle send him away?

Sam stared at her monitor for a few seconds before answering him, not sure she really wanted to. *Because she is beginning to care for him.*

She heard what sounded like a chuckle in her head and scowled at the ceiling.

So, she sends him off to find another damsel?

He won’t look for anyone else. It’s Isobelle he loves.

I see. So, it takes all that bickering between them before they can win each other’s love? Is that the way of it then? Because if it is, I don’t care for it.

Sam smiled at the gruff pitch of his voice. *It’s called conflict, and it’s vital to the story. Having the characters jump right into bed is boring. A reader wants to share in their emotions. The sexual tension needs to build.*

Why?

Because it's more satisfying that way. She rubbed her head. This was one conversation she did not want to have with him. Words like *sexual* and *satisfying* conjured too many mental images that chipped away at her defenses.

Do we have a conflict, Sam?

Yes, she sighed a bit miserably. You used to be a dragon for starters. You hate being a man, and you call making love mating. It should be more than that, Marcus.

Very well, then. In order to please you, I shall call it making love.

To please me?

Aye.

You mean to get me into bed, she accused mildly.

I'm offering you what you want, Sam. Love.

She almost laughed out loud. You don't even know what love is! You admitted it yourself. Sex is just a small part of it. There's so much more to it than that.

Like what?

Like... commitment, she told him. A bond two people make with their hearts that can never be broken.

He grew silent, finally, and Sam was thankful. Not even Raymond had tempted her to cast away all, including her irrational fears of abandonment—which proved to be not so irrational, after all.

She could feel Marcus probing her thoughts so she quieted them, for now. If he knew how close he'd come to having her, he would proceed at full throttle, and she would eventually give in. And then what? He'd already told her he that he had every intention on being changed back into a Drakkon. He wanted his old life back, and Sam really couldn't blame him. How powerful he must have been. How frightening a sight, billowing flames from his jaws, tearing up the heavens like a typhoon. His soul longed to be what he was before—what he was born to be. He wasn't going to stay here, and she was going to miss the hell out of him when he left.

Sam?

Her face paled realizing that he probably just heard every thought she had about him. Damn it! *Marcus, you really have to stop listening when I'm not speaking to you. I'm not used to having to control my thoughts. They're private, and I need them to be.*

Forgive me.

She nodded and stared blankly at her monitor, trying to force herself to get back to writing.

Sam?

What?

I'm going to miss you the hell out of you, too.

The sudden sting of tears made her curse under her breath. Why did he have to say that? And why did it wreak such havoc on her heart? It was tragic really. To find a man who seemed so enthralled with her that he'd read her book to try to know her better, a man who not only cared what she thought, but who poked about in her head, constantly interested.

It didn't matter why he did it; it made her feel important to him, wanted...really wanted for the first time in her life. But he was going to leave. *Enough*, she admonished herself, wiped her eyes, and clicked save on her computer. There was no use trying to write anymore today. What she needed was to get away from Marcus and think...alone.

I'm going to the market. You're eating me out of house and home.

Sam.

Don't, she stopped him. He'd listened again and she was too afraid of what he was going to say.

I was just going to ask you to purchase some of that pop you had in your icebox. I like the feel of the bubbles on my tongue.

Leaving her study, Sam couldn't help but smile. Despite everything else, she was glad he'd crashed into her stable and not someone else's.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SAM WASN'T USED to buying so much food, but as she loaded up her car with groceries, she realized she liked that there was a man in her castle with a big appetite. An instant later, she shivered, imagining how many pigpens he'd emptied as a Drakkon. When and why had she begun to feel safe around him? His every waking thought was to devour her, and a part of her was still afraid of him succeeding.

At least he wouldn't force himself upon her. He'd already proven that much when she turned him away on her sofa and left him panting. She felt terrible for causing him the kind of frustration that only hard, heavy masonry work could subdue. She would make it up to him tonight with a delicious meal.

She missed cooking for someone other than herself or Ellie. Eric was a picky eater, too concerned with his cholesterol to enjoy the kind of meal she intended to prepare for Marcus. Of course, she had to mask her scent before his dragon's instincts, and her own, took over. A thought occurred to her and she raced back inside the market. Once she'd purchased her first weapon, she ducked into a small vintage clothing shop and picked out her second.

On the way back to her car, the hair on the back of her neck stood up and she turned around slowly to look behind her. There was no one there but another woman carrying two bags to her car and an older man with white hair close by. Odd, since she left the castle she'd felt like someone was watching her.

And once, while she was pushing her cart along the dairy isle, she would have sworn she felt someone probing her thoughts the way that Marcus had. But it wasn't him. In fact, the feeling had made her so ill for a few seconds afterward, she thought she would be sick. She fumbled for her keys now and hurried toward her car.

On her drive home, she pondered her life and how easily Marcus could change it if she let him. She had to be more careful, more guarded against the way he moved—all power and grace combined like a panther on the prowl. She had to resist the undeniable male dominance he exuded in every word, every action, and the desire that tangled in his throat when he spoke her name. She could do it, she convinced herself. She was strong. She had control of herself. She was from New York. But by the time she reached the castle, she was aching to see him again.

From the drawbridge, she spotted him still working high above her, repairing the wall along the battlements. When he saw her, he stood and smiled. She waved, taking in the sight of his muscular thighs encased in snug-fitting shorts. He was shirtless again, despite the chill in the air, and Sam closed her eyes in defense of his pure masculine perfection. Why had he bothered buying clothes when he wore so little of them?

A short while after she entered the kitchen with her packages, she heard him behind her. “You know,” she said without turning. “It’s about fifty-five degrees outside and you’re wearing shorts. I think you’re nuts.”

He laughed, coming up close behind her and peeked over her shoulder into one of the shopping bags. “I have cold blood.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said. She bit her lower lip when she felt him bend his head and inhale her hair. She definitely had to do something about the way she smelled.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, hoping to get both their minds off the heat that threatened to make her turn around and offer him whatever he wanted.

“Starving.” The tickle of his breath along her ear sent shivers down her spine.

“Good.” She ducked and skittered away from him. “I’m going to make you a nice dinner tonight. Ellie’s not the only one who can cook around here.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” he asked, watching her put a box of cereal in the cupboard.

She turned to look over her shoulder. Thinking it was probably better not to bring up their kisses on her sofa and how he fought to emulate a knight from her books, she dropped her gaze and smiled at his long, shapely legs. “You have nice legs.”

He looked down at them, quirking his brow, then shrugged his shoulders. "Tomorrow I will show you my feet and maybe I can work another kiss out of you." Sam laughed and his eyes softened on her. "They are quite remarkable you know." He lifted the corner of his mouth in a heart-wrenching smile. "I never thought they could hold me up and I'm quite proud of them for it."

"I'm sure they're wonderfully strong feet." She reached up to put a can of beans on a shelf that was too high.

Marcus was behind her again in an instant, taking the can from her fingers and the thoughts from her head. Save one. "You're not afraid of me anymore then?"

"Should I be?"

"Nay, you shouldn't." Pressing his body up against hers, he turned her around to face him. "I will take nothing from you that you do not want to give."

Sam put her palms on the counter behind her. Oh, she *was* afraid. Afraid to touch him, afraid of what she might offer him if she did. When he slipped his hands around her waist, she arched her back, putting more distance between them.

He leaned forward, over her. "The sight of you—the scent of you is driving me mad, Sam. Shall I beg you for a kiss the way Sir Tristan did with Lady Patrice?" He looked down into her eyes and smiled.

That smile was Sam's undoing. So much for her control. How easily she yielded when he swooped down upon her to claim her mouth with merciless ease. She felt him against her teeth, soft, thrilling, probing. She couldn't fight him. She didn't want to, not when his touch was so possessive, his lips so masterful. She opened her mouth to his plunging tongue and surrendered to his massive strength.

Every nerve in her body shook and trembled at the size of him over her, the hunger of his mouth as it plundered hers over and over again, giving and taking until she went weak against him.

He lifted her and set her rump down on the countertop, then pushed her legs apart with his and stepped between her thighs, pressing the need that drove him hard against her warm niche. His strained, husky groan along her

neck revealed the restraint he used not to take her there on her kitchen counter.

Weightless in his arms, her mind clouded and fevered with want, she struggled to resist him. But when he slipped his hands under her buttocks, holding her up effortlessly, she clutched his shoulders and ran her hands down the smooth, sleek muscles of his arms. His erection between her legs maddened her and incredibly, she wanted him to rip away the barriers of clothing between them and make love to her.

She melted down to her very bones and felt more alive than ever before, every nerve ending on fire for him. What was he doing to her? Whatever Drakkon lure he'd used on her had worked. His power over her was complete and she could do nothing more about it. But she felt no pull from his thoughts. There were no hot, heaving images to enthrall her, save the ones her own mind created.

He used only his body to drive her deeper into a hopeless chasm of desire and decadence. All the years of holding back, of coming so close with Raymond, then stopping, seemed so wasteful now. But they weren't. She'd saved herself for this—for Marcus.

No! Her mind cried from someplace within. This wasn't how she wanted it to be! This was lust in its most basic form. She wanted more. Oh, she needed more.

She realized he must have heard her thoughts, for his body went rigid. He withdrew a hair's breath away and stared into her eyes. Something dark and entirely savage passed across his features before he released her.

"Marcus," she breathed softly, feeling responsible for the anguish she had caused his body yet again. She reached out and touched his parted lips and his body snapped, tightening until he felt like solid rock beneath her hand. He licked his lips and took a deep breath then stepped further away from her.

"I'm going to work on the drawbridge. The wood arrived while you were gone," he practically growled at her and then left her, still panting after him.



MARCUS STOOD STARING at the aged planks of the drawbridge, his muscles bunched and pained with the effects of his restraint. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd had a ripe and ready virgin in his hands and he'd left her. He was glad there were no other Drakkons left to mock him and the emotions, too foreign for him to name, that weakened him. Emotions that told him he wanted to possess her completely, protect her as he did his hoard. By the stars, he didn't need her heart to surrender to him. He only needed her mind, and body, and she had just offered both.

But she wanted more. And madly enough, so did he. He'd stopped because he wanted to hear her tell him...what? That she loved him? That she felt as lost without him as he had felt without her these last two weeks? He'd come back to win her but for the wrong reason! Damn him for letting Ellie read Sam's blasted tales to him. Damn him for being curious about things he was not born to be a part of. What did he care of love, of honor, or loyalty? He was no knight and he cursed himself for wanting to be one to please a woman!

"Marcus?"

Sam's voice and the touch of her hand on his arm shattered his brooding thoughts and he turned to face her. He knew he was in more trouble than even before, even more than his fiercest battle with a Red, when she offered him a can of pop and a smile.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SAM CHEWED HER FINGERNAIL while she eyed the three pairs of jeans laid out on her bed. Two were European cut and were more form fitting than the stonewash she'd brought with her from the States. If she were having a casual dinner with Eric, picking which pair to wear would not be a problem. But with Marcus, the less attention she brought to her figure, the better.

Still, the stonewash were well-worn and tattered at the knee and she didn't want Marcus to think this dinner meant so little to her that she couldn't even bother to fix herself up for it. Not that it meant anything more than exactly what it was. He was fixing her home. The least she could do was cook him a nice meal to show her gratitude. On the other hand, it was probably better to look like she didn't care what he thought of her appearance. After all, she didn't. Her cuticle began to bleed.

She disengaged her finger from her mouth and scowled at her jeans before deciding on the stonewash. Part of her wished she could wear the small red dress she'd purchased in Soho last year, but she doubted her virginity would last past dessert if she did.

She had to admit, while she pulled her jeans over her legs, that it was nice having a man around—a drop-dead gorgeous man, at that—who found her irresistible. Too bad the man was a dragon who would react the same way around any virgin. She wondered if the woman he'd practiced kissing before he came back was a virgin, and what had become of her when Marcus left her? Had he kissed that woman the same way he'd kissed her? With such fire, such demand? Probably.

Hadn't he said he was told he kissed rather nicely? Sam pouted, tore a sweater from her closet, and tossed it onto her bed. It was a thick cable knit of creamy white, bulky enough to conceal the slight swell of her breasts. Not that it took much material to achieve that endeavor. She wasn't blessed with

full breasts, not that Marcus cared about such things. It was her scent that enticed him.

Fortunately, she had that problem covered. Unwrapping the two halves of pungent onions she'd picked up at the market, she told herself that it was for his own good, as well as her's, that she mask her scent. The poor man was going to end up rebuilding her entire castle if she continued to frustrate him. And for her own good because she was certain his control couldn't last much longer.

She knew hers wouldn't if he ever kissed her the way he had against her kitchen counter. God help her, the man was pure sin. The scalding burn of his kiss was deadly enough. Feeling his hard shaft throbbing against her untried body nearly made her beg for it.

The onions were perfect.

She rubbed the onions up and down her bare arms, over her neck, and between her slight cleavage, then pulled her sweater over her head. Hopefully, they would be able to enjoy their dinner without Marcus wanting to deflower her every ten seconds. She smiled, happy with herself and wiped the stinging tears from her eyes. If she could make it through the night without gagging on her own odor, they would have a great victory to celebrate.

Marcus? She called to him outside and waited in the silence of her room for a moment.

Aye, Sam?

Dinner's just about ready, put down your hammer and come eat.

Marcus was just entering the cavernous foyer when she reached the top of the landing. Their gazes met at the same moment, stilled by the sight of each other. Sam understood why she could barely breathe, barely move. She doubted she would ever grow accustomed to his raw virility, the way his raven hair swept down his shoulders, or his dark, ever-hungry brow. But why he should seem just as affected by her, confounded her. Couldn't he smell the onions? How was it possible that he could make her feel as delectable as a plate of sizzling bacon when she'd gone to such measures to look shabby?

I like how you look, Sam.

His voice purred across her thoughts and she felt her blood rushing to her cheeks. Hell, she'd underestimated his power to seduce her.

Forcing herself to concentrate on dinner rather than on him, she severed her gaze from his, tucked her hair behind her ears, and hurried down the stairs.

"I'll go check on the roast."

When she moved to pass him, he stepped a bit closer, causing her heart to accelerate.

"Sam, I—" He sniffed the air then pulled back, grimacing. "Saint George's guts, what the hell is that smell?" He sniffed again, this time braving a few steps closer to her. He stopped when his nose tapped her shoulder and lifted his eyes to hers. "You seem to have bathed in something foul."

Sam grinned and inhaled as if she was standing in a garden of roses. "It's onion. Don't you think it's a wonderful idea?"

He straightened and scowled down at her. "Not unless you plan on serving yourself for dinner."

"Oh, don't be silly." Sam rolled her eyes and slapped his arm softly as she continued on her way to the kitchen. "I'm simply masking that smell you say drives you mad."

Marcus stood in his spot, watching her sashay away. "Well, go wash it off. I don't like it."

"No." Sam turned to smile at him over her shoulder. "I did this for you."

He stood there staring at her as if he had much to say on the matter, but decided against it. Sam suspected he knew she was right. Pleased with herself, she turned once again toward the kitchen.

An instant later, he was standing directly behind her, arriving there without a sound. His voice along her neck sent fissures down her spine. "I find your consideration for me quite... By the stars, you smell repulsive!"

"Go wash up, Marcus," she said glancing at him. "You don't smell so great yourself."

He stopped following her and looked so stricken Sam almost laughed. She did laugh when she turned to enter the kitchen and looked at him one last time to find him sniffing under his arms.

What a terrible liar she was. He actually smelled quite good, earthy and sweaty and masculine.

Thank you, Sam.

Rolling her eyes, but happy that he'd heard her, she lit the antique candelabra and carried it into the great hall.

"Oh," she called out before he disappeared up the stairs. "I picked up a shirt for you today at a wonderful little vintage shop. I think it will fit you better than the newer fashions you find so confining."

Thank you, Sam. Have you ever heard me sing?

No, I haven't, she answered, setting the table.

She took great care decorating everything to perfection with flowery napkins, her best silverware, and two solid silver goblets Ellie had given her as a house-warming gift. She was in the middle of pouring the wine when Marcus's voice boomed through her brain. He was singing. If his voice was musical when he spoke, the melody was lost when he tried to hold a tune. Maybe it was the bawdy song he chose to sing, but Sam drew her shoulders up around her ears, grateful that he couldn't see her face. She was very careful to think only positive thoughts.

Suddenly the sound of his laughter filled her head. *How long would you say nothing, my sweet Sam?*

Not much longer, I'm afraid. Secretively, she breathed a sigh of relief that he was done showing her how well he sang.

You do not actually think that a Drakkon would sing so vilely, did you?

Sam looked up at the ceiling. *Are you bathing up there, Marcus?*

I am. Would you care to join me?

She could almost see the smirk on his face when she told him to shut up. She was thinking of lighting the hearth fire when a sound so profoundly beautiful literally weakened her knees until she had to pull out a chair and sit down. He sang to her in the ancient language he had used when they met, and though she had no idea what the words meant, the sound of them brought tears to her eyes. His voice was no longer raspy and off-key, but smooth as fine silk and deeply moving.

When he finished, Sam remembered to breathe and wiped the tears from her eyes. *Oh, Marcus. That was beautiful.*

He told her, while she fed some freshly chopped wood to the fire, that the song was something his ancestors used to sing at Beltane. It told the story of two great Gold Drakkons who were life mates. *Their love transcended the stars, and even time. The male fought one day with a Green and was killed. His female wondered the earth looking for him for many years. When she discovered that he was dead, she mourned for centuries before hunting down the Green that killed him. She dashed her enemy to pieces with her tail and charred him to ashes. with her breath, and then she buried him.*

While he dressed upstairs, Marcus explained to Sam that it is forbidden for a Drakkon to burn another. Because the Gold had committed such a grievous act, she was condemned by the Great Council, destroyed and buried. Never to be re-consumed by the stars. *But nothing could stop the terrible disease that had come upon the world, born out of the ashes of her flesh and the soil of the earth.*

A plague? Sam asked him.

“Aye, Sam.” Marcus entered the great hall. He wore a new pair of black jeans he’d probably picked up with Ellie and the cream-colored gauze poet shirt she’d purchased from the vintage shop.

Seeing him in it, Sam doubted her resolve and her reasons for buying it. The shirt laced halfway down the center, loose at his neck, with bloused sleeves ending in a small ruffle over his wrists. He looked like a medieval man of her dreams. His hair was damp, with inky locks falling over the aged fabric, and even in the soft glow of the firelight, his eyes glimmered and clothed him in azure beauty. Sam knew she was doomed, but still she smiled when she looked down at his lack of footwear.

“Nice feet. You were right.”

He was staring into the fire and blinked when she spoke. “Thank you.” He bowed his head slightly and then looked around the hall. “It looks wonderful in here, Sam.”

“I’m glad you like it.” She watched him walk around the table, sweeping the surface with fingers half-covered by the ruffled edge of his sleeve. “Thank you for the shirt.” He looked over his shoulder at her. “I look just like a knight taking a break from hunting Drakkons.”

Sam’s smile faded.

It wasn't the mildly mocking tone of his voice that struck her like a blow, but the trace of hurt beneath it. She had thought to dress him like the men in her books, the men he tried to learn about in order to win her. She'd hoped to strengthen him, thoughtlessly forgetting that knights hunted dragons according to lore. How careless of her to try to change him into something he did not want to be. She remembered the horror in his face when he woke up in her stable and looked at his hands, the anger that flashed in his eyes with a fire from within when she told him he wasn't human.

What was he? Heartbroken for him, Sam took a step forward, and then her heart shattered to pieces when he smiled at her. What strength had that taken? What if she woke up one morning with claws and a tail and long, leathery wings?

"Marcus—" she began.

But he cut her off, his gaze on her soft and gentle. "I appreciate the things you do for me, Sam. No one has ever done them before. I'm sorry if I was cruel." He looked down at himself. "The shirt fits me well. It's quite comfortable and roomy."

As far as apologies went, his just outdid every person's she had ever known—and he didn't even have anything to be sorry for! Sam didn't know whether to stop herself from running from the hall or straight into his arms. "I wasn't thinking, Marcus."

"Shh," he quieted her, taking a step toward her. But he stopped before he reached her and rubbed his teary eyes.

"Now I understand why that keeps vampires away." He pulled her chair out instead.

"That's garlic, silly." Sam giggled in spite of the sadness she felt for him.

"Garlic...onions... they are both equally vile." He walked around the table and sat across from her.

"Are they real?"

"Vampires?"

She nodded, sitting down. "I don't doubt much anymore."

"In a way, they are. But that is a long story and one you most likely would not enjoy."

"Now you're being considerate."

Marcus's smile grew into a wide, heart-stopping grin. After that, his humor was completely restored. Sam gave him the honors of cutting the meat while she served the vegetables, baked potatoes, and the best wine she could afford. Every hour spent cooking for him was worth it when he bit into his dinner. Sam thought he would cry out in ecstasy at any moment.

"Didn't you ever eat cooked meat when you were a Drakkon?" she asked him incredulously.

"Nay," he said, and then stopped to savor the slice he'd just shoved in his mouth. "There wasn't time to char my food before I ate it, especially in the last several centuries. Knights hunted us day and night, and after them there were always others. We stayed out of sight mostly, but mankind is afraid of what they do not understand."

Sam nodded, feeling guilty for being one of them. "What about after you became a man? You never stopped into a Mickey D's for a burger?"

"Mickey D's burgers are meat, Sam?"

His question was asked with such a complete lack of guile that Sam burst out laughing. She watched him eat. She could have watched him all night long, though his table manners were endearingly atrocious. He chewed with his mouth open and gulped his wine like someone was standing behind him waiting to snatch it away. His appetite was insatiable, and later, when they relaxed with a blackberry pie Sam had bought at the local bakery, he lounged in his chair with one foot planted on the cushion and his knee drawn to his chest. He answered all her questions about being a Drakkon while popping chunks of pie into his mouth.

"We're not truly immortal. We simply age at a much slower rate than humans—a few hundred years slower."

"How old are you, then?" Sam asked him, her fist tucked under her chin, completely engrossed in his tale.

"I was born in the eleventh century."

His eyes dipped to her lips when she whistled. "How do you do that?"

"Make your lips tighter and blow."

He tried. Nothing came out but air. Sam would have preferred to watch him practice all night, but fantasizing about kissing him would do neither of them any good.

“So, if you remain a man,” she asked, taking her mind off his sensually shaped mouth. “You’ll grow old like me?”

“Nay, the Phoenix Amber can only alter our form. My blood is still Drakkon blood.”

“I see,” she said quietly as another truth dawned on her and threatened to ruin her evening. “Then you will always desire a virgin—any virgin?”

“Probably, if she is of an accountable age,” he answered, reaching for his cup. He stopped as if picking up her thoughts and looked at her. “It would pain you if I desired another woman, Sam?”

“Of course, not!” She forced a laugh. “We haven’t made any promises to each other. You can do what you want.”

It could have been the wine, but she was almost certain his eyes flashed with anger.

“What is it about virgins, anyway?” she asked him, a tad angry herself. “Are we trophies? Is that it?”

“I’m not sure what trophies are.” He tilted the cup he’d been holding to his lips and finished its contents in one gulp. “I do not know any more if it was even worth eat—” His eyes flicked guiltily to hers. “—taking their essence.”

“What do you mean?”

He squinted at her, then shook his head as if to clear it. “The Drakkon are superior over all other creatures, but we lack purity. Maybe we are born with it and we lose it over the centuries.” His voice grew low and pensive, unsure of what he knew anymore. “After living for a thousand years, very little remains fresh and new. You cease to see the good in things around you. Cynicism and caution become your only friends. But there is always that desire for innocence eating away at your heart, yearning to be born anew, to capture that one thing you do not possess, the thing none of us truly understands.”

“And you think you can find it in a virgin?” Sam asked him softly.

He blinked and pushed his plate away. “A virgin has never been soiled by another. Their blood is pure.”

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean their hearts are.” Did she want to open up to him? Could she? She never had with anyone else, but then again, no one else could read her thoughts and know her deepest feelings and fears.

Besides, if he thought he was going to find purity by sleeping with her, he was wrong. "Marcus, I'm a virgin and I look at the world through cynical eyes too. I was an orphan. I spent my life either alone or with people who really didn't care one way or the other about me. If I was fortunate enough to find foster parents who did care for me, it was never permanent. I don't have what you need."

He smiled at her from across the table, a gentle, understanding smile that colored his eyes like rare jewels and made Sam want to weep for them both.

"Perhaps then, Sam," he said leaving his chair and stumbling toward the hearth, "we are both looking for the same thing."

Feeling a little guilty for getting him drunk, Sam watched him and murmured under her breath, "Perhaps we are."

She followed him and sat at his side before the flames. "Marcus?"

"Aye?"

She smiled at the way he frequently crossed over from modern speech to medieval. "What was the terrible disease set forth by the Gold Drakkon's crime?"

"It was the birth of Mankind." He dragged his gaze from the fire to look at her. "The disease was man."

"I don't believe that, Marcus. God created man. We're not a disease."

He turned on his bottom and laid his head on her thigh, stretching out his long legs. "Perhaps not." He yawned and closed his eyes. "But if they are, then you are the cure born to right the wrong."

Sam stared down at him, thinking about all the losses in his long, lonely life. She understood what it was to grow up without the love and security of parents, but to lose your entire race, to know that everything you ever learned was now meaningless and considered nothing but myth...

She leaned down and kissed his brow. He snored in response and she smiled, tracing her finger over his ear. She sat there for a long time just listening to him breathe and watching him sleep. He had no idea how terribly beautiful he was. In his mind, he was nothing more than a disease now. The thought of it made a tear fall from Sam's eye. It dropped into his hair.

Why had he fallen into her stable? Was it fate? Why had he returned to her and why did he remain? Was it simply his driving need for purity? And when he took her, if she let him, would he disappear again?

She was going to have to buy more onions.

Sweeping her gaze over the length of his body, she knew there was no possible way she could get him up to bed, so with a whisper goodnight, she left him and climbed the stairs to her room.



MARCUS DREAMED IN magnificent colors of cerulean blues, emerald greens, magenta reds, sallow golds, and rich purples. In his dream, he flew, his majestic head tossing from side-to-side searching the earth below. He saw men scurrying to and fro and he opened his wide mouth to blast them with his fire. But something made him pause. He remembered human eyes as dark as the night sky. He sniffed the air, but the foul smell of onions filled his lungs. He cried out, anguished by what he could not find, and the sudden, stabbing pain in his head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SUN PUDDLED onto Sam's face from the two vaulted windows opposite her bed. Half awake, she shivered and pulled the blankets up to her chin and made a groggy mental note to replace the single-paned glass with double as soon as she received her royalty check. She was just beginning to settle back into a deeper sleep when she felt a tremendous thump right beside her. She bolted upright, fearing her ceiling had just caved in on top of her mattress.

"Marcus, what are you doing?" she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and gaped at him sprawled face down in the pillows next to her.

"Sam, not so loud, I beg you," he pleaded on a muffled groan and lifted his hands to clutch his head.

"Oh," she said as understanding washed over her. "You have a hangover."

"I'm dying, Samantha."

"You're not dying." She looked him over. Indeed, he was as healthy as any man had a right to be. She should feel uncomfortable about him being in her bed wearing nothing but his too-snug-for-the-good-of-her-senses white boxer briefs, but she liked the feel of waking up next to his big body.

"Had you ever drunk wine before last night, Marcus?"

He shook his head, groaned again, and then ripped the pillow from under him and threw it over his head.

"Come on," she said, getting out of bed. "You need some coffee." She stopped and thought for a moment. "Or is it a bloody Mary? I can't remember what the cure is for a hangover."

He moved the pillow aside and groaned. "That was a tasteless joke, Sam."

"It's a tomato concoction, silly."

His face paled to a pasty white and Sam gasped, leaping away from him. "Please don't throw up in my bed."

Marcus clenched his teeth at her for moving so fast. He sat up slowly, moaning as he went. "Fear not, I thought some fresh air would help so I went flying. I think I threw up on your Eric or near him. My aim was poor."

Sam's mouth fell open and then she clamped her hand over it to keep from laughing.

Poor Eric.

She led Marcus down the stairs, making sure she didn't speak too loudly or bang into anything like she usually did in the morning. On the way down, he took hold of her hand, cranking up her heartbeat. Marcus was huge and she felt ridiculous leading him around like a child. His hand was warm and rough and so very big compared to hers, and oh God help her, she was really starting to care for him. It scared the living daylight out of her.

In the kitchen, she sat him down gently in a chair and started a fresh pot of coffee.

The phone rang and he jumped to his feet and looked about to pass out.

"Hell, I hate those damn things," he said. It rang again and he grasped his forehead.

"Phones?" Sam cast him an odd look and ran to answer it before it rang again. "It's Ellie." She told him quietly. She figured the loss of color in his face was due to his hangover.

"Ellie?" he breathed, scowling as if someone had just told him his favorite dog was rabid.

"Marcus," Sam told the receiver. "Yes, he came back yesterday." Sam was smiling when she held the receiver out to him. "She wants to speak to you."

Cautiously, Marcus lifted his hand to accept the offering. He stared at the receiver, his scowl deepening. "Amanda had one of these cursed things. It screeched at the most ill-timed moments."

Sam's expression went dark as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Amanda?"

"Padgora's wife," he clarified, turning the receiver around in his hand.

"I see," Sam seethed. "Put it to your ear and say hello, Marcus."

He did as she instructed with a little help tilting it at the right angle from Sam.

“Hello?”

Ellie must have spoken, because he yanked the receiver away from his ear again and stared at it as if it had just sprouted wings and a tail. Sam would have laughed if she didn’t want to smash the damn thing over his head. Amanda’s phone rang at the most ill-timed moments, did it?

Oblivious to her ire, Marcus put the receiver back to his ear and took a cautious step toward the wall. “Where are you, Ellie?” he asked, poking the phone with his finger. He nodded at something she said on the other end, and then listened, all the while examining the phone and the springy cord that attached it to the receiver. “Yes, Ellie, I’m glad I came back, too.” He finally smiled—until Sam tossed him a thought.

So, you had sex with Padgora’s wife?

Marcus dropped the phone and clutched his head with both hands, squeezing his eyes shut in pain.

“Marcus, what is it?” Sam paled, reaching for his arm.

“Telepathy...don’t use it.”

Relieved that he wasn’t suffering some dragon brain aneurysm, Sam pulled him back gently to his chair, then returned to scoop the receiver off the floor. After she explained to Ellie that Marcus had one hell of a hangover, she nodded and hung up. “She’s coming over. She knows what to do.”

“Good,” he growled at her. “Then mayhap you’ll cease trying to kill me.”

Sam glared at him and slammed a cup on the counter. “You know what? Fix your own damn coffee. Or better yet, why don’t you call Amanda and have her come over and do it?” She stomped out of the kitchen spewing oaths at him that he could hear until she kicked her bedroom door shut upstairs.



ALONE, MARCUS SWORE a few choice oaths of his own. He hadn’t meant to snap at Sam, but he felt like hell. What in blazes was a hangover? Why was he being plagued with it? And what in damnation did Amanda have to do with any of it?

He leaned forward in his chair and dropped his pounding head into his hands. Damn Sam for screaming in his head. And damn it now if someone wasn't pounding on the front door.

He left his chair, staggering backward from the colorful stars that swam before his eyes. It was probably Ellie come to help him. That thought cheered him up some. He liked Ellie. She had a kind voice and a patient demeanor. When he yanked open the door, his already pained expression turned murderous. The morning just could not get any worse.

"It's you!" Eric Pembroke literally shrieked when he saw the hulking mountain on the other side of the door. His stunned, wide eyes followed the bare path of Marcus's chest down to his full briefs.

Marcus gritted his teeth and slammed the door shut in Eric's face before the worm could utter another word. Inside the castle, he rubbed his head and started for the kitchen to wait for Ellie.

The front door bursting open halted his steps and brought his shoulders up around his ears. "Where is she? Where's Sam?" Eric charged inside like a most foul curse on the wind.

Damnation, Marcus fumed. He'd forgotten to bolt the bloody door. He turned on his heel, muttering curses in his ancient tongue. Within seconds, his long strides brought him to Eric. He grabbed the smaller man's jacket collar in his fist and lifted him almost off the ground. "I have a hangover," he growled between tightly clenched teeth. "If you make another sound, I will throw you into the fire where you belong."

"I'm calling the authorities!" Eric bellowed, scraping the toes of his boots against the floor. "What have you done to Sam?"

"Damn it!" Marcus dragged Eric across the foyer into the great hall as if he were a child's doll. When Eric saw the hearth and the low flames within, he began to panic and raked at Marcus' fingers.

"Marcus, stop it!" Sam shouted at him from the top of the stairs then, raced down, dressed now in her jeans and a sweater.

Did everyone in the damned castle have to scream? Marcus's fingers tightened around Eric's collar and he yanked him forward, positively glowering at Sam, who was charging him.

She threw herself in front of the hearth, holding her arms out at her sides to stop Eric from being thrown into the fire.

“Move aside, Sam.”

“I will not!” she shouted, sounding ready to explode with fury. “You let him go, Marcus. Right now!”

For a moment, their eyes locked in a force that normally would have made Sam tremble and run, but she was not about to let him hurt Eric because he had a hangover.

“You would save this worm?”

“Yes, I would.” She glared up at him, her lower lip pursed in challenge.

“Very well, Sam,” he said, the anger in his gaze fading to something more like resignation. “Keep him then.” He dropped his fist from Eric’s jacket and walked off into the kitchen.

“Sam!” Eric picked himself off the floor where he’d landed and then took the time to smooth his collar. “He’s a madman. He attacked me for no reason!”

Sam shook her head and looked toward the kitchen. Was Marcus dangerous to others? Would he really have hurt Eric? “I’m sorry. He doesn’t seem to like you, but I don’t think he—”

“Who the hell is he anyway?” Eric demanded. “And why is he here at eight o’clock in the morning wearing nothing but skivvies? Are you having sex with him, Samantha?”

Marcus returned carrying a cup of steaming black coffee. He spotted a chair across the room and headed for it. “She’s a virgin, you maggot.” He gave Eric a quick, rough shove when he passed him and both Sam and Eric almost tumbled into the hearth. “Can’t you smell it?”

“Bastard,” Sam swore at him while he threw himself into the chair. He winced and she smiled.

Bastard! She flung at him with all her might and her smile widened into a joyous grin when he put the cup on the table and covered his pounding head.

Eric stared at Marcus, then at Sam in stunned disbelief. “You’re just going to let him sit there? Call the authorities, Sam!”

“Eric, he’s a friend of mine.”

“Oh, so now he’s a friend. You told me you hired him to repair your wall.”

“I did.” She glared at Eric now as well.

"I think," Eric said, unmoved by her increasingly furious gaze. "You and this...this..."

"Drakkon," Marcus finished for him.

"What?" Eric turned on him. "Aha, so you're a foreigner, that explains it."

For a brief, heady moment, Marcus considered flinging the lackwit bodily over Sam's pretty head into the waiting flames.

"Eric," Sam rubbed her forehead to stop the sudden pounding both of them were causing. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I came over to check on you since you said you were ill yesterday."

"She's fine now," Marcus informed him, his smile tinged with malice. "So, you can leave."

Sam tugged on Eric's sleeve before the fool said something he would regret. Or was it already too late for that? "I haven't eaten breakfast yet. Take me somewhere, will you? We can talk there."

Eric finally turned back to her, a million questions narrowing his eyes with suspicion. He nodded finally, then scrunched up his nose. "What's that smell?"

Sighing because even two showers couldn't remove the smell of onions from her body, Sam brushed by him. "Let me get my coat."

Marcus practically leaped over his chair. He reached the foyer first and snatched her coat off the hinge. Sam tried to grab it away from him, but his reflexes were sharp and fast. "Don't leave this house with him, Sam," he warned, his eyes smoldering with something deadly.

"Or what?" she asked just as forcefully. "You'll leave again?"

"No, but I..."

"Give me my coat," she demanded, unafraid of him.

He stared at her for another moment, giving her a chance to change her mind. When she didn't, he tossed the coat at her. "Very well, then. Farewell."

Sam watched him storm back to the great hall, passing Eric without comment.

Farewell? If you leave this time, don't come back. Her heart broke a little.

Stop talking in my blasted head and go if you're going!

For a moment, she didn't move. Marcus had no idea why that made his heart rejoice. But he celebrated too quickly.

"Come on." She pulled Eric toward the door.

Back in the great hall, Marcus shut his eyes when he heard the front door slam shut. Then he picked up his cup of coffee and dashed it into the fire with a blasphemous oath.

He was never going to get this right.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN SAM RETURNED to the castle later that afternoon, Ellie was sitting in the solar before a toasty fire of stacked wood, a warm woolen blanket around her shoulders, and a book about dragons perched in her lap. She barely looked up from over her half-moon spectacles when Sam entered the room.

"I see Marcus chopped some more wood." Sam took a seat in an oversized armchair beside Ellie and yanked off her boots. "I was sure he would have left," she said, unable to help the relief she felt that he hadn't.

"No, dear. He's still here. He was in a foul mood though."

"Humph," Sam grumbled. When Ellie went right on reading, Sam bent to look at the cover depicting a dragon. "Oh, wonderful."

Turning the book down on her lap, Ellie removed her glasses and finally gave Sam all her attention. "I see Marcus is not the only one who's in a foul mood today. Care to tell me what happened?"

"You mean he didn't tell you?"

Ellie shook her head. "He just said he had a terrible hangover from some drink you tried to poison him with last evening. And then he told me you went out with Eric, which I assumed was the real reason he was stomping about, cursing the walls."

"I tried to poison him?" Sam blistered. "I cooked him a fine dinner last night, Ellie. How was I supposed to know he couldn't hold his alcohol?"

Ellie held up her book. "According to this, alcohol is poisonous to Drakkons, dear. He could have died."

Sam gulped a swallow. "You mean *really* poisonous?" When Ellie nodded her head, Sam jumped out of her chair. "Is he okay?" she asked the older woman frantically. "Where is he? Oh, Ellie, I didn't know. If I did anything to hurt him I'd never forgive myself."

“He’s fine, dear.” Ellie soothed her. “I made him a brew of some thyme, thistle, and cranberry juice, if you can believe that. It actually helped him. He’s sleeping now.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Sam took her seat once again. “How did you know what to make him?”

“He told me,” Ellie informed her. “When I advised him that wine was an alcoholic drink, he knew what he needed to be well.” Ellie smiled and her chubby cheeks wrinkled. “He had no idea what a hangover was. He just assumed it meant an ill feeling that causes your head to hang over.”

Sam covered her mouth with her hand, hiding the smile that made her lips twitch. “Oh, Ellie, I had no idea.”

Sighing, Ellie took her glasses off the tip of her nose. “Sam, dear, you must realize that Marcus has never experienced some of the things we take for granted. He has this ancient knowledge coursing through his blood about the earth and the elements, and yet he’s as innocent as a babe when it comes to things men his human age should know.”

Sam nodded, and then blushed all the way to her roots remembering the way he had almost brought her to climax without even removing his shorts. He wasn’t that innocent.

“Oh, that’s all basic instinct, dear.” Ellie said, seeing Sam turn crimson and guessing why. “Any red-blooded male knows instinctively what to do with his...well...what God has endowed him with.”

Sam wanted the floor to open up so she could fall through it. “He didn’t...we didn’t...”

“Of course you didn’t, my dear.” Ellie quieted her with a soft voice and soothing, knowing smile. “Part of his ranting this morning had to do with you *rubbing yourself down in bleeping, flipping onions so that you wouldn’t drive him mad*, but you were driving him mad just the same.”

“Oh, for goodness sakes, Ellie!” Sam sighed, tired now of the whole business of blushing. “What else did he tell you?”

“That’s it,” her friend replied impassively. She slipped her glasses back on and returned to her book.

Sam sat there drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. Finally, when she realized that Ellie wasn’t going to say another word. “Where did you get the book?”

“Marcus gave it to me.”

Sam sat up, showing more interest now in the book. “What does it say?”

Ellie leaned toward Sam conspiratorially and smiled as if she couldn’t wait another second to tell Sam all about it and had been waiting for the right moment. “Well, according to this, the Drakkon have survived for thousands of years. They are a solitary race sharing some of the same emotions we feel, save passion, jealousy, sorrow, things like that.”

Sam bit her lip and cursed herself. Was Marcus jealous of Eric and he didn’t even know it?

“Like any beast,” Ellie continued, “they mate mainly to procreate. But they do love their life-mate, only I don’t think Marcus has ever loved anyone before. They also experience anger. *That* emotion he knows well,” she added with a slight shake of her head and a quick glance in Sam’s direction. “They lived in cliffs and caves. Some, like Marcus, lived around seas and some dwelled in mountains or in forests. They have, or had, a second stomach that turned what they digested into acid and in turn the acid would change into in byproduct of hydrogen and something or other. The book says there were many different species of the Drakkon, and many had their own color. Marcus was an Aqua, Sam.” Ellie informed her.

“The Aqua were among the first to inhabit the earth sometime around 16BC. They were a proud and mighty lot, unlike the Greens, their distant cousins, who were friend to any species in power at any given time. Or the Reds, who were a warrior genus. And then there are the Whites, who lived mostly in Scotland. They were the priests if you will, or peacemakers among all the classes. Marcus warred with them for many years.”

Sam’s eyes opened wide. “Marcus is mentioned in that book?”

“Yes, apparently, this book was written by a White who transformed, as they call it.”

“What does it say?” Sam was almost out of her seat to see for herself.

“Well,” Ellie pushed her eyeglasses further up the bridge of her nose and opened the book. “I’m sure whoever wrote this was quite biased against our Marcus, but it says that he was a renegade Drakkon, hunted by other transformed Drakkon for many years. The poor boy is not even aware that some of the knights who hunted him were transformed Reds and Greens.”

Ellie looked at Sam over her spectacles. "He cannot read our language, hence he has never read this book."

Sam bit her lip and shook her head, her heart breaking once again for the sleeping dragon upstairs.

"Anyway, it says here... 'Marrkiya of the *Eleventh*,' called so because of the century he was born in, turned against mankind and Drakkon alike, and was hunted, but neither man nor any other could stop him. His strength and power went unmatched throughout time, and as of this writing, there has yet to be a Drakkon strong enough to conquer him." Ellie stopped for a moment, scowling at the pages.

"Here is the bad part, Sam. It says that evil drove him to madness. A destroyer of cities, he ravaged men, women, and children alike with the mighty fire in a delusional plot to vanquish mankind. Marrkiya the Aqua, it says, does love no soul either living or dead, not even his own, but curses all to ashes." Ellie stopped reading hearing Sam's slight gasp of breath.

"You know it's not true, dear. This was written by his enemy."

"But why?" Sam felt like she was going to be sick. "Why would they say such terrible things about him?"

"Because he fought the change, Samantha. He didn't agree that transformation was the only answer that would keep the Drakkon alive. At first, he wanted to fight, but then it says he did try to go before the Council with requests to speak with Sir George of the High Order of Knights. The Whites refused, but Marcus tried anyway. Sir George shot him with a golden arrow, the only thing that can kill a full-blooded Drakkon and left Marrkiya to die. But Marrkiya was rescued, carried to a forgotten part of the world, according to this author, and when he returned a century later and stronger, he made war with man. His race turned against him and he fought alone."

"Who saved him?"

"It doesn't say. But the Whites are all afraid of him. This author, Patrick White he is called, says that 'as of the writing of this book, we endeavor to find Marrkiya and transform him ourselves.'"

"They found him and did it, Ellie," Sam said quietly.

"Yes, dear, they did." Ellie sighed, mirroring the sorrow Sam wore on her face. "There's a painting of him in this book. Would you like to see it?"

Sam nodded, but accepted the book with nervous apprehension. She wasn't sure if she wanted to see what Marcus looked like before, if it would frighten her or make her look at him now any differently.

"Page four hundred and sixty-three," Ellie told her.

Sam eyed Ellie with a slight smile for memorizing the page, then turned to it and closed her eyes. She opened them an instant later and looked down. Immediately, tears filled her vision. He was breathtaking. God help her, it was odd to see him as he really was. It made her stomach knot, her breath still. The painting was a portrait of sorts, done of his majestic head turned slightly to the side. He didn't look evil, but gloriously proud.

Sam touched her fingers to the shimmering aqua teardrop shaped scales tipped with deep purple. They looked almost like soft feathers. His face was wide and strong, his nose was not sharp but bluntly cut with flaring, upturned nostrils. Enormous canine teeth peeked from under his upper jaw. But it was his eyes that would haunt Sam forever.

For they were the same eyes she looked into this morning. They were large and alive with power and emotions, slanting slightly upward in the outer corners, shadowed by his majestic, protruding brow. He was nothing short of enchanting...the most terrifyingly beautiful creature she had ever seen.

"He looks so sad, Ellie."

"I know."

Rising from her chair, Sam handed Ellie back her book and patted her hand. "I'm going to go check on him and then make us some tea."

As Sam climbed the stairs, she remembered how angry she was with him this morning and she wished she could kick herself. Inadvertently, she had indeed poisoned the poor man. It was no wonder he was in such a foul mood when Eric arrived. She wondered if Marcus was truly jealous of Eric and then laughed at herself.

Marcus lusted for her, nothing else. If he was jealous, it was because, like it or not, he was part beast, and beasts were possessive with what they wanted. Which brought her back to her earlier fear. Would Marcus be a threat to other people in her life? He seemed to like Ellie enough. Then again, Ellie was a woman.

She reached his room and knocked softly on the door. When he didn't answer, she entered, grimacing when the old wood creaked. It was the first time she'd come to his room, even though he hadn't been living there but a couple of days. She stepped inside and looked around. His long, black coat was thrown over a small bench near the flaming hearth. Thank God, the man could chop wood and had such an affinity for fire. The castle had been freezing before he came here and winter hadn't even officially arrived.

There were no signs of his clothes and Sam was pleased to imagine he had them all neatly folded in the drawers of his wardrobe. She was tempted to look, but knowing she'd probably knock something over and wake him, she passed the large dresser and stepped around the bed. She ran her hand over the thick wooden frame smiling softly that he would pick the room with the oldest furniture in it.

She looked down at him, sighing. A single cotton sheet covered him up to his bare chest. One arm was hidden beneath it, while the other arm was thrown over his head. Soft raven waves splashed his pillow, surrounded by muscle. Sam felt his forehead with the back of her fingers, checking for a fever, and careful not to wake him. He shifted on the bed and the sheet slipped off his bent knee. Sam's eyes followed the curve of his strong legs and suppressed the urge to touch him.

Are you missing me?

Perhaps, a little. She smiled, watching him come awake. When he opened his eyes, he gazed at her with a look of such replete yearning she grew weak and sat next to him on the bed. She forgot her misgivings, all of them, and touched her fingers to his face. "Forgive me for poisoning you. I didn't know."

"I know." He smiled at her. "Forgive me for being a monster."

She nodded and let him entwine his fingers through hers as he sat up.

"I felt you missing me," he said, leaning in toward her. There was a spark of wonder in his gaze that made her want to smile. "I liked it. Do it again."

Sam blushed and his smile grew into a wide, sensual grin. "You would have to go away for me to miss you."

"Maybe I shall go away then."

She shook her head. "I'll never forgive you if you do."

He laughed and pulled her in for a kiss. They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"It's Ellie," Marcus whispered. "She worries over us. I just told her we'd be down in a moment."

"I saw the book you gave her," Sam told him gently. "Who is the author, Patrick White? Do you know him?"

He nodded. "He is Padgora, the one who altered me. Our names are changed after we are transformed."

Sam scowled and moved away from him. "The Padgora whose wife you slept with?"

He caught her wrist before she left the edge of the bed. "What is this anger you're feeling? Are you jealous, Sam?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" she laughed. But she was. Oh, she was! She hated the thought of him with someone else, naked and—

"It is the same way I feel about Eric, nay?" he asked.

"Maybe, but I didn't give myself to Eric."

"I didn't give myself to Amanda either."

"But you slept...you made love to her."

"It wasn't love. It was revenge."

Sam sighed. She doubted he would ever understand. "Revenge is wrong, Marcus. And it doesn't matter why you took her to bed. I still don't like it."

She didn't expect his smile to be so radiant. She certainly didn't expect to smile back at him when he spoke.

"Then I vow never to take another woman to bed, save you."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SAMANTHA WATCHED HIM where he sat in the kitchen with her and Ellie, enjoying his lunch.

Ellie had made them BLT's with extra bacon between Marcus's bread. He laughed at something her friend said. Sam laughed, too, but she wasn't really listening to the conversation.

How had her life become a surreal fairy tale, where the villain was now the hero? How was it possible that Marcus was once a dragon? Dragons were real. That truth alone had nearly sent her over the edge.

Marcus would have caught her.

She trusted him when she had every reason not to. She feared being rejected and abandoned again—and Marcus was too interested in plundering virgins to rely on. But she did. It made her want to cry, not because she didn't understand how she could feel this way, but because she *did* understand. He'd left her twice and came back. He'd invested his money and his time in her. Neither of which he'd likely get back. He'd dressed like a knight for her, let her read his favorite passage from her book to him, and if all that weren't enough, he *didn't* plunder her.

She felt his eyes on her now, his presence softly probing her thoughts. She gave him a slight glare, warning him to give her some privacy. He obeyed, but the smile he offered her made her blush to her roots.

She rose to serve him and Ellie more milk. He could read her mind, hear her thoughts, and see her visions. Could she live with that? To never again have a secret? She thought about him listening now and lifted her gaze to him.

"I think I'll go to town tomorrow," Ellie was saying. "I need a new toaster."

"I'll escort you," Marcus said. "Last time we shopped there, it seemed a bit raucous."

“My dear, it was raucous because of you. Why, there had to be a dozen women following us from store-to-store, and we gathered more as we went.”

Sam laughed, imagining how the sight of him must have affected lesser mortals. He was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. She remembered seeing him for the first time, fully naked and upright, solidly sculpted to perfection.

“Me?” he asked, all innocence. “What did I do?”

Ellie pushed her spectacles down her nose and looked him over. “You don’t look like other men, dear.”

When he drew his hand down his stubbled cheek and jaw and then gave his shirt a curious touch, Sam took pity on him.

“You look less...tamed. Women like big and you’ve got that in the bag.”

He held up his palms and looked around. “I don’t even have a bag.”

That’s when it hit her. Marcus thought Marrkiya was beautiful. He didn’t know how sinfully attractive he was as a human.

I do now.

Sam glared at him, but he smiled and then he winked at her. “How much longer will you be staying?”

He sat back and relaxed in his chair. “As long as I’m needed.”

That could be a very long time.

Damn it! He’d listened. His beautiful cerulean gaze had gone soft on her, his smiled widened.

Come fly with me, Sam.

Was he joking? *Not on your life.*

“Let me clean up, Ellie,” she offered. “You go rest with your book.”

“I’ll help.”

Sam tried to discourage him by holding up her palm but he insisted.

A broken dish and her favorite mug later, *she* insisted.

“Meet me in the bailey in five minutes,” he said while he picked shards of clay off the floor.

“What for?” she asked.

“Fly with me, Sam. Why are you afraid?” he asked when she shook her head, refusing his offer. “You know I won’t let you fall.”

She believed him.



EXACTLY FIVE MINUTES later, Marcus appeared in the bailey wearing jeans and boots and nothing else. “Did you miss me again, Sam?” he asked, lifting his large hands to cup her face. He moved in closer to her until she could feel every muscle in his body straining against hers. Tilting her face up toward his, he kissed her mouth until she grew weak. He withdrew with a ragged sigh.

Sam watched in blissful awe when he opened his eyes, so feverishly affected by her kiss. His vivid eyes gleamed a startling blue-green against the afternoon sun. His smile was a wide, slash of hungry heart aching, raw joy.

“I like kissing you,” he whispered roughly, dipping his forehead against hers.

“I like kissing you, too,” Sam breathed.

I am mad with desire for you. He told her silently. But there’s more to it. I want to make you happy. I find that I’m not happy unless you are. What does it mean?

She wasn’t sure what it meant, but she liked it. He made her feel reckless, shameless, and so eager she hardly recognized herself. When her hands fluttered over his shoulders and then closed around his neck, he groaned as if he was in pain. Without breaking their kiss, he wrapped his arm around her waist, dragging her further into him. His kiss deepened, ravishing her further until he filled every one of her senses.

She smelled him, tasted him, felt him, and she could hear his breath, his thoughts in her mind. She could see what he wanted to do to her, as a man, not a Drakkon, and she melted in his arms and sighed into his mouth. Their hearts beat madly together, which only seemed to further his torture. He broke away from her mouth but stayed close enough to her so that they still shared breath. His gaze impaled her, stripped her of all her defenses, and when he spoke in his rumbling, musical voice, Sam cast those defenses into the wind.

“Fly with me.”

She nodded, staring wide-eyed into his powerful gaze and then gasped when his wings appeared, unfurling behind him. Some deep, delicate part of her told her to be afraid. For what she was looking at was so mysteriously

beautiful, so brutally male and savage, she was sure he would hurt her if he took her. And taking her was exactly what was on his mind, in his searing sea-green eyes, the aching, tormented need to claim her with his body. And she wanted it, too.

She was tired of fighting it. She wanted to be his. She wanted to climb all over him and nibble on him. She wanted to feel him inside her, hard and heavy while she clung to him and probably cried her eyes out because for the first time in her life, she felt treasured. She refused to think about what would happen after she no longer carried the scent of a virgin. She only cared about this moment with him.

His wings snapped like giant pennants behind him, breathtaking, radiant aqua that made his eyes even more resplendent than they already were. He closed his arms around her and drew her in closer. He stared into her eyes, lost in some speechless awe she made him feel. And then he lifted her off her feet, beating his great wings until they were high above her home.

Sam couldn't breathe, she was so afraid. She held her arms around his neck so tightly she was sure she was strangling him. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the strength in his arms as he brought her straight up, higher and higher.

"I won't let you go, Samantha." He pressed his lips against her ear and flapped harder, letting exhilaration fill her, the ecstasy of flying with him consume her. "Wrap your legs around mine." When she did, he tilted his body forward and was about to carry her to the other side of the world, when they heard music. It filled them like ancient whispers and Marcus threw his head back lost in the terrible beauty of it.

"Marcus?" Sam gasped on a breath, "Where is that music coming from?"

She'd dreamed this the day he'd returned to her, hadn't she? Lost in some glorious dance with him while they flew wrapped in each other's arms. What did it mean? She looked up at him when he didn't answer. His eyes poured into hers and then he blinked as if coming out of a spell and looked away. He knew what the music meant, but he wasn't saying. Her heart crashed and she clutched him more tightly. He soared even higher until she closed her eyes and sucked in a soft gasp of the thin air.

"It's hard to breathe, Marcus."

Bending his head to hers, he captured her mouth and breathed air into her lungs. When he withdrew, he smiled at her and she smiled back. With a gentle shrug, he flexed his wings and she swirled with him toward the clouds, around and around until she grew dizzy and laughed in his tight embrace. He kissed her again, this time to the powerful, ancient echoes of a melody taught to the Drakkon alone.

Sam thought she had somehow died. Maybe she'd fallen off her horse and didn't know it, and now she was spinning toward heaven, carried there by a magnificent azure angel. But how could an angel make her feel such wanton desire, such feverish passion? All she knew at that moment was that she belonged with him. She felt born to be in his arms, born to be caressed so fully, from neck-to-toe, by his strong, hard body. When he lifted his head from their kiss, she nearly she wept. Every throbbing beat of her heart beat for him alone. She shook with the emotion of feeling like she existed just for him.

She was falling in love with him. Madly, fiercely, passionately in love, so much so, that she thought if he let her go, she might just sprout wings of her own and fly from the joy of it. Some place deep within her fought the release of her heart. He would hurt her. He would leave her. But she didn't want to think of that now. Not now.

She opened her eyes, realizing that Marcus was no longer kissing her but staring down into her face. His large, luminous eyes glistened like rare jewels, and when a tear fell from them onto her cheek, she released one of her hands from around his neck and touched his face.

"What's wrong?" Oh, if it were possible to have her heart torn from her body to ease the pain she saw in his tender gaze, she would have ripped it out of her chest herself.

"What is this you're feeling for me, Sam? I don't understand it."

Her eyes searched his. She ran her fingers over his lips, then gently kissed him. "Marcus, I'm falling in love with you."

"Why is it hurting you?" he almost pleaded with her, his face almost as tormented as the day he first looked at his hands.

"It's not hurting me," she explained. "Love is sacrificial. And sometimes that means giving up things you're afraid of. I'm afraid to love you."

She felt him trying to understand, but he shook his head. *I've never loved anything before, not in all the years I've lived*, she heard him say silently. *But I feel...* He shook his head, unable to put words to it.

"I'm not going to leave you, Sam," he told her instead.

"Do you promise?"

"Aye, I promise."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE HEAVY BLUE HAZE of twilight cast shadows over the distant hills. Foamy whitecaps crashed against the cliffs below over and over like a fevered lover bent on battering his way into the heart of his would-be mistress.

Sam turned away from the glorious view of the world outstretched before her and smiled at Marcus standing behind her on the rocky cliff. He'd brought her here, to his home as he called it. A cave bigger than the one he'd flown her to the first time. This one was set high above the North Sea where the wind was salty and moist and beat against her face with the bracing chill of winter.

She rested her eyes on the sleek, broad width of his bare shoulders, where silken black locks danced over his tattooed flesh. Her heart leapt, bringing to life thousands of butterflies in the pit of her stomach when he smiled at her.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked him in a soft voice.

He shook his head and she watched, enchanted, as his hair caressed the sleek muscles she ached to touch. "Are you?" he asked her, and Sam closed her eyes and sighed at the heavy, lilting weight of his voice. He came to her and wrapped her in his arms, enveloping her in his warmth.

"Do you want to go back?"

"No," she whispered into his chest. And she didn't. Not yet anyway.

This place was Marcus, wild, untamed, and dangerous; yet so starkly beautiful that it took her breath away. When he spoke, the crashing waves below were his echo and Sam realized this was where the music came from. It came from the sea. It came from the twinkling stars overhead. It was the pull of the moon dangling low in the night sky and the wind dancing over distant treetops. He was as ancient as the earth itself and he was a part of it. A part she could never be.

He swooped down and lifted her off her feet to cradle her in his arms. He carried her through the cavernous passageways; his steps matching each beat of some timeless spring weeping its cool water into a puddle somewhere to her right. In the pitch black that covered them, Sam clutched her hands around his neck and pressed her head to his chest, listening to the gentle rhythm of his heartbeat against her ear.

When he reached a hollowed-out chamber far enough away from the entrance that the wind no longer reached them, he laid her on a thick fur rug strewn across the floor. He built a fire for warmth and so that he could look upon her face when he kissed her.

When he stood over her, gazing down at the treasure the light brought to life, Sam lifted her arms to him. There were no words, only the gentle, hungry touch of his fingers along the curve of her jaw, the length of his body along hers, and the hard strength of it. His lips came to her in the deep golden glow of firelight, slowly at first, and up over the pulse of her throat. He tasted every inch of her neck, her jaw, igniting a path of flame with his tongue. One hand slipped under her neck and his other hand fit neatly over her hip, drawing her up closer to him.



MARCUS STOPPED AND stared down at her for a moment, to simply gather in the sight of her face. In that moment, he saw himself reflected in her eyes. He was a man and he felt every bit the part, aching for her, yet wanting nothing more than to hold her like this forever. He groaned at the stirrings she dragged out of him from someplace so deep they made him dizzy.

He could feel the pouring out of Sam's heart just like he felt her missing him earlier. And he liked it...he liked it all. No one had ever missed him before and certainly no one had ever loved him. But he'd also felt her anguish at the thought of losing him. He never understood the full pain of that until he'd felt it from her. He had spent centuries alone, never needing a companion. But Sam needed him, and it near ravished his soul. Could he leave her? He didn't think he could, but his attachment to her was a human feeling.

But the music. Could it be that she was his life-mate? The only time the melody was ever heard was when two hearts beat for each other while they flew toward heaven. He looked at her and drowned in the depthless dark pools of her eyes. He felt her fear and he did all he could to soothe it.

His gaze fell to her mouth and he whispered her name on a breath. He kissed her lower lip first and then breathed a ragged sigh on the curve of her upper lip. When he felt her fingers curl through his hair, his body hardened in a rush of desire so great, he had to close his hands into fists to stop them from tearing at her clothes. And then she tilted his head and kissed his eyelids, his brows, his cheeks, until he almost groaned with the love he felt pouring out of her.

“I want to give myself to you, Marcus,” she whispered into his hair.

Within him, his Drakkon heart roared and he dragged his throbbing manhood over her inner thigh. It was what every Drakkon wanted, to have a virgin offer herself without force, to partake in her purity and cleave her in twain with the power it gave him. And then eat her. Here she was, giving herself to him, already leaning up to tear off her sweater.

“Take me, Marcus.” Her sweet voice drifted over his flesh and he closed his eyes to try to regain his composure.

When he opened them again, he knew he was lost. She sat before him, his Sam, her eyes large with something akin to terror and desire mixed together. She was naked from the waist up and biting her lower lip.

Her breasts heaved. Marcus lifted his hand to touch them, surprised that his heart beat so hard. He said something in his ancient tongue offering her the worship she deserved. His fingertips traced the velvety soft buds of her nipples that tightened at his touch. Then his eyes found hers and he gave her an almost painful look, as if the mere sight of her was too much for him. It was. It made his heart swell with something unfamiliar and powerful.

Slowly, he slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her into his lap. She arched her back and he dipped his head, parting his lips to capture her nipple in his mouth. The moment he touched her, her body shook and trembled in his tightening embrace. When she lifted her arms over her head, Marcus lost all reason and drank from her deeply. He worshipped each breast in turn, smoothing his large hands over her throat, then down her flat belly.

His hands seemed to know her as they sculpted her shape. He was wild for her, and the more she trembled, the more feverish his mouth became. He cupped one breast in his hand, molding it within his fingers, taking delightful possession of her while he scraped his teeth, his lips, over her flesh.

He lowered her back onto the rug, never letting her go but kissing and suckling her until she cried out. With fingers that shook, he unbuttoned her jeans and ran his knuckles over the silky hollow between her hip and thigh.

He sat up on his knees to fully undress her and then groaned. For the first time in his life he was afraid of hurting something so precious. He met her languid gaze and unbuttoned his own jeans.



SAM BIT HER LIP, only half-aware of the fact that this man, this savage over her was about to make love to her. She almost cried out for him to stop. But the hot, driving ache she felt below her navel made her legs open on their own, inviting him to a place no other man had ever been before.

“I won’t hurt you,” he whispered.

All Sam could do was watch in helpless fascination at the way his strong hands tore his clothes away. She bit her lip at the sight of his naked body and a fleeting tremor of fear ripped through her at the size of him and the thought of all the sinewy muscle atop her.

She was afraid he would attack her without pause. He was a Drakkon after all. But he crawled up beside her and gathered her in his arms. He kissed her until she saw every color of the rainbow dance before her eyes. He filled all her senses and she raked her fingers down his arms, wanton in her sweet innocence, craving the secret intimacy he longed to give her.

She wrapped her legs around him, the way she had when they were flying and he covered her body with his. He cupped her face in his hands, his eyes pouring into hers with some unspoken agonizing need as ancient as time itself. He kissed her, parting her mouth with his tongue, and Sam clung to him as if he would fly away if she let go. She could feel the burning heat and throbbing muscle of his erection between her legs and opened for him, wanting him, needing him.

But he didn't take her. Instead, he lifted his head so that their gazes met. "No."

His breathing was ragged, his eyes half-closed. He looked like some dark angel in the throes of sinful ecstasy, and Sam swallowed hard to keep from weeping at his raw beauty. "I would taste a pearl of your passion before I take it." His voice was a raspy, restrained growl. "It's a treasure I'll cherish for all eternity."

In that moment, Sam knew what her virginity meant to him, but she didn't care that it was all he wanted. She would surrender all to give it to him, to give him anything he desired.

She held her breath while he finished undressing her, then kissed his way down her neck. He paused to drink from each nipple and then resumed kissing down her belly. He parted her legs gently with his hands and ran his bristled cheek along her inner thigh.

She gasped when his tongue flickered over her most private part. She sighed and relaxed again when he kissed her there as if she were a thing to be adored. What was happening to her? She could hardly believe it when she whispered yes and arched her back, inviting him to partake. And partake he did. His tongue worked meticulously, drinking up every pearl her body shed for him, savoring all as if her passion was the liquid of life itself. Then, suddenly, unable to be separated from her another second, he heaved his body over hers, catching her knees with his own to stop them from closing.

"Don't be frightened," he whispered, his breath close to her lips. "No...nay, my sweet. Relax with me." He soothed her, his voice deep and soft just above the seam of her mouth.

He kissed her with the same tenderness he used to enter her. He stopped, patient, when she shivered and clutched his shoulders, and then he spoke to her again, kissing every part of her face, melting her beneath him. He moved slowly, clenching his teeth with the passion that threatened to engulf him. He stroked her brow, smiled at her as though she gave him the breath he needed to live. But soon, he could no longer control the need to plunge deep within her.

Sam threw her head back at the stabbing pain that wrenched her. Her nails dug deeply into his muscled shoulders, but then he groaned, and it was almost an animal sound, ripped from his lungs. At first, Sam thought the pain

would continue and she was almost disappointed, but then he withdrew slowly and thrust again, and then again. All the while, he stared deep into her eyes, aching with need for her. He plunged deep, closing his eyes as delicious heat tightened her around him further.

“Marcus,” she breathed, unable to believe what he was doing to her and loving him more for doing it.

His body was hard and tight, even the muscles in his arms spasmed. His thrusts were slow and long and deep, and she ventured to run her fingers down his back and feel the power in his thighs while he claimed her over and over again. Oh, how she loved him. She looked at him, watched the ecstasy play across his beautiful face. Her heart melted because she was doing this to him.

He withdrew again, almost leaving her body completely, and then he smiled with sinful, wicked joy and drove himself into her like a sleek, hot lance. Sam moaned as hundreds of fires exploded inside her, lighting every nerve. He whispered something she was sure would have made her blush. He rocked her and plunged into her body to the drumming beat of primal, ancient music. She gasped and lifted her legs higher up his back, and then she grunted and screamed his name as agonizing, exhilarating convulsions racked through her in waves.



MARCUS WATCHED HER RELEASE. He was unable to take his eyes off her she was so breathtaking. He touched her face, whispering how she made him feel. And then, when she moaned, spent with exhaustion, he slipped his arm under her back and sat up on his knees, lifting her with him.

Still inside her, he caressed her to his chest and sighed when she wilted against him. He cherished her, and lifted her slowly up and down on his erection. Her name caught in his throat and he buried his face in her neck. What were these strange feelings that made him want to protect her, live for her, and die for her? When she lifted her arms around his neck, he tightened his arm around her and moved her harder.

He threw his head back, about to burst inside her. “My treasure.” His voice was set to music, his eyes almost pleading for understanding. He

groaned, sounding more like a wolf than a man...or even a Drakkon. He clenched his teeth, gasping as he exploded into her. And then he kissed her face until she laughed.

Later, he held her, wrapped up in his fur blanket. He could still hear the music playing somewhere far off. The memory of dancing with her would be forever imprinted on him. He would sooner give up his entire hoard, even his life, before he ever strayed. He wondered if she was what Padgora wanted. His greatest treasure. Something he would have to leave behind as leverage for the Whites. Padgora was afraid of him coming back as a Drakkon and killing all of them. He wouldn't do it if it meant bringing harm to Sam.

When he was transformed back, would he stop caring for her? At first, he had desired Sam because she was a virgin, and then he desired her because he was fond of her and because she was a virgin. Things were changing quickly though, instant-by-instant while he caressed her in his arms. She was his. He pulled her closer, throwing his leg over her hip and tightening his arms already coiled around her. He would bring destruction such as the Whites had never known if they tried to take her from him.

He inhaled deeply. The scent was gone, gone because she had given it to him. He smiled in the firelight, not because he'd been victorious over a virgin, but because he still wanted her. She was his life-mate and she was human. What did it mean for him? She would die long before he did and he'd have to live out an eternity without her.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him, snuggled into his chest.

"I'm thinking that perhaps I'm falling in love with you, as well."

Shifting in his embrace, Sam tilted her head up and looked at him. "Really?"

He smiled and nodded. "Really." And then he kissed her and fire filled him hotter than any combustible substance he'd ever breathed as a Drakkon.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MARCUS AND SAM didn't return to the castle for another two days, and when they did, both were surprised to find Ellie there. And she was not alone.

"I came by to see if you were back and found him lurking around," Ellie whispered and pushed her head close to Sam's while the two paused at the entrance of the solar and checked out the tall man sitting with Marcus. "I knew he was one of them by all that snowy white hair and those silver eyes. They just don't look like mortal men, do they?"

Sam shook her head. She'd seen this man before, in the parking lot of the grocery store. He'd been following her. She looked him over carefully now. His hair wasn't pure white but such a pale shade of blonde that it was hard to tell. His eyes were almost as beautiful as Marcus's, large and wide-set. He looked like an angel. His lips were full and his nose straight and strong. He was handsome, in a strange, angelic sort of way.

"Who is he and what does he want?" she asked Ellie while she balanced a tray, carrying their tea.

"Said his name was Thomas White, distant relation to Patrick White, the author of that book. I told him I knew what he was and he smiled and nearly knocked my knickers off. Said he needed to see Marcus and that he and Marcus went way back."

Sam narrowed her eyes on him. "I'm sure they do."

Can he hear me? She sent to Marcus.

Nay.

Is he a danger to you? Because if he is, Ellie and I know how to swing a frying pan.

Marcus stopped listening to what Thomas White was saying and turned to smile at her.

I should be insulted that you think I cannot handle this scrawny man, but I like that you would try to protect me.

“This must be Samantha.” Thomas White rose to his feet when she entered the room.

“She is mine, Thomas.” Marcus sprang to his feet and stepped directly in front of her, shielding her from their guest, though Mr. White hadn’t taken another step toward her. When he spoke, his voice rang with the promise of violence.

“I can tell that,” their guest said.

Or did he say he could smell that?

Sam turned as red as beet and contemplated running out of the solar and to hell with the tea.

“You’ve made the lady blush, Marcus.”

Was Thomas White insane to push Marcus now, with the promise of fire burning so intently in Marcus’s eyes?

“Worry not,” the pale angel continued in his boldness. “His temper will fade with time.”

Marcus turned around and took the tray from her hands. His scorching gaze met hers briefly before he returned it to Thomas. “Let’s discuss how you wake up sweating every night because of dreams of an Aqua Drakkon who still considers charring your friends to cinders and making you his next meal.”

Sam closed her eyes and hurried to the nearest chair with Ellie at her side. She didn’t like hearing the Drakkon speak. She was glad she never met him in his previous form.



“WELL, THOMAS,” MARCUS fell into the large cushioned chair closest to Sam’s. “What’s so urgent you came to my dwelling to tell me?”

Looking around the cozy, firelit room, Thomas nodded his approval before he sat down. For a few seconds, he just stared at Marcus with his chin pinched between his thumb and index finger. “May I speak freely in front of these ladies?”

After Marcus nodded, Thomas set his gaze on Sam again, riling Marcus's nerves.

"Get on with it, Thomas. I don't need to be Drakkon to kill you."

Thomas smiled. "How are you, Marcus? We've expected to hear more from you."

Aye, his revenge. Had he forgotten about it? "I've been busy. Get to your damned point."

Thomas chuckled a bit nervously. "You took a few things from Padgora."

"And?"

"And he wants them back."

Marcus threw his head back and laughed. When he looked at Thomas again, his azure eyes frosted from the cold blood in his veins. *How do I give the man back the languid whispers his wife poured into my ears while I took her?* he asked the White, keeping Sam from hearing his thoughts.

Thomas proved that he was braver against a man than he was against a Drakkon when he leaned forward in his chair and looked Marcus square in the eye. *You were ready to kill me for merely smiling at your woman, but you think taking another man's wife to bed is acceptable?*

The smile adorning Marcus's face vanished, and in a single moment, his eyes turned deadly serious. "Don't speak to me of what's acceptable. You destroyed the last living Drakkon against his will."

Thomas smiled cryptically. But whatever thought was going through his mind, he managed to keep hidden. "I have things to show you," he said instead. "You're not the cold monster Padgora claims you to be."

"And how do you know that?"

Thomas sat back in his chair and entwined his fingers together in his lap. Images, centuries old, but one he had never forgotten, invaded his thoughts, and he passed his thoughts to Marcus and to Sam and Ellie, as well.

Marrkiya had been so close to death that the very stars seemed to call to him. The wound in his side bled like water from a stream and he cried out... "*Fra taya lepodos existia.*" Thomas remembered his plea, was still haunted by the fear and anguish in those cerulean eyes. *I don't want to die.*

Thomas had saved his life. He had nursed the wound inflicted upon the young Drakkon and stayed with him every day until he was well again. "I

grew to love you as a brother, Marrkiya, in those days of sunlight and hours spent listening to your deepest desires, in those days before hatred consumed you.”

Marcus sat very still in his chair. He didn’t move, even when Sam reached across their chairs and rested her hand on his. “You?” he asked Thomas. His eyes glistened like sapphires beneath a sun-dappled stream, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet and low.

Could what he was seeing be true? He remembered Sir George attacking him, and his own hatred when he awoke weeks later, but he’d never known how he lived through the deathblow of the knight’s arrow. “Why don’t I remember you there?” he asked, almost stunned to silence.

“I made you forget.”

“Why?” Marcus almost pleaded.

“I wasn’t supposed to help you, Marcus.”

Marcus blinked his eyes. He rose from his chair and went to the fire and stared into the yellow flames. For a long time neither man spoke a word. Marcus had no more doubts that what he had just witnessed in his mind was real. As the minutes passed, he remembered all that they had talked about in those weeks while he convalesced and the years after that. His heart shattered within him now, hearing his own words from the past, feeling his terror at the changing world and then his brave resolve that he would never let it destroy him. He turned from the flames to face Thomas. “You knew what the Drakkon meant to me.”

Thomas closed his eyes in defense of Marcus’ wide, sorrow-filled eyes. “Yes, I knew.” He opened his eyes and their gazes met, as they had once long ago when Marrkiya woke, escaping death. “And that’s why I’m here now. No one loves our race the way you do. Patrick and the others have wanted you dead for so long. When they discovered your lair ten years ago, it was I who kept them from killing you.”

Marcus laughed, believing that had he remained a Drakkon, he could have killed them all first. “Thomas, you saved me once, long ago, and you have my gratitude for that, but you also had a part in destroying the Drakkon so I—”

Thomas held up his finger. Marcus felt the mind probe coming from him. The White was summoning someone in the castle. Marcus couldn’t tell

who it was except that her name was Tabitha. He turned immediately toward the door and waited for her to enter. "Who is she?" he asked Tomas without looking at him.

"You will see," Thomas answered.

While they waited, Thomas asked him silently why Marcus hadn't sought him out to discover what or where the special treasure was. *Your Samantha distracted you from your desire to change back.*

Marcus ignored him and kept his eyes on the entrance.

Soon, a girl no older than fifteen, stepped into the solar toting a little, golden-haired boy.

"Tabitha." Thomas went to her and put his arm around her shoulder. "This is Marcus."

"Hello, Marcus," she sang in a voice young and sweet. Her hair was raven black and plaited down her back and her eyes were the same vivid shade of aqua as Marcus's. She was Drakkon, the youngest Marcus knew of.

"I never thought I would meet another Aqua," she said, looking him over from foot-to-crown. "My father was one, but he died when I was born."

Marcus sniffed the air. She was born human and she was a virgin. Marcus scowled at him. "Why would you bring her to me? I don't want her."

Thomas arched his brow at him and then at Sam, then smiled again.

"I know. I brought her here because I heard the music two days ago. Others may have, as well. I knew now was the right time. Tabitha would be safe around you. But it isn't her who I bring to you, Marcus. It's him. This is Garion. He is an orphan."

Marcus looked at the boy and felt a slight tug on his heartstrings.

Thomas went to the child and bent to lift him in his arms. "Say hello to Marcus, Garion."

The boy popped his thumb into his mouth and waved at Marcus with the other. Marcus thought he had the most incredibly beautiful eyes he'd had ever seen. Like his hair, they were light golden brown with black rings circling each amber iris.

"Thomas?"

"Yes, he is Drakkon, Marcus. A Gold. The first one we've seen in six hundred years."

Garion popped his thumb out of his mouth. "I can fly. Wanna' see?"

Marcus paled. He turned to Tomas. "I thought I was the last."

"You were."

"But if he can fly, then that means he's only recently been transformed."

Thomas shook his head but held a finger up, signaling for Marcus to wait after he put the child down. They all waited while Garion tried to unbutton his shirt with tiny, pudgy fingers.

"Would you like some help?" Tabitha offered.

The little boy shook his head. "I can do it."

"He's quite independent," Tabitha advised with a carefully shielded smile.

"When did the Whites transform him?" Marcus asked.

"We didn't."

But Marcus had already turned his attention back to the boy. He smiled in triumph along with Garion when the last button was unfastened. Then, with a lot less effort than he'd used to rid himself of his shirt, Garion tore the Velcro fastener from his cotton pants and struggled out of them.

"What's he doing?" Marcus laughed, glancing at Thomas. Certainly, the child didn't need to be totally naked to fly. Only the shoulder blades needed to be exposed.

"Just watch," Thomas interrupted his thoughts, his silver eyes aflame while he stared down at Garion.

"Watch what..." But that was all Marcus could manage as he turned back to the boy and his mouth fell open. Behind him, he heard Sam and Ellie gasp. His own eyes grew wider with each passing second, then finally they stung with tears. Before him, where there had stood a perfect human boy only a moment earlier, sat a small Drakkon just as perfect in form.

Moved beyond words, Marcus lifted his hand to Garion's head and touched the soft, teardrop-shaped scales of glimmering, iridescent gold. He was real. Marcus fell forward from his squatting position to his knees and ran his palm over the Drakkon's flat head, then across the seven spikes that jutted upward just behind his crown and above his neck. But one hand was not enough to gather in the truth of what Marcus was seeing. With a soft catch at the back of his throat, he caressed the Drakkon's face in both hands.

"Marcus." Sam came to join him, bending to the small Drakkon in front of them. "He's a dragon. A real dragon."

Marcus heard the wonder in her voice and nodded, smiling at her tears. This Drakkon was real. But how?

Want to see me fly now? Garion probed Marcus's mind and asked.

In a moment, please. Marcus breathed, but just barely. *I haven't seen another Drakkon in so long, Garion. I would like to just look at you, if that's all right?*

Huge, luminously gold eyes stared at Marcus. Garion nodded.

"How is this possible, Thomas?" Marcus finally tore his eyes away from the miracle in front of him, complete with claws, neatly folded wings, and a short, spaded tail.

"I don't know. Patrick has known about him for a very long time. He's been searching, and when he couldn't find him, he assumed you had found the egg first and hid it with your hoard. But I found it three years ago, in the jungles of Madagascar. I've been hiding him since he hatched. It's been painstaking keeping my thoughts of him from the others. He can transform back and forth without the aid of any amber. We can discuss all the possibilities later. For now, all I need to know is if the boy and Tabitha can stay here with you?"

"Me?" Marcus rose to his feet and faced the White. The thought of watching a Drakkon grow, just of seeing one again, was almost too much for him to bear. Why would Thomas trust such a rare treasure with him? "Why me?"

"Because someone needs to protect him. Someone strong—with wings."

So, this little one was the treasure Padgora wanted so desperately. "You knew I would say aye, Thomas. But I could have done better protecting him as Drakkon."

"Perhaps," Thomas agreed. "But you wouldn't be able to kill Patrick as a Drakkon. You'd be shot down in the skies before you got near him."

"You let them transform me so that I could kill Patrick?"

"Yes," Thomas answered honestly. "And because you're the only Drakkon strong enough to fight Patrick and live if he tries to take Garion from you before you kill him. You're also the only Drakkon alive who truly understands what we've lost as a race. You won't let us lose the last one."

Marcus turned again to Sam while she cautiously lifted a finger to Garion's head. He didn't want to leave her...but his scales, his strength...

“Patrick is the only White who knows the workings of the Phoenix Amber,” he said softly. “If I kill him, I will forever remain a man.”

Sam tore her eyes away from the small Drakkon in her solar and looked at him, knowing what he desired above all else. She turned away without a word.

Marcus had never felt so torn in all the centuries he’d lived.

“We cannot lose him,” Thomas continued, pulling his attention back. “He is our greatest treasure.”

Their greatest treasure. Relief flooded through him that it wasn’t Sam, the White wanted. “The treasure Patrick thinks I already have,” Marcus thought aloud. He didn’t wait for Thomas to answer but looked at him. “What does Patrick mean to do with him?”

“He wants to take his essence. With it, he can transform at will like the boy can.”

Marcus grinded his teeth. “Garion would have to be dead to take his essence.”

“I know.”

Transforming at will—Marcus could see why Patrick would want him. If the White possessed such power... Marcus looked down at the small Gold. If he killed Patrick, he’d be condemned to remain a man, possibly for centuries...without Sam. If he refused to help, Patrick would kill the boy and live out his days as a Drakkon. “I won’t let anyone near him.”

“Then you accept?”

Marcus looked at Sam again. He longed to touch her face, to take her back to his cave and pretend Thomas had never arrived. But they were here and he needed to make a decision. He’d be giving up ever going back. “Sam, I—”

Her huge beautiful eyes poured over him. “Do what your heart tells you, Marcus. Garion is welcome to stay.”

He didn’t know what his heart wanted anymore. To let Garion die...

Marrkiya, cor fra blyss aprecide?

Marcus smiled at the boy and at the beautiful sound of their language. *Aye, Garion, you can fly now.* He watched in sincere delight when the small dragon took flight.

“Aye, Thomas, I accept. For now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GARION CONTINUED TO fly for the next two days, landing only to eat, which was the only time his 6-foot wingspan wasn't breaking something. Sam didn't mind the ear-piercing sound of glass shattering, as a matter of fact, she was quite proud of herself that she was handling the whole thing so well.

Her quiet, neat little world was falling apart with each new thunderous crash and she was still happy. For despite his claims to want nothing more than to return to being a Drakkon, Marcus had found every opportunity to remain a man. He made passionate love to her each night in bed, then shared the tales of his life with her. All ten centuries of it so far.

They'd laughed about Eric and men like him, and barely breathed gazing into each other's eyes. He might not like being a man, but he did it so well, leaving her aching every morning. She'd watched him in those early hours, sprawled out beside her like some magnificent bear snoring into his pillow, her heart in her eyes. He hadn't told her he loved her again since Thomas had arrived with Garion, since he'd made love to her and claimed her virginity.

But his gaze still followed her every movement whenever she was in his sight. There was more to his hungry eyes now. There was softness for her, as if the scales that had covered him for so long were falling away. He was reluctant to let them go. She could see it in his brooding scowl. As if every time he looked at her made him feel more like a man and he was unsure about how it made him feel.

She alone had the power to tighten his muscles, make him hard. Then softened him with a smile. He desired her as a man, wanted to devour her in his arms with his mouth, not his teeth. She rejoiced that although her scent was gone, he grew more insatiable for her the more he was with her.

Did he love her? Did he even know what love was? Would he leave her when all this was over?

I'll always remain in your life, Sam.

She looked up to where he was outside, working on the other side of her roof now. Oh, but it was nice to be dry in the rain.

She hadn't believed he'd leave her. But she hadn't considered that he might stick around as a Drakkon until after he'd confided in her last night that there might be a way to save Garion without killing Patrick immediately. He wanted his dragon body back. She didn't. She wasn't stupid. He could eat her!

Great, I'll be the only chick in town with her own pet Drakkon following her around.

Is a chick a pet? He sounded vexed in her mind. *Because I am not.*

She tuned him out and headed toward the kitchen, needing coffee. Despite all the clatter around the castle, her writing was coming along nicely.

"I promise to pay for whatever he breaks."

She turned to smile at Thomas White. She'd grown fond of him as the days had passed. He adored Garion and she thought Marcus might even be coming around.

Something crashed down the hall, followed by Tabitha and Ellie's frantic voices.

"Although, if he keeps this up..." Thomas closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I may have to tap into Marcus's treasure since the man is his guardian after all."

"What kind of treasure does he have? Like...a mountain of jewels or something?"

"Or something," Thomas answered with a wink.

She wasn't going to get anything out of him. According to Ellie's book, Drakkon treasures were sacred. One did not steal a Drakkon's treasure without losing his essence. Even speaking of another's hoard could be considered war.

"Coffee?"

"No tea?" Thomas asked, then smiled. "You must be from the States."

She nodded, trying to keep her past from his thoughts. She wanted to forget it. She was ready to let it all go.

Thomas's grin softened, then deepened again when she blushed. "You've managed to keep Marcus in one place longer than a se'nnight. And now I understand how. You are..."

Sam smiled, not really listening anymore. She looked past him at Marcus's enormous aqua wings filling her window. She watched them furl behind him until they were gone, and then, so was he.

The back door opened and he stepped inside, bringing the cold with him. He went directly to Thomas and without pause, clasped him by the collar and turned him around to face him.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Marcus!" Sam held up her hands.

He didn't blink. He dipped his head slightly and scored his eyes over Thomas's flesh like fire from his lungs. "Don't make her answer for you."

"Marcus! Stop it this instant!" Sam shouted and stomped her foot. He finally looked at her. She didn't care if his gaze was darker than a storm. "Let him go!"

"He thinks to take you from me," his answer was spoken with less anger, as if looking at her brought him back from his lair.

"I don't belong to you."

He looked so incredulous, so utterly stunned and dismayed that Sam didn't know whether to laugh or throw a fork at him.

"Very well, then." He backed away and bowed to her like a knight from one of her books. She watched him leave without another word, the same way he'd arrived.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with own eyes," Thomas said, watching him go, as well.

"Wouldn't have believed what?"

"How quickly you subdued him, for one. But more than that, his reaction to thinking I meant to take you from him."

"I know, and I'm sorry for that, Thomas. Did he hurt you?"

"No, sweet, don't you see? You've become his treasure."



SAM CLIMBED THE STAIRS to the room she and Marcus shared. Was she truly his treasure? Was that why he was so possessive? She ached to take the steps two at a time to reach him sooner, but she'd probably trip over a bunny ear and break both her legs and then he would be even more angry with her. She sighed. That wasn't the only reason she didn't run to him. She didn't care if she was a treasure or not, how dare he be angry with her? She'd done nothing. Marcus was going to have to learn to trust her, and then he was going to have to learn that she wasn't a piece of cattle that he owned.

She stomped up the stairs the rest of the way and pushed open the door to their room expecting to find him snoring like the big oaf that he was. When she saw him sitting in a chair in front of the hearth, staring into the flames, she paused. He looked so beautiful in his lonely silence, so masculine with his long legs stretched out before him and his forearms resting on his flat, bare belly. Sam almost forgot her anger at the sight of those wide, glorious eyes with flames dancing in their reflection. But he turned then and looked at her.

"Did you finally tire of Thomas's babbling?"

She held her ground, even if the sound of his deep, rumbling voice turned her to damned butter. "Thomas doesn't babble," she retorted with a cheeky smile and slammed the door shut. "At least he doesn't boss me around."

Marcus scowled and her heart ached. "Boss. What does that mean?"

Crossing the room, Sam kicked her slippers off her feet and threw herself on the bed. "It means he doesn't tell me what to do. He doesn't think he owns me, nor does he want to."

Marcus left his chair and stalked over to the bed and stood over her. "Own you?" he repeated with a hooded look and a tight clenching of his jaw.

"That's right." Sam looked up at him. "He's not an oaf...like you."

"I'm not an oaf, Sam." His anger flared right along with stung pride.

"You are, Marcus."

"I've been called many things, but I don't like being called an oaf by you."

Sam almost sighed dreamily into his face. He was so completely honest, so bare and open. When his heart felt something, he said it without reserve or double meaning.

But he was so arrogant. “You don’t truly prefer Thomas over me, do you?”

She wanted to laugh at his puffed-up pride that belied the worry in his eyes. What a fool he was to even suggest it. “Well, he does have pretty hair.”

She squealed with laughter when he swooped down on her and lifted her in his arms. He pressed kisses to her neck and collarbone that tickled her belly and made her laugh even more.

“Forgive my anger, Sam.” He stopped kissing long enough to gaze down at her. “You have become very important to me. The thought of someone else...”

She quieted him by leaning up to kiss his mouth. “There’s no one else. There’s only you.”

He pushed her down on the bed and began undressing her.

“Marry me, Sam.”

She looked up, confused. “What?”

“Marry me. Tomorrow. And then I’ll be your husband and I can own you properly.”

He laughed when Sam punched him in the arm and then he finished undressing her.



MARCUS WAS ALREADY bathed and dressed when Ellie called everyone down to breakfast. He stepped into the great hall moments before Thomas.

“Ah, good morn to you, lovely lady,” Thomas sang.

Marcus mumbled under his breath. He guessed he was going to have apologize to the White for manhandling him yesterday. He didn’t like these new feelings of regret and injured feelings, but they came easier to him as the weeks passed.

“Thomas!” Ellie practically beamed right out of her shoes. “You’re always so pleasant in the morning.”

“Why shouldn’t he be?” Marcus grumbled. “He’s living here in this beautiful castle, free of charge.”

Thomas laughed, passing him to plant a kiss on Ellie's cheek. "Someone has to protect Sam against the beast that lives here," he teased and swatted Marcus on the arm with his rolled-up newspaper.

"I'm not a beast." Marcus brooded, wishing he still had fangs and swatted Thomas back with his fist.

Thomas grimaced at him, rubbing his arm.

"Are you two boys fighting?" Ellie turned to admonish both of them with a cool, motherly glare and shook her spatula at them. "Because I won't have it. I'll box both your ears."

Thomas threw up his hands in surrender. "My mother boxed my ears once. And let me tell you, your ears haven't been boxed properly until they've been boxed with ten inch claws."

"Well, I dare say!" Ellie didn't have that kind of venom in her on her angriest day.

She tossed Thomas a pitied look and then blushed to her roots when he burst into laughter. Even Marcus allowed his mouth to hook into a smile at Thomas' teasing.

An instant later, they heard a crash from the outside hall, followed by a severe chastisement by Tabitha. And then, like a typhoon bent on destruction, Garion flew into the kitchen. He wasn't trying to hit anything. It was just that his wings, like those of any Drakkon, were bigger than the rest of him and got in the way of the seemingly clear path followed by his eyes.

"Good lord!" Ellie squealed as the Drakkon flew over her, slapping her in the head with the tip of one wing.

Tabitha rushed into the kitchen with Sam close at her heels. The younger girl skidded to a halt when she saw Marcus and the others ducking to avoid Garion's sharp, dangling claws.

"I'm sorry." Tabitha clutched her hands to her chest, then threw Garion a venomous look when he sailed over her, narrowly avoiding a disastrous encounter with Sam's curio shelf.

"Sorry for what?" Marcus asked, barely shielding his amusement. The poor girl looked on the verge of tears and her raven braid was coming loose in a dozen places. It looked as if Garion had tried to nest on top of her head. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Tabitha. Drakkons should be permitted to fly outside."

Tabitha shot a glance to Thomas. He had decided for the boy's own safety he should not be allowed to leave the castle in his Drakkon form. But Tabitha had to agree with Marcus. Garion was just too big and too inexperienced a flyer to soar around indoors.

Apparently, Garion agreed. He screeched Marcus's name and barreled toward him at the precise moment that Ellie's bacon decided to fire a sizzling missile of splattered grease onto one of Garion's tender scales. The Drakkon tumbled in the air, wings still flapping, and long, metallic-colored talons aimed straight for Sam's face.

Marcus vaulted forward. He covered Sam like a shield and spun her out of the way so fast she lost her footing and fell against his chest. When he was sure she wasn't hurt, he gritted his teeth and turned to Thomas. "Bring him outside. Now!"

"You coming, Marcus?" Thomas asked, needing his affirmation. Marcus was the only one besides Garion who could fly.

Everyone followed the small Drakkon into the inner bailey with Tabitha calling for the boy to put on his coat. Garion called back that he didn't need it, and Marcus's reassurance that he would keep him from danger.

The moment the young Drakkon felt the fresh air on his scales, Marcus knew he'd made the right decision, for Garion opened his wide jaws and a sound more beautiful than a chorus of angel's singing rushed out of it. The Drakkon flapped his leathery wings and soared toward the heavens with such great speed, they all paused after a moment, seeing nothing but a speck in the sky. But they could still hear the heart-wrenching song of his soul being set free.

An instant later, the speck became a golden star falling to the earth, and then the figure diving toward them grew larger until his scales could be seen sparkling like polished bronze in the sunshine.



WITH HIS HEAD tilted toward the heavens, Marcus watched Garion's flight and smiled. It was a smile of pure, unrequited joy that brought tears to Sam's eyes when she turned to look at him. This was what Marcus might never feel again, what the Whites had taken away from him. He could still fly, but the

magic of such natural, graceful majesty was gone. The power of his size, the swoosh of his great tail slicing the air, the brilliance of his luminescent scales reflecting and bouncing off golden rays of sunlight, was snatched away from him in one terrible moment.

His voice was still beautiful though, Sam comforted herself, and then looked away quickly when he lowered his head and turned to gaze at her.

“Blaseiaaaaaaa!” Garion roared to Sam’s right and she looked up in time to see him open his jaws directly behind a small meadowlark.

His body paused in the air for the space of a breath and then surged backward. Sam stood in awestruck wonder as he blew out a stream of fire that not only charred the bird, but a tip of one of the castle’s turrets more than thirty feet away as well.

“Well,” Thomas said, grinning from ear-to-ear when Garion dove and swallowed up his meal before it reached the ground. “That’s one less for breakfast, Ellie.”

“Two,” Marcus corrected.

“You’re not having breakfast with us?” Sam asked, her heart breaking for him.

“I’m going to stay out here and keep an eye on him.”

“We can call him in,” Tabitha suggested.

“No. He’s having too much fun.”

Once again, Sam realized what Marcus had lost, and she knew she could never be enough to make him happy. She doubted, after seeing the true magnificence of a Drakkon in flight, that anything ever could again. She turned and followed Ellie and the others back to the castle.



MARCUS WATCHED HER leave. He wanted to go to her and take her in his arms. He wanted to touch her soft hair, kiss her eyelids, and then her delicate, pouting mouth. He ached to smell her, for now she longer wore the scent of a virgin, but of him. And no matter how she felt about it, she was his. She loved him. He could feel it exuding from every pore. And he loved her. Hell, if anyone had told him that love hurt this much, and that he would

one day suffer the crushing weight of it, he would have burned them to cinders. He didn't want to leave her, but...

He looked up at Garion soaring above him and sighed. How easy life had been as a Drakkon compared to this ache in his heart. He hadn't flown with a Drakkon in so long, he couldn't remember doing it. He lifted his arms over his head and pulled his shirt off. He tossed it to the ground with a careless smile and unfolded his great, aqua wings.

Just below the clouds, the powerful arch of cool, liquid-like wings captured the wind and carried Marcus higher and higher. He set his gaze on Garion and watched the small Drakkon flap his wings wildly to catch up. When he did, he grinned, exposing small, sharp fangs. Marcus laughed and dipped to the right with perfect grace. They flew together for over an hour, playing and tumbling through the clouds. Marcus showed him how to prepare his fire before he found his target so that he wouldn't have to breathe in so deeply and pause his flight.

Garion practiced until there wasn't a bird left in sight. When he grew tired of flying, Garion transformed into a boy and rode on Marcus' back, squealing with delight while the wind whipped through his hair.

Later, they sat atop the battlements with their legs dangling over the edge. Garion popped his thumb into his mouth and listened with great interest while Marcus told him the tale of the great Sir Henry, a knight who lived in the thirteenth century.

"Why did he hunth you, Marcush?" the boy asked with his lips still wrapped around his chubby finger.

"Well, unlike the other knights, this one had a good reason," Marcus told him. "You see, he loved a virgin that I had wanted to eat."

"Whath is a virgin?"

Marcus looked down at the wide, golden orbs looking back at him and remembered that this child was Drakkon. He was going to need to understand what virgins were and why Drakkon desired them. "A virgin is a person who has not been touched or spoiled by...ehm...another person's...essence. When a human bonds with another their body absorbs a part of their lov...ehm...mate." Marcus rubbed his forehead. It was starting to ache. There was just no way to explain to the child what made a person unchaste physically but not spiritually.

“Did you eath her?” Garion asked, thankfully returning to the original course of the conversation.

“No,” Marcus said quietly, remembering. He cast Garion a long, sideward glance. “But it wasn’t because I couldn’t beat Sir Henry. It was because I didn’t want to beat him.”

“Why noth?”

“Because while I was busy licking my chops day-after-day over the virgin Isobelle, I was forced also to watch the way Henry loved her.” Marcus laughed softly to himself, recalling a day he’d spied on the couple from beyond a low hill. Sir Henry, mighty champion to the throne of England, slayer of two Reds, and lord of his own castle, had knelt on one knee reciting poetry to Isobelle. And pitiful poetry it was, too, though his lady seemed to like it enough.

Could you write me something better?

In my sleep, he replied haughtily, hearing Sam’s delicate voice in his mind, missing her face, seeking her out.

You don’t have to pen me any prose. She let him off the hook. *I’m not one for poetry. But can you do me a favor and stop talking about licking your chops over a virgin?*

He smiled, basking in the sound of her in his head and because he didn’t have to sit down with a pen. *I didn’t know you were listening.*

I like how you are with the boy. If you are looking for ways to court me, you’re doing fine right now.

He felt a rush of her warmth cover him.

“They called it courting back then,” Marcus told the child leaning against him. Sir Henry was much like the men in Sam’s books. His heart sank when he thought how unlike those men, he was.

You’re better, she whispered across his thoughts. *You’re real.*

“Whath’s courthing?”

Cutting Garion another side-glance, Marcus scowled at him. “You sure do ask a lot of questions.” To which he received a gut-wrenching smile.

“Come, it’s time to return indoors. Keep your current form inside from now on and I’ll bring you flying daily.” He gathered the boy in his arms and smiled at Garion’s sleepy eyes. “Do we have a bargain?”

“Yes.” Garion pulled his thumb out of his mouth and smiled at him. “Marcus?” he asked a moment later, while Marcus lowered them to the ground. “Do you like Sam?”

“Aye, I do,” Marcus told him. “I love her.”

“But Tabitha said one of the Whites told her you don’t love anything.”

“Well.” Marcus kissed the top of his head. “The White was wrong.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SAM MOVED FURTHER into the shadows along the thin battlement wall, staying carefully hidden while Marcus stood to his feet a short distance away. Only when he stepped over the side did she allow herself to move. She knew she shouldn't have spied on them, but she'd suspected earlier that Marcus wanted to fly with Garion. She'd been right and the sight of them, especially when Garion rode his back as a boy, tore at her heart. But she hadn't been able to look away.

She was thinking about how selfish it was to want Marcus to stay when giant talons clamped around her waist. She drew in a breath to scream at the fiery red wings flapping almost silently above her.

It was a Drakkon! A very real, very alive, full-sized Drakkon!

Open your mouth, it warned, turning its huge scaly head around so that it could look at her, *and I'll burn everything to ashes.*

No! Everyone she knew and loved was in the castle. She didn't open her mouth but she couldn't stop her heart from beating wildly—so wildly, she fainted.



"OH, THANK YOU for getting him to sleep." Tabitha met Marcus at the back door and took Garion from his arms. "I'll have some peace tonight."

Marcus smiled and promised her an entire day off on Sunday. He and Sam would look after him.

Sam, where are you? I'll come get you, my love.

When only silence filled his thoughts, he looked around the kitchen at Ellie and Thomas. "Where's Sam?"

"We thought she was with you," Ellie told him.

No, no, he wouldn't think the worst. *Samantha!* When she still didn't answer, he turned his pale face to Thomas. "She isn't answering me!"

At once, Thomas bolted from his chair. He pulled a small black stone from his pocket and looked into it. "I cannot see her," he said and ran for the door. "Did any of you hear a car?"

Samantha, answer me this instant.

Still nothing. His heart faltered. Where did he even begin to look for her? The castle and its perimeter were the first places. If she'd fallen somewhere and was unconscious she wouldn't hear him. If Patrick had taken her, he'd done it for ransom. He wouldn't have killed her already. Marcus was going to kill him and any others who came against him. But how would he find them?

"I'm going to look for her," he said, feeling the need to do something.

"I'll take the car." Thomas turned for his keys.

"No." Marcus stopped him. "If someone took Sam they might return for Garion if they read her thoughts about him. You need to stay here. I'll find her."

He ran from the kitchen before anyone could stop him. His wings snapped open to reveal thirty feet of aqua radiance as he took off running. He traveled north for three hundred miles, pushing his speed and the strength of his wings, then, finding nothing, he turned west. All the time, he called to her, searched for even a trace of her. But there was nothing.

His heart roared. He had to find her.

Sam, where are you?

She's safe. For now.

The sound of Patrick in his head drew him to a halt in the air. He hovered high above the island of Skye, searching for a direction.

Patrick, you're going to die for taking her. Your only decision now is how you want to take your last breath. If you hurt her in any way, I will hurl your family, including little Helena and her brother Jacob, over the cliffs.

Silence. He hated himself for threatening children, but hell, he'd eaten a few in the past. He was becoming more and more a man every day. Damn it all to hell.

Bring the boy to me and I'll give you back your original form. You never have to worry about being transformed again. The Phoenix Amber will not work more than

twice on the same body. You can do with this woman whatever you please. Do we have a deal?

Tell me where you are and I'll bring him.

I'll tell you when you bring him.

Marcus searched for her until morning. He returned without her, feeling more hopeless and enraged than ever before. He let the others ask him questions and he told them about Patrick and his demands. He lumbered into the great hall and fell into a cushioned chair.

He closed his eyes and thought he was dreaming her when her voice sounded in his head.

Marcus?

Sam! He bolted out of the chair. Where are you?

I don't know. It doesn't know I'm awake.

It? What do you mean, it?

A Drakkon, Marcus, she cried. A gigantic red dragon that can speak. Marcus, are you going to find me?

Aye, love, aye. I'm coming.

Hurry, Marcus, a male's voice invaded his thoughts, silencing hers. Patrick won't be kept waiting.

"What is it?" Thomas hurried to him after he entered the hall and saw the fear in Marcus's expression.

"Sam was able to contact me, but she doesn't know where she is. Also, she said a Drakkon had taken her. A Red."

Thomas thought it over for a moment. "It's most likely Simion Red. He and Patrick are close. Patrick must have transformed him."

Marcus ran his hand through his hair wanting to yank out every strand. "I have no proper weapon to fight a Drakkon, Thomas. Patrick wants Garion. I fear he may kill Sam if he doesn't get him."

"So, do we give up Garion then?" Thomas asked him with apprehension straining his throat.

No! Damn it, Marcus didn't know what to do. "I cannot make this choice, Thomas. She...she means everything to me."

"Marcus?"

Neither Marcus nor Thomas heard the faint voice at their feet.

"I don't want harm to come to the boy," Marcus continued. "He is our last hope. But I cannot live without Sam in my life."

"Marcus?" Garion tugged on his jeans.

"Garion, go find Ellie and tell her Marcus and I said you can have a cookie."

The boy blinked up at Thomas, smiled, and then turned back to Marcus. "Why don't you use your fire on the Drakkon?"

Marcus bent to his knees in front of him. "I can't use it, Garion. I'm not a Drakkon anymore."

"Do you want to be?" he said, shoving his thumb back into his mouth.

Ah, that was the question that plagued him. Did he want his majestic form back? Would he give it up for Sam? For Garion?

"There you are!" Tabitha hurried inside the hall and picked Garion up. "Leave the men alone," she scolded. "They have important things to discuss."

Marcus straightened and watched the child's beautiful face bobbling up and down behind Tabitha's shoulder.

"Do you want to be Drakkon again, Marcuth?" he asked around his thumb. "I could do it."

Marcus stared at him for a moment. "Tabitha, wait!" he called out, stopping her from leaving. He went to them and set his gaze on Garion's. "What can you do?"

The boy stopped sucking his thumb for a moment. "I can make you a Drakkon so you could fight better and bring Sam home. I like her."

"How, how can you make me Drakkon again? I will not harm you for your essence."

Behind him, Thomas smiled.

"You don't have to hurt me. Just mix some of my blood with yours. A little will do it."

Marcus couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was it possible? He pivoted on his heels and looked at Thomas. "Did you know he could do this?"

Thomas shook his head and came around to stare at Garion. "Why didn't you tell me you had this power?"

Garion shrugged his shoulders. "You like being a man."

Marcus needed to sit down. When he did, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, trying to think clearly. He could transform. Be a Drakkon again. All that power—his beautiful scales, his talons, his fire. All his once again. But he'd be giving up other things, new things like beds and bacon, laughter and making love. Human emotions, like sorrow, loneliness, compassion, love...Sam.

No. He didn't want to give up Sam. Not for any treasure, not even for his Drakkon body. The realization shook him to his core. He shook his head in amazement at how being a man had changed him. He looked around at Ellie and Garion, Tabitha and even Thomas. He had a family now.

"Do you want to be a Drakkon, Marcuth?"

He smiled at Garion. He'd wanted to return to his natural form more than he'd wanted anything else—until he'd met Samantha Montgomery and touched her face, her body, with human hands. He couldn't believe what he was about to say, even after he said it.

"No, Garion, I don't."

Thomas turned to him, stunned and wide-eyed. "Then, Samantha is your treasure."

Yes, yes, she was. Marcus stood. She was everything he wanted, all he ever needed. No one would take her from him. But how the hell was he going to fight Simion Red?

"Garion, if you transform me, will I remain a Drakkon?"

The boy shook his head. "No, you will be like me."

Marcus looked at Thomas and grinned. "Let's get to it then."



MARCUS STEPPED INTO the outer bailey with the others and looked up at the skies.

I'm coming for her, Padgora. And then I'm coming for you.

"If we're going to do this, Thomas interrupted his thoughts. "There are things we should discuss first."

"Make it quick," Marcus told him, pulling out of his jeans and boots. He stood ready, dressed only in his briefs.

“Well,” Thomas began, “Simion won’t be expecting a Drakkon, so you have the element of surprise. But we still don’t know where he’s taken Sam. My onyx is still dark.”

Marcus flicked his cool, beryl gaze to him. “I’ll be able to smell him when I’m Drakkon.”

“Will you remember Sam after the change? There’s a chance...”

“I’ll remember her.”

“Perhaps I should transform and come with you,” Thomas offered, then shook his head, remembering to whom he was speaking. No Drakkon was more deadly than Marrkiya. “I’ll stay here with Garion.”

Marcus bent his knees and met Garion’s smile with one of his own. “Now, little Drakkon, tell me what to do. Once we share blood, will I transform right away?”

The child shook his head and then looked at the sky. His thumb slipped from his mouth when his wide, topaz eyes fell on Marcus. “A Drakkon is coming.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MARCUS SPINTED INTO ACTION, lifting Garion in his arms and shouting for everyone to get inside the castle. “How close?”

The child didn’t answer but transformed. The instant he had fangs he tore them through the flesh at Marcus’s forearm and then turned them on himself, piercing a hole through his tender scales. They both bled and Garion pressed their wounds together.

How do you know what to do?

The baby Drakkon shrugged its bony shoulders. *I just do.*

“How?” Marcus stopped while a deep warmth pumped through his veins. It almost made his knees melt. He could feel the power of Drakkon returning to him, coursing through him. It made feel lightheaded and exhilarated. He waited an instant while a wave of nausea washed over him next. “How long will it take?”

You just have to want to be Drakkon, and you will become one.

“And the same the other way around, aye?”

Garion cocked his little horned head and listened. *Drakkon is closer.*

Marcus ran to the castle doors, calling Tabitha telepathically to come take the transforming baby Drakkon.

When they were safe inside, Marcus turned and leaned his back against the door and breathed. He just had to want to be a Drakkon. It was that simple. He thought about his great spaded-tail and how Garion would enjoy the tricks he’d teach him. But what if wanting to be a man wasn’t enough to bring him back? Back to her. What if he couldn’t turn back and was dangerous to Sam? To Ellie?

And so the simplest task of just wanting wasn’t working.

Drakkons could be silent in their flight if they were good enough flyers. Simion Red was not. He was still about a mile away but Marcus could see him now, riding the clouds.

To fly again. To rule the sky. A swoosh of his magnificent tail could dash the clouds to nothing.

I want to be a Drakkon!

It wasn't working. Damn it! Did he like being a man *that* much? He would admit that because of Sam, he loved it, but now was not the time to dwell on such things.

The Red hovered over the castle for a moment and then came in for a landing.

I want to be a Drakkon!

Nothing. So, after all this, love was going to get him killed?

Padgora is done waiting, human. Where's the boy? the Red rumbled in Marcus's thoughts while he landed gracefully and tucked in his wings.

Marcus stared at him for a moment. He hadn't seen a Red in so long. They were quite ugly. This Simion's—Marcus didn't know him—scales weren't blood red with a touch of iridescence to make them glimmer like red flames in certain light. His were smudged with brown, like dirt or rust. His snout was long and narrow and his brow was knobbed over red squinty eyes.

Nothing like an Aqua.

He stepped backward on his damned human feet and reached for one of the tools he'd left out here. Whatever he grabbed had a handle. Good enough.

"Tell Patrick to come and get him." He swung what turned out to be a shovel, straining the muscles in his arms. The edge of the metal cut across the Drakkon's chest, but only a trickle of blood issued forth. It didn't stop Marcus from going at him again. He'd fight as a man until his Drakkon showed up.

The Red swiped at him with his long, razor-sharp talons but Marcus leaped out of the way in time.

Suddenly, he heard Tabitha's voice outside. She was calling for Garion.

Marcus turned toward the castle doors and his heart dropped to the ground.

Garion was running toward him, his pudgy hands swinging to get him there faster. And then those arms changed into his golden-scaled claws, his sneakers popped and tore away, and his feet grew six-inch talons. He drew back in the air while his wings held him upright, opened his mouth and

breathed fire at the Red. It wasn't enough to do any real damage, but the small Drakkon was close enough to grab.

No! Marcus wanted to run to him but he couldn't move his legs. His breath caught in his chest. It was happening!

The world changed in his vision almost instantly. His Drakkon form grew out of his human body, tearing away his briefs and his concerns. The air was tainted with fear and he licked his hard, leathery chops to cleanse his tongue. The sea called to him but he swung his massive head toward the Red trying to grab a smaller Gold.

"Marrkiya! The boy!"

He lowered his gaze to a human waving his scrawny arms—*The boy!*

His wings unfurled with a booming snap and he leaped forward on huge, muscular haunches. He smashed against the Red and the two fell with a mighty crash.

Take hold of my tail, he commanded the little Gold. Don't let go.

He bolted back to his taloned feet and then attacked again. Their mighty wings lifted both Drakkons off the ground and into the air, claws entwined in a battle to the death.

Finally, exhausted from fighting a far better specimen, the Red backed up and hovered over the fields. *How did you do this, Mar—*

Marrkiya didn't give him a chance to finish and possibly let Padgora pick up his thoughts. He opened his mouth, and for the first time in months, breathed fire. His lungs were full but he didn't use up his store. It was one of the most difficult things he'd ever had to do as a Drakkon. But the Red was already burning, falling, and landing with a thunderous crash –on top of the bailey wall.

Don't kill Drakkon with fire, Garion warned while he let go of Marcus's tail and landed atop Marcus's head. Of course, it was broad enough to hold him.

We don't have a golden arrow, Marrkiya reminded him.

Yes, we do! the Gold cried out and flew down to the injured Red.

Marrkiya kept his wings close as he sped toward the smoke.

But he was too late. The little Gold's golden arrow-tipped tail was stuck inside the Red.

Now he's dead, Garion declared with arrogance that made Marrkiya proud.

Marrkiya nodded and pulled the Gold's tail loose. *Now get in the castle, he ordered, his brow dipped low over his eyes. Before I make you my dinner.*

He saw the humans running out to him but he stopped them when he lifted his head and blew out a gust of smoke from both nostrils. He was angry that they'd let the Drakkon out of their sight. They had better not let it happen again.

He remembered something else. Padgora had his treasure. With a mighty flap of his wings he rose off the ground and flew off toward the sun.

Patrick. I have the boy. You can still sense Drakkon, can't you? If he tried, he'd sense Marrkiya, and since he didn't know about the transformation, he would think he was picking up the Gold. *Or have you lost that ability too?*

Where's Simion? Patrick demanded.

I shot him with a golden arrow.

Traitor!

Marrkiya wanted to eat him. Slowly. He dared call him a traitor after he'd robbed the Drakkon of their destinies only to want to change back himself. And to change others to do his bidding.

I want to speak to the woman. Prove to me that she lives and I'll bring the child to you.

She sleeps.

Then you had better wake her or I make a detour to your house.

Marcus? He heard her a few minutes later.

Marcus. Another part of him. A part that loved her—whether he understood it or not. A part that drove him to continue.

Sing to me, he told her. Sing the song we heard the night we went flying, the night at my cave. Sing it and I'll find you.

Hurry, Marcus.

I'm coming.



SAM SAT STILL in the chair Patrick White had tied her in. She didn't care about the tears streaming down her face or about the man dressed in Armani, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows in his luxury high-rise

apartment. She was thankful to be away from the Drakkon and his foul breath.

“You miss the sky,” she said softly while Patrick, or as Marcus knew him, Padgora, continued to gaze outside.

“I will rule them once again,” he said, finally turning to her.

“He’s going to kick your ass.”

White smiled. “If he’s quick enough.”

“It doesn’t matter how quick he is. Have you seen the size of him? He isn’t a brick wall. He’s two. I’d be nervous if I were you.”

“You’re delightful!” he laughed at her heartfelt declaration. “I should have left you awake. You could have entertained me.”

“You can laugh, but your ass is getting kicked.”

He looked her over for a moment, coming to some conclusion that made his grin widen. “He races to your defense. He’s promised to toss my babes to the cliffs if I hurt you.”

Babies over cliffs? Horrible.

Of course, Marcus wouldn’t do it. He was wonderful with children.

“And do you want to know what he did to my wife?”

“No thank you.”

He ignored her and moved toward her. “He had sex with her, used her up and left me with her constant tears.”

Sam closed her eyes, wishing he would stop.

“She almost emptied my bank account with the expensive gifts she bought him. The first night I tried to have sex with her, she rejected me. I wasn’t good enough anymore. I had no other choice, really.”

“What did you do?”

“I killed her, of course. We were no longer any use to each other.”

“You’re sick!” she accused him.

“Perhaps. But I will be well soon.”

His back was to the windows, so he didn’t see the giant blue-green dragon breaking through the clouds and heading straight for them. An...aqua *Drakkon*. Marcus.

She took in the sight of him while he flew. She’d seen Garion and a giant red beast, but nothing, not even the portrait of him in Ellie’s book, could have prepared her to behold Marrkiya in the flesh.

He was something taken out of a Tolkien novel. Monstrously big and gloriously beautiful in a terrifying sort of way.

Her eyes couldn't help but grow wide with terror when Marrkiya the Drakkon crashed through the window, spraying glass everywhere. She screamed and pushed back in her chair. The chair toppled over and she went down hard. Thankfully, the flying glass didn't touch her.

She became aware of two things while she laid there—her breath, hard and heavy, and the loud crunch of the Drakkon's claws as it walked across the glass. His presence would have been oppressive, taking up most of the room, ducking his gigantic head beneath the low ceiling. But the sunlight reflected off his cerulean scales, bringing different hues of blue, green, and purple to life. She watched him, bound to her chair and unable to move while he swung his head in her direction. When he saw her, he extended his long neck until his scaly face was just above her.

Sam didn't breathe. She could only stare up at his wide jaws and the enormous fangs overlapping them. A whoosh of warm, methane-scented air covered her when he flared his upturned nostrils and breathed on her. Was he going to kill her? Eat her? She lifted her gaze to his enormous, elongated eyes. They softened on her. Did he recognize her?

Marcus.

One frilled ear quirked at the sound of her voice in his mind.

When no reply came, she squeezed her eyes shut, praying that her death came quickly. But instead of his teeth, she felt his sharp claw graze against her ankle. With a gentle swipe, he cut away the rope that bound her and then pushed her chair over with his broad snout and cut away the bindings around her wrists. She was free and she didn't waste an instant to scoot under the nearest table.

"How is this possible?" she heard Patrick White foolishly shouting at him. "What have you done? Where is the child?"

He is safe from you, Marrkiya replied in a calm deep, rumbling voice in Sam's mind.

"Not for long! I'll use the Phoenix Amber to transform myself and then I'll come after you, right after I slit the child's throat and take his essence!"

Sam almost felt sorry for Patrick for spouting such insanity. Did he think this Drakkon wouldn't kill him where he stood?

You would give up being a man, a father to your children, Marrkiya asked him then held up his claws and admired them. *The Phoenix Amber only works twice on one body. I assume that's why you haven't used it already. You wouldn't be able to transform back and you like being a man.*

Marcus turned to look at her again and when their eyes met, Sam understood why any virgin would give herself to him.

I like it too, he told her silently. *But first, I must stop him.*

Don't eat him! The thought of it turned her stomach.

I won't.

And don't burn him.

Samantha.

Not if I stop you first! Patrick's voice resonated through both their heads.

A flash of something gold caught Sam's eye. She looked up from beneath her hiding place and saw the White holding a golden bow, its matching arrow pointed at Marrkiya.

"I've waited for this day for so long. Oh, how I've dreamed of killing you, of wiping your arrogant face from my memory."

He pulled the taut bowstring. Sam screamed and leaped at him. Marrkiya could have easily flown out the open window, but he didn't leave her. He'd promised he never would.

She ran for Patrick even as the arrow flew. She knew it hit Marrkiya, for Patrick was too close to miss. And she knew what it meant.

With a blood-curdling scream, she threw her body against Patrick's as hard as she could. They both tumbled to the ground and rolled to the edge of the gaping window, fifty stories above the ground. Patrick White teetered over the side for a moment. When he started to fall, he grabbed hold of Sam's wrist to take her with him. She screamed again as she was dragged out the window.

A hand caught her just before she fell. She looked up, barely able to comprehend what was happening. Marcus leaned over the side in human form. The arrow piercing his shoulder moving with each breath he struggled to take. His long black hair swept across his eyes, terrified eyes that clung to her, adored her, bared his heart and soul to her.

"I've got you," he told her while she dangled in the air with Patrick holding on to her other wrist. His weight threatened to pull her free from Marcus. She held on, trying not to scream again.

I'm taking her with me, Marrkiya, Patrick promised with a note of triumph coating his thought.

Like hell, you are, came Marcus's reply. He yanked her up, ignoring Patrick's screams that he couldn't hold on.

Sam kept her eyes fixed on Marcus's as Patrick White's fingers slipped away and sent him hurdling downward.

With one final tug, Marcus pulled her up. She landed in his arms and clung to him, crying into his bare chest. He lived. *She* lived. "I thought he killed you," she wept on him. "The golden arrow—

"I transformed when the arrow struck me. As a man, the arrow has no effect. Thankfully, he only hit me in the shoulder. See? I am fine, my love."

She wiped her eyes and looked at him, finally taking in that he was naked. Oh, he was fine, indeed.

He touched her face with tender fingers, wiping her tears. "I love you, Sam. You're not going to get rid of me that easily."

"You were Marrkiya," she sniffed. "I thought you'd given up being a man. I can see why you would. You're a beautiful Drakkon, Marcus."

"I know, my love."

She had to smile at his unabashed arrogance. She thought of telling him that he was even more breathtaking as a man, but his head was big enough.

"I told you I wanted to be a man, and I meant it. Being Drakkon is wonderful and familiar, but I have come to know and feel something extraordinary. Love, more exhilarating than flying, more powerful than my fire, my scales, and my talons combined. Love for you and for Garion that has made me what I want to be, not a Drakkon, but a man, a husband, a father."

He dipped his head to kiss her.

"They thought my greatest treasure was the pride in my Drakkon blood, but they were wrong. My greatest treasure is you. My heart is yours and yours alone for as long as I live."

She spread her loving gaze over him and then smiled. "That's a long time, Drakkon."

“Aye,” he said, his smile turning into a scowl. “We’ll have to do something about that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MARCUS GROWLED AT THOMAS AND ELLIE and smacked their hands away, Thomas's from trying to fit him into the jacket of his tux and Ellie's from choking him to death with a hated tie at his throat.

"I told you nothing fits him," Ellie complained. "He's too big!"

"He looks fine," Thomas stepped away from Marcus's strong hands and gave him a thorough looking over.

The tux was snug but he'd be out of it soon enough. It was his wedding day and all he could think about was tonight and taking Sam to bed as his wife.

I miss you.

You saw me last night.

Aye, twelve hours ago, he complained. *I'm stuck here with these two fumbling at my limbs and neck. I would rather be with you.*

Just a little longer, my darling, she said, sounding a little over-indulgent, as if she were speaking to Garion.

Where is the boy?

Keeping Tabitha busy.

You remembered to tell him not to transform in front of our guests? I don't want any of the elders to know who he is or what he can do. And it turned out that he could do even more than they thought. Like healing, for instance. It was a wonder, really, but Marcus's shoulder was evidence that the child possessed more power than they could imagine.

Of course, I remembered to tell him, Sam assured him. *Stop worrying and let me get dressed.*

I would prefer you undressed.

He smiled, imaging her rolling her eyes at him from the other room when she didn't reply.

Life was good, despite the transformed Drakkon sitting in his great hall, despite the powerful little boy who couldn't think of anything but flying and sending those thoughts to Marcus and only God knew who else, and despite Thomas and Ellie picking at him and trying to smooth his coat. Life was good and he wanted to live it with Sam, but not forever.

Now that Thomas is the head elder, he's agreed to do something for me—as a gift for our wedding.

What has he agreed?

To use the Phoenix Amber to take away my immortality.

You call that a gift?

Aye, because I don't want to live for centuries without you. Of course, I'll lose my wings and we won't be able to dance in the clouds again. But I will learn how to dance on my feet.

She was quiet for a moment and then he heard her snuffle.

Are you crying?

Yes, Marcus.

Why?

Because you're better than any knight who ever lived.

That certainly was good to hear. But he already knew it. *Will you put me in your books then?*

She laughed in his head, giving his heart wings to soar higher than ever before.

Yes, I'll even let you eat a few of them.

Aye, life was good.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Quinn is a New York Times bestselling author and a sappy romantic moved by music, beautiful words, and the sight of a really nice pen. She lives in New York with her three beautiful children, six over-protective chihuahuas, and three adorable parrots. She loves to read romance and science fiction and has been writing since she was eleven. She's a faithful believer in God and thanks Him daily for all the blessings in her life.

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