



# Consorting with Dragons

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**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

**Description:** General Quinn Fortana has arrived on Lycanus 3 to retrieve a stolen dragon's egg, reportedly ready to hatch at any moment. He finds an arrogant, impossibly good-looking thief who stole the egg and calls himself a Prince. He claims King Davos is his grandfather. Quinn thinks that with his red hair and human looks, he might be the product of an illicit love affair the king may have had, but either way, it's an intergalactic incident waiting to happen. To make an impossible situation even worse, one touch of the thief's hand reveals to the general that the boy is his fated mate. When the egg hatches and immediately bonds with the gorgeous prince, things really begin to get out of hand.

When Prince Rylan is unintentionally thrust into the world of the fierce Dragon Riders and given a crash course in saving the day—and saving his lover, the General—he must use the daring tactics of aerial dragon fighting. Fate sweeps Rylan from his princely life of comfort into an uncertain future—and an unexpected kinship with two of the most extraordinary creatures he has ever met, the handsome, stern Lycan general who thinks Rylan is spoiled and arrogant, and a dragon who has an unexpected talent that may make all the difference.

**Total Pages (Source):** 57

## Chapter One

### Prince Rylan of Moravia

#### Son of King Stefan and His Royal Consort, Prince Vannos

My father cornered me with his plan at first-meal early one morning, while I was still groggy and half-asleep. In my defense, it had been a long night. Putting down his cup, my father leaned toward me with a suspicious expression on his face. I was perhaps a bit the worse for wear from a party I'd been to with Kareb and some of my other friends the night before. I'd still be tucked up in bed if not for the fact that my omak insisted we all show up for meals together.

Actually, I was still drunk on my ass, and I'd only had about two hours of sleep, so when my father leaned toward me and sniffed at me, it startled the hell out of me. I lurched back in alarm and didn't fully realize what was happening until it was too late for me to make some excuse and get out of there.

"You're still drunk," he said, his voice disgusted.

"N-no. I mean, not precisely. Maybe a little... Um, what do you mean?"

"You can barely sit up straight! You reek of liquor, Rylan."

"Oh. I-I just haven't bathed yet this morning, that's all. You see, I went to a party last night and Kareb spilled his drink on me." I shoved my chair back and stumbled to my feet. "Tell you what, I'll just run back upstairs and take care of that, so I don't

offend...”

“Sit down, boy! Don’t insult my intelligence by thinking I don’t know about the so-called party you and your friends attended last night. It was more like a drunken debauchery, and it took place in the guards’ quarters. It was thoroughly disgraceful from what I heard.”

So much shouting—my head was pounding and why was he still yelling? I was only inches away from him. The sound reverberated through my head.

“You woke up half the household last night stumbling up to your room.”

“About that, Father...I think maybe we should look into getting some carpet on those stairs. Those stone steps are hard on the knees when you fall.”

“Oh, you think so, do you? I’m not made of money, you know. Perhaps you wouldn’t be falling all over the steps in the middle of the night if you settled down and stopped making a complete spectacle of yourself partying with your friends. It’s high time you took your duties more seriously, Rylan. I think maybe it’s time to find you a spouse. You’ll still be older than your omak was when I married him. Isn’t that right, Vannos?” he said, looking over at my bearer, sitting on his right-hand side, stirring his tea. “Weren’t you only about nineteen or twenty when we met?”

My omak took a sip from his cup and shrugged. “Yes, and you said I was far too young. You got pretty upset about it, as I recall and locked me up after a brutal interrogation in a torture chamber.”

“What?” I said, feigning shock. Actually, I’d heard this story many, many times, but I was glad of the distraction. It was all hyperbole, of course. The “torture chamber” had merely been a storage room that had some harnesses hanging on the wall, and though it was true that he had been locked up—inside a comfortable bedroom for a couple of

days following the “interrogation,” and my father had spent most of that time locked in there with him—it hadn’t been much of a hardship for either of them.

“Oh, you poor thing. You say Father was angry about how young you were?” I asked solicitously, thinking I might stir up an argument and use it to slip out of the room, but it was already too late. My father slammed a hand down on the table, making the dishes rattle.

“It was because of the deception he was trying to pull off, and that’s all in the past now. A great deal of it was miscommunication, and you both know that. Besides all that, we’re not talking about me and your omak and ancient history, damn it!” the king said, addressing us both and getting a cold side-eye glance from my omak in return. “And for the record, most of that simply isn’t true. It’s time to put those old lies to rest.”

My omak answered him serenely, without raising his voice. “I’m sure you’d like that. And pray tell me, if this has nothing to do with me and you, then what difference does it make how old I was when we first met? And don’t give me that look. You’re the one who started this and dragged me into this.”

The king looked ready to explode, and I knew an argument was brewing, and I’d just as soon not be there to hear it, because I was bound to be drawn into it. Besides, a lecture from the king would no doubt follow, and those could go on and on.

“You two seem to have a lot to talk about. Maybe I could leave you to it and just circle back to talk about this with you later.” I half-rose from my seat, but my father, who had been busy glaring at my omak, spared me one feral glance that had me quickly dropping back to my chair.

“Don’t you move, boy. I’m not through talking to you yet. It’s time you settled down and started taking your responsibilities seriously.”

My omak picked up his cup to take another sip of his tea, supremely indifferent to the king's anger. Unfortunately, I was not.

"Father, please," I appealed to him. My head was pounding way too hard to have this conversation. "I won't even be twenty-one for a few months yet and besides, that's not such a vast age. I have plenty of time to settle down."

"Maybe I should accept the offer I already received for you. I would if I had any sense."

"Offer? You have an offer? For me?"

"Who offered for him?" my omak broke in. "Not that person from Thalios, I hope? That King Travon? He's way too old to marry my boy. That man's forty, if he's a day, and he's not even a nice person. He may be handsome in an oily kind of way, but there's something creepy about him."

"What is this 'creepy?' I don't even know what that word means. Nobody is talking about marriage, damn it! But if I did want that for my son, then it would be my decision."

"I believe you were talking about it, just now. And I agree with Rylan. If he's not interested in marriage yet, then he shouldn't be forced into it. Besides, we haven't discussed anyone suitable, and what in the four hells do you mean by saying it's your decision for your son? I suppose I have no say in it."

"I said I wasn't talking about marriage!" He banged his hand on the table again to emphasize his point. "What's wrong with you two this morning? Rylan, you get more like your omak every day!"

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My omak raised one eyebrow. “But that’s a good thing, right? I’m sure that’s what you meant to say.”

My father flushed a deep red as he closed his eyes and seemed to be counting to ten. He did that a lot with my omak.

“Of course, it is. But I was talking about him settling down and taking on his responsibilities,” he finally said, in a voice with less volume. “Because I have something I need him to do for me. A simple errand I need him to run.”

“Of course, Father,” I said, making another abortive attempt to escape, “and I’ll be glad to. But if you don’t mind, could we discuss this later? You could give me all the details then. I have a slight headache now, you see, and...”

“I do mind, so sit down and be quiet!”

“All this yelling is completely unnecessary, Stefan,” my omak said, giving the king a long look that made him deeply sigh. “We’re sitting right here.”

“You’re right. I apologize,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I’ll try to moderate my tone.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Omak said.

He turned back to me. “Now then, Rylan, I want you to go to Lycanus 3 for me.”

“Um...you want me to do what?”

“Go to Lycanus 3. Bauxite is manufactured there. Spacecraft are often made from that material.”

“Okay. I know that, but I still don’t understand why.”

“Why what? Why make the spacecraft from bauxite, or why am I sending you?”

I clutched my head and groaned. “Father, please...”

“There’s a shipment there that was intended for another buyer, if you must know, who came up short on funds, and the Lycans are selling it to me at a reduced price. I need you to pick it up for me. You can leave tomorrow to get there on time, and since it isn’t far, you should be back home late the next day.”

“You want me to leave tomorrow? But I have plans for tomorrow, and I don’t know anything about bauxite.”

“You don’t have to know anything about the damn bauxite. You just have to go pick it up for me and take my payment to the Lyncan officials. And your plans can wait.”

“But why can’t you do it?”

“Because I have a meeting with the council about this alliance with the Coalition of Small Planets. It’s a newlyformed organization King Travon has created. We’ve been corresponding, and he feels as if there’s safety in numbers.”

“Safety?” My omak broke in. “What does he think is going to happen? You both have the Axis to defend you now. I find that insulting to my father and brother. Wait a minute—are you talking about those new members of the Axis who wanted to remain independent, but Mikos forced them to join the Axis anyway? They’re the ones who are all still loyal to the Alliance and hate Tygeria, aren’t they? Troublemakers. Some

are still openly hostile. And King Travon of Thalios is helping them form some kind of coalition? What in the four hells is that about?"

"I think 'hostile' is too strong a word for what they feel, but those planets are still trying to reconcile themselves to being forced into pledging their allegiance to the Axis even after so many years, so yes, they are a bit resistant. They were all independent during the war, just like we were on Moravia, and Mikos told them their independence was not possible anymore, and like us, they had to pick a side. Just as we were told years ago. They know they have to do this, and they're doing it, but from what I understand, they're also forming this new group—think of it as a very small group within the Axis. Just for solidarity. For those planets like ours who never really wanted to be part of the Axis empire. And for the ones who dislike Prince Mikos."

"Dislike him? This Travon person does know that Mikos is my brother, doesn't he? And that King Davos is my father? You realize that too, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, but they also know I never wanted our planet to be part of the Axis either and that it took me a while to come around to the idea. It's a very loose alliance. Loose enough so as not to be an encumbrance on us, and absolutely no threat to the Axis Empire or your father. It's more of a discussion group, really. Nothing that your father or your brother could possibly disapprove of or consider to be any kind of threat against Tygeria."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that," my omak said, raising both eyebrows. "Speaking of discussions, have you 'discussed' this with Father or Mikos?"

My uncle Mikos was the direct heir to the throne, though Davos was still young for a Tygerian and showed no signs of stepping down anytime soon. Tygerians lived very long lives, so my grandfather was considered to be still in his prime and Mikos still gaining experience, as was his own son, Prince Mikol. My omak, Vannos, and my



brothers and I were somewhere in the long line of succession, but very far down, and we were content to be so. Still, that didn't mean we weren't a close family.

"If I were you, I'd contact Mikos about this meeting of yours right away and tell him what you know about it," Vannos said.

My father ignored him and kept talking as if he hadn't inserted his opinion. "The Coalition would simply give us close, valuable allies within the Axis empire that we might need one day."

My omak put his cup down with a clatter. "Closer than your own family? And what exactly would you need these allies for? To overthrow my father in a rebellion?"

"Of course not," he said, getting red in the face again. "And I haven't joined them yet. It's just a meeting to talk about it, and that's all."

"I think you need to speak with my father or Mikos about this, Stefan. Before you do something rash and ill-advised."

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“There is no need to speak to them or involve them in any way. This is only about Moravia, and I’m still the king here, I might remind you. I think it’s a good idea, and both Tallon and Bryos agree.”

He was referring to his oldest friend and aide, General Tallon and my eldest brother, Prince Bryos, both of whom would no doubt agree with pretty much anything my father said. Bryos was also totally available to make this trip to Lycanus 3 that my father wanted to send me on, for example, but he was the heir, so maybe that explained why I had been picked to waste my time instead. His time was no doubt far too valuable. I brought it up anyway, of course.

“Whatabout Bryos? Why isn’t he going to Lycanus 3 to pick up this bauxite for you?”

“Because I need him here, and I don’t want Bryos to go. I want you to do it.”

“But Bryos is...”

“You’re going, Rylan. It’s time you learned how to do things. It’s time you grew up.”

“I’d like to go on record as saying I don’t think that any of this is fair.”

My father had huffed with impatience. “Enough. You’re going and that’s an end to it.”

“Well, why do we need this stuff anyway?”

“I told you. Bauxite is becoming a very scarce commodity.”

“Just offer more money for them to deliver it to us. If this is about not having enough for the delivery fee, then I’m sure Grandfather would loan you...”

“Do you think I need Tygerian gold, Rylan? I don’t. We need spacecraft, or we will eventually, and I can’t believe you don’t know this. Did you learn nothing from your tutors? These ships are an investment in the future of my children and grandchildren, and I can’t let the opportunity to purchase material pass when it’s bound to sell out.”

Of course, I knew all this—kind of. I was just a little slow that morning, which is what mixing Rother, a Moravian rum, and Tygerian visu punch would do to a person. And my tutors had been very good, actually. Bauxite was used to make parts of spacecraft...I knew that. And that was pretty much the extent of my knowledge, actually.

“I understand all that, sir, but if we need it so badly, can’t we just buy it somewhere closer? Or get someone to bring it here?”

“The deal has been made. Besides, I think it would be a good idea for you to get off-planet more and learn how to do things. If we ever hope to attract a suitable spouse for you, people have to see you. And though you’re not exactly on the market just yet, you’re not on the market. If someone suitable made us an offer, I’d certainly consider it.”

“Like you’re considering King Travon’s offer?” Omak asked.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, he’s a perfectly suitable candidate, Vannos. An older, more mature man might settle this son of yours down a little.”

I sighed deeply. “I don’t need settling. And besides, people have seen me. People know me.”

“Some do, but not many. They obviously know you’re my son and the grandson of King Davos, but Davos has a lot of grandsons. You come from a long, distinguished line of royalty on both sides, and you’ll be able to make a good match when the right offer comes along. In the meantime, it could be to your advantage to let yourself be seen around the other planets close by. Your face is almost the image of your omak’s when I first saw him, and he was easily one of the most beautiful people I’d ever seen. He still is,” he said, glancing over at him. He reached for his hand too, probably in an attempt to smooth things over from the cross words they’d exchanged earlier, but my omak had a long memory and was having none of it. He deftly pulled his hand away, reaching for a pastry.

The king cleared his throat and tried again. “The kind of beauty my consort has and that you have is a highly prized commodity. It could lead to a high marriage price when the time comes.”

A marriage price was, I knew, the exchange of valuables, money, or property from the groom or his family to me and my family as a form of compensation for the loss of my “services,” or whatever. It was all pretty old fashioned, just like a dowry for a bride and nothing I valued. It was still a popular thing to do in royal families though.

“Oh, really?” Vannos said, his tone deceptively casual. “My son is for sale now, I suppose, like some kind of commodity? Is that what he is?”

My father glared at him, and he glared right back. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought they were fighting, but they had bickered this way all my life, and it was a kind of dance they did before they chose to excuse themselves and disappear into their bedroom. My brothers and I pretended not to notice, and we didn’t like to think about it anyway.

My face did resemble my omak’s—minus the faint, exotic striping under the skin that he had. He was Tygerian, after all, and though I definitely had his classic bone

structure and his golden-red hair color, I didn't have the beautiful markings he had. Though in my mind that was a good thing, because I was already way too different looking from other Moravians as it was. Other men my age were dark-haired and brown-eyed, and my hair color and my odd, turquoise-blue eyes that were like my human grandfather's had been an embarrassment to me for as long as I could remember. I could only imagine what the teasing would have been like if I'd had stripes too, even if they were under my skin and barely noticeable, like my omak's.

What I hadn't inherited from either of my parents was the thing I would have loved the most—their tall, well-built, muscular bodies. Both of them were powerful, handsome warriors. Still in their early forties, they were pretty much in their prime, and they were frankly a lot to live up to.

I was just under six feet tall, if I stretched it an inch. Or maybe two. And though I did have muscles, and I worked hard to keep them, I didn't have the bulky, bulging muscles of either of my fathers or of my brother Bryos. I had a brother younger than I was named Tilar, and so far, he appeared to have taken after our grandfather Blake, too. We called Blake our omak-ahn, which was kind of like omak-once-removed, and he was the human royal consort of King Davos. Tilar and I both had much leaner frames that I blamed directly on Blake as well.

Not that I didn't love Blake dearly. He was funny and smart and sarcastic and still handsome—beautiful really, in a human way, because that's what he was, after all. We all thought that King Davos was dosing him with something to keep him young looking, since Tygerians lived so much longer than humans, and Davos had made it clear he didn't want to outlive Blake, who had come to Tygeria years ago as an Alliance captive from Earth and had wound up married to Davos, the leader of the Axis and now the most powerful man in the galaxy. Blake had spoiled all of his children—all seven of them. Quite shamelessly, to be honest. And his grandchildren too as they came along. But he was undeniably human with human DNA that had obviously been passed down to me.

Only my eldest brother had been genetically altered before birth. Our father had insisted that Tilar and I had to take our chances with genetics, because he wanted more Moravian looking children. In my case, that experiment didn't work.

I made one more attempt to get out of going to Lycanus 3.

“Father, I feel like it's unreasonable of you to pressure me like this!” The second those words left my mouth, I knew I'd made the fatal mistake of yelling it at him—I blamed that on my hangover—but that was pretty much the end of the argument, because he was not the kind of father whose children—no matter how old they might be—were allowed to shout back in his face.

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The king gave me a stern look. He then proceeded to give me a long lecture about what an excellent opportunity he was giving me and how lucky I was to receive it.

“Well, what if Redmond went in my place?” I’d politely asked. “I bet I could go tell him now and he’d be happy to do this for you.”

Redmond was General Tallon’s mate, and my omak’s best friend. My omak looked up in surprise. “Oh, what a great idea. Redmond and I could go. That sounds like fun. I love shopping in the marketplaces on Lycanus 3.”

The king got that belligerent look on his face that I knew all too well.

“What are you talking about?” he thundered, “this is not up for discussion. It’s not something for you to decide whether or not you want to do it, either, Rylan. It’s an order! What’s wrong with you? You’re going to pick this up for me, and you’re going to like it. It’s time you got out more. Don’t you agree, Vannos?” he asked, trying to draw him in. But Omak had already lost interest and was gazing out the window at the view outside, twirling a long piece of his hair with one finger.

He jumped a little when he heard his name, probably still lost in daydreams of shopping on Lycanus 3 with his friend Redmond. I covered my mouth with my hand so neither of them would see my smile and perhaps get the wrong impression. My omak was beautiful—no other word for it, even if he were a man, and you were supposed to call men handsome—but my omak was just pretty, and there were no other words for that. However, maybe he wasn’t exactly the deepest thinker I’d ever met. Not that he wasn’t wonderful—because he was. He was wise and sweet and kind and the best omak a person could have. My brothers and I adored him, almost as

much as our father did. But he was not burdened by overthinking a situation as a general rule.

The Consort brushed his thick red-gold hair out of his eyes and turned to look at the king. You'd think my father was abusive or mean to him by how nervous Omak looked, but that would be really far from the truth. King Stefan doted on him, adored him, almost always deferred to him and acted as if every word that fell from his lips was a perfect little pearl. Not that they didn't bicker—because they did, all the time. But they quickly made up.

My parents' marriage was full of these little arguments and small irritations at each other, because they were really—really—different kinds of people. The king was above all else a warrior—stern, no-nonsense and fierce. As for my omak, Vannos? Despite his strong, muscular frame and all his military training in his youth—he wasn't what I'd call a warrior. Not at all.

My uncle Mikos, for example, had a reputation for being stone cold and fearless in battle. His nickname was the “bloody prince” after all. I overheard him once say that he had worried about his younger brother Vannos, not because he wasn't well-trained, skilled and even courageous, but because it literally hurt him deeply, way down in his soul, to cause other people any real harm.

When my omak had first come to Moravia, one of the servants, a young boy named Louis, who fancied himself in love with the king and was insanely jealous of my omak, had tried to kill him in an unprovoked and cowardly attack. My father, Vannos, who was already in a weakened condition from a recent fall, had been about to bathe when Louis came up behind him and attacked him with a heavy iron sculpture, bring the object down on him again and again. He'd been in danger of dying that day, and he would surely have been killed if he hadn't used all his remaining strength to hold his attacker at bay until help finally arrived.



The king was understandably beside himself with rage, and he wanted Louis's execution to be carried out, but Vannos intervened on Louis's behalf. He begged my father to get psychiatric help for Louis instead and to see to his rehabilitation. My father agreed after a long while, most reluctantly, and Louis was now living a productive life, working on a farm on one of Moravia's moons. The doctors had used their drugs on him and their psychotherapy, and he had long since married and had a family of his own. He was no longer a threat to society in any way.

As far as Omak's relationship with the king, occasionally he would make some remark that might make the king roll his eyes and shoot him a look, and my omak would take offense, turn up his very attractive nose and get up to storm out. But as he swept past the king in the tight leather trousers he liked to wear, the ones that made me and my brothers blush, the king would suddenly grab his hand and pull him into his lap, murmuring something that sounded apologetic, until he finally relaxed and nodded. Then the king would excuse himself and disappear with my omak behind the nearest closed door to "finish discussing things," and come back after a half-hour or so, a bit out of breath and disheveled looking. That had been going on all my life, and it wasn't slowing down one bit. My brothers and I were kind of used to it.

"Oh, are you back to asking me now?" Omak asked, looking surprised. "I thought you were still yelling at our son and laying down the law. You're only raising your blood pressure doing all that shouting, you know. Why don't we go outside for a while instead? It's such a nice day today. I was just thinking we might go for a ride later. Pegalos probably feels neglected, and wouldn't a ride in the fresh air be nice? I could get the kitchen to pack us a nice lunch."

Pegalos was one of the arrizes we kept, a huge animal that was used for riding. Pegalos was old now as arrizes went, though they lived very long lives, and he wasn't nearly as wild as he used to be when he was young and had been my father's mount. My father had finally been dragged into this century by the rest of us and had invested a few years ago in a large number of hovercraft to traverse the steep

mountain trails. We used the animals mostly for sport these days. Anyone who didn't consider riding an arriz a challenging sport never truly considered how much courage it took to climb on the backs of over a thousand pounds of muscle and ferocity and the skill it took to control the beast and race down a narrow mountain path at top speed. My brothers and I had been riding since we were little boys.

The arrizes were all uniformly black, incredibly powerful and wild. Their bodies were sleeker and had longer legs than Earthan horses, which they otherwise resembled, and their ears were more like slits on the side of their heads. They were muscular and beautiful, but they didn't have the long manes of a horse either. Instead, their manes were short and bristly and ran all the way down their backs to their long, silky looking tails.

My omak was fearless, and he loved trying to tame and ride them. He had been riding Pegalos since my father had switched to a younger, faster mount, not because Pegalos was necessarily any tamer now, but because my omak didn't want Pegalos to think he'd been abandoned. He said he didn't want to "hurt his feelings."

"Vannos," my father said, irritably, "we can talk about lunch and riding arrizes later. I was discussing our son's journey to Lycanus 3, if you remember?"

"Of course, I remember. I haven't lost my mind, though you sometimes act as if I have." Omak gave him one of the icy looks that I'd seen my omak-ahn Blake bestow upon my grandfather, Davos. They were never a good sign. They almost always meant an argument and perhaps a little groveling later on for whichever king was involved.

"Vannos," my father said, "let's put an end to this argument. Rylan is almost twenty-one. It's past time he did these kinds of things for me without his omak interfering on his behalf."

“Why do you feel you need to keep reminding me of my son’s age, Stefan? I can assure you I’m intimately acquainted with the occasion of his birth. And I don’t ‘interfere.’ He’s my son. How would that even be possible?”

My father turned an unflattering shade of red, like he often did when my omak argued with him. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But he’s certainly old enough to do this for me. Rylan is very mature and intelligent, unlike you at his age. You were...”

“Yes? What was I? Dig the hole a little deeper, why don’t you?”

“Vannos, sweetheart, this is getting off track. This is a silly argument.”

“Silly? Is that what I am?”

My father’s face turned red again. “I didn’t mean it that way, and you know it.”

I took pity on him and spoke up. “I’ve already agreed to go and do this, Father,” I said, trying to take some of the heat off. “I was only teasing before when I said Redmond could go in my place. I said I’d go, and I don’t need you to go along, Omak, though it’s really sweet of you to offer.”

“If you don’t want me to go, then I won’t, honey,” my omak said directly to me, ignoring my father. “Because I listen to what my sons want.” He stood up and glanced at the king. “As for me, I’m going for a ride. Perhaps I’ll see if the Stable Master would like to go along. It’s a lovely day for it, and he, at least, always seems to enjoy my company.”

He gave the king one more haughty glance and then swept regally from the room, as my father cursed softly under his breath and glared after him. He glanced back sharply over at me, and I got up quickly, holding up my hands in surrender. “I guess I’ll go pack. See you when I get back.”

“Wait a minute and sit back down,” he said, before I could get the hell out of there.  
“Now that your omak is gone, I can tell you the real reason you’re going to Lycanus  
3.”

“The real reason? What do you mean?”

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“Our wedding anniversary is coming up soon, and I’ve bought a gift for Vannos that I need you to pick up for me. I wanted it to be a surprise for him. There is no bauxite. Well, there is, but I’m not really interested in that. It’s the gift I need you to pick up.”

“Oh...well, why didn’t you just say so in the first place, without all that bauxite business?”

“Because it’s a surprise, like I just said.”

“What did you get him?”

“You know how much he loves animals—and you know how he talks about being in training years ago and riding those vetami creatures from that moon of Lycanus 3? I got word that a rare vetami egg was about to hatch and it was offered to me. It’s really unusual for them to be available at all, and their gestation period is really long. Anyway, it’s more or less forbidden to buy them now. They’re considered to be a protected, endangered species. I jumped on it right away, as soon as it was offered.”

“What do you mean? Even though it’s an endangered species? Father, that doesn’t seem right. Can’t you get arrested for doing something like that?”

“Not if you have connections, like I do. The breeder of the egg, himself, King Travon of Thalios, the one we were just discussing, owns the egg and he’s agreed to sell it to me. He wanted you to come to his planet to pick it up, but I talked him into taking it to Lycanus 3, which is more or less halfway, and he agreed when he heard that you would be picking it up for me.”

“But why?”

“Because Vannos is right about him being a bit too old for you, but he’s very interested in you. And I don’t have time right now to accompany you as a chaperone, so meeting him like this is perfect. To tell the truth, I don’t fully trust him not to compromise you, so you’d have to marry him.”

“Compromise me? Father, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can, but I’ve heard rumors. It’s just better that you meet on Lycanus 3 on more or less neutral ground.”

I laughed a little. “Surely, he wouldn’t try anything in public. And if he’s so awful, why do you want me to marry him?”

“I don’t, but there can’t be any harm in meeting him. I’m sure he must have heard how good looking you are, because he’s very insistent. Anyway, the egg is inside its crate and waiting for you there on the docks. I’ve already sent him the purchase price and I have the signed receipt. All you have to do is meet him, have a few minutes of conversation and bring the egg home.”

“But what about the fact that the vetami are an endangered species?”

“Only the ones from that moon Horvath are on that list. That’s a moon of Lycanus 3 and the vetami are native to that world. This egg is perfectly legal because it comes from the planet Thalios, where Travon is king. People used to be able to purchase them for years until the people of Horvath got involved and petitioned the Axis to make them endangered, even though they have literally hundreds of them on Horvath. Then the Intergalactic Union for the Conservation of Nature got involved and now you can’t buy the eggs at all anymore.”

“Then how did King Travon doing it?”

“From what Travon told me, his father is from Horvath, but came to Thalios years ago, with some of his property. Including vetami. It was all perfectly legal back then—and now King Travon has a large herd of these vetami, and they’re quitevaluable. But he has agreed to sell me this one egg as a favor and a mark of his friendship. As I told you, he’s interested in you as well. Not that you have to do anything about that,” he said. “That’s a negotiation for me and your omak to be involved in. But it won’t hurt you to at least meet the man. He’s doing me a big favor here. Do you understand now?”

“I guess so. You want me to pick up Omak’s gift, meet this king and then bring the gift home. Easy! What is a vetami anyway? You said it was an egg. Are they some kind of birds?”

“No, Rylan. They’re much more special than that.They’re dragons.”

## Chapter Two

“Dragons?Father, what are you talking about? Dragons aren’t real.”

“It’s what people call them. There was an Alliance Command base on Horvath during the war, full of humans, and that name got started back then when the humans noted the resemblance to the fictional creatures in their old legends and stories. I’ve seen the drawings, and they really do resemble the things. Their true species name isvetami.Your omak was stationed on Horvath during the war after the Axis kicked the Alliance out and took over, and he was able to ride the creatures with his friends. I know you must have heard him talk about it.”

“Those creatures that flew? I thought they were supposed to be kind of vicious.”

“The wild vetami can be, but not the ones who are properly raised and trained. I think Vannos would be thrilled to have one. Anyway, I’ve already made the purchase. I just need you to pick it up for me.”

“So, it’s an egg?”

“Yes. But it’s due to hatch soon, so we need to get it here before that happens. They’re very valuable, but Travon gave me a really good price. Anyway, I’ve made all the arrangements and all you have to do is just meet King Travon and take possession. He might ask you to go to his ship for the meeting, and as long as you have your guards with you, that should be fine. Then pick up the egg and bring it home.”

I shrugged. It sounded easy enough. “All right. Consider it done.”

He clapped me on the back, and I finally escaped back to my room to get ready for this journey. I actually felt pretty lucky that it seemed to be an easy task, except for meeting this king. I had no interest in that, but I figured it might be good to firmly shut him down before he got any more ideas. I had no interest in getting married to him or anyone else.

I thought it was true that Omak probably would love having one of the flying creatures. I would too for that matter. He certainly relived his time there on that moon often enough and told us all about it. He’d been a teenager at the time though. I thought he might be a bit old to go flying around these days, though I’d never say it to his face. I went upstairs to pack a small bag in case we did get delayed and had to spend more than one night. I made up my mind that I’d get through this and then I could take off with my friend Kareb on a little trip to the southern coast. It had been far too long since we’d been to the beach.

A few hours later, I was in my father’s ship headed to Lycanus 3. Kareb had gone



along with me, as one of my personal bodyguards, and we'd been talking about our upcoming trip, when one of the other guards interrupted us.

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“Excuse me, Your Highness,” he said from the aisle beside me. “The captain wanted me to let you know we’ll be landing in an hour or so. We’re coming across Lycanus 1 now, and we’ll be on the surface of Lycanus 3 fairly soon after that.”

I nodded my thanks and settled back in my seat. My father had sent more than the usual number of guards with me, though our ship wasn’t all that large. He was being careful, and not just to guard my virtue with old, randy kings.

We’d had kidnappings of some of our royal family members recently. It hadn’t been long since my uncle Rakkur and my first cousin Jago were attacked and taken captive. The kidnappings hadn’t been in this part of the galaxy, but King Davos insisted on taking extra precautions now, with all his children and grandchildren, so that none of us would be taken hostage again. He actually wouldn’t like the small size of this ship, if he’d known about it, considering there were pirates said to operate around the three Lycan planets and their moons because of all the trading that went on there. But King Stefan didn’t like to be told what to do with his family or much of anything else, for that matter.

My family’s drama earlier in the year had all worked out in the end, and my relatives had been recovered, but it had scared everybody. This part of the galaxy should be safe enough, I thought, but it was still a little wild and wooly, as my omak would say. Like I said, from time to time, some pretty vicious pirates were known to still operate in this area. I felt a little shudder go down my spine but soon went back to gazing out the large porthole beside me and having a glass of Rother and visu punch as a little pick me up, as we soared past the largest of the three planets of Lycanus.

I was a bit nervous, because I wanted to please my father—all I had to do, he’d told

me, was go to the Lycan trading offices and King Travon would be there to meet me and transfer the egg But I just didn't want to fuck this up. My father told me all the time that I was like my omak, by which he meant pretty but not too bright. He denied it, of course, but I knew, just like my omak did, and we both resented it.

It didn't mean that my father wasn't crazy about my omak—about both of us. We all knew that he was. Maybe the difference in their royal status bothered him more than he liked to let on. After all, my omak, Prince Vannos, was the beloved son of King Davos, the head of the entire Axis Command. He was powerful because of that and maybe my father was a bit jealous.

The long, terrible war had ended way before I'd even been born, but it had been so devastating that no one was even closeto forgetting it, from what I'd seen, even after all these years. Moravia had stayed neutral at first, though, but strongly Axis leaning and eventually agreed to join the empire, largely because of my omak.

Earth had been occupied only up until recently and strong resentments lingered both there and on the Lycan planets. Others in this region felt the same way. The Axis had briefly considered martial law on the Lycanus planets and moons, but quickly decided they'd simply be fighting the Lycans all the time and another war might even break out. The Lycans didn't like to admit they'd been on the losing side, as they didn't admit defeat easily. In fact, they still maintained that they had never officially surrendered. Surrendering was what made things permanent—and official, I guess. At least in their minds.

Moravia was friendly enough with Lycanus, but we were too closely associated with the Tygerians for a close alliance, again because of my omak, Vannos. This task my father had set for me certainly wasn't hard, but any transactions with the Lycans could be tricky. I wanted to do well and not screw any of this up.

My guards were all mostly my friends that I'd been in school and training with, and

they thought it might be better if no one knew exactly who I was when we went for pickup of the vetami egg, because of the whole Tygerian thing. I had agreed to dress in similar clothing to what they all wore, and I'd tied back my hair and wore a hooded jacket to help disguise the red-gold color, which was also closely associated with Tygerians. I told everyone not to address me as "Your Highness," which they rarely did anyway, to be honest. I wanted to remain as low-key and unrecognizable as possible. That was the plan anyway.

We were supposed to be meeting King Travon on the docks for the transfer of the egg, and I dreaded that. I was ready to go meet him, be as nice as I possibly could to him, while not expressing any undue interest, and then get out of there. My father had advised me not to go onboard his ship alone and without guards under any circumstances, though, which I thought was odd. I still think everything would have been fine if not for what happened when we got to the warehouse.

I still think it wasn't my fault that almost the first thing I did after we arrived was to get myself involved in a huge brawl.

It all began because as luck would have it, King Travon wasn't the only other interested party there to meet us on Lycanus 3. I was there at the agreed-upon time, and we had followed the directions my father had given me to the letter. We saw the crate containing the egg on the floor inside the warehouse, with a group of men wearing green uniforms standing beside it. I figured that the one standing in front of the men and gazing at me so intensely must be the king of Thalios, King Travon himself.

My first impression was that he was a handsome man. Not exactly my type, but still not too bad. He was regally and expensively dressed and had many badges and medals on his uniform. He gave me a little smile and inclined his head when he saw me. So far so good, or so I thought.

The crate was beside the group, and it was huge. It was some ten feet wide, and about that tall. I could hear my men behind me, discussing the best way to get the thing loaded when Kareb suddenly nudged me hard in the side. I turned to see what he wanted and saw him looking across the big warehouse at another, even larger group of men. They were also in uniform, though theirs consisted of red capes over leather armor. They had been standing around at the back of the huge warehouse when we arrived, and they were now beginning to advance quickly on our group. Their leader had a determined expression.

He was big and blond and intimidating, and he looked military too. The cape was what was called Alliance red after the uniforms of the old Alliance. He had insignia on his uniform, along with patches on his sleeves that I didn't recognize. As he came closer, I could see they featured some kind of lizard looking creature that had wings—the dragons, I supposed. He looked like a Lycan, except for the blond hair.

He was seriously good-looking, though, and he had the arrogant expression on his face that often went along with that.

He gave all of us, both my group and King Travon's, a deeply unfriendly look out of eyes that were jade green. He resembled many of the other inhabitants of this part of the galaxy, in his size, and muscular build, but that hair and those eyes were unique. Did I mention how good looking he was? It was worth mentioning a few times. Even if he was staring at me like he wanted to eat me. Or maybe because of that, come to think of it.

The Lycans, the Tygerians and even the Moravians resembled each other in a few significant ways in this area of the galaxy, and this tall, muscular build they all had was one of those ways. Some ancient astronauts must have visited each of their planets, in turn, which were fairly close together in galactic terms and there they'd spread their seed around liberally.

This man was even taller and bigger than some Lycans and maybe even the Tygerians. Not that it mattered—my training instructors had assured me that big men were often slow and didn't know proper fighting techniques, because they relied on all that brute strength. Somehow, I didn't think that would be the case with this one, however.

I still wasn't all that alarmed. After all, I didn't know any of them and hadn't had time to make any enemies on Lycanus 3—not yet anyway. I hadn't done anything wrong, as far as I knew, and I had no reason to think they were angry at us in particular, though they certainly looked as if they were furious about something.

“Which of you is in charge here?” the handsome man in the red cape demanded as he came up to my group. He looked straight at my friend, Kareb, as he said it.

I spoke up instead and stepped out to confront him. “I'm in charge. Who wants to know?”

“My name is General Fortina, of Horvath,” the tall, blond officer said in a surprised voice. “Did you say you're the buyer of this vetami egg? How old are you anyway?”

“I'm old enough. Why? Who are you?”

“I've already told you my name. Now answer me! Are you the buyer of this egg?”

“Now see here,” King Travon said stepping over to us and interrupting. “Don't speak to him that way. His Highness, Prince Rylan and I, are here conducting a private business transaction which is none of your concern.”

“I disagree,” Fortina said. “This is an illegal transaction and it's very much my concern. You could both be arrested for this, in fact.”

“I beg your pardon!” King Travon said in a cold, imperious tone. “How dare you? Perhaps you didn’t hear me. I am King Travon of Thalios and this young man is Prince Rylan of Moravia.”

Fortina glared at him, and the king’s guards drew closer. I decided maybe I should speak up before anything got any more intense. “Listen, we seem to have got off on the wrong foot here. I’m a buyer for this vetami egg that King Travon has so graciously consented to sell us. I’m here to pick up the crate containing the egg, and this is a perfectly legal transaction and frankly, none of your damn business.”

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Fortina whirled around to glare at me. “You’re admitting it then.”

“That’s an odd way to put it, but yes, I’m here for the egg! Pray tell me, what business is this of yours, sir?”

“Indeed, I’d like to know the answer to that myself,” King Travon said. “What’s the meaning of all this?” He had a haughty, bad-tempered look as he glared at the man in the red cape. “Who do you think you are to accost us like this?”

“Are you people hard of hearing? I just told you who I am.” He frowned at each of us in turn and settled on King Travon first. “Stealing something doesn’t convey ownership, sir, no matter how long ago it may have been.”

Travon made a huffing sound. “How dare you? I’ve stolen nothing! The egg came from my own herd of vetami back on Thalios.”

“The herd you’re speaking of was stolen by your father years ago when he left Horvath and migrated to Thalios. The creatures are an endangered species by order of Davos of Tygeria, the head of the Axis. I think you’re well aware of that fact.”

After he made that shocking pronouncement, he turned to me. “As for you, boy, you have made an illegal purchase. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. The eggs are exclusively the property of the queen of Horvath. And mine, as her agent. I’m sure you know that vetami and their eggs are considered to be endangered and no one can own them except for a Horvathian.”

“This is outrageous!” Travon shouted at the man. “I am King Travon of Thalios, and



we've had vetami on our planet for many years. I own one myself. This egg was purchased from its legal owner, namely me. Where's your proof that you're who you say you are anyway? As to your claim that they're an endangered species, they aren't endangered on my planet!"

"Are you really so ignorant?" he asked in an unfriendly, insulting tone. "Is Thalios some backwater planet on the ass end of nowhere, where no one gets the news? Everyone knows vetamis are an endangered species in this entire galaxy and protected by intergalactic law. This egg is stolen. No one is allowed to own a vetami egg except for Horvathians. That makes you either sadly misinformed, extremely stupid, or a fucking thief. Which one are you?"

For a moment Travon was speechless, and so was I. I was sure he'd never been spoken to in such a way and neither had I. He turned alarmingly red in the face and spluttered at the arrogance of the insulting little speech we'd both just been subjected to. All of my men began to murmur uneasily and draw closer to me. Kareb tried to take my arm, but I pulled away.

"How dare you speak to His Majesty in such a way?" I shouted at him. "Or me, for that matter. This egg was bought and paid for, damn you! I have the legal paperwork right here in my hand. So, I'd advise you to back off. And if you dare speak to either of us like that again, I'll-I'll knock you on your big ass."

I have to admit I enjoyed the look on his face when that registered on him. Clearly, he had no idea who I was. I had a half-formed idea in my head that if he wanted to start some shit, then I'd certainly give him some. All I had to do was invoke King Davos's name as my grandfather, and that should settle any difficulties pretty quickly. Still, I was a little hesitant about doing that. The Axis was not well-loved in all parts of the realm and especially on former Alliance planets like the Lycanus group. Some might even say they were heartily disliked. As Davos's grandson, I had the full power of his name behind me, but what would he think if I bandied it around when I got myself in

trouble? No, I didn't need my father's or my grandfather's name. I would handle this myself. I threw back my hood and faced this general, feeling supremely confident that I could handle any situation that arose.

"I demand to see a Lycan official immediately. I'm going to demand your arrest."

The soldiers who were with Fortina laughed at that, but he didn't seem to think it was funny in the least. He glanced down at the receipt I'd been waving in his face contemptuously and then he slapped it right out of my hand and to the floor. I have to say it shocked me. My hand was tingling, and no one had ever laid hands on me before or treated me with such disrespect.

"The vetami egg belongs to Horvath," Fortina snarled at me. "We're confiscating it as stolen goods and taking this egg in custody. I might just arrest you as well and haul you back with us to face a judge. I'm getting tired of your smart mouth."

"Arrest me? You can't do that! You wouldn't dare touch me!"

He glared down at me and lifted one side of his mouth in a sardonic smile.

"Watch me. Little boys shouldn't make threats they can't back up."

"You bastard!" I shouted at him and then I shoved him on his chest as hard as I could. Looking back on it, I can see now that it was probably an unwise move. It was like shoving a brick wall, for one thing, and for another he hadn't been exactly violent up to this point. Insulting as hell, yes, but not violent. That was all on my part. And not only did he not budge when I shoved him—all I did was hurt my hands on his hard chest.

He glared down at me contemptuously and then he literally leaned over and growled in my face. I reeled back and tried to punch him, but he stopped my fist with his hand

and pulled me over to him to take me into custody. The moment he touched me, he suddenly stiffened, getting a shocked expression on his face.

“What is this? Tell me who you are!” he yelled down at me and then inexplicably pushed me violently away again.

I stumbled backward and fell to the floor. Suddenly I was the one on my ass, looking up at him. King Travon gave a shocked gasp at the sudden outbreak of violence, and he allowed his men to pull him away. I was vaguely aware of him fading into the shadows and my own men struggling to come to my aid but being blocked by the red-caped soldiers. There was yelling and fighting all around me, but all my focus turned to this general in front of me. He was staring down at me like I’d just suddenly grown another head.

Kareb broke free and grabbed my arm to pull me to safety, but the second he touched me, Fortina reached for me and yanked me back toward him.

“Take your hands off him. He’s mine.” he said, in a low, menacing tone that frightened me more than his shouting had.

Kareb and I looked at each other in complete confusion, but his face suddenly turned a dull red. “I mean to say that he’s my prisoner. Now get back. He’s coming with me.”

But I was the son of a king and the grandson of Davos. I had been raised to think I was protected, sheltered, guarded at all times and downright bullet-proof as my omak-ahn Blake would say. Outraged, I immediately made a fist and tried to hit him in his face. And just as immediately, I regretted it.

He grabbed my wrist and held it in the air, glaring down at me. I felt like I was well and truly captured, and it was pretty clear I wasn’t getting away until he decided to let me go. In a sudden move, he twisted my arm around behind my back and pulled me

against him, then turned and snarled an order to one of the people standing near him in uniform.

“Find one of the Lycan officials who work here. Get someone over here to arrest this bunch of thieves now. I’m taking this one with me.”

“No!” I squirmed and tried my best to get away, but he held on tightly so that I couldn’t budge.

“Let go of me, damn you! How dare you lay hands on me! Do you have any idea who I am?”

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I thought he wouldn't answer at first and then he snarled down at me. "I know exactly who you are. You're a thief and now you're my prisoner. That's all either of us need to know."

My friends surged forward to help me, but his men pushed in front of them and suddenly we were in a standoff. All of his people were bristling with weapons, while we had left ours on board the ship, thinking we didn't need them for the simple pickup of a crate. All, that is, except for one disruptor, which I suddenly remembered I had stuck down in the waistband of my trousers before we left the ship—just in case I needed it. It looked as if this were definitely the case, so I pulled it out and held it up for him to see.

"Let me go!"

He became incensed at the sight of my disruptor. Angry words—I didn't understand them, but they sounded angry, anyway—flew back and forth like stinging insects between him and his men. What I thought were threats of violence filled the air, along with some totally unnecessary shoving and name calling.

Okay, maybe that was mostly on my part, but I felt it was more than justified. King Travon and his men had all vanished, and we were alone with these big brutes who wanted to arrest us.

He knocked the disruptor from my hand, and it fell to the floor. A huge fight would no doubt have broken out, because my men were so loyal to me, but then one of the Lycan officials finally came charging over to break it all up. It was too little and way too late, in my opinion. Things had rapidly gone downhill.

The official took me by the arm to pull me away, yet as soon as he did, the blond man holding onto me yanked me back toward him and stared directly down into the official's eyes like he was challenging him now, and his gaze was suddenly fixed and threatening.

“Leave him to me. He's mine!” he growled, tucking me into his side. He had growled, like some kind of animal. And why did that make my typid go hard as a rock?

The Lycan official looked alarmed and began speaking intensely to him, and this time in Lycan—in fact, most of the rest of their exchange was conducted in the Lycan language, which always sounded like a series of snarls and grunts to me, and I didn't understand any of it. The official gestured down at me in his arms, and the entire time they were speaking, the insufferable man kept pulling me closer and closer and refusing to let me go, snarling at any of my friends who tried to come closer to help me. He actually snapped his teeth at one of them and pushed another one of them to the floor. I was almost literally wrapped up in his arms by that time, and he showed no signs of letting me go.

The Lycan official asked him a question, still looking from him to me with a shocked expression, and Fortina answered with an up and down jerk of his head. He still looked furious for whatever reason, and the official reacted strongly, first looking equally shocked and then leaning in to speak softly to him, saying what sounded like the same phrase over and over, like he was trying to calm him. Other Lycan officials had come running over to help by this time, and I was surrounded by all these huge men. Slowly, however, they convinced Fortina to let up a little and stop crushing me to his side. One of the officials even reached out gingerly and pulled me away, and he let me go, glaring at both of us suspiciously.

When I was finally free, I stumbled over to my guards, straightening my jacket and shooting him a resentful look back over my shoulder. He was watching me closely as I bent over to pick up my weapon, and I had the feeling that if I tried to make a run

for it, he'd be on top of me before I made it two feet. I was embarrassed and really angry, but mostly my heart was racing, and I felt humiliated. In fact, the more I considered it, the madder I got. It was then that I lost all reason and pulled the disruptor up to aim it right in his face.

It was all bravado and temper, and I would never have actually shot him. He gave me such a contemptuous look that I did consider it though. Everyone was yelling, and he held out his hand to me, indicating that he wanted the damn thing—wanted me to just hand it over to him.

That's when it happened. I meant to brandish it at him and try to scare him a little—to let him know I wasn't weak. But to my horror, the damn thing went off! Everyone jumped back with loud cries as the general ducked, and the charge zinged over his head. His men started yelling loudly at me and rushed me, knocking me to the floor.

I didn't mean to shoot him—but I was upset and somehow, I must have knocked the safety off. I was a little out of control and immediately frightened by what I had done, but having gone this far, I wasn't sure how to get out of it.

Several of his men rushed me, tackling me to the ground. I yelled because I was frightened that they'd kill me, but suddenly, the general was there, dragging me out from under the weight of them and thrusting me behind him. He snarled at his men to back off, apparently, because they all moved away, but if I thought I was in the clear, I was sadly mistaken. He turned to me and roughly began to pat me down, checking to see if I had anything else on me. As bad luck would have it, he felt the knife I kept strapped to my thigh and began jerking down my trousers to get at it.

I began fighting him in earnest then, but the trousers were tight, the way I liked them, so he was basically ripping them off me to get to the knife. By the time it was done, my trousers were hanging off me in tatters, and I was left with mostly just my breka, which was a kind of underwear that only covered my typpid and my balls, as my

omak called them.

His eyes widened as he looked down at me, and I stared back up at him as well. To my surprise, he took off his long red cape and wrapped it around me to cover me. I felt the strangest urges sweeping over me, and I had no idea where they were coming from. He looked as rattled as I felt.

Just in time, more Lycans arrived on the scene, shouting at us and pulling us away from each other. He looked stunned, which was the way I felt.

The Lycans finally managed to get him moving away from me. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Even though I'd been shocked by his actions, I felt somehow safer when he was near me. At least he was protecting me from his men, who were shooting me glances that should have killed me on the spot. They surrounded him and led him away, speaking urgently to him, and it seemed like he was beginning to come back to his senses, just as he had robbed me of mine.

Holding me by my arm, one of the Lycans began reading something to me, though I didn't understand a word of what he was saying. Finally, I realized he was reading me my rights and that he had just arrested me. All around me, my guards were standing around looking shocked and scared, not knowing what to do or how to help. Kareb was shouting at the officials, but they were ignoring him.

I was so angry and embarrassed that I was pretty speechless at that point and almost naked under the general's cape. I glared up at the Lycan while he finished saying what he had to say. He began to march me out of the building and onto the outside docks, holding tightly to my arm. It wasn't terribly cold on Lycanus 3, but it wasn't exactly warm either, especially when I wasn't wearing any pants. I stumbled along beside the Lycan, helped by his grip on my elbow, and he led me to a ship. It was a huge, older model star cruiser, which was often used to transport heavy cargo.



He took me inside the alien ship and hauled me down a passageway to the lifts. I was far too angry—and scared—to say much. I noticed him staring down at me, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of looking at him. I was too proud to beg him to let me go. I didn't think it would have done any good anyway.

When we reached the lower deck, he took me into a small jail cell that had a kind of rack attached to the wall for sleeping and a thing I recognized as a toilet. He put me inside and closed the door. Then he left me there all alone.

It took a moment for the truth to sink in. I was under arrest and being detained on an alien ship. I didn't know where they were taking me or what they were going to do to me. I sat down on the rack and felt tears spring to my eyes. I dashed them away angrily, folded my arms over my chest and just waited for someone to come and save me.

### Chapter Three

Quinn Fortina,

Marshal General of Horvath

I had the beautiful boy arrested because I couldn't bear to part with him. No more reason than that, but I couldn't let him know it just yet. I had to keep up this pretense that it was because he'd been caught in an illegal action regarding a vetami egg and then he'd pulled a disruptor on me, even though now that things had calmed down, and I'd had a chance to think, I knew the truth.

Travon had misrepresented his ownership of the egg, and the boy or, more likely, his family had purchased it. As for the disruptor, I knew it had discharged accidentally. I'd seen the look of utter shock on his pretty face.

I'd easily disarmed him. He'd been waving it around like a child would do, and it had been little threat to me. But I would use that as an excuse if I had to. I had to have some good reason for keeping him. And I couldn't tell him the real reason that he wasn't going back home. Not now at least. Probably not ever.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

I could hardly stand to admit it to myself.

The Lycans had notified us days earlier that they had received word that a large crate containing a vetami egg was going to be transferred on their docks and we had arrived the day before to meet the thieves when they arrived. It was a large, ready-to-hatch egg, according to their sources and it supposedly “belonged” to King Travon of Thalios. He had sold the egg to a third party, they said, and that person or his agent was coming to pick it up.

On Horvath, we had known about Travon of Thalios and his vetamis for years. In fact, he was my cousin, the son of my late father’s youngest brother, though I’d never actually met either of them. I’d never had any desire to meet them. His father and my uncle, a man named Illios, had been entirely disreputable. He had married the queen of Thalios long ago in an arranged marriage. The queen had tragically died of “food poisoning” not long after their son Travon was born, and Illios had then installed himself as Regent for the infant. Illios proved to be a harsh ruler, and there was a short-lived coup attempt later on by what was left of the old Thalian army after he got through with it. Illios had prevailed against it, however, creating his own army of mercenaries and he kept his office.

When he had first gone to Thalios, Illios had taken six vetami with him without permission from Horvath. From what we knew, he had, over the years, managed to build his own stock of vetami, and they numbered around twenty-five or thirty beasts from what our spies had been able to report. It didn’t seem like much, but Vetami eggs took years to hatch, and vetami weren’t prolific beasts by any means anyway. It was one reason they’d landed on the endangered species list.

Worst of all, he had taken all of the very rare Golden vetami left on Horvath. Goldens had always been scarce, and therefore more valuable. It seemed as if he'd taken every one capable of breeding with him.

Travon hadn't assumed the role of king, however, until after the death of Illios, about ten years ago.

The Parliament of Horvath had declined to make an issue about the vetami Illios had stolen from us. But they did agree to keep a close eye out for any trafficking of the eggs or the young vetami themselves, and Travon had been sternly warned against trying to sell or breed them. The very fact that there was an egg at all was illegal, as he had been told not to breed any of them without permission. We offered again and again to purchase the eggs from him, but he continued to refuse. King Davos himself had agreed to step in if it became necessary, and it seemed, with this latest stunt, that it was. Travon was flirting with rebellion too, and we'd heard the increasing rumors of King Davos's patience wearing thin.

Travon's presence here on Lycanus 3 delivering "his" egg was a direct violation of the law, and I intended to report him right away and see if I couldn't hurry the process along. If I had my way, I would have arrested him today for the violation, but once he'd made it back to his ship. I didn't want to involve the Lycans in his removal and arrest. Travon was a thief, plain and simple, and a troublemaker. I wondered what it was that he'd meant to accomplish by selling the Moravian king this egg. He was the kind of man who would always have some nefarious scheme in mind. Having seen the beautiful prince, I now had a good idea of what that might be. Travon was probably hoping to marry the young man and gain favor and power as Davos's grandson-in-law.

We had petitioned for rights over all the vetami years ago, just after the war, when so many eggs and young hatchlings were being stolen by Axis and Alliance soldiers. They were not only stealing our heritage but a valuable asset of our moon, and

thankfully, King Davos had agreed.

All of this was racing through my mind and jealousy swept over me to think of Travon even touching the boy. Was this brash, gorgeous young man guilty of anything except bad judgment? I didn't think he was. He's said something about his father sending him to pick up the egg, so I was holding out hope for the fact that he'd been caught up in something that wasn't his fault. I fully intended to find out for sure.

But despite the outcome, his fate was already sealed. I would never let him go. I'd try to negotiate a marriage contract, but if that failed for some reason, I'd take him and go to the Narvathian Mountains, so wild and so remote that we'd never be found. Tracking equipment didn't work up there because of the magnetic fields that covered the area, and it was well known throughout the galaxy as a place a man could hide out indefinitely.

Hopefully, it would never come to that extreme. I was not only the Marshal General of Horvath, and related by marriage to the queen, but my grandfather had been a former king of Horvath, so I was a royal in my own right. I didn't think the boy's family would turn down my marriage offer.

I fell down in my chair, exhausted by the morning's excitement, and wondering what the hell I was going to do now. I didn't want a mate and had no business having one—especially a young man like this one, who was so loud, so belligerent, and so rather extraordinarily beautiful that having a mate like him would demand far too much of my time and attention. It wasn't anything I wanted or needed. But it looked as if I were trapped by this damn mating bond.

That morning in the warehouse, the scent of him had hit me from across the room. It was sweet and compelling—and so intense that it made my knees a little weak. But I tried to ignore it at first. I began to breathe through my mouth, because I had an awful feeling that I knew what this was, and it couldn't have come at a worse time. Not that

there was ever a good time for the fucking mate bond, but I was hoping against hope that I was mistaken and one of the men in this place simply smelled incredibly good.

Of course, I knew the truth, but at the time, I was in deep denial.

The moment I'd seen him, however, I felt that pain in my stomach that people said came along with the bond. It infuriated me, and as I got up closer and more personal to him, thatridiculously sweet scent continued to hit me hard. He began shouting at me at one point and my brain was screaming "mate" at me, but I was determined to ignore it and keep denying it. And I did pretty well, considering. I didn't like the others touching him, but I was all right until he pulled that damn disruptor, and I had to disarm him. The moment I put my hands on him, I was lost.

I didn't have to treat him the way I did, but by that time I'd seriously lost all reason anyway. Thank the gods he hadn't tried to run from me. I came to my senses fairly quickly and got him up to his feet, wrapping my cape around him to hide his nearly naked body from prying eyes. I was shaking as I realized that some small part of me was thinking of mating him right then and there. Like a Lycan wolf, determined to have its way.

I didn't strictly consider myself to be a Lycan—no Horvathian ever did. The truth, of course, was that we more or lesswere, though we didn't like to admit it. Horvath was a moon of Lycanus 3, and to be sure, we had common ancestors with the residents of the three planets. Physically, we resembled their inhabitants, except for our fair hair, but we proudly considered ourselves to be just Horvathian citizens and not Lycans. There were significant differences between us in our history and our biology as well. We didn't shift into Lycan wolves, as they did for one thing, and we never had. That was one, big, definite evolutionary split in our favor. It was said that it was the main reason our ancestors had migrated to this moon.

But somewhere down the line, many of us had inherited that stupid mating bond they

had, and it was nothing that any of us wanted. It completely disrupted and even ruined lives, like I felt it was about to ruin mine.

Like the Lycans, Horvathians were cursed to find our mates unexpectedly and without warning. Then we were further cursed to be unable to resist them. Born with the capacity to have a bond that was damn near unbreakable, most of us dreaded the day it might hit us, because it was so fucking unpredictable. The objects of our affection could be any sex, any age, or any social situation. If the person were truly unacceptable age-wise, or if either we or they were already mated, we could try to distance ourselves from them, but usually, even that didn't work very well.

On Horvath, our claim to fame was our dragons. Those of us who were Dragon Riders formed a similar bond to our dragons as we did with our mates, and it was damn near unbreakable. I sometimes wondered if we humanoids hadn't developed right alongside the vetami on our moon and that was where this bond had somehow originated. It was as if their blood called to ours—like the blood of our mates did. When it came to the vetamis, it was of vital importance as to whether or not the eventually ten-ton-plus beast would accept their rider and follow his commands. Both lives might depend on the strength of that bond. The same was true for our mates.

If the person were already married or far too young or too old for marriage, then we faced a lifetime of disappointment and pain—unless we simply ignored everything and kept them with us, regardless of all other considerations. It simply didn't matter. That's why we considered the bond to be such a curse.

Dragon bonds were easier. My own dragon had only just hatched when he'd chosen me as his rider, and the exhilaration I'd felt was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Or it had been until this very moment in the warehouse when the other known type of blood bond chose that horribly inconvenient moment to rear its head with furious, unrelenting force.

It was said that a mating bond was the strongest feeling we would ever experience in our lifetimes. When it came, we had to exert every bit of our self-control to not be overcome with lust and passion for the person associated with it, and a kind of madness came over us that could send us into a mating frenzy. We might grab the person, hold them captive or even fuck them right where they stood, and we'd fight anyone who tried to stop us. If the person didn't fight us and just accepted the bond, we would eventually calm down, but they would rightfully hate us for it. It was a no-win situation.

The Lycans, who were our closest genetic cousins, had a similar thing that happened to them when they found their mates, so we began to call it the same thing they did, the mating bond, but that was far too tame a name for the violence of those feelings. I didn't just want to "mate" or "bond" with this man. I wanted to possess him, to own him body and soul. He was mine from the first moment I knew what was happening.

When I had first smelled that heady scent, I was frantic to see who it was coming from and then the prettiest little face I'd probably ever seen on a man or a woman was right there in front of me, and I knew the scent was coming from him. Everything about him was flawless, from his perfectly chiseled face to his oddly colored blue-green eyes. Was he feeling this too? It was said the mating bond went both ways, regardless of species. I hoped that was true, so he might be able to understand.

"Tell me who you are," I said, and he looked back up at me and said something I could barely even hear. I paid him little attention, because he had pushed back his hood just then to display a flood of red-gold curls cascading down to his shoulders, and his beauty was stunning. Was he part Tygerian? He was much too small to be fully Tygerian, and his skin didn't have the right markings, but the Tygerians were the only ones in this part of our galaxy known for having red hair. His eyes flashed at me, and his pretty little bow-shaped mouth sneered at me, which was infuriating—and adorable.



He was arguing about something, resentful of the way I was acting, I'm sure, but I couldn't seem to stop myself long enough to listen to him. And I thought to myself, if he was a thief, as I thought, then he was out of control, and it was my job as his mate to bring him back in line. I was angry at him, but at the same time, I wanted to kiss him, caress him and run my fingers through those red-gold curls until he purred with pleasure. I wanted to make him mine, and I'd never felt that way about anybody before, let alone another male.

I liked women, but I wanted to kiss those plump lips of his and feel his soft stubble on the skin of my face. I wanted to wrap him up in my arms and never let him go, and the mating urge was telling me—why not? Go ahead. Do whatever you want to do to him, because he's yours, isn't he?

And it was all because I was convinced, with no further proof necessary, that this boy belonged to me. Like I said, it makes no sense when you think of it later, or try to explain it, but my every instinct was urging me to take him, lock him down and get him under my control.

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Whenever my dragon disobeyed, or got into a fight with another male, or did anything I thought made him look less than perfect—which he very nearly was, in my eyes—I felt the same way. As if he were a reflection or an extension of me. I knew from the first time I saw my dragon that he was a spoiled little beauty, who was far too handsome for his own good. He'd need correction and my close, personal attention for the rest of his life. This boy was the same.

I remember a lot of yelling when the Lycan officials took him away from me. It took several of them to hold me back. They finally got through to me by holding onto me and speaking softly and reasonably to me in Lycan. As Lycan males, they were familiar with this kind of behavior, I suppose, and because I was a high-ranking officer on Horvath, they didn't arrest me like they would have someone else. One of them realized what was happening, and he asked me if this was my mate. I said yes with great confidence. He told me over and over again that I was experiencing a mating frenzy, and that I'd hurt the boy if I kept this up.

Hurting him was the last thing I wanted to do. It was totally unacceptable, so I began to fight the urges instead of the officials. I was able to calm down now that he was away from me, and I was no longer touching him. At least enough to let him go and allow the Lycans to take him away after assuring me they would take him to my ship and put the rest of his crew under arrest for the theft.

I managed to get myself under control again while that was going on, and eventually I took my men with me and headed toward my ship. I was met there by a Lycan official, who told me it would be for the best if I left the planet with the boy.

"I put him in the cargo bay, in one of those detention cells you have there. We have

decided it's better not to arrest his entire crew and told that group of men to leave our planet immediately and go home. There was a little trouble with them not wanting to leave the boy, but I told them you were taking him into custody and were leaving to go back to Horvath. They keep yelling at us about his father and his grandfather being kings, but we can't fully understand them and none of them speak Lycan. We're just sending them all back home."

"Good. We'll be leaving in a few minutes too. I apologize for my behavior," I said, and we bowed formally to each other.

"It's nothing we haven't seen before, General. This mating bond can be the devil. But talk to him once the frenzy passes. He needs to understand what's happening, because you're no doubt frightening him."

"Of course. I will, and I'll contact his parents right away about a mating contract."

"Good idea. The sooner, the better. I'll send you the details we have for him. It seems he is Prince Rylan of Moravia, but I have no idea why he was involved in this theft."

"I'll find out. This vetami egg is nearer to hatching than was first reported to us, so I have to get it back home right away. I'll try to talk to his parents on the way or shortly after we arrive. If any inquiries are made, we'll be going directly to Horvath."

"His crew threatened to go to Lycan Command to stop you, but if you leave within the next few minutes, I can tell them that I was too late to interfere with your takeoff. You need to leave, though."

"Thank you," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'll tell the bridge to prepare for it."

The official nodded and hurried off the ship as I made the call to the bridge.

I sat in my chair for a few moments and rubbed my hand over my face as I realized I had just acquired a mate, whether I needed one or not. And now I had to figure out what to do with him.

It would take us a full day or so to get home, since we wouldn't be traveling at the highest possible spacecraft speed. The technology existed with us, of course, but it was far too expensive to use for short trips like this one and completely unnecessary for them besides. Anyway, I had a small span of time to figure things out and calm things down before we arrived back on Horvath.

First things first, I had to complete the paperwork on the arrest and write a report on what happened to send to the queen. Maybe that would give me time to calm down.

I gathered my thoughts and then began to dictate an account of the incident into my communicator. I wanted badly to put this off and go see the boy, but I needed to make sure I was in the right frame of mind first.

I wondered if he would talk to me. I'd frightened him pretty badly, and I knew he was upset, even if he'd probably never admit it. I wanted to reassure him that he was fine and that no one would harm him. The trouble was that I was fairly sure he wouldn't listen to a word I had to say. After all, I'd acted like a madman from the first moment he'd seen me. It was that damn mating bond that made animals of us all.

But I had to try. I didn't like to think about him below decks, being scared and all alone. He wasn't in any kind of jail cell or detention room, though he must have thought he was. The Lycan official was wrong about that. It was merely a kind of sleeping quarters on that level of the ship for anyone who needed to remain on duty down there overnight. There were two racks in the room, along with a small table and chairs. It was comfortable, if a little plain.

I'd need to talk to him about a mating ceremony right away, if he had any family that

would care about his reputation. If he really was a prince, and I had no reason to doubt it, then I was sure they'd insist on a wedding. That was fine with me. Once we found our bond mate, we had to secure them, no matter what, and whether or not we even wanted a marriage. I definitely didn't, but I knew I didn't have any choice. It would drive me mad if I had to leave him or stay away from him for any length of time. It was only one of the many things that made this stupid mate bond so complicated. I'd try to negotiate a contract for him, but if his father refused my offer, I'd simply take him anyway and fight anyone who tried to take him away from me again.

This thing was reciprocal after a short time, so he would be just as miserable if his family decided to be stubborn about it. After a few months or maybe a year or so, I could probably let him go if he still wanted to leave and only visit him occasionally. Maybe. We could both go back to our own lives as before. That would be the best-case scenario anyway. Seeing as how I spent very little time at home, it would be for better for him anyway, if he went back to his own life when I was on duty. So long as he didn't have any males around him except for his relatives, I should be all right with it. Others who had been cursed with this mating bond had managed to work something out. Surely, I could too.

I glanced at the time on my communicator and was surprised to see how late it was. It had taken me over an hour to finish the report and gather my thoughts. We were by this time well out of Lycan airspace and into open space. I took a deep breath and stood up. I may as well get this thing over with and go down to try and explain to him what had happened. I dreaded the coming interview with every fiber of my being.

## Chapter Four

When I used the keypad to open the door, I found the pretty young man sitting with my cape still wrapped around him on one of the racks. He snarled at me as I came in the room, so I stayed near the door, leaning back against it.

“I’m not here to fight you.”

“Well, that will make a nice change,” he said, lifting his stubborn little chin and glaring at me. His extraordinary eyes flashed at me, and the tiny room was filled with his scent. I tried to remember to breathe through my mouth.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“I’m Prince Rylan of Morovia, and you’ve seriously fucked up by kidnapping me like this. And those Lycans have too! My father is a king, you know. He’ll gut you like a fish for taking me like this.”

Did I believe him? Not really, no. Not that I didn’t believe the “gutting” part. From what I knew of kings, I could well believe that. I had no doubt he’d try, if such a person existed. But considering how volatile—and young—he was, what was a king doing by letting him run around stealing dragon eggs anyway? It seemed farfetched to say the least.

“Well, I’m suitably terrified, ‘Prince,’” I replied. “Do you have any way of verifying any of this?”

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“I had the receipt, but you knocked it out of my hand and to the floor. Just before you threw me to the floor and ripped up my clothing.”

“Which happened, by the way, because I was disarming you after you attempted to murder me with your disruptor.”

He folded his arms over his chest, pushed his bottom lip out into a pout and glared at me. “That’s not what happened.”

“Then please tell me your version of it.”

“I admit I shouldn’t have pulled the disruptor on you. That was wrong of me, but I never would have shot you!”

“The charge whizzing past my head told a different story.”

“I-I never meant for that to happen. It was an accident. I thought I had the safety on!”

“Well, that would be a great comfort to my friends and family. You could have explained that to them at my funeral.”

He blushed very prettily, and this time he bit his bottom lip, which I found way too adorable.

“How old are you anyway?”

“I’m twenty-one, if it’s any of your business.”

I was surprised and relieved to hear it. I was afraid he was more like sixteen.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” he said, in a small voice that made me feel sorry for him. I tried to steel myself against him. He needed discipline.

“Please,” he , looking up at me with those extraordinary eyes of his. “You have to believe me and let me go home.”

“All right, calm down. No one is going to hurt you. I admit that both of us lost control. I shouldn’t have been so rough with you. And I should have let the Lycan officials search you for more weapons instead of taking matters in my own hands.”

“Indeed, you should have!”

“As I said. Now, we’ve both apologized. I hope we can put that part of all this behind us.”

“Oh, I just bet you do!” he shouted at me, “now that you know I’m a prince.”

“Actually, I’m from a royal family myself, so that goes both ways.”

He looked startled. “What? You are?”

“My grandfather was a king of Horvath. My father wasn’t the direct heir, so I don’t use my title, and I’m not in the direct line for the throne. But I have a title, nonetheless. And, oh yes, one more thing is in my favor...I didn’t try to murder you as you did me.”

He looked mad enough to spit at me, so I decided not to keep bantering with him. He needed to understand what had happened and what he was to me. But how could I explain it?



“None of that is what I need to talk to you about. I have something I need to tell you. To try to explain to you.”

“What’s your full name, sir?” he asked, ignoring what I’d said.

“I’m Marshal General Quinn Fortina. The egg you were trying to steal belongs not only to my queen, but to me and my unit.”

“I’ve already told you that we weren’t stealing it! My father, the king of Moravia, purchased the damn thing. I was simply there to pick it up.”

“Yes, but my aunt, the queen of Horvath, wasn’t willing to sell it.”

I was relieved to hear his father had been duped—if it were true—though his story still had to be verified. “If indeed your father was purchasing the egg, then I regret to inform you that he was the victim of a thief. Vetami eggs are never sold. They’re an endangered species on our moon, and King Davos and his son Mikos have certified them as such.”

He flushed a dark shade of red. “My father didn’t buy it from your moon. He bought it from Thalios, because they also have vetami. My father would never steal.”

“Then again, he was duped. Thalios has no rights over our vetami. The ones they have were stolen years ago. By law, they should have been returned to us, but our parliament didn’t want to start a war over the issue.”

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“But that can’t be right. My father bought it from the king of Thalios, King Travon. He brought it as far as Lycanus 3 for us to pick up.”

“And Travon is a thief. As was his father before him.”

“You must turn this ship around then and go back to Lycanus 3. I demand that you take me out of this cell and return me so we can get this straightened out with my father. It’s all a terrible misunderstanding.”

“You’re not in a cell—this is just a room below decks. I had no place else to put you, as this ship has no guest quarters.”

“Oh. Well, I still demand that...”

“We turn this ship around and take you back?”

“Yes!”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. First of all, I have only your word for all this as you have no receipt or paperwork or proof of any kind.”

“I did have it! But you knocked it from my hand!”

“Secondly, and more importantly, the vetami egg seems to be about to hatch. When it does, it has to be paired with a rider immediately, because if it’s not done right away, the hatchling could and probably would grow up to be a dangerous beast. They have to be handled with strength and kindness from the moment they hatch, or else they

can become untrainable. We would have no recourse but to send the hatchling to our breeding grounds and clip its wings so it couldn't fly away and go back into the wild. No one wants to do that."

"That's not my problem!"

"You made it your problem when you pulled out that disruptor and tried to shoot me."

"Well, isn't that convenient?"

"It's not convenient at all. But if you're implying that I'm lying about the egg hatching, I can assure you, I'm not. I can't rush you back to Lycanus 3 because you lost your temper and tried to kill me, causing yourself to be arrested and thereby putting the vetami's life in danger too."

He blushed again, and I felt bad for not telling him the whole truth of the matter—but I couldn't have left him behind, and I didn't think he was ready to learn yet why I'd had to take him with me. It was bound to upset him, and despite his brash attitude and bravado, I thought he was frightened, and I knew he wanted to go home. I needed time to try and win him over. I wanted to tell him about the mate bond, but maybe I could put it off for a little while yet. I had to stall for time, if I could.

"Where is this place you're taking me to? And how will I get back once you find out the truth?"

"It's Horvath, a moon of Lycanus 3. But try not to worry about that now. We have a day or so yet until we get there."

"But why am I going there?"

I sighed. “How many times are we going to go over this?”

“But I don’t want to go to your moon.”

“Nevertheless.”

“Look, perhaps if I explain it to you calmly...my omak, who is my bearer...”

“Is he Tygerian? I’m familiar with Tygerian omaks.”

“Yes, he is. Anyway, he did some training on Lycanus after the war ended. He’s spoken of the vetami and how much he liked to ride them, so my father was going to buy one for him as a surprise gift. He had no idea this egg was stolen—if indeed, it really was.”

“It definitely was. They’re an endemic species to Horvath.”

More specifically, they were unique to a vast region in the northern mountains, where they made their nests high in the rocky terrain. We’d called them “dragons” affectionately, like the Alliance soldiers stationed on Horvath had done during the war, and the name seemed to stick, even after they left and the Tygerians came. Even though the vetami weren’t quite as large as those mythical creatures were supposed to be, nor did they resemble serpents. They did have definite dragon-like qualities, however. The vetami were beautiful and intelligent creatures. We’d managed to build their numbers back up, but we still consider them to be endangered.

I explained that last part to him and he sighed. “I’m sorry for our part in it then. Though I think there was no need for you to get so excited about it.”

“The excitement came when you tried to shoot me.”

He pressed his lips together in a prim little line. “I’ve explained about that. When can I go home?”

I was saved from answering by a sudden loud and strident alarm going off. Rylan jumped to his feet. “What is that?”

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“I don’t know. I’ll go check on it and you stay here. Keep this door locked.”

“Is there danger?”

“Prince Rylan, I don’t know. I’ll be back if there is. Stay inside this room and keep the door locked.”

As soon as I got outside his door, the call from the bridge was already coming through on my communicator. It was from my pilot, yelling in my ear that we were about to be attacked by a ship that had Thalian insignia.

“Sir, a ship has just uncloaked beside us, and it has Thalian markings, but it’s not the same one King Travon was traveling on. This one is smaller and faster. I’ve taken evasive action, but they’re still trying to ram us.”

“What in hell? We’ve just left Lycan airspace. Have they been waiting to waylay us? Send out a general hail to any ships in the area and address the Thalian vessel specifically. Tell them to desist immediately or prepare to receive no quarter from our guns.”

“Already done, sir, but they’re ignoring our hail.”

“Then tell them to go ahead and board us, then, and that they’re all dead men when they do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is no doubt an attempted robbery of our egg, but they may try to kidnap any young crewmen they come across to sell them to slavers too. Thalian mercenaries are known for that. Send some men to the docking area and prepare for a chase if necessary. I’m on the lower decks. Advise as soon as you know where they intend to breach the ship.”

Kidnappings were the most common result of an attack like this. I hated the Thalias, and though I was ready for a fight, I was still worried about Rylan’s safety and about the safety of the egg. I’d decided not to risk Rylan in case they managed to board us. He’d be better off next to me. I started back to his room when I heard the noise of an explosion coming from the loading deck.

I took off running, pulling out my disruptor as I went. They had managed to force their way inside the loading deck and a few of the bastards were already trying to take the crate containing the egg. Some of them, along with my men, were already dead or wounded, lying crumpled on the deck, and the cries of wounded, unarmed crew members filled the air as they were hit by the blasts of Thalian weapons. I noticed something else right away too. These men were no soldiers, though they might have been using a soldier’s vessel. These men were wearing green uniforms like the Thalias, and I knew they must be some of Travon’s mercenaries—little more than pirates.

My blood had been hot since that afternoon, and I could feel the rage pulsing through my veins. My pilot had already set off charges designed to blow their ship away from ours, trapping their crew onboard as they went spinning off away from us and into space. But we were right beside them so the blasts rocked our ship too, and I fell to the floor in their wake. I hoped the pilot would make sure the Thalian ship was completely destroyed.

By this time some of my soldiers had joined me and as we fought our way inside the loading dock, we saw that the boarders had themselves barricaded in the cargo area,

despite our loud shouts and numerous threats to surrender or die. We couldn't risk explosives near the egg, so we tore down their barrier and charged inside. We were met with fierce, armed resistance. There was a mixture of different nationalities from the looks of them, which was common with mercenary crews. It made sense that Travon couldn't inspire loyalty in his own men but had to pay mercenaries instead. At least twenty or more of them were of Nilanium heritage, or more likely, Drex. I recognized the long braids. All of them were savage and probably irredeemable. I would give no quarter to any of them, because I already knew they were murderers. The bodies of the unarmed loading crew were strewn all around me.

One of my lieutenants fell next to me. My disruptor was still charging back up in my holster, so I knocked his attacker to the floor with my fists. and before the man could get back to his feet, I stuck my dagger in his chest and enjoyed the sight of the blood spurting in a furious jet and splashing up on his neck and face. I felt a hard blow to the back and turned to find I'd been hit with a disruptor that was almost out of its charge, apparently, or I might have been killed. With no time to pull another weapon, I turned and slashed the one who shot me with my knife, burying my dagger in his throat and pulling it viciously from side to side, almost severing his head from his shoulders.

My disruptor was charged at last, so I pulled it out and began shooting into the crowd still left on deck. They were packed so closely together in the narrow passage that I was hitting more than one of them with each shot and had to step over their bodies or kick them out of the way to get past them. A fierce battle had broken out behind me, but I was intent on making my way to Rylan's room, ready to kill anyone I saw threatening him, and bloodlust ran hot in my veins.

When I arrived, I saw my beautiful boy being threatened at knifepoint by a hairy bastard with braided hair and jagged teeth. There had already been a fight, and Rylan appeared to be only half-conscious with blood staining his shirt and dripping onto the floor. The fear that hit me almost stopped my heart. I didn't even know this boy, but



he was already vitally important to me. The one holding him up by his beautiful, blood-stained hair had a long, wickedly sharp knife in his hand, pressed against Rylan's throat. It would have been so easy to end his life—just one slip of that knife. Blood was trickling down from where he'd already pierced his skin, and Rylan seemed to be only partially conscious.

“Come no farther or I'll kill him,” the man yelled at me. “Don't doubt that I'll do it!”

“Wait! Just fucking wait a minute and let's talk about this. You must have been told to bring him with you and not to kill him! Just think of what you're doing!”

He gave me a grin with his blackened teeth. “Shit happens, General. The king will understand.”

I could see the madness in his eyes, and I knew I only had seconds. I raised my weapon without another word or a moment's hesitation and shot the bastard right between his fucking eyes.

A huge, round hole appeared on the mercenary's forehead, which was really satisfying to me, considering what they had done to my loading deck crew and this bastard had been about to do to Rylan. The asshole stiffened with a look of total shock, as his face went blank and he fell to the floor, taking my boy with him. I kicked the bastard off him and dragged Rylan's slight body out from under him. Quickly calling for medics, I laid Rylan on the deck and tried to figure out where all the blood was coming from so I could try to stop it. I was almost afraid to touch him in case I made it worse. The smell of his blood was almost overwhelming me, and I tried breathing only through my mouth, which helped a little.

The medics came rushing in just as I located more than one stab wound in his right side. He'd been attacked by a knife or short sword with such force that I thought it had probably broken a few of his ribs. It looked as if these mercenary soldiers had

been trying to kidnap him and then steal back the egg but panicked as we came closer and burst onto the loading dock. The reason they wanted Rylan was obvious—he was beautiful, and I had no doubt that if Travon couldn't manage to force him into marriage, then he would simply hold him as hostage if his parents were wealthy or sell him to the highest bidder.

There were a couple of slash wounds on Rylan's arms and hands, but they were mostly defensive. The real damage had been done to his side and his head. A deep purple bruise was already blossoming on his temples and forehead, and his hair was matted with blood on that side. "He's losing way too much blood. Sedate him quickly and we'll move him to sick bay. Tell the medics they'll have to concentrate on stopping the bleeding," I told them. "He's going to be in a lot of pain when he comes to." I reached down to brush a lock of his hair from his forehead while I was checking on his head wound, and my hand was shaking so badly that I got an odd look from the medics, but it was better for all of us right at that moment if I just concentrated on doing what I could to help him and not think of any possible outcomes.

One of my lieutenants came to tell me that all of the mercenaries inside the ship were either already dead or dying, and the egg was still intact. There were about ten men in my crew who were injured and more than a few deceased.

I picked Rylan up from the floor and carried him to sick bay. Once I got him there, I couldn't seem to let him go. In the end, the doctors had to shout at me to get me to turn him loose. I knew I needed to get him seen by the doctors as quickly as I could, and I tried not to think about how close he'd come to being killed or how badly he was hurt. I still had to give high priority to getting our egg home just as quickly as I could, while not going absolutely crazy with worry over Rylan. We were a bit closer to Lycanus 3, but I knew they didn't have a trauma center in the hospital there, and our best bet was to travel on to Horvath. At this point, it was almost as close as Lycanus 3. Years ago, during the war, the Alliance had established a huge trauma center on our moon and we still used it today. Most of the planets in this area of space

sent their trauma patients to us, and I had an excellent doctor on board as well. I told the pilot to set a course for Horvath. And I told myself there was no way I'd let Rylan get out of my sight again.

## Chapter Five

Rylan

Someone was talking in a low voice nearby, and I tried to open my eyes to see who it was. My eyes felt as if they'd been glued shut, so I raised a hand to rub them, but another, stronger hand grabbed mine and pulled it away.

"Don't..." someone said softly from beside me. "The doctor just put some drops in your eyes. Go back to sleep now, and you'll feel better when you wake up."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

I opened my mouth to answer, and a finger was laid across my lips. “Hush now,” someone said to me. “You need to rest.”

I was too tired to argue about it, so I sighed and snuggled my cheek into the warm hand beside it. I could still hear low voices discussing me, but I didn’t know the language they were speaking. It was like a soothing hum, though, and lulled me back to sleep again.

The next time I woke up, my head didn’t hurt quite as much as before, though I still had a dull ache on one side of it, near one of my temples. I could see a little better, and I blinked until I could focus my vision more clearly. I was in a hospital—no, a sick bay on a ship, because I could hear the hum of the engines. There were beds on either side of me, and a soft light coming from overhead. It was no place I’d ever seen before, and I began trembling a little and trying to sit up. Was I on a pirate ship? In the hands of those horrible men?

“Drink this. It’s only water mixed with some medicine but it will help your throat.”

A blond man held out a glass to me, and I tried to grab for it but missed. I hurt my side again when I moved and closed my eyes and whimpered. Instantly, he stepped closer to put an arm around my shoulders and hold the glass up to my lips. I drank and drank, until he pulled it away, saying, “Enough for now. You can have more later.”

“W-where am I?”

“You’re on a ship heading toward Horvath. Are you familiar with Horvath?”

“No.”

“That’s all right. It’s one of the moons of Lycanus 3. We were attacked by pirates, but they can’t hurt you now. You’re safe, so please try to rest.”

I started to shake my head, but it hurt too much, so I quickly stopped. “But,” I managed to get out. “Where’s my crew? Let me see them.”

“None of your crew were ever on this ship. They’re all safely on their way back home now. Do you know where you are? Do you know your name?”

“Of course,” I said, confidently, feeling arrogant about it. Why was he wasting my time with these silly questions?

“Can you tell me?”

I opened my mouth to do just that, but nothing came to me. My mind went blank and that scared me for real. Why wouldn’t it come? I began to feel agitated and felt tears spring to my eyes.

“I can’t remember it. Why can’t I?”

“Nothing to worry about. You’re just tired. Try to go back to sleep.”

“But where am I?” I asked, clutching the blond man’s hand.

“In a ship on the way to Horvath.”

“Why does my head hurt so much and my side?” I clutched at it again and moaned as a pain knifed through me. “Oh gods, was I stabbed?”

“Don’t worry about it for now. Your head was injured and some of your ribs were broken. We’re fixing it.”

“Somebody broke my ribs?Why?”

“The doctor has just given you something for the pain, and it will help you go back to sleep. The rest of what happened will come to you soon, I’m sure. Once you’ve had some rest.”

I reached a hand to him blindly, and he took it in his and held on tightly. He had a deep, take-charge kind of voice, and it made me feel better somehow. Like someone was in charge, and I needed someone to be in charge.

“But where am I?”

The tall man leaned closer to me. “You’re safe now, and everything’s going to be fine.

I nodded, almost afraid not to. He sounded familiar, like someone I knew.

“Where did you say I was?”

“You’re on a ship, heading to Horvath.”

“Can’t I just go home?”

“Where is home? Do you remember?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

“No. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. It’s on Horvath, and we’re on the way there now,” he said, his voice firm.

“Oh, good.” I fell back on the pillow in abject relief and frankly unable to sit up another second with my side hurting the way it was.

The man turned to the doctor and told him something in a soft voice, and another man came in holding something in his hand.

“What’s that?”

“Something for pain.”

I didn’t let go of his hand. I felt a pinch in my arm and a feeling of drowsiness slowly overcame me. I closed my eyes, but just before I sank down into sleep, I popped my eyes back open again and glared at him accusingly.

“But why won’t you tell me where I am?”

He smiled down at me, and I closed my eyes and drifted back to sleep.

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Quinn Fortina

“What’s wrong with him? Why does he keep asking me the same thing over and

over? Is it part of his injury?"

The boy had finally fallen asleep as the sedatives took hold, but he'd refused to let go of my hand. Not that I'd tried very hard to remove it. I'd sit there all day if it helped him. I felt deeply protective over him. Unusually so, and it bothered me more than I wanted to let on

"The scans show he has a slight concussion and that's probably causing his confusion and the short-term memory loss," the doctor told me. "He had blunt trauma to his head, but luckily, there were no skull fractures, and I really expect the confusion to clear up soon. It's not uncommon in these types of injuries and usually doesn't cause any lasting problems."

"I think the plan was to kidnap him, but that idiot nearly killed him when we closed in on him."

"He'll be fine. We'll just need to watch him carefully and be patient with him. He's pretty young, so he should bounce back."

"How young?"

"Early twenties, I'd say. Hard to tell with his species. He's small."

"I think he's part human. Maybe with some Tygerian in the mix."

"That would explain it. He resembles the Tygerians in some ways. It's the hair, I think, but he doesn't have the skinmarkings. And he's definitely got a little human blood in him—obviously he's a hybrid species, possibly from one of the Tygerians' so-called love slaves."

"Maybe he's one of the Moravian king's bastards. He said he was a prince, but



probably not legitimate. I hope not, anyway. It would make my negotiations harder.”

“Good thing you got to him when you did.”

I sighed. Of course, it was, but I was still furious about the casualties we’d suffered. The Thalian mercenaries had been insane to attack our ship when it was so much larger than theirs. What had they been so desperate to take from us? They’d tried to steal the egg as soon as they boarded us, so that was definitely part of it. And maybe they’d come for Rylan too. A king might pay a high ransom for his son, bastard or not.

“How are his ribs?”

“All I can do for them is provide pain relief and try to reduce the swelling. Once he’s up and around, I can put a rib supporter on him. It’s a treatment he can wear several times a day to help his ribs heal faster, but it will still take a little time. Perhaps the doctors at his home would have more they can do.”

“He’ll be at his home when we get to Horvath.” The doctor raised his eyebrows, but wisely didn’t reply.

I looked down at the boy again and felt the same strong pull as when I’d first seen him. He looked so small in the bed that was made for the Horvathian men onboard this ship. Horvathians averaged just under six five or so in height, and this boy would only come up to mid-chest on most of us. We kept our hair cut short, too, and certainly not worn in a riot of long curls in gold and red, falling down their backs, like a female’s. He wasn’t feminine—except for the hair, and that was a matter of style. He was far too good looking, though, and despite myself, I was affected by those long eyelashes sweeping over his cheeks. Not to mention the face with that almost perfect bone structure. I forgot just how attractive he was until I was with him again—every time.

His body was toned and muscular, but still boyish. He was probably too young for me. I was nearing the age of thirty, and he was only in his early twenties, according to the doctor. I had developed the mating bond quickly, but I didn't think he had it fully yet, though holding my hand seemed to comfort him.

I had absolutely no need of a mate—especially one like this boy. I didn't want a male who was far too young, far too beautiful and who had possibly tried to steal one of our dragon eggs. No, it wouldn't do, but if I had to deal with this—and it seemed I did—I'd just keep my distance as much as I could and not allow any greater attachment to form. So far, this was mostly just lust. I'd still mate him—and that was non-negotiable. I didn't think I could do without him for long. But love? No. That was out of the question. I simply wouldn't allow it to happen. It wouldn't be good for either of us. I had to try harder to keep him at an emotional distance. That would be the best possible outcome.

“Let him sleep as long as he can and try to keep him as pain free as possible. Contact me when he shows signs of waking up again.”

“Of course, Marshal General.”

I turned to go back up to my quarters and tried to get my mind off him. We were only a few hours away from Horvath now, and it was a good thing from the reports I’d been getting all morning about the egg. It seemed that it was beginning to tremble from time to time. I’d seen that before, and it was usually a sign that hatching was imminent, and the vetami would soon be here.

Nobody knew how “aware” the vetami truly were inside the egg. From the moment they hatched, they were clear thinking and able to form a bond with their riders. Or at least, right away they followed the commands of the one they chose, while still displaying a lot of personality that was all their own. Each one seemed unique, just like each of us. And all of them were stubborn and wanted their own way in all things.

And that was a problem, because the hatchling needed to find his rider very soon after it hatched so the two of them could bond. We had a waiting list for new riders, but the Dragon Riders, could be almost as difficult as the vetamis themselves. Most of them had been wary of this egg, because there was no way of knowing what might hatch. Breed and lineage were important factors to any new rider, and we weren’t even sure what color this one would be—Red, Green or Golden.

Red breeds were wilder and harder to train, as a rule, but more highly prized because they were absolutely fearless in battle. They were also prickly and difficult to handle, as a rule. They were fire breathers, which was highly prized as well. They tended to be hard to tame and would spit fire at their rider or anyone else who seriously annoyed them. A good rider had to break him of that bad habit right away without

being too harsh and then vigilantly teach them loyalty.

Green dragons, on the other hand, were more playful and weren't fire breathers. They were fast fliers and could be any shade of green from deep emerald to a pale, leafy color. They tended to be easier going and not as hard to handle, but along with that came the fact that they weren't especially known for their battle skills. As a result, we kept them away from the fighting, if we could, and they were used most often as messengers because of their speed. They weren't as sought after as the Reds by the riders, of course, though they were still vital to the mission.

As for Goldens, they were an unknown. They had died out on Horvath years ago, and the only specimens we knew of were the ones on Thalia. Information from that source had been sparse, to say the least.

The first thing I needed to do was make a list of suitable candidates for a rider on this ship, just in case the egg hatched before I could get it back to our base and then talk to each of them about becoming the hatchling's rider, if necessary. I'd meant to do it earlier but had been distracted by the attack.

Or I should say I'd been distracted by beautiful young men who clung to me with fear in their blue eyes, needing my protection. A part of me knew that would lead to nothing but attachment and trouble, and it had to stop.

Oh, I'd give him the protection he sought. Feelings of possessiveness, protection, and discipline for a mate were all fine, even to be desired. But love? And not just any love but love to the point of distraction—that was what had been known to happen with the mate bond and what I had to avoid at all costs. Love like that was for other people, but it couldn't be for a Dragon Rider. We had a prior claim to our loyalty and our love, and I didn't think many of us had the capacity for two obsessions.

A love relationship with a mate would further be impossible to maintain as a rider,

because we were only home with our mates perhaps ninety to a hundred days out of a year, and that almost always caused trouble. Most mates weren't willing to wait around and most Riders' marriages lasted only a short time. Some Riders still surrendered to the mating urge and left the service—which I now understood all too well. But it was unthinkable to me to leave my dragon. Feelings for a mate could be very strong, and though Riders did sometimes try to have both--establishing homes for their mates and being with them as their duty allowed, it was far from an ideal situation. Part of a fated mate's focus was always elsewhere. It was one reason why Dragon Riders were so hard to recruit and even harder to keep. The commitment it took could be a lifelong challenge.

## Chapter Six

### Rylan

When I woke up much later on, I felt a little better. The pain pills the doctor had given me were effective, and the ache in my head was at least tolerable now. I thought I might be able to think a little better and maybe figure things out. Things like where in the world I was and how I'd gotten there. There were big gaps in my memories that made my head ache if I concentrated on them too hard.

The doctor had given me a band to wear around my midsection. He called it a name that he said translated roughly to rib supporter, and there were little pouches all around it that had a cooling substance inside. It felt good against the soreness. He said it would help the swelling of my ribs and muscles to go down too. He got me on my feet to walk, and I made it to the bathroom. I walked around a little in the sick bay area as well, and though I was exhausted when I got back in bed, my mind was clearer.

Well, a little. I knew my name was Rylan, anyway, and not just because they called me by that name. I had no idea why I was on this ship though, and no one would tell

me. They just said, “Wait for the general.”

I remembered the tall, handsome, blond officer and wondered what my relationship was to him. I thought it must be close because of the way he looked at me and held my hand. When he finally came back to see me, though, he wasn't as friendly as he had been before. He sat beside me, but when I reached for his hand, he looked surprised. He held it anyway when I reached for it, but he seemed uncomfortable.

“Maybe I'm in your way,” I told him.

His eyes softened with surprise as he looked down at me. “You're not in my way.”

“Really? Then why do you sound so irritated?”

“I don't mean to. I just have some things on my mind, that's all. I need to hurry back to Horvath.”

“Why?”

“I know you don't remember much about what happened. I think we have to give it some time and not get into all of that now. In the meantime, I'll contact your family and let them know where you are.”

I had a pain in my chest when he mentioned family and started rubbing it with my fist. Suddenly I had a strange yearning feeling that was physically painful. The general frowned down at me.

“Don't look so sad. I promise you I'll contact them.”

“Okay. But why don't they know where I am? Where exactly am I anyway?”

He smiled. “I haven’t heard that word ‘okay’ in a long time. Your voice and the way you talk...it sounds human sometimes. Are you part human, or do you visit Earth often? Maybe one of the other old Alliance planets?”

“Earth? No, I don’t think so. That doesn’t seem right, but I-I’m part human, I think. That sounds right. I don’t remember everything like I should. Why won’t you tell me where we are?” I started breathing hard and feeling agitated again, and he wrapped his arm around me.

“Don’t get upset, Rylan. I have told you, but you keep forgetting. We’re on a ship to Horvath, one of the moons of Lycanus 3. You need to stop worrying. I told you that I’m taking care of everything, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“I-I’m not. Not exactly. It’s just that I think there’s something I need to remember. Something about why I’m here. Remind me why we’re going to Horvath.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

He looked down at me, not at all unkindly, but it made me nervous, and I started to feel a little panicky. “We’re going home,” he said.

It didn’t feel like home to me, but I decided not to argue. “What if I never remember?” I asked him. “What will I do?”

“Shh...don’t worry about any of that. I’ll take care of you, though of course, your memories will come back.”

“But surely somebody must be looking for me by now.” I began picking at the coverlet on top of my bed nervously, and again, he hugged me tight to distract me.

“Stop. Don’t stress over any of this. The doctor thinks that’s bad for you, and it will only push the memories farther away. Give it time, and it will all come back to you and then we’ll talk.”

“I guess I don’t have any choice.”

“We’ll be landing on Horvath soon. Once we deboard and unload everything, then I promise I’ll concentrate on contacting your family and getting you settled. Is that ‘okay’ with you?” He smiled at me, and it changed his whole face from just handsome to downright gorgeous. It made me tongue tied.

I nodded, and he patted my arm. “Let the doctor know if you need me for anything. I’ll see you after we land.”

I nodded again, and he looked down at me like he wanted to say more but then



quickly left instead. I thought about trying to walk around the room a little more, but I was suddenly exhausted and made the mistake of putting back my head and closing my eyes. I didn't wake up until the doctor came in and told me we were about to land on Horvath. I guess we'd been closer than I'd thought.

It was a smooth landing and before long, the doctor came in with an aide to help me get up and sit in a chair that glided on air currents underneath it. I told the doctor I could walk, but he shook his head and put me in the chair. We moved down a long corridor to the main hatch, with me trying to straighten the robe they'd put me in and finger-comb my long hair, tucking it back behind my ears. It was a little cold, so the doctor wrapped a blanket around me, but it really wasn't all that necessary. The temperature outside was cool, but not too bad. I'd wondered about breathing the atmosphere, but I needn't have worried. There was plenty of oxygen and whatever else I needed. I wasn't in any distress anyway.

The dock was one of several in the port area where we landed, and the whole place was buzzing with activity. Large ships were being loaded and unloaded, and a few smaller passenger ships were arriving and departing too. The sky overhead was a pale shade of gray with puffy rain clouds, and I could see tall, dark green mountains in the distance. I heard a commotion from behind us and looked back to see the handsome Marshal General coming down the gangway in his long, red cape. He was supervising the movement of a big crate of some kind. It was at least as tall as I was and as wide as it was tall.

Suddenly, one of the men holding the crate lost his grip and slipped on the wet surface of the gangway. He righted himself, and I thought he'd be all right, but the crate suddenly lurched hard to the left, as if something inside the crate shifted its weight. The man lost his balance, and he and the other one carrying the crate called out for help so they wouldn't drop it. The officer turned to put out a hand to try and catch it, but the crate crashed down on the gangway instead and broke apart. Some of the pieces fell onto the grassy ground below the ramp. I was shocked to see there was

an egg inside it—an egg that was now cracked and broken.

And not just any egg. It was huge and a pale blue color with speckles. There was a huge outcry and commotion, as people started running over to help. Even my attendants rushed toward the now smashed open crate, leaving me alone on the side of the ramp. I saw the general's face lose color, as he shouted commands and everyone scrambled to help.

The soldiers nearest it began picking up pieces of it to reveal the rest of the huge, badly cracked egg. At least it had once had an egg shape, though now it was missing big chunks of its shell, showing a milky white membrane underneath. Everybody began shouting at once and as they watched in various stages of dismay, as what was left of it began to shake violently. The cracks got wider and more pieces of it fell off. Suddenly a little head popped out of the top of the shell. The head was like a lizard's and covered with golden scales. The little face had a slitted black nose and beady black eyes peeking out at the crowd. It had tufts of pale golden appendages coming out of its head that looked a bit like wet horns. Two of the tufted horns were larger than the rest and they were coming out of the forehead, sloping back toward the rest of the body. The whole head was out by then, and I could see that it was around the size of one of the large colts of the arrizes back at my home.

The little creature began to climb out. It had short arms and legs, and the whole small body was covered in those golden scales with black wings folded tightly over its back. Was I dreaming, or did that look exactly like a little baby dragon?

It stood there, shaking off the last bits of shell sticking to it and looking around curiously. Another sudden memory came back to me. My omak had told me stories about these creatures, because he had been on a moon during the war, and he told me that the moon he lived on had flying dragons of all things. This must be the same place. He told us about how he had flown them and bragged that he was always really good at it. I'd thought he was teasing me and my brothers, but my omak said...

I stiffened in shock as I realized what was going through my mind. My omak! I remembered my omak!

I could suddenly see him in my mind's eye as plain as day and that terrible yearning came over me again. It was so bad that I bent double and cried out with a sharp pain in my chest and tears literally sprang to my eyes. It wasn't only because I was missing him either. It was because suddenly everything about the attack a few days before came slamming back into me in a huge rush, and I was overwhelmed, suddenly remembering it all, including how the attackers had slaughtered a crewman who had tried to help me and how badly they'd kept hurting me.

I knew exactly who I was and where I came from too, with no more gaps in my memory at all. I remembered every detail of that day at the Lycan warehouse, my arrest and the terrible attack later on. It was a lot to take in, but the worst by far was the attack and for a split second I was back on that ship, watching in horror as they hacked and stabbed at the crewmen over and over. I had been trying to crawl out from under one of the bodies when rough hands pulled me to my feet, slapped me hard across the face and then hit me on the side of my head with the hilt of a large knife.

The onslaught of those awful memories was too much—I moaned aloud, slipped out of the chair and fell to my knees. Oh gods, I needed to go home. I had to talk to my parents and let them know what had happened to me. They must be so worried about me.

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Quinn Fortina

It was after we had finally landed on Horvath and were disembarking that everything went to hell. I had finally settled on the first helmsman as the most suitable candidate

for a Dragon Rider onboard the ship, should the egg hatch unexpectedly. He was far from ideal, but frankly, he'd been the only one to volunteer. We needed to press someone into service, and if necessary, try to work with them to make them more suitable later on. I'd spoken with his supervisor, and though he was a little dubious about it, he had agreed he might be all right, with a lot of work.

The young helmsman expressed a love for the adventure of being a rider, or at least the idea of it, though he was young and had also expressed a little fear of the commitment too. This job was for his lifetime and was not to be considered lightly. Plus, if he was thinking of doing this for the adventure of it only, then he would be bound to be disappointed at the long hours of training and the reality of dealing with a dragon on an almost daily basis. They could be demanding creatures, although they were also fierce, brave fighters, and they could make wonderful companions and comrades. Or not, depending on the bond they had with their rider.

All things considered, I hoped everything would go well, and the egg wouldn't hatch until we arrived back at our base of operations, and we could find a more suitable candidate. The vetamis had some definite ideas about their riders and this one might even reject the man I'd chosen and choose his own rider—it had been known to happen before. We did everything we could to encourage them to choose the man we'd approved, but they could be extremely stubborn creatures.

It was cold as we began to disembark—it was always cold on this side of our moon, which was already about to set over the planet below us. I couldn't help but think of Rylan's comfort as he came off the ship and hope that the physician had put plenty of blankets over him. He seemed fragile to me, and I was worried because he still didn't remember things like he should. As soon as the thought came into my head, I firmly pushed it away. He wasn't a child, and I didn't need to worry about him constantly—no matter what this damnable mating instinct inside me tried to insist.

I'd been hoping that nothing else would go wrong until we got to our command

center, and I could get my other candidates for Dragon Rider ready for when the egg cracked. The dragon could then choose the one he was most attracted to. But as my mother used to say, “If you don’t think that things could possibly go wrong or even get any worse, then you simply aren’t using your imagination.”

The crewmen dropped the crate going down the ramp. I was horrified and ran over to it, hoping the dragon hadn’t been injured, and I peered over into the remains of the box to get a glimpse of the hatchling. I’d have to be careful the dragon didn’t see me and fixate on me accidentally—I already had a dragon, and I didn’t want to confuse the hatchling.

The first thing I noticed was that his scales were golden. I’d never seen a Golden before, so this was a rare occurrence and hadn’t happened on Horvath for many years. The scales were bright in color and healthy looking, though. And as they caught the last rays of the setting sun, they literally glowed. He was tiny, compared to the size I knew he would eventually be and perfectly formed. Dragons grew at an amazing rate, so he wouldn’t be so small for long, but for now, he came up only just past my knee.

He was beautiful, and a complete unknown. Would he be a fire breather? A fighter like the Reds? Or did his talents lie in his quickness and agility in flight, like a green? Vetamis had a history of bonding very quickly—sometimes almost on sight. And there was usually no way of talking them out of their choice of Riders once they’d made it, so if my helmsman didn’t like the idea of a new and completely unknown type of dragon, that could be a serious problem.

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As I came back down the ramp after getting a look at the new hatchling, I noticed two things. First of all, Rylan was on the gangway ahead of me, being moved off the ship, but somehow, he had spilled out of the chair he was being transported in, and now he was on the ground and looked upset. Damn it! Was he hurt again? He had his head down and his face buried in his hands, and I panicked. I began running toward him, literally knocking people out of my way in my haste to get to him.

I saw a golden blur pass me by at a speed that made me feel like I was backing up. It was the little dragon racing by me and over to Rylan, plopping down squarely in his lap. The dragon started rubbing his head against Rylan's face and chest, while Rylan looked down at him in complete and utter shock. I ran over, too, intending to pull the vetami away, but it was far too late. The hatchling was licking Rylan's face, his long, pink tongue rasping over his skin and paying close attention to the bruises on his face, licking each one thoroughly as if to heal them.

As for Rylan—he was looking down at the little dragon in fascination and delight. Instead of pushing him away, he was patting his head.

I heard the dragon say, quite plainly, “Why are you so sad?” in a high-pitched, thin voice.

Rylan's mouth dropped open in complete shock, as well it should have. We knew that vetami could “talk” to each other, or more accurately, they could communicate with each other with sounds if it was truly necessary, but as a general rule, they simply didn't. And they almost made sounds to us.

It wasn't even exactly speech. They usually made a murmuring noise. Just like this

little one had made, come to think of it, only in a low voice and only to each other, so we had no idea what they were saying. Only this time we could understand quite plainly.

There were no actual words or any sounds that could be construed as such. They seemed to make these noises to each other only when they were mating, or when the females were communicating with their offspring, and they seemed to understand each other. There had even been times when I was praising my dragon or giving him a squeeze or a pat when I was particularly pleased at how well he'd performed, and he had made a murmuring sound to me. My dragon didn't speak to me, though. Not in any language I recognized, anyway.

This little dragon, however, was speaking actual words. Or...was he? Though the vetami had been clearly communicating in what I perceived to be actual language, when I tried to recall the exact words he'd used just moments before, the memory had already faded. Yet, at the time, I had understood the little golden dragon perfectly clearly. And he had spoken in my own language.

Rylan was gazing down at the dragon in pure delight.

“Are you talking to me? That's so incredible. How are you doing that?”

How indeed? To be able to actually talk, any living creature had to coordinate his lips, jaw, tongue and larynx all at the same time. The hatchling's mouth had moved up and down a little, but his “lips” were reptilian and therefore incapable of forming words—not to mention his thin forked tongue. Did dragons even have voice boxes? None of this made any sense at all.

The little dragon tipped his head to the side and spoke to Rylan again. “Why are you so sad?”

Rylan smiled again and looked straight up at me. “He’s talking to me. In Moravian!”

“What? No, it was Horvathian. I heard him—he wants to know why you’re sad.”

“Yes, I know. I heard him too, but it was my language. I’m absolutely sure it was Moravian, and I don’t know any Horvathian. Wait a minute—does anyone know about this? That the dragons on this moon can speak? I know there are a few other non-humanoid species that communicate with a type of speech, but I never knew there were any in this part of the galaxy. Does King Davos know? He’ll be amazed. Blake will probably want one of them!”

“What are you talking about, Rylan?”

He was excited and I’m not sure if he even knew what he was saying, because he obviously was remembering things, but why was he so interested in what King Davos of all people might know anyway? And who was this Blake? There was a lot to unpack here, but it would have to wait—one emergency at a time.

He was still petting the vetami’s head as my men watched in a state of shock. “You’re so clever,” he said to the hatchling, who continued to stare back up at him.

I’d definitely heard the little dragon speaking Horvathian that last time, while Rylan insisted it was Moravian. It occurred to me that the only logical explanation was that the creature must be doing this with some form of telepathy. Had he planted the words in my head somehow? In a way that he knew I would understand? And in Rylan’s mind too, at the exact same time, only Rylan heard the words in his own language. If so, it was an amazing trick and could have far-reaching potential.

It wasn’t completely unprecedented. My own dragon had once used a form of telepathy with me once when I was a new rider, long ago, so I had actually known it was possible for dragons. Although up to now, I’d always thought it had been a



quarter desperation and three quarters my overactive imagination in my thinking that he had really talked to me. Gods, I hadn't thought about it in years.

It had happened when we were fighting in the Narvathian Mountains, and under attack by a ship directing firing at us. My dragon, whose name was Sulamon, named after one of the finest Marshal Generals the Riders had ever known, turned his head to look back at me and told me there was a shallow cave ahead on the left that we could hide in, its entrance hidden by foliage., "Until the bad ones go away," he'd told me.

He communicated the thought to me not with words, but by a kind of thought transference. I remember being shocked by it at the time, though my old trainer had told me that dragons could be telepathic and would communicate in that way when they really needed to. I hadn't fully believed him at the time.

Sulamon told me plainly in my head that day that the opening to this cave was covered by vegetation, but he knew it was there, and if we hid inside it, the ones chasing us couldn't see us to fire at us. I heard him quite clearly, and I called out for him to fly there as I pulled on his reins to redirect him.

We made it just as the ship dived at us and my clever dragon flew straight into what looked like the side of the mountain as I clung to his neck. I had a moment of doubt as we soared into what looked like a solid rock face, but I buried my face in the warm scales on his neck and we soared through the vegetation there, which was indeed hidden by foliage. The dragon's long, slim body was a tight fit, but he made it with me clinging to him, and inside it was much larger and the ceiling was so high I could barely see it. The ship tried to follow us in, but crashed into the cliffside, unable to fit through the mouth of the cave. We watched it bounce off the rocks and spiral down to the valley below, where it burst into flames. maneuver and his communication to me had saved our lives.

“You’re very nice to ask me why I’m upset,” Rylan was saying to the little dragon, “but please don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I got hurt a few days ago, but I’m feeling better. I was just thinking about my family all of a sudden.”

“Wait,” I said, interrupting him. “Your memory returned? You remember your family now?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling up at me through the tears still trembling on those thick eyelashes. “And I got a little overwhelmed. I remembered the attack too.”

At the appearance of a slight wobble of his chin and fresh tears springing to his eyes, the little dragon licked his face again and literally glared at me, as if I were the one making him upset. He gave me a look of such reproach that it startled a laugh from me.

He turned back to Rylan and looked up at him again. “I’m very hungry. Can you feed me now?”

Rylan looked to me in surprise, and I shrugged. “They like to eat as soon as they hatch. I’ll get him some food.”

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I turned and signaled Captain Brodor, my second in command, who was watching us closely from the gangway. He knew all about the voracious appetites of hatchlings, as he had a dragon of his own, and he had a quick word with one of his aides. We had set some meat aside for him, just in case.

The crewman sprinted back up to the ship to get the food for the hatchling. The vetamis were carnivores, so even though he was small, he still had sharp teeth and claws for hunting and tearing apart his food, along with strong jaws and a heavy skull to help him grind bones.

“We’re getting you something,” I said, kneeling down to his level and addressing him directly.

He nodded, forgiving me a little and began licking one of his paws.

“In the meantime, perhaps you’d like to come with me?” I asked him. “You can eat something, and I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

He looked up at me inquiringly.

“Your new rider,” I said gesturing at my helmsman, Lt. Worving, who was standing on the gangway, staring at us with fascination. “He’d very much like to meet you.”

The little dragon flicked his gaze toward my Rider and looked him up and down.

“No. I stay here,” he said, showing absolutely no interest in anyone else, and he put his little head down on Rylan’s chest.

It was important not to upset a hatchling, and I knew how stubborn they could be, but I tried again. Obviously, this was an untenable situation—the dragon seemed to have chosen Rylan. But Rylan wasn't any kind of Dragon Rider. He wasn't even Horvathian. I sat back on my heels and tried to come up with some idea that might help me lure the little dragon away, but I couldn't think of a thing. It was a catastrophically bad situation, because not only was he a beautiful little dragon, with a unique color we hadn't seen before, but he also had a talent for speaking and communicating that we needed to study. If we could somehow enhance all of our dragons' abilities to communicate as easily and clearly as this, it would be an innovation that could have a huge effect on our training programs and our battle plans.

I felt a little paw land on my chest and looked up into those black, shiny eyes, only a few inches from my face. He hadn't left Rylan's lap but had turned his head toward me.

"I need something to eat." He dug his little claws into my chest just the tiniest bit, and I could see he was quickly losing patience—and seemed to blame me.

"Of course. I'll check on it. It should be coming soon." I turned my head to call to my second. "Captain Brodor! Where's the food for the hatchling?"

"Checking on it, sir," I heard him yell, but I never took my eyes away from the little vetami. They could be very unpredictable, even this small, and they were born with a fullset of those sharp, carnivorous teeth that could just as easily rip into my chest as into the food that was supposed to be coming. It was important not to show any fear of them, so I covered his little paw with my hand, prepared to yank it away if he dug those claws in any deeper.

But Rylan spoke up, drawing his attention. "Be careful, dear, and don't hurt the Marshal General. Your food is coming soon, so you must be patient."

Almost instantly, the claws retracted, and the hatchling pulled back his paw. “I wasn’t going to hurt him,” he said, turning his head toward Rylan. “He’s nice and he said he’d get me food. I was just reminding him a little.”

“Oh, I see. Well, you’re very clever to think of it, in case he had forgotten, but it’s not good manners to touch someone without asking them first. Especially with those sharp claws of yours. They’re very impressive and pretty and really sharp.”

He preened at the praise Rylan was giving him but began to pout a little too. “But I touched you, and you didn’t mind.”

“That’s true, but you were worried and just being kind. And you had your pretty claws retracted. That was a really sweet thing to do. It was just the claws that you shouldn’t have threatened the nice officer with. And you should always say please and thank you. Why don’t you tell him you’re sorry?” He was petting the hatchling’s head as he gently reprimanded him, and the little dragon actually preened, like he was proud of himself. Gods, Rylan was good with him, but this was quickly getting out of hand.

“I like you,” The hatchling said, nuzzling his face into Rylan’s chest again. He turned to look at me. “And you too. I’m sorry, but I do hope they hurry. Um...please.”

Captain Brodor laid a hand on my shoulder then after that remarkable little speech, and I turned to see a huge chunk of raw meat attached to what looked like part of a leg bone from a wild bovid, one of the mountain animals with the long, curved horns we called agoral. It should fill the little hatchling up and the bone should keep him busy a while. I slowly got to my feet and motioned for Brodor to lay the haunch of meat on the ground where I’d been sitting, and as soon as he did, the dragon jumped down from Rylan’s lap and hunched over it, growling his pleasure. I quickly held out a hand to draw Rylan to his feet. The vetami glanced over at us but went right back to his meal.

“We need to talk,” I told Rylan in a soft voice, and he nodded quickly. “But you need to go inside. I’ll come to you as soon as I have him settled.”

“Should I tell him I’m leaving and going in?”

“Yes, but please tell him you’ll see him again soon. I don’t want to upset him. Can you make it back to the chair on your own?”

“Yes.”

Rylan got to his feet, wincing a little in pain, which caused the hatchling to glance up at him. Rylan smiled at him and said, “It’s okay. I’m fine. But I need to go inside for a while so I can rest. I’ve been sick, you see. But I’ll visit you again very soon.”

The dragon tipped his head to the side, but finally lowered it to his food again, which was apparently a much greater priority. Rylan slowly backed away and sat down in his chair.

“Bring me a harness for him,” I told Brodor. “And Worving, you come over here and help me put it on him after he eats.”

“Yes sir,” Worving said and moved slowly, as he’d been recently trained to, so as not to startle the young dragon, over to where we stood watching the hatchling finish his meal. I could only hope it wasn’t too late for the dragon to accept Worving as his new rider. I had a sinking feeling that the hatchling had set his sights on Rylan. And that would be an unmitigated disaster.

Chapter Seven

Rylan

I was still shaken by the memories that had flooded into my head out on the dock, not to mention the beautiful little dragon hatchling that had dropped into my lap so unexpectedly. But I was determined to get someone to contact my parents as soon as possible. I could only imagine how upset and frantic my omak must be, along with the rest of my family, if they knew what had happened to me. I didn't remember anything much after being grabbed by that soldier and hit in the head, and I had no idea what had become of my ship and the other members of my crew. No one had mentioned a word about that, or had they? Had I even been in my own ship? I couldn't remember.

I still didn't remember much about the actual attack, and I needed to know everything. The little creature on the docks had momentarily distracted me, but now I was almost frantic to speak to someone about it.

I could barely wait to get on the transport that was taking me to their base—that's what the doctor had called it, anyway, telling me the Marshal General would be along soon to answer all my questions when they got me back.

They put me in a room on the base, one that had a big, wide bed, while I waited impatiently for the Marshal General, as it seemed no one did anything around there without his permission. Thankfully, I didn't have too long to wait. I heard a commotion out in the corridor and then the door opened, and I was surprised to see not only the Marshal General, but the youngman from the docks following him, leading the little dragon hatchling on a harness with a leash.

I could already hear the hatchling's loud and bitter complaints coming toward me.

"Where are you taking me? I want to go back. You said you'd take me to the one with the pretty hair. I want to see him. You're mean not to let me see him."

The Marshal General, who was one of the ones the dragon was complaining to, along with the young man holding his leash, had red patches blooming on his cheeks, and his mouth was set in a grim line. He was walking stoically ahead of the little creature, as if trying to ignore the constant barrage of grievances coming from the little dragon. I had a feeling the dragon might have a bad temper, and this was hard for him. But I couldn't help smiling as the little creature suddenly spotted me in bed and gave a sharp cry of excitement.

He began straining at the leash they had around his neck so much that I started to worry he might hurt himself. I got off the bed quickly and hurried over to him, kneeling down beside him and wincing a little when my ribs complained. The dragon's little warm body wriggled into my arms as he laid his head on my shoulder.

"Where have you been? I couldn't find you." He turned and glared up at the one still holding onto his leash. I recognized him then as the young man I'd seen on the dock. "And you! You said he'd left to go back home to his own planet. You lied to me."

This was said with so much resentment and recrimination that the young man blushed hotly and glanced quickly over at the Marshal General.

"Oh no, dear," I said, interrupting, the hatchling. "Don't be angry about it. I did leave—not to go to my home but to come to the hospital here, because I've been sick. I'm sorry if you thought I was gone for good and got worried about me."

"Are you still sick now?" the little dragon asked. "I don't want you to leave me again."



“Well, I...I do need to talk to the Marshal General, but you can stay here with me for a while, I think. If that’s all right with...” I glanced up at the young man still holding the leash, but he had turned his head and was refusing to look at either of us—me or the dragon—his face still bright red.

Thankfully, the Marshal General stepped in. “Go back to the ship, Worving. I’ll speak to you later.”

“Come along then, you,” he said, jerking at the strap around the dragon’s neck, as he tried to pull him away from me and hand him off to the Marshal General. “You’ve caused quite enough trouble as it is.”

Worving was being way too stern and rough with him, I thought, and I wondered why the General had chosen him to help the dragon in the first place. He was totally unfit to work with animals. I’d spent a great deal of time with our arrizes at home, helping to break in and train the young ones and just generally helping out in their stables. My omak rode almost daily, and he’d instilled the same love of animals in all of his sons. Anyway, I’d seen a lot of stable workers come and go over the years. Some people simply didn’t know how to work with animals, and it showed in the way they treated them. I had no idea why the General had this man taking care of the little dragon, but I could tell he was the wrong choice after just seconds in his company.

The dragon yelped at the rough treatment from Worving, and before I thought it through—which was how my father said I did most things—I walked over to yank the leash away from him. Then I sat down on the floor so the dragon could climb up into my lap.

“There’s no need to be so rough with him!” I shouted and wrapped my arms tightly around the dragon’s little golden neck. I heard him make a sound that was a little like a cross between a growl and a sob.

I patted him, and he nuzzled my neck again. Even the General smiled the tiniest bit. As for Worving—let's just say he was not amused.

“You'll spoil him if you keep that up,” he snapped at me. “He...”

“He just hatched and he's a baby. My omak says you can't spoil a baby.”

The General smiled and said, “Does he now? Well, that explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head, and I might have taken offense if not for the little smile playing around his lips. “Never mind. You can leave now Worving. Wait for me outside.”

The horrible lieutenant left, and I remained on the floor with the dragon. I needed to talk to this general, and I had plenty to say. My memories were mostly back and I was upset and angry about this entire situation.

“Look, I'm sorry I had to bring the dragon here and bother you like this. I've just called the Training Facility and they're on the way to get him. But he was insisting on seeing you and getting more and more agitated. Hopefully, the trainers will know what to do for him. I think that Lt. Worving and I have both agreed that he is not at all the right choice. The dragon has rejected him.”

“I see. He was a terrible choice in the first place. That baby deserves much better.”

“I know, but at the time I was desperate, and he was the only one who volunteered. The vetamis are known to choose their riders soon after they hatch. Usually we have someone standing by, ready to step in and interact with the hatchlings right away. They feed them and talk to them when they hatch, and they bond. That bond is almost unbreakable and lasts their whole lifetime. But it seems as if this little one saw you

first and now nobody else will do.”

“Me? Oh no. That’s can’t work.” I looked up at him with hopeful eyes. “Can it?”

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“No, which is why I have a call in to the chief trainer. Maybe he can give me some idea of what to do. In the meantime, I brought the hatchling here to you in hopes it would settle him down.”

“I’m glad you did,” I said, still petting his head.

He came closer and extended his hand to me. “Won’t you get back up on the bed, please? You’ll get a chill down there.”

“I’m fine where I am,” I said, ignoring his hand. “It’s not as if you’ve cared overly much for my comfort during this entire thing. Why start now?”

He had the good grace at least to look down at the floor and neither of us said anything for a long time. Then he sighed. “Ah, I see more of your memories have come back.”

“Yes, they have. I know that you arrested me in that warehouse and threw me in that jail cell in your ship, for example.”

He sighed. “Rylan, it wasn’t a jail cell. I’ve already explained that it was a crewman’s quarters. Now please get up and get back in bed.”

I got back up to my feet, again ignoring his outstretched hand, and I carried the dragon baby over to a chair by the window, instead of the bed, so we could sit together. “I’ll sit here. I don’t need to be in bed anymore. I guess I need to toughen up anyway for when I go to your jail.”

“I’m not sending you to any jail.”

“Why not? You said you were arresting me back on Lycanus 3. You called me a thief and said awful things to me.”

He came to sit in the chair across from me. “Please listen to me...I’m sorry for all that’s happened. It’s been a big misunderstanding right from the start.”

“Hmm. Well, I probably don’t have any rights here, but I’d like it if you contacted my parents and let them know where I am. That I’m still alive. I assume that prisoners on your moon have at least some rights, don’t they?”

“You’re not a prisoner, and I’ve already sent a message to your parents to let them know where you are. Like I told you I would. And I told them about the attack and your injuries. Everything. They know all about the incident on Lycanus 3, too, and I believe your omak is already on his way here now to see you. They mentioned some of your other relatives too.”

“Did they mention Blake?” I asked. “Oh, if it’s him, then you’re in for it.”

“They didn’t give me any names. Will you let me try to explain things to you?”

“I didn’t steal anything, you know. And neither did my father. He simply bought the egg from the king of Thalios as a gift for my omak.”

“I know. I’d like to tell you what we know, if you’ll let me. I meant to tell you on the ship, but...with all that happened, I haven’t had a chance.”

I sniffed and turned my head away, but I couldn’t stay mad at him—not exactly. I wasn’t sure why. I wanted to hear what he had to say, and it wasn’t just because he was so big and so good looking, and he was sitting there looking at me with those

beautiful, jade green eyes, though that was probably a big part of it.

“Well go ahead then. Try to explain it to me, if you can.”

“The king of Thalios only had a vetami egg in the first place because his father, who used to live on Horvath, left here long ago with some breeding pairs of the animals. He shouldn’t have, and he knew it, though it wasn’t strictly illegal at the time. He took the vetamis to Thalios, when he married their queen, and he bred the Golden vetami. Vetamis are usually red or green. We’d like to know how long this has been going on, and if there are more Golden ones like this one. We’ve asked the Axis leader, King Davos, to open an investigation into it.”

“I see. And you must see that my father would have had no way of knowing any of this.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sure we can exonerate him completely, though that will be up to King Davos.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem then. And my father paid a lot for this egg, you know. Will you give him his money back?”

“I don’t have his money. He’ll need to take that up with the Thalian king. Or Davos.”

“Oh. I suppose you’re right. I’ll talk to my grandfather about it.”

He gave me a puzzled look. “And what does your grandfather have to do with any of this?”

I looked at him oddly. “My grandfather is King Davos, of course.”

He fell back in his chair like he was thunderstruck.

“W-what did you say? What are you talking about?”

“Davos is my grandfather on my omak’s side. My omak is Prince Vannos of Tygeria, son of King Davos. Didn’t you know that?”

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“No, I certainly did not.”

“Oh. Well, he is. So, we should be able to get that King Travon to give my father his money back.”

He was still just sitting there staring at me, like he was in shock.

“Why are you staring at me that way?”

“It’s...a huge surprise. I had no idea.”

“You never asked.”

“Listen Rylan, this might be a good time to tell you something really important. About why I reacted so strongly when I first met you.”

“Because you believed I was a thief?”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not it. There’s another, bigger reason I reacted to you the way I did.” He blew out a long sigh and scrubbed his face with his hand. “Gods, I can’t believe any of this is happening.”

“Just tell me.”

He took my hand in his and looked deeply into my eyes. “Have you ever heard of the Lycan mating bond?”



I just stared incredulously at him then, because everyone who had ever dealt with Lycans had heard of that. My uncle Anarr had been caught up in that craziness when he first met his husband, Renard Dimitru, a former Lycan general. Oddly enough, Anarr had also been arrested by that same general the very first time they met. Just like I had been arrested by this one.

I pulled my hand away. “Are you trying to say...did you feel that? For me?”

He leaned forward and put a hand on my arm. “Yes, Rylan, I did. I do. It made me a little excited, I’m afraid.”

“A little excited?” I sat up straight and pointed my finger at him. “You were totally crazy and out of control, and I didn’t do anything!”

“Well, you did pull that disruptor on me.”

“Totally deserved!”

“And you tried to shoot me.”

“I-I didn’t! I mean, yes, I did fire it, but that was an accident. And you called me a thief!”

“I thought you were at the time. You refused to explain anything.”

“I didn’t refuse. Not exactly. You didn’t give me much chance to tell you anything. I just didn’t understand what was happening. Though I suppose it might have been wrong of me to pull that disruptor out.”

“Might have been? You could have killed me.”

I sat there for a moment, still fuming as I went back over all that had happened that day. It was still a bit of a blur. “But I had reasons.”

“I know.”

“Is my crew all right? Did you hurt them?”

“No, they’re fine and they’re all back home safely now. They didn’t want to leave you behind.”

“Of course not. You can’t blame them.”

“I know.”

I sat for a few seconds longer, trying to figure all this out in my head. It was difficult, because he was holding my hand again somehow and gazing at me with those beautiful green eyes. And I wasn’t objecting. Anarr always said the mating bond went both ways. He’d told my omak-ahn, Blake, that he had probably fallen in love with Renard right away too, but Renard had been such an ass to him that he hadn’t let on right away. He’d been in denial in a way. Still, Blake was human and didn’t understand such things at all. He and my uncle Renard had never really become friends, even though he and Anarr were very happily married now and had been for years.

I looked over at General Fortina and I totally understood what Anarr had meant, because he was an ass too. But he was a handsome ass. He’d been kind to me, all things considered, and he smelled wonderful to me, gods help me. All Lycans were pretty much the same, though they didn’t like to admit it. Even from planet to planet they claimed differences, but Lycans were all a little crazy. Everyone said so. Horvath was the same as the planets of Lycanus, really, though none of them would admit it. Typical Lycan behavior.

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I stirred restlessly in my chair. “So, explain what you’re saying exactly, and tell me the truth. Do you have this mating bond thing for me?”

“Yes, Rylan. I do.”

“You could have just talked to me, you know. Just told me what was going on.”

“Yes, I know. I should have. Can you forgive me for not doing that? I didn’t fully understand myself and I was upset. I’m really sorry. You wouldn’t have been hurt if I hadn’t taken you onboard my ship.”

“That’s very true. You really do have a lot to make up to me.”

He nodded, looking down at my hand that he was still holding.

“I know. I’d like a chance to try, if you’ll give it to me.”

“Well then...what are you going to do about it?”

He looked up in surprise and stared at me for a moment.

“Well?”

“I-I’d like to make an offer for you to your father, if you’ll agree. I mean, I’m going to. If you say yes.”

“What does that mean,make anoffer for me?”

“Ask your father for a marriage contract on you.”

It was my turn to look surprised. I barely knew him, but that was often the way with royalty and arranged marriages. There had been talk of arranging one for me for a couple of years now, though nothing seriously. An arranged marriage was sort of what this was like, in a way, I supposed. In an odd kind of way. And then there was the fact that I was wildly attracted to him.

“I have to tell you, though,” he said, as I hesitated. “I don’t think I’ll be able to take no for an answer. If your father refuses, that is.”

“Why are you trying to ruin this for me?”

“I’m not. I just wanted you to know this bond is really strong. If your father denies my offer, I’ll-I’ll just...” He lowered his head and mumbled something under his breath.

“What was that? What did you say there at the end?”

He looked up and shrugged. “I’d keep you here anyway.”

I think my mouth must have fallen open. Was he serious? It seemed as if he was.

“Oh really? You will, huh? Just keep me anyway, like some kind of puppy.”

He blinked at me a few times. “Maybe. I’m not sure what that is.”

“You’d just keep me without benefit of marriage? Is that what you think of me?”

“I couldn’t possibly think more highly of you, Rylan. Surely you know that. And I’d still marry you regardless.”

“Regardless of what I say?”

His shoulders slumped. “I really hope it doesn’t come to that. But I don’t think it would make much difference what you say, to tell the truth. That’s how strong this mate bond is.”

“I see. So, in your mind, this is pretty much a done deal?”

“A what?”

“A thing that has already been decided before those of us affected by it even hear about it, leaving us with no option whatsoever but to just fucking accept it! Even though I barely know you at all.”

“Oh.” He seemed to think about it and then nodded. “Yes, that does sound like it.”

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“And you’re not bothered by that? That I wouldn’t want to be with you?”

“Of course it bothers me, but I really have no choice either. If that were the case, then I’d have to do everything in my power to change your mind. To get you to agree. This was a ‘done deal,’ as you say, the moment I touched you in that warehouse on Lycanus 3. You’re mine, Rylan, and nothing can change that for me. Nothing. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth.”

A loud knock came on the door before I could make any kind of stunned reply, and the general turned a furious face toward it. “Go away,” he called out. “I’m busy now.”

I laughed at his frustrated expression, and the little dragon in my lap, who had been sitting quietly, laughed when I did. He was mirroring me, and it was so cute that I couldn’t help but hug him again.

“And you,” the Marshal General said reprovably to the little creature. “You’re not helping much, you know.”

A sharp knock came on the door again, and when the Marshal General called out for whoever it was to “Come the hell in, damn you and stop pounding on that door!” The door opened to reveal two men—a tall, thin, older one with a full gray beard and severe features, and a younger man, tall, with a long nose, and the short, pale blond hair so many of the Horvathians seemed to have.

“Marshal General Fortina, my name is Colonel Bentine, and this is Lieutenant Mythe. We’ve come to pick up the vetami hatchling. Lt. Mythe is considering taking him on

as his trainer.”

“Oh. Yes, all right. May I present Prince Rylan of Moravia.”

He gave me a short, unfriendly glance and didn’t bow. Neither did he unbend in the least when he shifted his disapproving gaze to the cute little creature in my lap. He totally ignored me and looked back at the general.

“Marshal General Fortina, you’ve done well in obtaining the egg and overseeing the hatching, but I’m happy to say you won’t have to continue that service any longer. I’ll be taking charge of the hatchling, and Lt. Mythe here will relieve you of the burden of his further training.” He turned to look at me. “As for you sir,” he said in a frosty tone, “I’ll ask you to put the hatchling down and stop interfering in his care. Holding them like that spoils them terribly.”

I was so shocked by his rudeness that I gasped aloud. “Now wait a minute,” I said, putting a proprietary hand on the little dragon in my lap. At the same time, the General shouted at him.

“Colonel Bentine! You forget yourself. You’re speaking to an honored guest and a royal prince.”

I wasn’t through yet either. “And I’ll have you know I have not interfered in any way whatsoever with this hatchling!” I yelled at him. “Which just so happens to belong to me!”

“Belongs to you? What do you mean?” Bentine started spluttering. He turned immediately to the general. “What does this person mean by that, sir?”

The little dragon snuggled closer to me and seemed to need comfort—which I gladly gave him.

Fortina stood, inserting himself in front of me, and he looked furious. “This person, as you refer to him, is Prince Rylan of Moravia and my intended mate, so keep a civil tongue in your damned head!”

I tried to stay quiet, but I just couldn’t. I peeked around the big Horvathian standing in front of me. “I agree that somebody dropped the ball around here, but I can assure you it wasn’t me.”

The older man flushed an ugly red and shot me another glance. I thought I’d probably made an enemy there, but I didn’t care. “Ball, what ball?” He turned to Fortina. “What does he mean?”

“It’s just an expression—he simply means someone failed in their duty, and I have to agree. We did fail this hatchling from the day we left to retrieve the egg and no one from your facility showed up to take charge of it, even though we notified you. I’m a Rider myself, but not a trainer. This little dragon has had a poor reception from the Horvathians. And I think it’s time that mistake was remedied.”

“The vetami,” the odious man said, emphasizing the word, “will do much better in the hands of a qualified trainer.” He glanced over at me again. “Not to mention someone who is an actual citizen of Horvath at the very least.”

Before I could reply, Fortina took a step forward, straightening to his full height, some inches above either of the two, and glared down menacingly at the older man. “I’d like to remind you that I’m your superior officer. I think you’ll agree that I have had some experience in training vetami, and I still have had very little success, because this little dragon is special. He’s extremely intelligent and can communicate better than any dragon I’ve ever seen. Furthermore, sir, might I remind you once again that you’re being an insubordinate ass. I’ve a good mind to have you brought up on charges!”



Bentine's face flushed again, and he drew himself up and stiffly saluted.

"Of course, Marshal General. I-I'm very sorry. I apologize for any misunderstanding."

"Prince Rylan also happens to be the grandson of King Davos of Tygeria and the entire Axis Forces. You will show him the respect he deserves for that as well."

He looked a bit shocked, and his face paled, but I didn't think he was one bit sorry for being so rude to either of us. He gave me a short, stiff bow.

"Naturally, I meant no disrespect to His Highness. I apologize. I'm sure his family must be worried about him and anxious for his rapid return. His Highness has been most kind to the vetami, and we appreciate his untrained efforts, but surely, you've explained to him the impossibility of this situation. Occasionally, a new Rider is lost because of disease or injury, and we've had to replace them. It's worked out well in the past and I'm sure it will again. We still have time to change this youngone's behavior if we immediately impose a strict regimen on him. But first we have to take charge of him."

"How many times?" I asked, interrupting him, my voice a little louder than I intended it to be.

He glanced at me in complete confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"You said this had happened before, when a hatchling lost his intended Rider. I was wondering how many times this has happened in the past. Can you tell me?"

"Well, not exactly. Not off-hand, that is, but I assure you..."

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Deliberately ignoring whatever he was about to say, I turned my back on him and faced the General. I had asked myself what Blake, my omak-ahn would do in this situation. He was well known in our family for being outspoken and saying whatever was on his mind. If I channeled him, I'd know exactly what to say and do. I was being incredibly rude and probably overstepping my status, and I was definitely trading on my grandfather's name, but just then, I didn't care.

"I'll say goodbye to him properly then, shall I? I certainly don't want to interfere with his training. But I do ask you to oversee the instruction this young animal receives, Marshal General Fortina. I don't want him to be mistreated either, and I'll make sure he isn't." I looked directly at the two men. "Not by anyone."

"Your Highness," the colonel said stiffly. "I assure you..."

I interrupted him. "I don't need your assurances. I need to know he's in good hands. Can you promise me that?"

"Most certainly," he huffed.

I nodded and gave the dragon, who had by now nodded off in my arms, one last pat and hug and as he began to stir, I whispered softly in his ear. "You have to leave now, honey, but you go with these men and do as they say. I'll come to see you soon."

I picked the baby dragon up to hand him to the General, and he curled both forelegs around me and even wrapped his little wings around my arms. He was surprisingly strong. He nuzzled his hot, dry nose in my cheek. "I don't want to go," he cried. "Don't make me. Please!"

I looked up helplessly at Quinn, who looked as surprised as I felt at the little dragon's pleas to stay with me. He knelt beside him and began speaking softly to him in his own language, but I could see it wasn't working. Quinn took him in his arms, pulling him gently away to give him to the older man. The dragon cried out loudly and reached back toward me.

And I couldn't do it. I couldn't just turn my back on him and walk away.

"Stop!" I said, jumping to my feet, forgetting in the heat of the moment that I was too injured to be getting so excited. I paid for it with a sharp pain in my side that almost doubled me over. "Don't touch him. He's coming home with me."

## Chapter Eight

Things went from bad to worse quickly after that. I went over to the window to look out while the Marshal General battled it out with the others behind me. Thankfully the rest of the entire conversation was conducted in Horvathian, so I was spared having to listen to what the training people were no doubt saying about me. The dragon was clinging to me with its legs wrapped around my waist, which felt very odd, I had to admit. His little body wasn't all that heavy, and he was surprisingly warm, so it wasn't uncomfortable, but I began to wonder if I hadn't spoken too soon, and in a far too imperious manner.

Probably the only one who would understand at all would be my omak and Blake, both of whom were always in my corner—and who both loved all animals as much as I did. Blake always had baby animals around the palace, including the puppies he insisted on having. In my omak's case, he especially loved the animals that he could ride. He was already familiar with the vetami from his Training Academy days, and he would help me, I felt sure, if I somehow managed to pull this off and keep the little dragon.

And that was a big “if” judging by the occasional dirty looks being aimed my way by the Horvathian trainers. Finally, they finished their argument and the two training people left, casting me dark looks. I stared back out the window again, but Quinn didn’t speak. In fact, a little silence fell over the room, so I turned to see if the general might have left along with the others, but no such luck. He was still in the room, leaning against the edge of my hospital bed. He had his arms folded and his head turned down slightly, seeming to be deep in thought. He was aware of me turning though, because he lifted his head and gazed directly toward me.

“This won’t work, you know,” he said, in a conversational tone. “And all you’re accomplishing is to make this harder for him. When we signed our peace treaty with the Axis, a part of the deal was that we were to have full authority over our dragons. Davos won’t go back on that, and Prince Mikos wouldn’t agree to it either. They’re not going to go back on their promises to our queen in a signed treaty just to cater to your whims. And I’m sorry, Rylan, but I’m not going to stand for it either.”

I gave him the look I thought that statement deserved, as he stood up and began walking toward me. “This isn’t much I wouldn’t do for you, Rylan, but this is about the vetami and what’s best for him, too. This is what’s going to happen instead. You’re going to let me take him, and if you really care about him at all, you’ll try to help me make him see that it’s for the best that he remains among his own kind and gets the training he needs. You’ll ask him to accept a new Rider and do his best, knowing that he’ll soon forget all about you and all of this and move on.”

“That’s what I’m going to do, huh?”

“Yes, it is. Now please, baby. Say your goodbyes, and I’ll take him.”

I glared at him for a good ten seconds or so, while he gazed serenely back at me. I think it was the word ‘baby’ that did it, though I couldn’t believe I liked it. I never had before with anyone else, but somehow it was different with him.

“Take him then,” I said. “But I’ll hate you for this forever.”

He stared at me solemnly for a moment and then nodded. “I really hope not. But this has to be done for the dragon’s sake. Rylan, he’ll one day be as tall as a two-story building and weigh about 20,000 pounds. You have to be reasonable about this for his sake.”

I glared at him some more, and then finally, I gently pried the dragon’s little forelegs off my waist and bent over to whisper in his ear.

“I’m sorry. So very sorry, and I tried, but it’s for the best if you go with the men who came for you and go to meet the other dragons.”

He began to make little distressed noises, as the Marshal General pulled him away, and I didn’t watch as Quinn turned his back and walked quickly out of the room with him. I could hear the dragon’s loud wails drifting back down the corridor. I fell back down in my chair and let all that had happened mingle with what I was feeling about the dragon, and I’m not ashamed to admit that it took me a few moments to gather myself again after he left.

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Quinn Fortina

It had been two very long days since I’d last seen Rylan, though I’d checked on him often. It had killed me to stay away from him, knowing that he was upset with me and upset about the dragon. Those two days I’d spent waiting on his family to come and dreading what would happen when they did.

I was hopeful that they would agree on an immediate marriage and agree to Rylan living here in my home in Horvath afterward. At least for the foreseeable future. I

still didn't like the idea of being parted from him for long, so that had to be a priority. Perhaps in the future, I wouldn't feel as strongly about it, and he could go home for visits.

Probably not, though. With each day that passed, I felt more and more attached.

He hadn't actually agreed to marry me, though he hadn't said no. I clung to that and hoped he'd come around. I was giving him a little time and distance to do that, and I hoped it would work.

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The whole thing was inconvenient and embarrassing, but I had talked to the queen about it, hoping she could come up with a better solution. I'd heard that she and my uncle had been victims of the mating bond too, so she was able to understand and commiserate with me. Once I'd gotten the signed contract from his father, I would even agree to a small wedding appropriate to his station, even though I abhorred the idea of such a fuss being made over my domestic arrangements. The queen had some thoughts on that when I mentioned it.

"It's not only about you now," Queen Eujanie had told me. "Once you marry, it has to be about compromise and about what's best for both of you. One person can't expect to get their way in all things."

I knew she was probably right, but I didn't like it much. For now, I could only hope that Rylan didn't fully remember all that had happened in that warehouse on the day we met. After all, it had been a rather disgraceful exhibition on my part. Thank the gods the Lycan officials had stopped me before I'd made a complete ass of myself. It had been a close thing, and that would have been difficult to make up to him, to say the least. I didn't think he would ever have forgiven me if I had just gone ahead and done what I'd wanted to in front of everyone, and who could blame him?

It had been much harder than I'd thought it would be to stay away from him these past two days, but I knew I had to try. I had a great deal to do. I had notified the Moravian and Axis contingents of the whereabouts of the young prince as soon as we returned, and I gave them a few details about the entire incident, including the subsequent pirate attack and his injuries. Only an hour or so later, I received a return message from Prince Mikos asking me to stand by for a subspace communication.

After a short delay, the screen flickered a few times, and I was looking at the bloody prince of Tygeria himself, Prince Mikos, infamous to those of us who had sided with the Alliance and against his forces during the war. He had gained even more notoriety and fame when he later married a human male, an Alliance colonel, to secure a treaty that could end the war and would acknowledge the victory of the Axis. Their marriage did buy us some favorable terms and ended that awful war, though Earth itself—the instigator of the entire war—didn't fare too well. Even though King Davos had married a human from Earth, he came down pretty hard against their leaders. Davos and his human mate had seven children together over the succeeding years, Prince Mikos, being the eldest. He was the heir apparent to the Tygerian throne.

The conversation with Mikos was every bit as intense as I figured it would be. He wanted precise details about the attack, and about his nephew's condition, which I gave him as well as I could. The dicey parts came when he seemed a bit suspicious of my motives and asked if I was interested in some kind of "reward" for Rylan's safe return. Did he think this was a hostage situation and I wanted a ransom? Since it had never entered my mind to want a payment of any kind, I assured him in no uncertain terms that I did not.

"I don't need or want any kind of reward. I'm glad I could help him and regret that it was necessary in the first place. Had he been more cooperative in the beginning and not pulled a weapon and fired it at me, he would never have been detained at all."

A total prevarication on my part—once I'd seen Rylan, and once I'd realized who he was to me, I'd felt like I had no choice but to keep him, but I thought it better not to reveal that just yet.

The prince gave me a long, steady look. "Thank you, Marshal General. Please give my nephew my regards and tell him hisomak and mine are both already on their way to pick him up and bring him home. Unless there is some objection to those plans."



“About that, Your Highness....”

His tone turned even frostier. “Yes? Is there some problem with my nephew’s release, General?”

“Not a problem exactly. But there have been certain...complications.”

He gave me a look that should have peeled the skin off my face.

“What kind of complications?”

“I seem to have formed a mate bond with him.” I held my head high and gave him a bold look, because I couldn’t afford to show weakness to this man. And it was the unvarnished truth. Rylan was mine.

His face became suffused with red, and I could see that he was about to explode, so I held up a hand to stop him. “I will have a marriage contract ready for his father as soon as he arrives. Nothing has happened between us, and the prince is uncompromised in every way. But the moment I saw him...I knew he was mine. I assume you’re familiar with the Lycan mating bond? The Horvathian one is quite similar, if not exactly the same. And the bond goes both ways. I believe he feels it as much as I do.”

The prince slammed his hand down on his desk and for the next few minutes, he shouted at me, loudly cursing me, my family, my heritage, the day I was born and everyone I was ever associated with, past, present and future. Quite fluently. It was all in Tygerian, so I missed a few words, but I let him finish, and then I cleared my throat to speak again.

“I can see that you’re upset. Understandably so. None of this was in my plan either, I assure you. But I believe I’m worthy of consideration as his mate. I know he’s a royal

prince twice over, but I am the Marshal General of Horvath. I myself also hold a royal title on Horvath as my father was the late Prince Karlton of Horvath, who was killed honorably in the war. He created a tactical force called the Special Warfare Riders or SWR, which I now run. His brother, the late king of Horvath designated me as Riders Leader, a title he created for me not long before his own passing. In fact, I've had a fairly long and distinguished career in the Army. I believe my background is quite suitable, and we would have the blessing of the dowager Queen Regent Eujanie. We'd like to have yours and the king's blessings as well, and of course, his parents' blessing. But make no mistake, sir. Whether I have any of that or not...you need to understand that I'm not asking for permission. I fully intend to marry Prince Rylan. Very soon."

An ominous silence filled the room. "Is that so?" he said softly, menacingly.

"Yes, it is. I've spoken to him about it as well, and he has raised no objections."

"I see," he said in a snide tone. "In other words, you're simply 'informing me' of what's going to happen, is that it? This is a done deal as far as you're concerned."

There was that term again, and luckily, this time I was familiar with it. I nodded. "Yes. It's a done deal, as you say. He belongs to me." For emphasis, and in case I hadn't made myself perfectly clear, I repeated myself. "He's mine."

He glared at me for a long moment, practically daring me to keep staring at him. I knew that breaking eye contact would be seen as a weakness, however. And he didn't intimidate me. We were equals in status as far as I was concerned.

"Then it seems, General," he said, "that we have nothing more to say to each other. I'll inform my father."

On that note, he abruptly signed off without another word, and I was left staring at a

dark screen.

I went to see Rylan that same afternoon to give him the news. I hoped he'd be good with it. He was sitting on a lounge chair by the window, and he looked up at me and gave me a beautiful smile as I came in. I blinked at him a few times, because I really hadn't been expecting that. I wanted badly to go over and touch him, which was all a part of the craziness of this bond. I made myself stand by the door and gazed in at him instead.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm much better, and I've just spoken with my uncle Mikos." He held up a communicator to show me. "The doctor brought it in, because he insisted on speaking directly to me after the two of you talked. Thank you for notifying him, Quinn. My omak will be arriving soon, he said."

"Oh? Yes. Good."

I thought it was a bit unusual for Mikos to contact Rylan directly and so soon after speaking to me, but I suppose he wanted to hear his voice for himself and make sure he wasn't being coerced or forced in any way. Our relations with Tygeria had never completely normalized since the war. As with the Three Planets of Lycanus, we had a sometimes-uneasy truce. Let's just say, there wasn't a lot of love lost on either side. Another reason why it was awkward for me that Prince Mikos knew I'd bonded with his nephew, without even asking Rylan's father first.

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But that just wasn't the way this bond thing worked.

"He doesn't like you much," Rylan told me with a mischievous grin.

"Uh, no, it seems not."

"He said you were arrogant and full of yourself. I agreed with him."

"Rylan..."

"But I told him I planned to marry you anyway. No matter what he said."

"You-you did?"

"Yes. Oh, and my omak-ahn Blake is coming with my omak. He's the king's consort and Mikos's bearer."

"Yes, you've mentioned that a few times. And they're both coming here? I didn't realize you were so close to your grandparents."

"Oh yes. Blake is close with all of his children and grandchildren. And my grandfather, Davos is too. He wanted to come, but Mikos said you weren't giving him enough notice. He said you were insistent and rude and far too impatient."

"I-I simply feel that we should be married right away. I'm sorry your uncle feels that way. But you can't stay here in the hospital forever, and it would be unseemly for you to stay with me before we marry."

“Unseemly? I barely know what that word means, but I think it means improper. Funny you should worry about that, considering the liberties you took with me on Lycanus 3.”

I could feel my face burning. I wasn't proud of my actions on Lycanus 3. “Rylan, listen...”

“The good news is that you've already seen my ass and felt me up too.”

I had no idea what that last part meant, though I could certainly guess. “Did you like what you saw?”

“This is not a proper topic for conversation, Rylan.” I could feel my face practically melting with heat. “Not at all.”

“Did I tell you my brothers and I used to stay at Davos's palace on Tygeria during school breaks? Blake's wonderful. You'll see when you meet him. And my omak is too, of course.”

“I-I look forward to it,” I said, a little dizzy from the change in subjects and lying through my teeth. I had neither the time nor the patience for visits from spoiled and pampered consorts, like this Blake was reported to be, and like Rylan's “omak” undoubtedly was too. And I dreaded their questions, not to mention their disapproval. I expected this visit to be most unpleasant. And if they insisted on trying to take Rylan home with them—I wasn't sure what would happen. But Rylan wasn't going anywhere.

Of course, I'd be polite to them for as long as I could. I'd have to notify the queen, too, and she might want to have a reception for the royal visitors here on Horvath if there was time. Unless they didn't want that. I had no idea how any of this worked.

Meanwhile, I was far too busy for all of this. I was having problems with the new hatchling and carrying on my normal duties. And somehow, I also had to solve the problem of what to do about this bond the hatchling had with Rylan. I'd been able to ignore the problem with the hatchling for the past couple of days, but I'd had a disturbing call about him just that morning, and it was weighing on my mind.

"How's my little dragon?" Rylan asked eagerly, and I jumped a little. It seemed like he could read my mind sometimes. "Can you tell me how he's doing? Where is he exactly?"

"He's at the training facility, and I haven't heard any negative reports on him. Not really."

"What do you mean by, 'not really?'"

"He's uh...he's had a little difficulty settling in, but the head trainer has assured me he has it all in hand."

"That man who came here to see me? He was an idiot."

"Rylan..." I sighed. But he wouldn't be dissuaded. Not that I disagreed.

"He was mean to the hatchling, as you call him. And rude to me."

"I did reprimand him, if you recall."

"Not enough. And what do you mean by saying that the baby dragon is having problems settling in? What's happening?"

I raised my eyes to the ceiling and considered not telling him, but the truth was that I was a bit worried about the little dragon. He was on his second day of not

eating—which for a young vetami and this little Golden in particular—was extraordinary and would soon make him very ill.

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“He’s not eating much. And he-he cries sometimes.”

“What?” He jumped from his chair, hurting his side and clutching it for a moment in pain. I rushed to his side to lower him back down.

“Now see what you’ve done,” I said, as alarms went off on his monitor. “The doctors will be in here in a moment. You could have hurt yourself again.”

“I didn’t, so let them come! Tell me about my dragon.”

“Rylan, be reasonable, please. He’s not your dragon.”

“He sure thinks he is.”

Since that was undoubtedly true, I could hardly deny it. The doctor came in then and reset the alarm. He gave me an odd look as he went back out and told me to please be careful not to undo all his hard work. I sighed again and tried to change the subject.

“Look, we need to talk about your relatives’ upcoming visit. They’ll be here very soon, and preparations need to be made.”

“First I have to see my dragon.”

“Rylan...”

“Please. Maybe he’ll eat for me. He’s too young to go without food. Please let me try to talk to him.”



I blew out a breath. “If I were to take you to him—and I’m not saying I will—then you can’t make him think he’ll be leaving. You have to coax him to eat and accept his new Rider.”

“Oh no. He won’t accept his new Rider either? That poor baby. What have you people done to him?”

“Rylan, he’s not a baby, so please stop calling him that. And he won’t stay little for long, you know. I told you how big he’s liable to get, and he could even get bigger. My dragon is fully grown and weighs almost 12 tons. Are you familiar with Alliance measurements?”

“Yes. Blake is human, and he taught us lots of things about Earth.”

“Yes. I knew that. We’ve heard a lot about King Davos’s consort.”

“I’ll bet. And some of it may even be true. But only the good stuff. You’ll get to meet him soon, and you’ll see for yourself. Both my omak and my omak-ahn are wonderful.”

“I look forward to meeting them,” I told him. Again, I didn’t mean a word of it.

“You don’t look so sure about that, but you’ll see. I’m so anxious to see them both. But I want to see the dragon now. Please take me to him or bring him here to me.”

“That may not be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s already confused, and he has to stop all this foolishness and settle in. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise, what? What will you do to him?”

“You understand that the ten-ton beast he will become one day has to earn his keep...which is considerable. We’ll give him every chance, but...”

“But what?” His face visibly paled right in front of me. “Would you kill him?”

“Kill him? Certainly not. But we’d have to send him to the breeding grounds and clip his wings so he couldn’t fly away.”

“No!” Rylan shouted at me in outrage, his eyes dark with anger. “I forbid it. No, I’ll talk to King Davos, and he’ll forbid it!”

“Stop all this now and calm down. Getting so excited is not good for you.”

“Then you’d better take me to my dragon. I insist!”

Chapter Nine

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

I took him that same afternoon. Not because he'd insisted and threatened me with his grandfather—that had only made me angry—but because I got a call from the soldier at the Training Center who was trying to convince the dragon that he was his new Rider. And he told me the situation was beginning to be dire.

The Rider was the same lieutenant we'd met earlier, by the name of Lt. Mythe. From what I found out about him, he was a good soldier, and one of the few who had stepped up to volunteer to be the Golden dragon's Rider.

I believed this to be because the vetami was almost a complete unknown. The fact that he chattered away all the time was disconcerting and odd. Potential riders wondered how large he would eventually become, and what his temperament would be like. Even how long he might live—all were a mystery to us at the moment. Once I'd had him transferred to the Training Center, I'd made some calls to various breeders to try and research Goldens, with only limited success. I found some old reports of Goldens on Thalios dating back years ago and learned that they didn't spit fire at their enemies, nor did they breathe it out like a Red could do.

However, it was said that the Goldens had been exceptional fighters. They were fast and fierce in battle even though their numbers had always been extremely low. Rumor had it that they had eventually all died out twenty years or more ago, but that was obviously false. My uncle and later on his son, Travon, must have been breeding them all along and lying about it.

The only thing we knew about this little Golden so far was that he was intelligent, an excellent communicator, and extremely stubborn. I also discovered that he wasn't eating because he was literally on a hunger strike at the moment because he hadn't

gotten his way and got Prince Rylan as his new handler. The situation was intolerable, and I made sure to make my feelings about it known to Rylan on the way to the training camp to see him.

“I understand, Quinn, believe me,” Rylan said. “But as you’ve told me, the vetamis are extremely stubborn creatures. I hope you’re not implying that I had anything to do with that. I merely hugged him when he was crying about leaving.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I must have misunderstood you when you said he was ‘coming home’ with you, and that you’d use your influence with your grandfather to make sure of it.”

He flushed and lowered his head. “I may have gotten carried away in the moment. Just a bit. But I didn’t like to see him so upset.”

I blew out a long-suffering breath and looked over at him. We were in my private hovercraft. He was still pale and had still needed my arm to walk to it, but he was much stronger, and his headaches were being controlled by the medicine he was taking. One thing I knew for sure was that nobody should look so good after what he’d been through. He had pulled back his hair and tied it behind his head for our outing, which didn’t help my feelings at all because he was still unreasonably beautiful. The severe hairstyle only served to emphasize the classic features of his face and those damn long eyelashes of his.

“When you talk to the vetami,” I said, “explain to him that you haven’t been trained as a Rider. You’re not even from Horvath. He’s a smart creature, even as young as he is, and I’m sure he realizes that his own choices are limited. He needs to accept someone new.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. But what if he still refuses?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

He glanced over at me like he didn’t believe a word. “I don’t think my dragon will like whatever it is you have to say.”

I glared at him, though it didn’t seem to bother him in the least. I was used to men quaking with fear when I gave them that same look, so it was a little disconcerting to realize I didn’t scare this boy one bit. Not that I wanted to scare him, exactly, but I did want him to take what I was saying more seriously. He had fought me in that Lycan warehouse the first time I met him, as little as he was compared to me. And though I’d been irritated by it, I was impressed by his courage too. Or maybe I should call it foolhardiness. I felt as if he must not be afraid of anything. I’d had to revise my opinion of him as the pampered prince I’d thought he must be.

We arrived at the training facility, and I took Rylan down to see the little dragon, who still had no name, because he’d refused to accept the name that Lt. Mythe had given him and wouldn’t answer to it.

I told Rylan and right away, he wanted to know what the name had been.

“Mythe’s Golden,” I replied.

“Well, that’s just a stupid name.”

“Other riders have used their names as part of what they call the dragon. It’s not that unusual.”

“I didn’t say it was unusual. I said it was stupid. It’s too long for one thing. And it’s dumb. Anyone can see what color he is, so what’s the point of putting it in his name? No, I don’t like it at all. No wonder the poor baby refused it.”

“Again, he’s not a baby, and he doesn’t need a baby name. It’s customary to give them a name that’s regal or at least fierce. Some name them after famous generals in our history. When he’s fully grown, he’ll be enormous. Since he’s been here, he’s already gained a lot of weight and gotten taller despite his current hunger strike. I think you’ll be surprised when you see him.”

“I can’t wait. Now for this name...you say it should be something majestic or fierce, since he’ll be a battle dragon?”

“Yes, that would be ideal.”

“What would you name him, just for an example?”

“Maybe after a famous general in our history. Remingly, for example. He was a great Horvathian hero during the war.”

He sniffed. “I don’t like it. I could do much better than that.”

“Oh? And what would you name him?”

“Since he’d be mine, I think I’d name him after a famous general on my planet—a brave and loyal warrior named General Tallon. I’d drop one of the L’s and just call him Talon—like a sharp, curved claw.” He smiled over at me. “It sounds tough. I think he’d like that name.”

I had to agree he probably would. What the training facility would think of it was a different story. A dragon named after an alien general and a dragon’s body part? They’d have a collective stroke, though it did sound like something the little dragon would approve of, as much as I hated to admit it. We didn’t have to tell them about the alien general, I suppose.

We arrived at the front gate, and I took Rylan through, still holding tightly to his arm. Not that he particularly needed it anymore, but it made me feel better, and I didn't like to think about why. As we walked by some of the training grounds, we stopped to observe a few adult dragons taking off and landing. We had put them in new, lightweight armor for future flying missions but it could still feel heavy to them until they got used to it, so they needed to learn to land properly so they wouldn't injure themselves.

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These dragons were both Reds, and Rylan was amazed by their size and by how beautiful they were. They were indeed as big as a small building, like I'd told him, with massive bodies and a huge wingspan. They kept their wings folded neatly over their backs as a general rule. He looked impressed. He should see my beautiful dragon, Sulamon, and his impressive wingspan. I made a mental note to take him to see him soon.

We stood watching for a few minutes, but Rylan was clearly restless and anxious to go see the Golden. I took his arm again and led him down to one of the last of the large enclosures. There we found the little dragon sprawled out on his stomach, his head between his outstretched paws, and looking like he'd been crying again. I cleared my throat to let him know we were there, and he raised his head to look at us.

His face lit up with joy as soon as he saw Rylan and he leaped to his feet and came rushing toward the fence. As for Rylan, he was already opening the gate to the enclosure. I followed him in, a bit reluctantly, but I was afraid the Golden would jump on him and reinjure his ribs. I rushed over and caught hold of his harness just in time to prevent him leaping into Rylan's arms and knocking him flat.

"You came! You came to see me! Oh, I'm glad. They've been so mean to me."

"No, we have not," I told him and then I turned to Rylan who was giving me an incredulous look. "We havenot."

Rylan, who had plopped right down on the floor of the enclosure and was holding out his arms for the dragon's squirming body, looked over at me accusingly.



“My goodness, dear, what have they done to you?” I let the vetami go and he plopped down in front of Rylan and tried to climb in his lap, but he was far too big.

“They don’t play with me, and they don’t pet me, and they hardly ever give me food. I’msooooohungry.”

Rylan looked at me accusingly again, and I shook my head. “He’s a little fraud. He’s been offered food every day—severaltimes a day—but he says he’ll wait for you to feed him. He says he’s on a hunger strike, though I have no idea how he even heard of such a thing.”

“Please bring him something to eat now then, and I’ll feed him right away.”

I went over to a speaker on the wall and pushed the button. When someone asked what I needed, I told them to bring food for the Golden as quickly as they could. Then I turned and leaned against the wall, waiting impatiently while Rylan and the little dragon had their reunion. The Golden babbled to him about the enclosure and what he’d been doing, and plied Rylan with endless questions over where he’d been and why he hadn’t been to see him. Rylan answered him very softly and seriously, managing to calm him down in a remarkably short time. This had gotten out of hand quickly, and I wondered if I should have ever brought Rylan here at all. I was pretty sure of the answer. This was only going to make everything so much worse.

When his food came—a shoulder of goral meat—he fell on it quickly and ate so rapidly that we both had to caution him about making himself sick. He ate every bite of his food and drank a whole bucket of water. Then he lay down with his head in Rylan’s lap and fell sound asleep.

“How can I leave him?” Rylan said softly, looking up at me as the dragon snuggled his head into his lap and began snoring.

“I know it’s hard when he carries on the way he does, but it’s really for the best that you don’t let him get even more attached to you.”

“Better? For me or for him? Please don’t make me leave him, Quinn. Besides, you owe me. You admitted that you were out of control at that warehouse on Lycanus 3, and you said you were sorry for the things you did to me. Don’t you want a chance to make it up to me? To convince me to marry you?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I was shocked by his manipulations. I had never acted the way I had on Lycanus before in my life, and the memory of it was excruciatingly embarrassing to me. I’d been hoping that particular memory of his might fade again, but no such luck.

“You know that was a huge misunderstanding,” I said, my voice stiff. “I don’t think now is the time to discuss it.”

“Then when? We’re negotiating. I’d like to talk about it now.”

“No.”

“No? That’s all I’m going to get?”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about it any further.”

“Quinn Fortina, you held me in your arms, and you growled at anyone who tried to take me away from you. You ripped my trousers off, exposing my naked ass to the world and would have done more if not for the Lycans.”

I could feel my face flaming. “Why are we still talking about this? I-I didn’t mean for you to be hurt, and I’m sorry. Though if you hadn’t fought me, it would never have happened. Not so soon, anyway.”

“I asked the doctor about it, you know,” Rylan said. “About how such a thing could have happened, and do you know what he said?”

“How would I know? And I can’t believe you discussed our private business with the doctor.”

Ignoring me, he carried on talking. He was just like the chatty little dragon, never knowing when to be quiet.

“He said that with Horvathians, sometimes males feel the mating urge so strongly and it’s so powerful and undeniable that they bite the other person to mark them as theirs. Could it be that you wanted to bite me, Quinn? Would you like to bite me even now?”

I glared furiously at him, because damn it, it was all I wanted, and I didn’t know how much longer I could wait to claim him.

“No!” I shouted at him. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

A small voice spoke up in front of me. “Why are you yelling at him? That’s not nice.”

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I looked in surprise at the dragon who was looking right back up at me.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“Then why did you do it?”

I was far too exasperated to have this conversation. I blew out a long and furious breath and looked back at Rylan. “Are you ready to go? I need to get back to base.”

“Go?” The little dragon cried out. “But you just got here!”

“It’s all right,” Rylan told him. “You’re coming with me this time.”

“No, he isn’t! Don’t promise him things like that!”

He stood up and faced me. “Yes, he is. You owe me, Quinn and you know it. If you don’t let me have him, right here and now, then as soon as we get back to your base, I’m calling my grandfather and telling him I want to come back home, but you won’t let me. And then you can work the rest of it out with him.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” I growled at him.

“I’ll stay if you give me this dragon. I promise I will. Consider it part of my mate price. Only this part will be paid directly to me.”

“In other words, you’re blackmailing me.”

“No other words—that’s exactly what I’m doing. You give me this dragon, and I’ll agree to marry you. If not, then I’ll get my grandfather, King Davos, to come and get me. Don’t think I won’t. I think I can even squeeze out a few tears for him. I’ll tell him how you beat me and keep me locked up all the time.”

“This is outrageous.”

“Maybe so, but those are my terms. Take them or leave them. What’s it going to be?”

As I stood there glaring at him in complete fury and astonishment, he nodded with satisfaction.

“That’s what I thought.” He found the little vetami’s harness and slipped it on him. Then he took the end of the leash, came out of the enclosure and began leading him quickly toward the exit, with the dragon trotting happily along beside him.

I hesitated only a few seconds before I followed him.

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As I imagined it would be, it was an awkward ride back, to say the least. I was seething with anger while Rylan sat with the Golden—whom he had already begun calling Talon—in his lap, smiling happily because he’d gotten his way.

Actually, the vetami’s broad backside was sprawled in the floor beside Rylan’s seat, and his front paws were draped over Rylan’s legs. He had grown that much in the past few days and was already too large to sit in his lap. Now that he was eating again, he’d grow a great deal more and rapidly too. This would probably be his last time inside a vehicle, because soon he wouldn’t fit. He was babbling now about how he just loved his new name and how clever Rylan was to think of it.

I dreaded the uproar that this would cause with the training facility, although, in truth, I felt like some of the trainers had been a little too harsh in their dealings with the vetami. Perhaps it was time for them to realize they didn't "own" them either but were simply tasked with their training and well-being. Some of the top trainers, like that Colonel Bentine, seemed to have grown a bit complacent and a little too comfortable in the job, as evidenced by the way he'd acted when I'd come to see Talon earlier in the week.

On the way back to the base, I decided it would be best to detour away from the hospital and just take Rylan and his vetami both straight to my family home outside the capitol city, in the foothills of the eastern mountain chain called the Kramons. It was where I'd grown up and where I kept Sulamon, in a large field beside the house. He had his own attendants and his own enclosure there, fully heated in the harsh winters. There would be plenty of room for little Talon there too. And because Talon was so young, I didn't think Sulamon would try to fight him, even though males didn't get along too well, as a general rule with other male dragons.

I would have brought Rylan here soon, anyway, which I knew would be a necessity because of his high rank and status. Perhaps it would all be for the best anyway. I'd be gone often on various missions and duty related trips, and having Talon here would be good company for Rylan while I was gone. It would help keep him occupied.

"I'm going to take you and Talon to my home in the hills. I'll have your things brought over to you."

"I don't have any things."

I glanced over at him in surprise. "I'm so sorry, Rylan. I've been preoccupied since we got back, but I told the doctors to provide whatever you needed. Whatever you asked for."

He shrugged and kept staring out the windshield.

“If you’ll make a list of everything you want, I’ll get it for you. Or I can take you shopping. Just tell me what you want to do.” Rylan continued to stare straight ahead while I was telling him all this, and I couldn’t read his mood at all. It irritated me a little that I had to worry about such things now, but having a mate changed everything.

“What do you think?” I prompted him. “Would that work? Will you go there to my home and live with me?”

“I don’t know. Do you intend to marry me right away? You keep talking about a mate contract, but I haven’t seen one yet. I won’t stay there unless there’s a wedding, you know.”

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“Yes, of course, I want to marry you as soon as possible. I’m going to inform the queen tonight and I’ll arrange a wedding for us.”

“And I’m not through talking about this camp of yours. It’s silly to think that you can make your men some kind of ‘warrior monks’ who have no lives outside of work. That’s never going to work, you know.”

“Well, I...”

“Have you spoken to my parents about all this yet?”

“No. Not exactly. Not yet. I thought I would do that in person, when your bearer arrives. I did speak to Prince Mikos already, as you know, and he knows my intentions.”

He turned toward me. “Oh, I know. He told me, but he’s not my father. He’s my uncle. That whole conversation was kind of a disaster, anyway, wasn’t it?”

“Was it?”

“You know it was. He makes most people nervous. Not you, though, he said. The two of you argued.”

“It wasn’t exactly an argument. But no, he doesn’t bother me, though I think he wanted to. I tried to make him understand how I felt about everything, but I’m still not sure if he did. He said one of his fathers is coming along with yours.”



“Blake, Davos’s consort, like I already told you. We call them omaks. They’re our bearers, as well as one of our fathers. I don’t think you have those here.”

“No, we do not.”

“I don’t plan to bear children, just so you know. If you have that idea, just get it out of your head right now.”

“No,” I said, looking over at him in horror at the idea of altering his body. “I don’t want that at all.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with it, so there’s no need for your face to look like that. It’s just not for me. I don’t plan to stay at home all the time and take care of babies.”

“I...see. Then what do you plan to do?”

“That’s something I’ll have to figure out. I’ve decided that I will marry you—though you still haven’t exactly asked me to.”

“Yes, I did.” I said a little heatedly.

“No. We discussed how you told my uncle you planned to keep me and mentioned sending my father a marriage contract. We negotiated a little over Talon. But no, you never actually asked me to marry you.”

“Well, I...”

“You’ll have to send the contract to my other father, King Stefan, or else he’ll be offended. He’s pretty tough, you know. But he’ll probably agree. You should also call him and just be nice and respectful to him. Not like you were with Mikos.”

“Of course.”

I suddenly needed to touch him, but I thought that once I got started with that, I wouldn't be able to stop. “I'm sorry if I'm messing this up.”

He put a hand on Talon's head and finally turned to smile at me. “You're getting a little better at it. And as Blake says, ‘practice does make perfect.’”

## Chapter Ten

Rylan

Quinn had decided to greet my family at his home, and he thought that we'd all be more comfortable staying there, so reluctantly I had agreed to spend the night, though I made it clear we'd be in separate bedrooms. Meanwhile, he'd had one of his servants go to a store and purchase some clothing for me from a list I made, while I took a long nap. The activities of the morning had tired me out. He had also contacted his queen, and he said that she wished us happiness and told him she would be happy to make arrangements for our wedding. I told him I'd think about it, but that my omak would probably have other plans.

I wound up sleeping most of the day, waking up only when the servants brought a tray to my room. I guess I must have really needed the rest.

The next morning my omak and Blake were set to arrive, and I couldn't wait to see them both. I'd wanted to go down to the docks to meet them, but I had a slight headache when I woke up, and Quinn didn't want me to exert myself. He'd planned on picking them up himself, but my omak had sent a message that they had their own transport and would come to us. They just needed our coordinates.

Considering the contentious meeting he'd had with my uncle Mikos, I wasn't too sure

what my omak and omak-ahn would have to say about any of this, but I was ready for anything. I really needed to talk to them. My omak could talk to my father if he would, before Quinn sent him the contract, and the king usually listened more to him than to anyone else. I was anxious to hear what my parent would have to say about King Travon and how he'd been less than honest and had run back to his ship once the trouble started.

Meanwhile, Talon had settled in nicely and liked the big open field by the house and all the food he'd been offered since he'd been there. Maybe it was more accurate to say he especially liked the food. We'd both met Sulamon, and my first sight of him was a little terrifying, to be honest. Quinn's huge red dragon had sniffed curiously at us both, but seemed friendly enough. Then again, Quinn had been right there to intervene if he hadn't been. He was enormous—much larger than I'd expected, to be honest. Unlike Talon, who chattered away at him, he didn't talk to us at all. I wondered how much he understood, though I thought he looked at me with intelligence in his eyes.

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He towered up over me and Talon, and had beautiful, bright red scales. I was a little worried about the fact that he was a fire breather, but Quinn assured me he was much too well behaved and well trained to be any kind of threat to me or Talon.

His wingspan was enormous, yet his wings looked to be gossamer thin when he unfolded them. Usually, he kept them neatly folded up behind his back. He rushed to Quinn and greeted him with soft cries, and Quinn had to spend some time petting him and talking softly to him, as Sulamon bent down and seemed to be listening closely.

Quinn's house was made of gray stone, and it had large and spacious rooms. The inside was decorated by some designer Quinn had hired, so it had a lot of art on the walls and colorful rugs on the dark, wooden floors. The paintings were all in bright colors and the paint had been applied in thick swaths that sat up off the canvases in thick, hard ridges. The subjects were mostly dragons in flight, and I loved them. The bright, sinewy forms were beautiful, flying across the gray, Horvathian sky, their wings soaring up in the clouds. And of course, as soon as I saw them, I wanted a new one commissioned, featuring a golden dragon. I told Quinn that it would be a wonderful wedding present for me.

“Another one?” he asked, though he smiled indulgently. “You’re going to be expensive, aren’t you?”

I thought he’d do it anyway.

I didn’t want him to know how happy I was—not just about the painting, but about a lot of things, and all concerning him personally. I was fascinated by him, drawn to him and very attracted to him. I knew Blake wouldn’t understand how soon these

feelings had developed, but I thought my omak might. He had felt the same way for my father quickly, and I'd heard their story many times. Of course, I still didn't really know Quinn or know what his opinions would be on most things. Maybe when I did, that would change, but I didn't think so. The mating bond that Quinn talked about probably did go both ways, I was beginning to think. Maybe it was all my imagination, but I was fascinated by him and beyond attracted to him physically. I wanted to sleep with him, but I knew my omak could tell if I did and he wouldn't like it, so I was going to try to wait a little while longer. "Try" being the operative word.

It was a bit scary to think about living in this alien world, but I was an adventurous person. We'd gotten off to a rough start, but he'd saved my life and had been solicitous and wonderful when I got hurt by the Thalian mercenaries. I trusted Quinn to have my back. Still, there was an old phrase on Earth that I'd heard my human relatives use a few times—trust but verify.

As long as he was on Horvath, then I needed to be there too. Not that I planned on making it too easy for him. He needed to work for me a little. Getting him to agree to let me keep Talon had been a nice first step. I planned on training Talon myself, with his help. The idea of riding him one day was exciting and gave me a lot to look forward to.

Most of all, if I got good enough at it, I was hoping that Quinn would let me join the Dragon Riders. Of course, I knew that would be an uphill climb. And both Talon and I had a lot to learn before that happened, and probably a long time to train, but I hoped I could one day get Quinn to agree to my plan. As I'd told him, I was not the kind of person who sat around and waited for their spouse to come home. I'd been trained as a warrior, myself, just like he had. I knew I lacked experience, but I had enthusiasm on my side at least. I thought I took after King Stefan more than my other father when it came to being a soldier.

Speaking of my omak, not to mention my uncles and my grandparents, I wasn't quite

sure what they'd think about all this. My first cousin, Jago, who was the son of my uncle Anarr, had only recently been married, and the family was still not fully pleased about his choice, though Jago seemed really happy at his wedding. And he'd married a handsome officer from the mysterious Pton. Quinn and Horvath seemed almost a tame choice after that.

Quinn showed me to a guest bedroom that he said was mine to use until after the wedding.

“Unless you want to just go ahead and move into my room, and I can stay in the guest room?”

I didn't want to take his bedroom, even though it was tempting. I knew that neither my omak nor Blake would approve, and besides, I didn't want to make things too tempting for him.

Since he told me my omak and Blake would be arriving that afternoon, I took a long, hot bath before getting dressed again in similar clothing to Quinn's.

He wore tight-fitting trousers and a tunic, and when he went out, he wore his uniform cape clasped around his shoulders. I didn't have a cape, but I wore a similar outfit otherwise. Quinn said the cape colors corresponded with his dragon's color. The idea of wearing a golden cape one day was intriguing to me, but again, I couldn't get ahead of myself...not quite yet.

By afternoon, I was dressed and waiting impatiently for my family to arrive. We heard hovercraft arriving and I hurried to the door to greet them. Quinn came at a much slower pace, and I think he was not looking forward to this initial meeting.

I was surprised at the number of hovers landing in Quinn's circular courtyard. There were five of them and most were filled with Imperial guards. I should have known

my grandfather wouldn't allow Blake to come without "suitable" backup, though this seemed a bit excessive even for Davos.

My omak was first one off the hover, looking effortlessly gorgeous, as always. He looked closer to his thirties than his real age, but then Tygerians had much longer lifespans than humans and they didn't age much at all until they were really old. Blake came next, his blond hair shining and streaked now with silver. It was really the only sign of his age. He wore his long, sapphire robe, which was traditional, if a little old-fashioned on Tygeria now. The color made his eyes even bluer, but then he always looked wonderful to me. I ran out to throw my arms around them both.

The guards stood by, a little closer than I thought was strictly necessary. I pulled both my omak and Blake to the door, where Quinn was waiting.

He bowed deeply to them, as I introduced him. "Blake, Omak, this is Marshal General Quinn Fortina, the man I'm going to marry."

Blake gave me an arch look, before he returned the bow. He didn't look all that happy, and I was left wondering what he thought about all this. I knew he'd be sure to tell me. My omak stepped forward and gave Quinn a brief but cordial bow.

"It's very nice to meet you, General," he said. "I'm interested in hearing about how you met my son."

Blake was already hugging me and had an arm around my shoulders. He murmured in my ear to ask me if I was all right. I smiled and told him I was perfect.

"Just say the word if you want me to get you out of here," he said to me in English, which was his native tongue and a dialect from Earth that he'd taught to us when we'd go to visit. Most humans used Earthan, which was a mixture of languages from Earth, so I wasn't sure if Quinn could understand him or not in his English. He was

giving both of us an intense look.

“No, I’m happy, Omak-ahn,” I told him in the same language. “Just get to know him first before you judge.”

“I could say the same to you.”

I laughed, and threw an arm around his waist to pull him with me into the main living area, while Quinn walked beside my omak on the way in. Several guards filed in behind us and stationed themselves by the doors, looking around suspiciously.

As soon as we sat down, Blake started. “I understand, sir, that you told my son Mikos that you intend to marry my grandson. Is that right?”

“Yes, Your Highness, it is,” Quinn replied.

“Hm. That’s odd. I don’t remember seeing any offers for him yet. My son Vannos would have told me if there had been any. Or is that not how you do things here on Horvath?”



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“As I explained to His Highness, Prince Mikos, our meeting was sudden and we’ve only just returned home to Horvath. I’m drafting a marriage contract proposal now, but there have been...distractions since we arrived. When I first met Rylan on Lycanus 3, I quickly discovered that he was my mate. I knew it shortly after I first saw him. Rylan told me that one of your other sons is mated to a Lycan, so you must know what that means. The Lycan mating bond...”

“Yes, yes, I know all about Lycans,” Blake said.

“I’d like to point out that although we are a related species, I amnota Lycan. I am Horvathian.”

“I see. That’s to your credit, I suppose, though so far, I’m not seeing a huge difference.”

“Omak,” Vannos said softly and shook his head. “General Fortina, my husband and I are willing to entertain your offer for our son, but you need to know that it’s at least partly up to Rylan. And he certainly seems to be all right with the situation, though he must speak up if he has any reservations.” He turned to me. “Rylan, I hope you know you can speak freely. Or we can speak in private if you’d like. But General Fortina should know that I’m willing to fight my way out of here if we have to, and be assured, General, that I would, if the need arises.”

I don’t know who was most surprised by his words. Everyone looked a little shocked, even the guards. But the general leaned over and took my hand in his.

“Rylan knows my intentions,” he said, “and believe me, he’s not the least bit afraid of

me. Nor would I want him to be. I don't know what I might have said to Prince Mikos to give him such a bad impression. I simply told him my background and my intent, and they were stated clearly, but please understand that I am not coercing Rylan, or forcing him to stay here."

"And if he decided to leave and go home with us?" Blake said. "What would you do about it?"

"I'd try to strongly persuade him otherwise. Very strongly. But never with violence. I consider him my mate, and I could never hurt him or his family in any way."

"Yes, but you haven't answered the question. Would you let him leave?" Blake asked.

Quinn sighed but looked directly at Blake as he replied. "No, I'm afraid I couldn't do that."

I stood up then and moved over to sit beside Quinn.

"I don't know where all this is coming from," I said. " All these hypotheticals. The fact is that I want to be here with Quinn. I'd like you both to be happy about it, and I don't mean any disrespect, but please understand that I'm staying here with him, regardless of what either of you say."

"Rylan," Blake said in a slightly surprised tone.

I'm not sure what would have happened then if we hadn't been interrupted by one of the servants, who came bursting in to speak to Quinn. The guards all tensed and put their hands on their weapons, but the servant simply signaled for Quinn frantically to come speak to him, saying something in Horvathian that I didn't understand.

Quinn did, of course, and he gripped my hand. “I’m so sorry, but I’m needed outside. The dragons...” When I heard that, I began to panic and jumped to my feet too.

My omak grabbed my hand. “What is it? Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know, but he said it was the dragons. I need to go check on them too!”

“What?” Blake said, getting to his feet, looking confused. “Dragons? For God’s sake, what’s going on around here?”

I rushed to the door after Quinn, with my family and the guards right behind me. Quinn was just ahead of me, and I could already hear his raised voice as we went around the corner of the house to the enclosure, and worst of all, I heard a sudden sharp cry from little Talon.

I started running even faster, because I was hearing other raised voices as well. And I recognized them—it was Colonel Bentine, and his lieutenant, the one who had tried to name Talon, Mythe’s Golden. The colonel was crouched beside Talon, holding his harness. He had it halfway on and was struggling to put the rest of it on him. Talon was trying to get loose so he could run to Quinn. He had curled in on himself at Bentine’s feet and was lying on the ground, his claws dug deeply into the soil, like he was hanging on. Quinn threw himself down beside him and began taking the harness off him, arguing loudly with the colonel.

“What’s going on here?” I shouted and charged over toward Talon to help him. Mythe stood up and came toward me like he was going to interfere, so I hit him squarely on his jaw, making his head snap back. He was a big man, like all of the Horvathians were, and his face got red and he held up his closed fists, ready to hit me. That’s when my omak stepped up between us, and he was just as big as this Horvathian and twice as angry. He shoved the man roughly away from me and pulled back his own fist to hit him. But before he could do anything, Quinn was there,

jerking Mythe up by his shirt front and yelling in his face.

The Imperial guards were already swarming between them to break up the fight.

“How dare you raise your hands to my mate and his father” Quinn was shouting. “Get out of here! Both of you! Get off my property before I do something I’ll regret later.”

I think he might have been fighting the men already if not for the Imperial guards, who had come to break up the tussle with my omak and Mythe. I bent over next to my dragon and began to pet him, stroking his sleek nose and making soft, crooning noises to him.

The Imperials surrounded Bentine and Mythe, and Bentine was yelling over them toward the General. “General Fortina, all this is unnecessary! We merely came by to look for the vetami, and we found him here in your enclosure.”

“Did you think he just wandered in, you fool? This is no longer any of your concern. I’m relieving you of your duties, Bentine and you too, Lieutenant.”

“B-but General Horvath, be reasonable! You can’t just give the vetami to this foreign boy! He belongs to Horvath and to the queen. He’s not yours to give!”

A cold and deadly silence fell between Quinn and the colonel as they exchanged glares. The colonel’s gaze broke first. Mythe looked uncertain and uncomfortable, and as for me, I was so incensed I couldn’t even speak, so I bent back down to Talon, and finished taking off the hated harness that man had brought with him. I realized my omak was again right beside me, having broken away from the guards. He was leaning over Talon too, helping me to soothe him.

“Poor baby, it’s all right,” he said, petting Talon’s head. “We have you now, and no one is going to hurt you.”

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“What in the world is going on around here?” I heard Omak-ahn yelling, and my little dragon sat up on his hind legs and said, “Oh, look Rylan. Who is that? He’s little, like you.”

My omak stared, with his mouth falling open. “Did he just talk or am I going crazy?”

“No, he talks,” I said, and kissed Talon on his little snout. He curled his forelegs around me and nuzzled me.

“Those men told me you didn’t like dragons, Rylie,” he was telling me. “And that you wanted to go home and not be stuck taking care of me. They said you left me here, and I thought maybe it was so you could leave again, but I didn’t know how to find you.”

“Oh, darling, that was a wicked lie! I’m not unhappy at all. You don’t ever have to listen to those men again. You belong with me now, and this is your home. Here with Sulamon and Quinn and me.”

“But I don’t understand,” Blake was saying. “How can this animal talk like he does? My God, he was speaking English just then! How is that even possible?”

“Who is that, Rylie? He has gold hair the same color as my scales. And he’s pretty, just like you.”

Blake’s face lit up and he laughed out loud. “I think I’m going to like your dragon, Rylan. Where can I get one of my own?”

## Chapter Eleven

### Quinn

It was getting late, and I had already shown the Royal Consorts to their rooms.

I had been surprised when I met them earlier at how good-looking they both were. Davos's consort could only be described as beautiful, even though I knew his age. His blond and platinum-streaked hair and his classic features made him so, however, though "beautiful" was a term I usually reserved for females. Obviously, Davos had altered his natural aging process, because he looked around the same age as his son, Vannos, who looked as if he'd barely hit his prime.

Vannos was all Tygerian, but a particularly fine specimen. His hair was Tygerian red-gold, like Rylan's, but he and Blake both had those same oddly colored blue-green eyes like Rylan's too. And though he resembled his brother Mikos, and though Mikos was considered to be a handsome man, there was something about Prince Vannos that was different. Despite what Rylan had told me about his "omak," I thought that anyone who underestimated him probably did so at their own peril.

I was in the kitchen, making myself something to eat—we never did get around to having dinner—when I heard someone behind me clear his throat. Startled, I whirled around to find the Consort Blake standing in the doorway. He seemed still full of energy, despite the late hour.

"Good evening, Your Highness. Can't you sleep? Is your bed not comfortable?" I asked him, worried that maybe I'd awakened him, banging things around. I was still furious about seeing Mythe threatening Rylan and his father. As far as I was concerned, both Mythe and Bentine were finished. I'd been far too lenient with them up to this point, and I had to admit that maybe I'd also been too absent, preferring to be in the field with my men rather than overseeing training. Now these men who rode

only in training thought they ran everything and could even tell me what to do. That was a situation that would quickly change.

“The bed is fine, and your home is lovely. I’m just absorbing all that happened today. I should be used to things like talking dragons, I suppose, after all I’ve seen out here traveling with my husband to other worlds. But it’s good to know that sometimes I can still be surprised. In all these years, I don’t think I’ve ever been around non-humanoid creatures that spoke before.”

“Talon is the only one I’ve seen able to speak to such an extent too.” I told him, leaning my hip against the counter. “From what I can find out, anyway. Though I do believe that the rest of the vetami, including my own mount, Sulamon, may have at least some of the same capabilities, though they don’t use them. And I’m very interested in finding out about the vetami that are supposed to be on Thalios. There may be more like Talon. But they shouldn’t even be there, and I’d like to know more about them.”

“Maybe that was why your Colonel Bentine was so upset about you giving Talon away.” He leaned against the counter and gave me a long look. “Perhaps he knows more than he’s saying. Tell me. Will you take Talon back to the Training Center now?”

I looked up at him, a little surprised. “What? No, I couldn’t do that. I gave him to Rylan, and he loves him. I’d never go back on my word to him. He was so upset that they might have hurt Talon that he was beside himself earlier. He was angry about them telling Talon lies too.”

“Lies? Oh, about Rylan not wanting him?”

“Yes. It took us a long time to settle him down. I finally had to tell the servants to make up a cot for Rylan beside him tonight. For your son, Vannos, too. He insisted

on staying with Rylan, too, though I told them both it wasn't a good precedent to start."

Blake smiled indulgently. "My son Vannos has a huge heart. And he loves animals. He's as fascinated by Talon as Rylan is, I think. Rylan told Vannos that Talon was supposed to have been his, and he'd share him with my son. But Vannos said he could see Talon had bonded with Rylan."

"The vetami are wonderful creatures. There are some planets in the galaxy where the air is too thin to use hover craft for special missions. As hovers ascend, the air gets even thinner, meaning, as you know, there are fewer air molecules to push against to generate lift and thrust. The vetamis have no such issues. The downstroke of a dragon's wings pushes air downward, creating an upward reaction force—that's the lift—and it propels them forward, which is the thrust. The weapons used against hovercraft such as heat seeking missiles won't work against dragons, either, because they're cold-blooded creatures. And if the atmosphere isn't breathable, we can make masks for them and then tell them to use them. And they listen. They're more agile and more intelligent than most animals, and they can work things out for themselves if the need arises, like an extension of the Rider. They're also absolutely fearless as well. All of this makes them invaluable in an attack."

"You're very passionate about the vetami, General. Odd choice for you to call them dragons, though. It's not very scientific."

"No, you're right. But it wasn't started by us. Your own human soldiers began it during the war. I mean the Alliance soldiers from Earth. They took one look at them and started calling them dragons."

"They do look amazingly similar to mythological dragons. Legends on Earth say the old kings had dragons hunted to extinction because they thought of them as being evil and from the devil."



“I’ve always loved vetami and been fascinated by them. When I met Rylan, I was trying to apprehend the thief who had stolen one of our dragon eggs.” I smiled at the memory of him the first time I saw him. “And then this beautiful, infuriating boy showed up to claim the egg.”

“That would be Rylan, I presume.”

“Yes. I couldn’t walk away from him and leave him there.”

“Really? I wonder then if you think you love my grandson.”

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I got very nervous, and I could feel my face flaming. I turned back around to finish making my sandwich. “Would you like one of these by the way? They were favorites of Alliance soldiers back during the war, and they caught on with our people.”

“Sandwiches? Yes, I know about sandwiches. I was one of those soldiers, once upon a time, you know. It seems like another lifetime now.”

I turned again to look at him. “But you haven’t been unhappy with the king from what I’ve heard. Everyone speaks of how close the two of you are. How much he cares for you.”

“He does, and we are happy. No, I have no regrets. But that wasn’t true at first. Back then, Alliance prisoners were dealt with harshly, and from the moment he met me, he says he knew he was in trouble. I was very young and half mad with fear and defiance and the willingness to die for my world. Davos was just as determined not to let me. At that time, Davos was the Dyson, which is the Tygerian word for Battle Commander, and he had immense power, but he told me over and over again that if I kept being so defiant, even he might not be able to save me from the highest authorities. Worst of all, my defiance and anger made him want to bring me under control. Again, that’s part of a Tygerian’s nature and not a personality defect. He has to fight against it constantly. A good deal like you must be with Rylan.”

That surprised me and I blushed hotly again. “I do have those urges, but I could never hurt him.”

“Hmm. Davos and I really don’t belong together, and maybe that’s why our worlds were located so far apart in the first place. By all rights, we should never have even

met. And once we did, against all odds, we should never have been together. But the heart wants what it wants.” He shrugged and smiled. “Everyone always thinks that they’ll be different. That they’ll be the ones to make it work.”

“And that’s a dangerous assumption, you think?”

“Well, it can be. Your species is very different from Rylan’s, and you can’t help how you feel—some of it is absolutely instinctual and part of your nature. And I can guarantee you Rylan won’t give that the respect he should. His behavior may call to you, and you’ll want to bring him under control, like my husband tried to do with me, but he had to learn to be careful, and so must you. I’m not worried you’ll kill him or hurt him, because I don’t think you’d ever do that. Though accidents have happened in the past. My youngest son married a Tygerian whose father killed his human mate in an argument, and then killed himself because he couldn’t live with what he’d done.”

“That’s...that’s too horrible to even contemplate.”

“I know. My husband knew how much bigger and stronger he was than me, and though he could force me to comply, what would be the cost? He would have changed who I really was, and he didn’t want that.”

I knew he was trying to warn me about Rylan, and a part of me resented the idea that he was implying I would ever hurt him. Still, I kept quiet and heard him out.

“I have to say I’m not as worried now that I’ve seen you with him, though. Even if it seems to scare you to speak of loving him.”

“It doesn’t scare me, but it’s-it’s fast. Too fast, I think. I barely know him. I can’t say I love him yet, though I can’t live without him, I think, because of the mating curse.”

“Oh honey, I agree with you about how fast it is. But it seems you and I are in the minority in this part of the galaxy. Just take your time. You’ll know when it’s real. I certainly did. One day, he’ll walk into a room you’re in, or he’ll smile at you in a certain way, or he’ll do or say something that will let you know for sure that he’s the one. And that no one else could ever do.” He turned and went to the door to look back at me. “Enjoy your sandwich, General. Tomorrow, we’ll talk to Rylan about what kind of wedding he’s going to want. In the meantime, you go ahead and finish writing up that offer and send it to his father back on Moravia. Goodnight. Oh, and don’t even think about letting him stay when he comes to your room later tonight.”

“What? Did he say he was coming?”

“No. But I know my grandson. And if you let him stay, then there’s no turning back. You’ll have to get married then.” He turned and winked at me. “Unless of course, that’s what you’re counting on.”

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Quinn Fortina

I took the Consort’s words to heart. I would never have tried to sneak into Rylan’s bed, because he’d made his wishes clear about wanting to wait for marriage. But if he changed his mind or took matters into his own hands, then I wouldn’t fight him on it. I was very open to the idea.

After I’d eaten my sandwich, I decided to go to bed. It had been an eventful day and evening, and I was tired, but I couldn’t seem to get to sleep right away. I kept thinking about Rylan and his beautiful body. Being so close to him like this was torture.

I was thinking too about everything Bentine had said and the more I thought about it,

the angrier I got. I was lying on my back, rigid with resentment at the man telling me what I could and couldn't do, when I heard my bedroom door open, and someone slip inside. My first thought was that someone might have been looking for the toilet and had come in the wrong door.

I sat up in bed and called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," came a whispered voice in the dark. "Were you expecting someone else?"

I snapped on the light beside my bed, and Rylan was standing by the door, wearing nothing but a short, silky robe.

"Rylan, what are you doing here?" I gasped, barely able to get the words out. "Your family will be outraged if they find you. The guards..."

"Are outside. And I wore a coat over here, so take that horrified look off your face," he said, indicating a long, red overcoat, like the ones the Imperial guards wore, lying on the floor by the door. "You've seen me in less, you know. And besides, they're Imperials. They'd be shot dead before they did anything inappropriate to a royal family member. One of them followed me here, and he's waiting outside the house, like I told him to. We won't be disturbed. But lower your voice so my omak-ahn won't come barging in here."

"You said that you wouldn't come to me until we were married. Rylan," I said, sitting up now. Even I could hear the "outraged virgin" tone in my voice, and I was trying hard to get my emotions under control. "This is dangerous. I can't control my feelings for you if you come in here like this—half-dressed, with your hair down around your shoulders, looking like you do."

I could also hear that my voice had deepened with those last words. I was losing it a little at a time, and I fought to regain control. "Go away, Rylan. I mean it."

He smiled and deliberately came closer—so close I could almost touch him. “Are you sure you mean it? Sure you want me to go? I came to give you an update on Talon. And other things...”

“You can do all that in the morning.”

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“But I want to tell you now.” He came even closer, and I heard a low growl start up in my chest. He shivered and bit his bottom lip and on impulse, I leaned over and snagged him around the waist to drag him closer so I could kiss him. I needed to touch him. He sighed as he came willingly, but I knew I was lost, because now that I had him, I didn’t think I could let him go.

“You told me you wanted to wait until after our ceremony. Why did you change your mind?”

“I-I don’t know. I just kept thinking of you in here all alone, and...the next thing I knew I was getting up to come to you.”

“The royal Consort doesn’t believe in all this. He said...”

“I can imagine. But he’s human, and he doesn’t believe in love this fast.”

“Rylan...”

“And yes, I know you don’t love me either. Not yet. And maybe neither do I. But I want to be with you. I want to be your mate. And I know my own mind.”

“Your omak...?”

“Is still sound asleep in the enclosure. He’ll watch over Talon for me. And he understands a little about mating bonds. His twin brother is married to a Lycan.”

“You have to be sure about this.”

“I am.”

I took his face in my hands to thoroughly kiss his mouth again, pressing against his plump, perfect lips and then grinding into them a little harder. It was aggressive and probably way too dominant, but this was the first time I’d truly had him in my arms in such a way. I couldn’t hold back. He sighed into the kiss and touched his tongue to mine gently, sweetly, like this was his first time to ever kiss someone like this. Maybe it was, and the thought thrilled me and terrified me at the same time.

I picked him up and put him on the bed beside me, pulling the robe off him and trying not to tear it off in my haste, especially once I discovered he was naked underneath.

His body was perfection, his skin like porcelain, even scratched up and bruised from all the fights he’d been in since I’d met him. His skin seemed to glow in the soft light coming through the windows. I had lights strung up around my property, because with only starlight to illuminate the night, it got pretty dark on Horvath.

I ran my hand over his flat stomach. “Spread your knees farther apart.” I reached down and began to stroke him as he squirmed with excitement.

“Rylan, why are you naked under your robe? Where are your underclothes?”

He laughed. “I thought it would save time for me not to wear any.”

I groaned and put my forehead against his. “You can’t walk around naked. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you. But I knew I was coming straight to you.”

“Damn it,” I groaned again. “Do you even know what you’re doing to me?”



“I think so. My friends told me that when you’re with your lover, he wants to touch you and he’ll take your typpid and stroke it up and down, like you’re doing now.”

“Your what?” I said, half-smiling at his silly names for things.

“My typpid. Here,” he said, and grabbed my hand to put it over his beautiful cock. It was dark pink and thick with a broad head. I bent down to kiss it, and he arched his back. I took his hot flesh in my hand right away and took in a deep and ragged breath, trying to slow this down.

I heard him groan as I touched him, as if he were in pain. I began to stroke him, slowly at first and then harder and harder as I ripped off my own underclothes one-handed. I usually slept with nothing on, but because of the visitors around, I’d put on something tonight at least. And now it was just in the way. He snuggled his pretty face into my neck and made gasping sounds against my throat as I stroked him.

“Oh, that feels so...I can’t hold back.”

“Then don’t.”

I nibbled and licked his sweet neck, torturing and teasing both of us, and I felt strong and a little out of control, but I managed to tell him what was about to happen.

“Rylan, you do know that if I bite you, I won’t be able to stop myself from making love to you? You understand enough about the people of my moon to know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll be mates for life then. There won’t be any going back, and I will never share you with anyone. Not ever. This is forever and there will never be any way for you to

divorce me. I wouldn't allow it."

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“I understand,” he said softly, breathlessly, as if my words excited him. ”That goes for you too,” he said.

I pulled Rylan into my arms, unable to wait any longer but I was careful not to hurt his side, calming and soothing him as his body jerked and trembled. I licked over the place I would soon bite him. I was holding off as long as I could, teasing us both, but I couldn't hold off much longer.

I nibbled at the spot and then slowly, gradually sank my teeth in. He tried his best not to scream, and I put a hand over his mouth to help muffle the noise. He squirmed beneath me, which only inflamed me further. Finally, I was able to pull away, and I licked over the wound again and again as he moaned and whimpered.

His cheeks were pink already with the fever that would take his body temperature higher. It wouldn't last long, only a few hours, but when he awoke the next morning, he'd be my mate in every way.

Wanting to make him feel better, I began to kiss and lick and nibble the hard, beautiful cock leaking in my hand, and soon he was groaning with pleasure again, his breathing coming faster and faster with the promise of the attention coming toward his “typpid.” I put my mouth over the broad head, and he cried out, unable to hold it in. I took the heavy length of him into my mouth and throat, swallowing around it and he began swearing above me, because he was becoming out of control again at this point. I bent over and licked him from his little pink hole to his pretty cock and he clung to my shoulders and screamed. I put my hand on his perfect ass, and slid my finger straight down to his pink, puckered hole. I pushed slowly in, and he gasped, shocked into silence.

“Found your off switch anyway.”

He nodded frantically and moaned at me. “Feels so good.” He would wake up everyone in the house at this rate. I pulled my mouth away with a little plop then sat on my heels to look at him.

“I’m going to make love to you now,” I told him, my voice sounding hoarse and strained even to my own ears. “But only if you stay quiet.”

“Yes, please. I will be,” he replied, panting hard for breath. He pulled me down to him so he could offer up his mouth again. He sighed into the kiss, and it thrilled me. He wound his arms around my shoulders as he ran his hands through my hair. I felt my cock harden even more at the feel of him so close and in such an intimate embrace, and I pulled his legs up, so I could gain access to that sweet hole.

“Have you ever done this before, Rylan?”

“No. I’m a royal prince.”

I laughed softly because that meant just nothing at all, but I kissed his mouth because he was so perfect. “This will hurt then, but I’ll try to make it as good for you as I can.”

I left him briefly to retrieve some oil to use on him to help ease my way into him. I positioned myself between his legs again, massaging and opening him as much as I could and then I eased inside him. I meant to go slow, but the sight and the smell of him overwhelmed me and I slid inside him as he moaned and thrashed wildly and even screamed. I bent down to tease his pink nipples with my tongue, and he practically convulsed under me. I captured his mouth in a long kiss, meant to quiet him.

I slid my hands down to his ass and gripped it with both hands, pulling him up so he had to lift his legs again and wrap them both around my waist. His eyes were huge, round and surprised as he stared into mine. I buried myself deep inside him and when he opened his mouth to suck in some air, I slipped my tongue inside, sending a shudder all through him.

Capturing his throat gently in my hand again, I pulled him up against me and soothed him with kisses on the side of his neck. I licked over his bite again as I began to stroke inside him rhythmically. I was fucking him slowly and steadily, and he shuddered in my arms and moaned with pleasure.

I knew his orgasm was close, and I wanted it to be good for him. When I bit him again to complete the process, it would be painful at first, and I wanted him to be far gone in his passion when it happened. When he began to convulse under me, I thought he was ready, and I bit deeply into the side of his neck. I knew it would feel like twin needles boring into him, and he would scream in pain, so I held my hand over his mouth so we wouldn't have all the guards plus the consorts in the room with us.

He arched his back, moaning, and I kissed him again, stroking inside him harder than before. He gave a wordless cry as he strained against me and had another orgasm. He was crying out loudly with pleasure, and I didn't have the heart to stop him this time after his orgasm, the feelings seemed to only get stronger, and he was soaring.

“Quinn, the stars! They're flying over the ceiling!” he cried. Vaguely, in some other part of his brain, it must have been registering that I was licking his throat, bathing the bite in saliva, and it was stimulating the bite, causing him to hallucinate. I felt the stars rushing at us—even I could see them this time, as the blackness came down around us—and I fell back on the bed with him clutched tightly to me, determined to never let him go.

We both slept late the next morning, and I knew that everyone in the house had to have heard us the night before. Rylan was curled up beside me in bed and moaned when I nudged him to wake up.

“Rylan, get up. We slept really late. Your family is bound to be awake and well aware of just exactly where you are.”

His eyes sprang open at that. “Oh shit,” he said, way too loud. I got out of bed and began pulling on some clothing before someone came in. I figured—having met Blake—that we had only minutes.

“Hurry. Your family will be in here soon.”

“Oh gods,” he said softly. “What are we going to do?”

“Say hello, I imagine. It’s far too late to lie about it now.”

“I don’t have any clothes to put on!” he whispered fiercely, and I had to smile. I wondered why he hadn’t thought of that the night before.

“Put on the robe. Or the coat. I imagine they’ve seen you in even less, and as I said they know exactly what we’ve been doing.”

He whirled to look at me. “Are you crazy? I can’t do that! It’s too embarrassing.”

“What did you think would happen when you came to me last night?”

“I didn’t think you’d let me go to sleep afterward! I was planning on leaving afterward.”

I laughed again because it was such a ludicrous situation, and I was far too old for all

this.

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“You had a Lycan mate bite. You’re lucky that you’re even conscious. I’d give you some of my clothes but they’re all way too big. Wrap a blanket around you and let’s go out and have something to eat. I’m starving.”

“No! Are you crazy? You go if you want to and try to find me some clothes from my closet. You can bring them to me.”

We were saved from further arguments about it when a loud knock came on the door, and it suddenly swung open to reveal the consort standing framed in the doorway. Rylan dived beneath the covers with a little squeak.

“Rylan,” the consort said, “Stop all this foolishness and come out here.” Blake swung his gaze over to me. “You too, General. We have things to discuss.” He closed the door and I got dressed to go out. When I opened the door, Blake stood framed in the doorway and held out a hand imperiously to me, so I took it. I let him lead me out to the main living area and gave Rylan a backward, apologetic glance, but I knew better than to tell this man no.

Rylan’s father, or omak as he called him, was sitting on a wooden chair sipping a cup of something that was probably tea, since I didn’t have much else in my kitchen. He nodded to me as I came out. “Is Rylan coming?” he asked.

“He, uh, doesn’t want to, but I imagine he will in a minute.”

“Why don’t you sit down and have some tea and some of these pastries? I sent the guards out early this morning to find some kind of bake shop to buy them for us, and they found these. They’re quite good.”



“Your Highness...”

“Oh, call me Vannos. I know what happened last night. We all do. Rylan woke up the entire house. The question now is, how soon can we get you married.”

“We can do it today if you like.”

“A quick answer. I like that at least. Tell me, General, was last night your idea or my son’s?”

“I-I don’t like to say. What difference does it make? It’s happened now, and I take full responsibility.”

Vannos exchanged a look with his father and then cleared his throat “I see. Very well. Would you make those arrangements, please?”

“Certainly.” I stood up to go, but Rylan walked out then, a blanket wrapped around his beautiful body and trailing to the floor. His face was bright red, and I couldn’t help but go to him and whisper in his ear. “It’ll be all right. They’ve asked me to make the wedding arrangements for later today, and I’m going to do that now.” I gazed down at him. “Is that all right? Is it too soon?”

He shook his head, raising a troubled face to me. “It’s fine with me if it is with you. Are you sure? Don’t let them bully you into anything.”

“I won’t. And they don’t seem angry, so stop being so nervous. Do you want me to stay here with you?”

“Yes, please,” he said, taking my hand. I kissed his sweet lips, just a quick brushing of them, and led him over to where I’d been sitting.

Blake was smiling at me. “We’re not going to eat him, General. You can go and make those arrangements. And Rylan, we’re simply going to talk about your wedding. I suppose it does no good now to bring up your shameless behavior, anyway, does it, General? I imagine my grandson has been fully claimed by this time?”

“He, uh...”

“That’s all right. You needn’t answer. Luckily for the both of you, Davos will be tied up in the foreseeable future with that uprising on Thalios. Some group calling themselves the Coalition of Small Planets.”

“From Thalios?” Vannos said, interrupting him. “Rylan, was that the coalition your father was thinking about joining? He talked about it at breakfast just before you left for Lycanus 3.”

“I think so.”

“Oh no. Father won’t like that too much.”

“No, I daresay he won’t,” Blake replied. “That will serve as just the distraction we needed to hide this from Davos and Mikos a little longer though. With any luck, the two of you will be married and all this will all be blown over before the rebellion is put down. And Vannos, you need to send a message to Stefan and tell him to stay out of this situation with Thalios and well away from my husband for a while. It may get pretty ugly.”

“Oh, believe me, I plan to. Though Stefan is stubborn too.”

“Hmm. Well, meanwhile, we’ll go ahead with this wedding.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I left them to it and went to my office. I would need to make some calls to finish the arrangements. I felt oddly hopeful that maybe Rylan would soon settle in and be happy and my life would get back to normal.

## Chapter Twelve

Rylan

Three months later

The water was beautifully warm as Talon flew across the large lake not far from Quinn's house, dipping and skimming along the surface, scooping up the occasional big fish as he went. He didn't even stop to feast on them but gulped them down and flew up toward the clouds again. The lake wasn't quite the blue color we had on Moravia, but more of a pale gray. I had always loved the water no matter what color it was, though.

I spotted a big outcropping of rock close to shore and steered Talon toward it by pulling on his reins and calling out to him to land on it. It was just about big enough that he could stand on it and still have room for me to slide off and land on my feet beside him.

He had grown in leaps and bounds in the past few months. When I was a little boy, Blake had told me about animals at what he called a "soo" or maybe it was, "zoo." Anyway, it was a funny word that he used for a place he used to go on Earth as a child. He had described the various animals to me and when he got to the elephants, I'd been so amazed that he had shown me some pictures of them. We didn't have anything that large on Moravia.

If you took away the giant ears and long trunks and if elephants had wings and shorter legs, the body size of one of those fully grown animals would be approximate to Talon at three months of age. And Quinn had assured me he'd get bigger than he already was. He would probably grow until his firstbirthday, if he followed the pattern of the red vetami, so maybe he'd even be as large as Sulamon, Quinn's dragon.

Though we had tried to research Golden dragons, we hadn't been too successful in the details, so we were still being surprised by Talon on an almost daily basis. His neck was already longer and more wiry than the other dragons his age and his wingspan was much wider. He never breathed any fire like the Reds, but he loved to chatter away almost nonstop. Again, that was very unlike the Reds and the Greens.

He and Sulamon did communicate in their enclosure though, and when I'd asked Talon about it, he told me that Sulamon "talked to him on the inside of his head." That's what Talon did with us too, though we could hear him quite plainly, and as a rule, we couldn't hear Sulamon at all, though Quinn said he had heard him during emergencies in the past. He insisted that Sulamon had communicated with him a couple of times before, and on one notable occasion during a skirmish with the enemy, Sulamon had told him clearly about a cleft in the side of a cliff where they could hide. It had saved them both. That gave Quinn hope for the future, but so far, any attempt to get the Red to talk to us like Talon did had been unsuccessful.

But today was a beautiful day and not one for worrying about anything. I was enjoying flying with Talon, and he loved the water. Quinn had gone back to work, ending our vacation not long after the wedding Blake had called that time our "honeymoon." Whatever it was, it had been amazing, and I'd been lonely for Quinn ever since.

Talon jumped in the water as soon as I dismounted and started to splash. He loved to dive deep beneath the surface, and I'd learned that he could hold his breath for long periods of time.

While he went swimming, I took off my shirt and trousers, leaving me in nothing but mybreka, and I stretched out on my back to let the sun warm my skin. Quinn would be so scandalized if he saw me. The breka didn't cover much. He thought I was an "exhibitionist" and that I should be more modest, especially since I was a married

man now. But he was on one of his “missions,” and I hadn’t seen him now in just under a month. We talked almost every evening before I went to sleep, but it wasn’t the same and it wasn’t enough, and I didn’t quite understand how it could be for him. Or why he thought it could be enough for me.

Our wedding ceremony had been low key and simple, just the way we’d both wanted it. Quinn had given me a ring that had belonged to his father—a heavy chunk of gold that was way too big and fit only my thumb. Quinn took it to a jeweler the next week and I finally had it back now. It was still a heavy chunk of gold, but really beautiful. I mostly wore it on a chain around my neck.

Quinn had taken about three weeks off from his job after our wedding to stay with me, and we’d become so close in that short amount of time that I’d hoped he wouldn’t be able to leave me when it came time for him to go back to work. We’d made love every day, several times a day, and he had taken me flying on Sulamon to show me his moon.

Horvath was so much larger than I’d imagined. Larger than a lot of planets, its defining feature was that it orbited Lycanus 3, held there by that planet’s gravitational pull.

I’d met Horvath’s queen, whose name was Eujanie. She was very nice and softspoken, and he’d introduced me to a few of the other generals, who were council members and his friends.

But most of all, it had been glorious to sail across Horvath with the wind in my hair, hanging onto Quinn’s waist with both arms wrapped around him, while he pointed out the various landmarks of his world. He flew up into the wild, green mountains near his home and Sulamon found a clifftop with an amazing view of the valley below. We dismounted and stood there just admiring the view for a while, with Sulamon crouched beside us.

Quinn pointed out that Horvath's interior, particularly its high mountains, were mostly unmapped. He made it a point to tell me to never stray from our mapped and predetermined route if I wanted to explore on my own with Talon. He scared me a little with his stories of how easy it was to get lost.

On one notable occasion, we stopped at a place to take a rest, and I had taken off the heavy coat Quinn had given me for flying, along with the oiled cloth rain cloak that had a hood. I had learned to wear that cloak at all times, especially because Sulamon loved to fly through clouds that got me uncomfortably damp. Quinn took a blanket from our pack to spread on the ground, along with some of the sandwiches he liked and a bottle of wine. We sat on the blanket, eating our sandwiches and passing the wine back and forth between us for a long time that day. We made love there on that mountaintop, under the puffy clouds, and I thought I'd never been so happy before. That had been a good day, but I soon learned those days of togetherness would be few and far between.

It wasn't long before Quinn started talking about needing to get back to work. When he said "work" he really meant training, because that was the majority of what he and his Dragon Riders did. They trained to stay sharp and ready to go whenever they were needed.

I had asked him to explain the Riders to me and he said they were a special operations unit, within the Horvathian army. It wasn't anything he liked to go into detail about, but I knew from the few stories he told me that they had a wide range of missions. I knew they did reconnaissance and some stealth raids, because with so many vetami flying everywhere, some tamed and some in the wild, it would be almost impossible to track them all. The Dragon Riders had to teach the animals to fly in patterns and stay together. They could still easily be mistaken for random flights of wild vetami, who liked to hunt for game in small packs, but it was necessary for them to attack as a group.

Horvath was a large moon and a well-known destination for smugglers and pirates. They came to hide out, because it was on the trade routes and near the Lycan planets, not to mention Leeria, a known pirate refuge. With its mountainous terrain and heavy, jungle-like foliage, there was plenty of cover on Horvath for pirate ships that used cloaking devices to fly in secretly to hide their contraband in one of the many caves or conduct other illegal activities.

As long as they didn't conduct any illegal activities on Horvath, Quinn and his men mostly left them alone, a fact that greatly irritated King Davos and Prince Mikos, who hated pirates and felt they were the scourge of the galaxy.

Right now, the Axis skirmishes with the so-called Coalition of Planets were still going on as well. The king of Thalios had been deposed and was on the run, trying to hide from Mikos. During the raid on Thalios, my grandfather's army had found a herd of adult Goldens left behind when Travon escaped. It was a small group though, and the officials thought King Travon had managed to run and take some of his vetami with him. No one had been able to find the king as yet, though it was assumed others in his "Coalition" might be helping him.

As far as any actual training went with Talon, that was practically non-existent. I'd been riding him as long as he'd been old enough, and I had learned to ride him really well, but he wasn't the best at following orders. He talked almost non-stop, telling me every maneuver he was about to make, which was good, but if he suddenly decided to veer off course and go investigate some interesting fish or bird, or whatever, he just took off. We were working on that, along with him taking orders, but it was a slow process. And since there were only so many times that I could ride him around to look at scenery, we were both getting a little bored. We mostly did it now to help Talon practice his flying skills.

But, in point of fact, I was just bored, full stop. And I was afraid that Talon would get that way soon too. Back at home, I'd been in my father's army and had trained and



worked with the other soldiers a good deal of the time. Now it seemed that Quinn just wanted me to sit around and be an ornamental fuck toy and that just wasn't me. Actually, the fuck toy part of that wasn't totally wrong, as long as it was Quinn, but I still wanted a real job.

What I really wanted to do was train to be a Dragon Rider, but every time I brought it up, Quinn said it was "out of the question." As if that were supposed to end the discussion. In truth, all it did was piss me off and make me want to do it even more.

I was lying on my back, half asleep that day, basking in the sun, when a big shadow came across me, and I sat up to see what it was. I was shocked to see a black hovercraft above me, like the kind the Tygerians used. I clambered to my feet, shading my eyes with my hand as I looked up at it. It flew past me, then turned and came back, slowing down as if looking for a place to land. Talon saw it too and came rushing to me from the water, getting out and shaking himself off. He stood in front of me with his wings unfurling.

"What is it, Rylie? Is it another dragon like me? One I haven't seen before?"

"No, Talon, it's a hovercraft. A spaceship. Tygerian, I think. Maybe somebody I know."

The hovercraft had landed not far from us, over on shore. I grabbed my trousers and pulled them on and then held the rest of my clothes in my hand as Talon bent down for me to get on his leg, so he could toss me up to his back. It was a fancy little maneuver that we'd practiced so many times we could practically do it in our sleep. It was a little showy, and he tossed me probably unnecessarily high up in the air. I landed with a little plop in my seat. Then when I was settled in my small saddle-like device across his shoulders, Talon took off with a big beat of his wings and soared over onto shore to land about fifty feet away from the hovercraft. I jumped off, still barefoot and shirtless to see the hatch door swing upward and a set of automatic steps

descend.

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King Davos himself came striding down the ramp, jumping the last few feet to the ground, and then turning to hold out a hand to help Blake jump the last few feet as well. Though at the last moment, he took him by the waist and swung him down to the ground, laughing at him when he yelled and hit his shoulder.

“I can do it myself!” he fussed, and Davos smiled and winked at him—definitely a mannerism he’d picked up from Blake over the years, as that was not a Tygerian custom.

I shouted out my surprise and joy at seeing them both here on Horvath, and my grandfather came over to pull me into a big bear hug as Blake looked on with a grin. Then it was his turn to hug and kiss me, as nearby, Talon watched us all with jealousy and deep disapproval.

Blake saw him standing there and exclaimed over him. “This can’t be Talon, can it? I last saw you both only weeks ago, and this beautiful dragon is so much bigger than little Talon was!”

Talon looked a little mollified at Blake’s words, preening a little as Blake called him beautiful.

“This is indeed my Talon. And yes, he’s grown a lot since you saw him, though I don’t notice it as much seeing him every day like I do. He’s going to be much bigger before he’s done—as big as a two-story building Quinn thinks.”

“But that’s amazing,” my grandfather said. “I had no idea vetami got so big.”

“Quinn says the ones the Tygerian soldiers brought back home for sport years ago were bred to be much smaller. But this is how they look in the wild. Most of them are red or green, though, and not this gorgeous golden color.”

Blake had come closer and put out a hand to him, but Davos pulled it back very quickly.

“Oh, he would never hurt anyone,” I said.

“Unless they were hurting you,” Talon interrupted, in his high, thin voice. “I would fight them if they tried to do that.”

I smiled when the king reeled back in surprise. “He talks!”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Talon, be nice. My grandfather has never seen anyone like you before. We want to show him you have good manners, don’t we?”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Then it’s very nice to meet you, sir. And to see you again too, Rylie’s omak-ahn.”

Blake turned to me in amazement. “He remembered me? And he calls you Rylie?”

I nodded, and he turned back to Talon. “How clever of you to know who I am,” he said. “You were only a little baby the last time I saw you.”

“Oh yes, I’m very smart. Rylie tells me so all the time.”

Blake laughed delightedly. “May I touch you?”

“Yes, if you like.”

He reached up to rub his nose and Talon actually made a purring sound, almost like a really big cat. It was like a soft rumble in his chest.

“Your scales are so warm.”

“From the sun,” Talon said.

“Won’t you come back to the house with me?” I asked them. “Quinn isn’t here, but I can contact him and let him know you’ve arrived. I know he’d love to meet you, Grandfather.”

“Our ship is in orbit around this moon for now, with the permission of the queen, so I suppose we can stay a while. We just came from Lycanus and a meeting with your uncle, Renard, about the fact we think the Thaliens might try to come here to this moon to hide out. The attack you were involved in was all the encouragement I needed. Have you fully recovered, Rylan?”

“Oh yes, I’m much better. My ribs are fully healed, and I barely have any headaches anymore.”

“Surely, your new husband didn’t leave you here alone though, after you were so badly injured?”

“No, I have guards here—way too many if you ask me.”

“I don’t see any of them.”

My face got a little warm, because I had gone to great pains to slip away from the guards that morning. “I didn’t feel like I needed any today. Talon was with me, and we just wanted to go swimming for a while.”

“So, you left without letting them know? That’s dangerous, Rylan, and it needs to stop. You’d be an attractive target for kidnapping and hostage taking. I’ll speak to your mate about it.”

“No, please don’t do that, or I’d never hear the end of it. Please, Grandfather. I promise to do better. Look, just follow me to the house and I’ll ask the cook to fix you something to eat. Omak-ahn, you can ride Talon with me, if you like.”

“No, he can’t,” Davos answered, before Blake could say anything. He pulled Blake away. “He needs to come with me.”

Blake rolled his eyes and gave me an apologetic smile, but patted Talon again and followed my grandfather back onto their hovercraft. That was exactly the kind of high-handed treatment I hated for myself when Quinn answered for me and made decisions about me. I was a little surprised that Blake didn’t speak up, but maybe Blake had learned to pick his battles over the years. Then too, I guess the idea of riding a dragon with no safety equipment didn’t really appeal to him like it did me.

“I’d be very careful, and if you do fall, I’m pretty sure I could catch you before you hit the ground,” Talon told him.

Blake threw back his head and laughed, while Grandfather's eyes got wide. I kissed Talon on the snout. "Not really helping, honey, but thank you. They can just follow us home."

I ran over and jumped on his leg that he held out to assist me, and Talon and I did our trick where I vaulted over his shoulders, twisted in the air and landed neatly in the saddle. Blake shook his head admiringly, and my grandfather laughed. Then the two of them went back up the hovercraft ramp so they could follow me home.

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Quinn

I got the call from Rylan that his grandparents had unexpectedly come for a visit around lunchtime that day and immediately cleared my schedule for the entire afternoon. A visit from King Davos was huge, and something I'd been dreading. Sulamon and I flew out soon afterward, heading home, but since the flying distance was around sixty miles, it would take at least two or three hours for us to arrive. Sulamon wasn't as fast as some others, due to his large size, and I didn't want to overtake him.

Our training was taking place in the high mountains, and it was a little too far to go home every night. Instead, I tried to make it home once a week or so, and it really wasn't enough. I had a constant ache in my chest, which was surprising, because I hadn't expected to miss Rylan quite so much. I'd really thought that not seeing him around all the time would mean I wouldn't be thinking of him so much. I thought that going back to work, keeping busy with training would keep lonely feelings for him at bay. I was wrong. It did help, but not nearly enough.

He was the first thing I thought about in the morning and the last thing at night. And all during the day, little thoughts of him would steal over me. If I had a good meal,

I'd find myself wondering if I should tell the cook about it, because Rylan might really like it, and so far he hadn't been a huge fan of Horvathian food. If I saw a nice view, or came across a pretty stream, or even sat outside my tent in the evenings, watching a nice sunset, I'd wish he was there to see it with me.

But damn it, I refused to become one of those foolish people who pined for their mates when they weren't with them. It was fairly common here on Horvath, where so many had the Lycan mating bond, or Lycan curse, as I called it. Most of those people just dealt with it or worked closer to their homes, if they couldn't manage it in any other way. I'd always thought it foolishness until I experienced it for myself and realized that it interfered with concentration on the job at hand. The only other thing I could do was travel home every night or bring Rylie to me. Bringing him here was just impractical, and what would he do when we went on a mission?

Rylan, naturally, had been all for it when I'd casually mentioned it in passing, trying to explain why that wouldn't work. He had begun pestering me to let him join the Dragon Riders, which horrified me and was just out of the question. The Riders were an elite fighting force, and it wasn't simply a job that just anyone could apply for. The Riders were all experienced soldiers and each of them had been submitted by their commanding officers for consideration after they had expressed an interest. And only then were they even allowed to apply for the training.

With only a handful of Rider groups, there weren't that many slots to go around, and some people had waited years to be able to join us. Not only was it far too dangerous for Rylan, but I doubted that the other riders would ever accept him. They would consider it to be extreme nepotism on my part to bring in my untrained, foreign mate as a rider. Then too, he was too small and too closely related to the Tygerians, who were still unpopular on our moon, even so many years after the end of the war. And even if I could put all of that aside, Rylan was a complete unknown in any kind of battle situation. He might be a good soldier—I had only his word to go on for that—but then again, he might not be up to my standards. If he wasn't, then it would



be dangerous for him and his entire group.

Besides all of that, I felt as if Rylan had been badly spoiled by his parents and his grandparents. He wasn't terribly mature and seemed younger than his age to me. I'd given Rylan one excuse after another every time he brought it up, trying not to hurt his feelings, and we'd had another epic argument about it just before I left to go back to work this last time, in which I finally told him a few of my concerns. Not in so many words and not so bluntly, but I had expressed some of my thoughts about it. He'd been highly insulted and hadn't spoken to me for three, very long days.

I'd waited him out, and finally, we'd come to a point where we just didn't speak of it at all, because we were never going to agree, and I thought neither of us wanted to risk our relationship over that one issue. I did find a folder on my desk not long after that, full of glowing reports about his performance and experience as an officer and soldier for the Moravian army. It had apparently come from his Army files and must have arrived with the last mail he'd received from his family. Most of their correspondence was by communicator, but his "omak" sent him things from time to time that he'd asked for.

He was twenty-one years old. How much experience could he have had in the Moravian army? And it was highly doubtful that his superior officers would give him a bad report, anyway. He was the son of the king, and the grandson of Davos, and I knew how that would go.

We didn't speak any more about it, but I felt as if he were biding his time and letting things cool down a little before he started asking me about it again. I had begun to dread the inevitable furious argument that was coming, when, again, neither of us would be willing to back down.

I landed in the enclosure yard about an hour before sunset. Large moonslike ours had atmospheres due to a combination of factors, including gravity, size, distance from

their planet, and the presence of a magnetic field. Horvath had sufficient gravity to retain atmospheric gases, as well as greater gravitational pull than other moons and therefore retained a substantial atmosphere. Here on Horvath, our atmosphere extended from our surface to a height of many thousands of miles, and our sun set in a dull red glow on the horizon. We experienced a sunset every night and afterward, our star shone brightly in the night sky. Our moon rotated on its axis, and our atmosphere scattered and refracted the sunlight just like on Lycanus 3.

I got Sulamon settled in his enclosure and saw Talon peering out at us from his own shelter next door. Waving to him, I called out to tell him I'd be out to say goodnight later and he chattered excitedly to me about "visitors." I told him I'd be out to see him later and went toward the house. I had to admit I was happy at the idea of seeing Rylan. His grandfather? Not so much, but it was important that I tried not to lose my temper, like I'd done with his son, Prince Mikos when I'd spoken to him. I knew I'd left a bad impression there.

I went to the house, which was lit up inside in almost every room. I found the king and his consort in the main room, along with Rylan, of course, who jumped up to fling himself at me. I had no resistance when it came to him, especially when he was in my arms, so I had to hug him and endure the many kisses he was giving me all over my face. I may have even enjoyed it a little. I finally peeled him away and bowed deeply to King Davos, who had risen off the long bench in my main room and was watching us closely.

"Your Majesties," I said, and then bowed again to the king. "It's very nice to meet you, sir. Nice to see you again, too, Royal Consort Blake. Rylan has missed you."

Blake surprised me then by immediately coming over to me and giving me a warm hug. "Nice to see you as well, General. I see that you've taken good care of my boy."

"Always," I said, glancing down at Rylan again fondly. He was still hanging all over

me, and though it wasn't a Horvathian custom in any way to be so demonstrative with our mates, I found I didn't mind it. In fact, I pulled him in a bit closer.

I turned back to King Davos, who was larger than I'd thought, and a handsome, vigorous man of perhaps sixty years. For a Tygerian, who typically lived to be around two hundred years old, sixty was just a number, and not even a high one. He was still very much in prime condition. I could only surmise a guess at his age by being familiar with his history. And as leader of the Axis, he was probably the most famous—some might say notorious—man in our galaxy. He was immensely powerful.

He returned the brief bow I'd given him, saying, "It's nice to meet you as well, General Fortina. Rylan has been telling us all about you. He seems to be very fond of you."

"I hope so, sir. It's certainly mutual." I indicated the bench behind him. "Won't you sit down, Your Majesties? And can I offer you another glass of wine?"

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“Rylan has taken care of all that, but please help yourself. You must be fatigued after your long journey.”

“I’ll get you one,” Rylan said, and slipped quickly into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry I missed your wedding,” Davos said, taking a sip of his wine. “My consort tells me it was a nice ceremony, if a little rushed. But then, as you told my son Mikos, his family simply needs to understand that you were going to marry Prince Rylan with or without their permission, so we had to take what we could get.”

I felt my face grow a bit warm, but I knew I couldn’t back down now. “That’s not exactly what I said, though it’s somewhat true, Your Majesty. It was never my intention to be arrogant about it, however. I was simply stating a fact, though perhaps you could say I was a bit abrupt in my delivery.”

A small smile played around his lips, but I didn’t think he was really amused in the least. His amber eyes flashed at me dangerously. “Yes,” he said, “perhaps you might say that.”

“However,” Blake put a hand on Davos’s knee as he leaned forward. “Your ancestry and lineage are most acceptable, and you come from a distinguished family. Not to mention your father’s high rank as a prince of this kingdom and your own title and ranking in the Horvathian army. Had a marriage offer been presented to us in a more conventional way, then it would have no doubt been accepted. As for the hurried-up nature of the actual wedding, that was my idea, and I think we mostly have Rylan to blame for some of that.”

Rylan came back in the room just as Blake said those last words, and I saw his face flush a dull red as he glanced warily at Davos. I took the glass of wine he'd brought me and took his hand in mine to draw him closer.

"I'm don't mean to dispute you, sir, but I believe you may be mistaken. It wasn't Rylan's fault at all. I take full responsibility for our first night together."

"Oh, well said," Blake replied. And then he winked at me. There was that gesture again that he and his family often used. I understood it to be suggestive, however, and I thought it was an extraordinary thing for him to do in front of his husband. I glanced quickly over at King Davos to see if he had taken any offense. His face hadn't changed expression. In fact, he shook his head.

"Don't worry about it, General. My consort is not really flirting. He's letting you know he's in on the joke, but really, he's just a law unto himself. I'm almost used to it by now." He flicked a glance over at Blake and put a proprietorial arm around his waist as he settled him back beside him. The way Davos watched his consort was a bit like a thief might stare at some priceless jewel he coveted. Or like Blake was a bomb that might go off at any moment. One or the other. It was an insatiable, greedy and yet wary glance, demanding the object of his attention's total attention. I wondered if that same look was on my face too whenever I looked at Rylan. It was certainly the way I felt about him most of the time.

"I'm actually glad to see you taking my grandson's part, even if what you said is not strictly true. I don't like being lied to, General. Though I would have covered for my mate as well." Davos gave me a little toast with his own glass, and I returned the gesture, still feeling the danger hadn't quite passed.

Rylan tried to change the subject by asking about Sulamon, and the talk grudgingly turned to more general things, including the dragons of Horvath.

Davos seemed to be fascinated by them. “I only recently realized that they grew to be so large,” he said. “Or that they were able to speak. You may have heard about the small rebellion of the so-called Coalition of Planets.”

“Yes, we’ve been hearing reports of fighting.”

“Mostly over now. Or it will be as soon as we catch up to Travon of Thalios. He was the one who formed the group and set up their mission, which was to leave the Axis and form their own treasonous government.”

“I see.”

“I understand he has vetami with him wherever he is. Golden ones, like Rylan’s pet. I understand they have the ability to speak like he does as well.”

I was surprised by the information. Only one dragon we knew of had that ready ability to speak, and that was little Talon.

“Talon’s ability is more like telepathy, I think. I’d like to get the chance to work more closely with him in the future to understand the process more completely. We think he establishes a powerful telepathic link, you see, with those he speaks to, and if we could learn more about it, or actually teach the other dragons to use it, then it could be of major importance to us.”

“I would think my grandson would be helpful with that. He seems to have a close relationship to Talon. Extraordinarily close. And the dragon takes orders from Rylan well. I’d be interested to see if Rylan and Talon could teach the other dragons how to communicate as well as they do. I think it would be a great breakthrough.”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t be possible, sir.”

“Oh? And why not?”

“It would require frequent or daily instruction, at least at first, I would think. And Rylan can’t very well live in a camp full of common soldiers. It wouldn’t be appropriate for my mate, and neither Rylan nor Talon would want to be separated from each other. Talon feels strongly about Rylan.”

Davos glanced over at Rylan, who was keeping his head down and not looking at me or his grandfather, who was frowning at me.

“My grandsons all took training for soldiering, General Fortina. I can assure you they’ve all camped outside and lived with other soldiers in close proximity as well. Isn’t that right, Rylan?”

“Yes, Grandfather.” Rylan’s tone was soft, but very eager, and I felt a little frisson of unease. A little anger too—had they already been discussing this? Had Rylan tried to get his grandfather on his side in this?

“I went on several missions in Moravia,” Rylan continued. “For weeks at a time, and we all lived in tents,” Rylan continued.

“Well, there you are. Of course, I understand that you wouldn’t want him to sleep among the other soldiers. I’d feel the same way about Blake. But he could share your quarters at night and work with the vetami during the day. As for any resentment it might cause, rank has its privileges. I see no reason why that plan wouldn’t work.”

I could see plenty of reasons, and it made me angry to sit there and say nothing in reply. What about bathing or even going to the bathroom? I couldn’t be with him every moment and there was very little privacy in the camp.

It was rare that my orders were countermanded so quickly, leaving me with no real

recourse. Even the queen usually followed my recommendations, but this king was under no such obligation, nor did he have any such inclination. It occurred to me that Rylan must have put the king up to this, and that knowledge was quickly followed by absolute rage on my part. I had refused to allow him to come stay with me, so he must have deliberately gone behind my back to talk to his grandfather and get him to do his bidding. Even the unexpectedness of this visit was suspicious. Why else had the two of them simply shown up out of the blue in such a way?



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No, Rylan had to have contacted Blake, this “omak-ahn” of his, and ask him for his help. The idea was infuriating.

“Why don’t you arrange that, General?” Davos said. “The training, I mean. I can provide any extra funding for it if need be. I think it would be really useful if it works. The dragons of Horvath could be a valuable asset to us.”

“Oh Grandfather, that would be wonderful,” Rylan exclaimed. “Talon is so bright and he’s very expressive. I think he could easily teach the others if I worked with him a little. I already showed him how to practice with Sulamon.”

“Who?”

Rylan laughed, happy, I supposed, now that he thought he’d gotten his way. “Sulamon is Quinn’s dragon, remember? He’s a Red, so he’s also a fire breather.”

“A fire breather? You mean he shoots out actual fire? I had no idea, but I’d like to see that.”

“Yes,” Rylan said eagerly. “That’s one reason the Alliance soldiers gave them the name of dragon. They can fly in close to targets if you want them to, and they’re impervious to heat-seeking missiles, because they have cold blood.”

“I think I should have become familiar with these animals a long time ago.” He turned back to me. “After speaking with you, General, Mikos looked up your record with these Dragon Riders, and it’s most impressive. I’d like to see some reports on what their full capabilities are. Perhaps some demonstrations are in order too.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll have some reports forwarded to you right away. And just let me know when you want to visit a camp for a demonstration.”

“Excellent. I will.”

“In the meantime, the cook has prepared us a meal,” Rylan said. “Perhaps we can continue our discussion over dinner, and I can tell you more about Talon.”

## Chapter Thirteen

### Rylan

My grandparents hadn’t stayed too long after dinner. I’d wanted them to spend the night, but Blake insisted they needed to go back to their ship, because he wanted to be on the way home. He wanted to be there by the next day to meet visitors—my cousin Mikol and his consort. Blake and my grandfather led busy lives, and my cousin Mikol was coming to them for an extended visit, now that the tensions with the Pton on Loros were finally at an end. As Mikol was in direct line for the throne one day, it was important that the people of Tygeria saw him regularly, and it had been a while since he and his consort Kalen could leave Loros to visit Tygeria.

After they left to go up to their ship, I was tired from all the excitement of their visit and went to bed right away. Of course, I wanted some time alone with my husband. I’d turned to him almost as soon as door closed behind them, draping myself over him as he stood beside me, but to my surprise, he shrugged me off, pulling my arms down from around his neck. He said he’d promised to spend some time with Sulamon and Talon and that he’d be back in a while. He was a little stony-faced and cool, but I thought he must have a lot on his mind. I lifted my face for a kiss, but he seemed not to notice as he turned and abruptly took off outside.

I tried to stay awake to wait for him, but with all the swimming, sun and exercise

from earlier in the day, not to mention the excitement of seeing my grandparents, it soon put me out. I never knew what time Quinn came to bed that night, or even if he came at all.

By the time I awoke the next morning, he was already dressed and preparing to head back to his camp in the mountains. He was standing by the side of our bed looking down at me when I opened my eyes.

“I need to be on my way back, Rylan.”

“But you only just got home. I thought you might spend the morning at least and perhaps have lunch with me. We could have a little time together this morning before you have to leave.”

“Unfortunately, no. But I’ll be home again in a few days.”

“Oh, okay, then. I guess I could start working with Talon on some teaching methods in the meantime. To see if he can explain to another dragon how he communicates so easily. You know, explain his process.”

“I think if he could do that, he’d already have done it. He’d have had Sulamon talking like he does. Don’t get your hopes up about this idea. How would he or anyone for that matter teach someone else to use telepathy? Surely, you know that’s never going to work, Rylan.”

“But you agreed to try it when Grandfather brought it up.”

“Did I? I don’t remember making any promises like that. I did what I always do when some king is talking about something he knows nothing at all about but starts making pronouncements anyway—I keep my mouth shut and my thoughts to myself. And you know full well exactly what I think about you staying in camp with me. It’s a

terrible idea and it's not going to happen. I resent you going behind my back to put him up to it."

"Put him up to it? I did no such thing!" I sat up angrily and glared at him. "Though that's a great idea. I wish I'd thought of it."

He glared down at me, looking surprisingly hot, angry and frustrated.

"Why? Because you'd like to display yourself to other men? Is that what interests you? There are easier ways to do that, Rylan. Stand on any street corner in the city with all that curly hair down around your shoulders. It's a good advertisement. They'll easily take you for some kind of...of..."

"Of what? Prostitute? Whore? Are those the words you were looking for? And now you object to my hair? That's what you don't approve of? Gods, how can you be so-so stupid?"

"I don't think it's me who's being that way. We've talked about this foolishness before, damn it, and if you have no sense of modesty and decorum, then thank the gods I do! You'll go nowhere near the camp; do you hear me? It is out of the question! I forbid it."

I was shocked at all the angry words, and no one had ever spoken to me like that before. For a moment I just stared at him. Who the fuck did he think he was talking to? And was this why he hadn't come to bed the night before to make love to me?

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“We have so little time together and this is how you want to spend the few hours we have? By shouting and calling me names? You’re so stupid!”

Okay, so maybe I’d started the name-calling, but he’d just as good as called me a whore. It had made me furious.

He’d just dismissed the idea of me coming to stay with him out of hand. Why would he deliberately choose for us to be apart when I could be with him? Did he really dislike me deep down? Did I get on his nerves? It was infuriating, and I felt as if my head were about to explode. I just gaped at him for a moment or two though, because I thought it was better than what I wanted to do to him.

“You’re not my father. It’s not your place to teach me morality.”

“Somebody needs to, and it seems like it has to be me.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

His face turned red, and he clenched his fists by his side.

“Do you want to hit me now? Go ahead. I dare you.”

“Stop acting like a damn child. We’ve had this discussion about the camp so many times,” he said, his face stern and cold. “Did you really think that getting your grandfather to tell me to let you come to camp would work? I don’t need his input, Rylan, and I don’t need yours, for that matter. I make my own decisions, and I resent you putting me in an awkward position last evening.”

“Once again, fuck you!”

His face flamed and he looked shocked and angry, but my temper was always ready, willing and able to come to my aid at a moment’s notice. I jumped out of bed, naked, because I’d been waiting like an idiot for him to come to bed the night before. I saw him react to that, and his face get even redder. He probably thought even that was a deliberate ploy on my part. I snatched up some clothes from a chair next to my bed and stormed into the bathroom to get dressed, slamming the door behind me and locking it for good measure. But he was right behind me.

“Rylan, get out here!” he yelled, pounding on the door. “We need to talk about this!”

“Go to hell!”

“Rylan, open this damn door.”

“Why? You’ve made up your mind about how things are, and that’s unlikely to change. If you need distance from me so much, then take it! Go and never come back! Or maybe I should. Either way, I don’t care!”

“I’m not going anywhere until we talk about this. Stop being such a child and get out here and face me.”

“You should know what my answer is by now!’ Just leave, damn it. Go on! Get out! And I won’t be here when you get back!”

If I’d ever thought that would work, I was sadly mistaken. I heard his heavy boot slam against the door once and then twice, and the door suddenly sprang open. He charged in, hauled me into his arms and kissed me like he owned me, which in both our minds, I guess he did.

“You’re mine,” he growled at me. “Don’t ever lock yourself away from me again, damn it!”

He threw the clothes I was holding in my hand violently across the room, swept me up in his arms and carried me into the bedroom to throw me down on my back in the bed. He stood there over me for a long moment, his chest heaving with emotion, and I could clearly see what he wanted to do to me. But this had nothing to do with love. It was pure, furious possession. I think he knew he was way too out of control, and he was trying desperately to rein himself in before he touched me.

Well, fuck that too, because I wanted him as much as he wanted me, and I was just as angry as he was. I was also craving his body. Besides, I knew he would never hurt me. But just like him, I was too stubborn and too mad to make up, so I deliberately taunted him by putting my hand on my thigh and stroking it lazily up and down, staring into his eyes the whole time.

“What’s the matter, Quinn? You want some of this?”

His eyebrows shot up, and I could see it enraged him for me to say such things and taunt him this way. No doubt it slightly scandalized him too, because one thing I’d learned was that the Horvathians were prudish and rigid as hell, especially when it came to their sense of “propriety” or what was appropriate behavior and what was definitely not.

He reached for me and flipped me over onto my stomach, because I guess he couldn’t stand to keep looking at me stroking myself. I began calling him names over my shoulder, because I was so angry and he clapped a hand over my mouth, so I licked his palm and looked back up into his eyes as I did it. That’s when he seemed to lose his mind.

I was never afraid of him. He was about to make love to me, because lust and the

mating urge had overtaken him, but it would be making love and nothing more, because for one thing, I was more than willing for him to do whatever he wanted to do. I was a man, and I wanted him as much as he wanted me. Whatever he was feeling, I was feeling it too. It began coming over me in waves, a strong desire to have him inside me and thrusting against me. He was the only man I'd ever made love to, and we had "practiced" often in the weeks since we got married. I craved him now like a drug.

My typpid was hard as a rock between my legs. I was leaving little wet trails on the sheets as he pushed and pulled me where he wanted, arranging me on the bed. He was ripping off his clothes too, and throwing them down, and I tried to turn over to watch him, but he wouldn't let me. He tossed me back over again and climbed on top of me, intending to carefully prepare me with his fingers, because he'd never hurt me in any way. But I wasn't having it. I shoved my hips backward to impale myself on his large member and he gasped and cried out at the heat and the passion I was showing him.

I was thrusting up my hips as best I could, when he rammed himself in me, half-growling, half-groaning, like he was in real pain. He kept trying to pull my hands down, trying to come back to himself, but I reached back to caress his hip and dug in my fingernails instead, urging him on, wanting to hurt him physically, like he'd hurt me emotionally.

He jerked my hand away and began to rock his body against mine, thrusting hard inside me and not holding back. I moved with him and against him so that he couldn't thrust the way he wanted to. He was breathing hard and began holding me down and moving faster, losing any control he might have had. I turned my head and licked his ear and bit down hard on his earlobe, urging him on. If he'd been trying to teach me some lesson, then it was me who was teaching him now. If I was his, then he was mine too, body and soul. It was time he acknowledged it. He could no more do without me than I could do without him.



He hadn't come, but it wasn't for lack of trying on my part. He was slick with pre-come and I knew he had to be close. He began to taste the skin on the back of my neck with little nibbles and licks and sucked up a mark. I encouraged everything he did with loud groans and sounds of passion.

He turned me over and I reached up and grabbed him around the neck, pulling him down to kiss me so hard neither of us could breathe. I saw little flashes like shooting stars in my head as he positioned himself again and thrust hard into me. I writhed under him, making those noises that I knew would embarrass me later when I remembered them.

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He had such a beautiful typpid, long and hard, with a broad mushroom head and I urged him to bury it inside me. I twisted onto my back and reached for his balls to squeeze them, but he pushed my hand away. I laughed and began to hump him, wanting more friction, more touch, more everything. I was leaving trails of come on his tight stomach and he reached for my typpid to hold me in his hand.

It felt wonderful to have all of his weight on top of me, while he sucked at my skin and bit my shoulder, and I bucked my hips under him again and again, wanting more. More pleasure, more passion, more feeling, more everything.

“Mine,” he murmured in my ear, and I knew he was saying it for both of us, to reassure both of us and re-establish his claim on me. I was fully onboard with that as far as sex was concerned. I tried again to surge up to embrace him and pull him backdown, and though he allowed it, he made murmuring sounds to me to shush me and soothe me, like I was one of the dragons.

I strained against him and cried out so loudly I was afraid some of the servants might come in to investigate. I began spurting hot ejaculate onto my stomach and chest, and I couldn’t seem to stop. I wanted him to come inside me. I arched against him, as he thrust against me at the same time and then suddenly, he groaned loudly and collapsed over me, panting for breath. I could feel his hot come shooting deep inside me.

He was heavy, but I never wanted him to move. Not ever. I wanted to stay this way, with him buried deep inside me like this, because I needed this connection to him. I was drowsy and half asleep, but I still wanted more. I wanted him to stay and talk to me—fight with me if he had to, but figure this thing out between us, because I didn’t

want him to leave and go back to the mountain camp with us so at odds. But he lay beside me for only a few minutes, panting for breath, and then he sat up, scrubbing his face with his hands, like he was coming back to himself.

I put a hand on his back. “No, don’t get up. Stay and talk to me!”

“No,” he said, getting back to his feet. “I hate this. I can’t control my feelings for you, and you use it against me.” He turned to look down at me, still deadly cold. I could practically see him building his defensive walls against me.

“I don’t use it against you. What are you talking about? I thought we were making love.”

“No, you were deliberately baiting me to make love to you. Walking around naked like a-a...”

“Oh wait, I know this one. Like a whore, right? And what is it that you hate so much? Making love to me? Or are you embarrassed to be with someone like me? Someone foreign and strange.”

“No, and you know that’s not what I meant. I hate being so out of control and unable to resist you. I will conquer this. I have to.”

I wondered if he’d forgotten for a moment that he was talking out loud, and if he knew that each word he spoke was like a dagger to my heart. Conquer it? He wanted to conquer what? His love for me? His attraction to me? His need to be with me?

Pain surged inside me as surely as if he truly had just sunk a knife into my chest. He wanted to resist me, huh? Well, maybe I could help him with that by putting some distance and space between us. Quite literally. I made up my mind in that instant not to be there when he decided to return. I stayed quiet, which for me, really wasn’t

easy. I turned away from him, hoping he'd think I'd gone back to sleep. After a while, he began to get dressed. I heard him go to the door and hesitate.

"Rylan?" he called. His voice was soft, but I still thought it sounded unfriendly and cold. I never moved or even glanced over my shoulder at him. Then I heard the bedroom door shut behind him and he was gone. I continued to lie there, too heartsick to move, like I knew I had to do eventually. I had no choice but to find a way to go on. I didn't actually want to be with someone who didn't want to be with me, no matter what my stupid heart was telling me. I couldn't think of anything that could possibly be any worse. I began to make plans to leave him.

Arguments are funny things, though. During one, people will almost say anything they can to hurt the other person and thereby win the fight. Terrible things they don't even mean or only mean at the time they say them. Arguments and words can be destructive, because even if the words aren't really true, they make the person they're aimed at love you just a little less than they loved you before. Blake had told me of an ancient torture called "death by a thousand cuts." I knew exactly what that meant now.

Meanwhile, it left me feeling so hurt and angry that I wanted to strike back at him. To wound him even more than I was wounded—this person that I claimed to love.

As the minutes passed by, and I really thought things through, I knew I didn't want to go away from him. I still loved him more than I thought possible. But that would change unless we did something to stop this. I had so many big feelings inside me that I didn't know what to do with them. I had tried to stuff them away deep inside, but they didn't fit anymore. They were bursting out of me now and destroying me little by little.

Maybe I should just go home for a while and think things over. I loved him, but I couldn't stand the idea of one day hating him. And if we kept on this way, I might.

Maybe we could have some kind of long-distance relationship. It wasn't ideal, but if we could keep our connection, then I wouldn't have to stay at home like some housewife and slowly go insane. He might not even object. He wasn't with me now, and I rarely saw him anyway.

Unable to keep going over and over it, I dressed in a hurry and took off outside, practically running to the enclosures to see Talon. He was so easy to love and always so glad to see me, no matter what, and I needed that just then. He stuck his head out through the bars of his gate inquiringly as he heard me running across the field. He was still munching on his first meal, and had fresh sheep's blood smeared around his mouth and chest.

"Rylie!" he called out to me, clearly happy to see me. I knew from experience that later, he'd spend some time licking his paws and cleaning himself up just like an enormous cat, like the one Blake kept in the palace. He'd had Nilanium traders bring it to him when it was a kitten, and it had been hanging around the palace ever since, perching in windows, or basking in the sun or even sitting in Blake's lap just to annoy Davos. My omak-ahn had that animal for a few years now and was talking about getting a boy cat to breed it, but I thought that was probably just talk.

"I was eating after seeing Sulamon and the general off a few minutes ago," Talon told me. "Are you sad that they left? The general seemed sad too. And mad. He said they had to go back to their camp, but I wish we could go too, don't you? I could try to cheer him up."

I managed to nod and smile, because I didn't want him to see how upset I was. Of course he did anyway, because he was telepathic. He cuddled right up to me.

"Listen Talon, I was thinking of perhaps the two of us going on a little trip soon ourselves. To my home on Moravia. Would you like that? I just have to contact my parents, and they'd have to send a ship big enough to transport you. It would take a

few days to do that, but I think I could get them to do it. Would you like to go to my old home with me? Back to where I used to live.”

“Yes, of course. I always want to go with you,” he said. “Do you want to go for a ride now, though? We could go to the lake, and you can lie in the sun. You like to do that, and maybe it will make you feel better. And I can swim and catch fish! You can talk more about the trip to me.”

I laughed a little at how happy the idea of a splash in the water made him, and maybe I needed something to distract me and take my mind off the terrible argument I’d just had with Quinn as well.

“I’ll go grab something to eat too, then. And maybe we’ll just stay for a little while. I don’t want to be stuck here all day by myself. Again.”

I ducked into the barn and told a couple of his handlers who were lounging around the door, probably listening to us, to get him cleaned up a bit and put his harness on, and that I’d be back in a few minutes. Then I went back to the house and quickly ate a little fruit and some fried bread the cook had made for me and asked her to pack me some food. I told her that I was going out and might be gone for most of the day.

By the time I got back to the enclosure, bringing my cloak and rain gear because of the puffy clouds that were around, the ones both Sulamon and Talon loved to fly through and get us wet, it was getting late, and I was anxious to be on the way. Quinn preferred it if one of the handlers went with me, but they were lazy and tried to get out of it when they could. It was just as well to me, because I liked to swim wearing only my breka or nothing at all, and I couldn’t do that if a handler went with me. Well, I could, but Quinn would kill both of us.

I thought briefly about calling my grandparents to see if they might possibly still be in the area somewhere, but I told myself they were surely already nearing home by

now. Besides, I really needed time to think about this and not just react out of pure anger—which I was still feeling. And as mad as I was, I didn't want to stir Davos up. He was very perceptive at times, and he'd know if I was unhappy. Maybe I'd wait and see if Quinn called me that night as he usually did. He might apologize. Or he might call just to berate me some more. Either way, I hoped he'd call.

The truth was that I didn't like being so at odds with him. I was aching a little in my chest, and I remembered my omak telling me that my uncle Anarr had pain in his stomach whenever my uncle Renard was angry at him. Horvathians prided themselves on not being quite the "animals" that Lycans were, as they never transformed into Lycan beasts. But maybe there were some vestiges of that beast inside them anyway, and it was now inside me courtesy of that bite Quinn had given me. I still had the marks of it on my neck. He'd told me when he'd done it that it meant we were mates for life. That there was no going back, and that he would never share me with anyone. I guess I'd thought then that it was mostly just sex talk. I guess I'd been wrong.

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He had also told me I could never leave him. It still didn't mean I had forgiven him for a damn thing though, and I was still mad as hell at the way he'd spoken to me earlier that morning. I was brooding about that as we flew through the warm air that day, when Talon suddenly spoke up in my head. "Are we looking for a new lake, Rylie? There are some nice ones ahead, I think. I can see them in the distance. Ones we've never been to."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"We passed the one we usually go to a while ago and you never told me to stop. Are we going to a new one?"

"Oh dear, I guess we must be. I was preoccupied and didn't notice it. Do you want to go back or just go on to the next lake?"

"We can keep going," his little voice chirped at me. "It's a nice day to fly."

I didn't want to go too far, though, because all I needed to do was to get lost out here in these mountains. I'd never hear the end of that. I began to pay closer attention to what I was doing. Before long, we passed over a slightly smaller lake, probably five or six miles beyond where we usually swam. There weren't many convenient rocks to lie on like at our old lake, but the shore was well defined, and it even had a bit of a "beachy" area. He landed and I unstrapped myself from the harness and jumped down, moving over to some patchy land near the southern side, while Talon dipped and swam and paddled about, eating his fill of fish. I could see that the water was really clear and because it wasn't too deep, it was lovely and warmed a little by the sun. I took off my clothes, all except for my breka and waded in the water a bit while



Talon swam.

He splashed me playfully and I splashed him back, and I even rode his back in the water a little while as he went out to a deeper part of the lake. He dove down into its depths until the water turned colder and colder. After a while, I needed a breath, so I pulled on his neck to get him to come up. I climbed off him then and swam over to sit on the beach. It was much warmer there in the sun and I found myself dozing a little. All the adrenalin from the fight I'd had with Quinn earlier had sneaked up on me. I fell asleep and only realized how much time had passed when Talon came out of the water and shook himself beside me. I realized then that the sun was sinking lower in the sky, and that we'd better make our way home before it got any later. I could already hear Talon's stomach rumbling with hunger even though he'd eaten a lot of the little fish in the lake.

I got dressed quickly, and he extended his leg so I could climb up on his back. He flew up into the sky and turned away from the sun and flew in the direction of home.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Quinn

I'd been back at the camp for only one night when I got the call about Rylan. It came across my communicator not long after I'd eaten my first meal and was on my second cup of strong Lycan tea. I hated the stuff, but it helped keep me awake to do the paperwork I needed to finish. I was trying to feel less guilty about how I'd treated my new mate before I left. I hadn't called him yet, because I was still angry, and now I felt foolish about that. After all, I'd accused him of being immature and yet here I was, acting the same way. When I got notice of the call, I thought it must be him and wondered why he hadn't called me directly.

When I answered, I saw my mistake. The call was from the home number and not

Rylan's communicator. The cook's name was Madal and she'd been my cook for years, and my family's before that. I had absolutely no idea why she would be calling me, but my mind went instantly to Rylan and something being wrong. I got a bad feeling and had to take a deep breath.

"What's wrong, Madal?" I barked into the communicator as soon as I heard her voice. She obviously wasn't putting the communicator she was using up to her mouth, so I had to strain to hear her.

"Madal, what's the matter? Is it Rylan?"

"Sir, he left here last evening with his dragon and when I got here this morning I saw he hadn't returned. I knew you'd want to know."

"Of course I do. Where was he headed?" I was trying to keep calm, but I was already on my feet and pacing up and down in my tent. There was no way I could stand still, because the first thought that came to my mind was that he'd left me. I'd been way too hard on him, and he'd gone back home. I realized almost immediately that the thought was foolish. He couldn't have taken his dragon with him if he was going home. How would that work? I took a deep breath and willed myself to calm down.

I needed to talk to him. Surely, he knew I had no real regrets about marrying him. I was obsessed with him far too much, that was all, and I was very afraid that he knew it and tried to control me with that obsession. I'd said things I hadn't meant—not really. I was trying to look out for him, but all he did was fight me. He was at once the major source of all the annoyance, distress, and inconvenience in my life, the damn bane of my existence, and the fact that he was also the object of all my desires was just plain irritating. I feared he was well aware of that fact, though, and he used it to his advantage.

"Did he say where he was going when he left?"

“The men in the stables said that he and his dragon were talking about going swimming in the lake they like to go to. The one just south of here. They said that your mate went back in the house and came back out wearing his coat you gave him to keep off the rain. That was not too long after you left to go back to camp.”

“Has someone been to the lake to check on them?”

“Not yesterday, they didn’t, sir. The men went home at the usual time. When the night guards got here, they were a little late, but all looked quiet, so they didn’t check on him. When I discovered he’d never come home, I sent the men out looking. But there was no sign of them there at that lake this morning. Or anywhere along the way.”

“Tell them to keep looking, Madal. Call in help if they need to. I’m on my way.”

It would take me a little over two hours to fly home and then if he still wasn’t at home...I wasn’t sure what to do next. I simply had to find him.

I was hoping that Rylan would be home when I arrived, but when I saw he wasn’t, I went back out to the enclosure and began to berate the men standing around out there.

“If you haven’t found him yet, then why the fuck are you even here?” I shouted at them.

“Sir, we just came back to check and see if he was home. We’re going out again.”

“Damn right you are! Those are communicators in your pocket, so use them! Communicate with each other to make sure you’re covering all the lakes and ponds! Look in the forest too, in case they decided to land on a trail or even a cliffside with an overlook. One of them could be injured, or they could be lost. Call me immediately if you locate any sign of them.”

“Yes, sir, right away!”

They scrambled to climb back in their hovercrafts and be on their way before I pulled out my disruptor and started shooting every last one of them. It was what I felt like doing. I’d already warned them not to let Rylan go flying without a guard with him. It had begun to drizzle rain, so I pulled out my rain gear along with my heavier cape from my packs while Sulamon ate his dinner and drank water to refresh himself. I paced up and down impatiently as I waited for my dragon to rest a few minutes before we left again. I didn’t want to push him too hard, but I was worried, and the later it got, and the more I worried I was, and the more my feelings turned to anger. Not against Sulamon, but against Rylan. I told myself he was willful and spoiled and used to having his own way. He might even have done this on purpose, and if I found out he had, I’d put a stop to it.

It occurred to me that he might have gotten in touch with some of his relatives and told them to come for him to take him back home. They had met him somewhere, so he could leave me. I almost called his omak, but I managed to calm down enough to realize that kind of thinking was alarmist and crazy. It was far more likely that he’d gone too far afield, and he’s simply gotten lost. He might have lost his communicator too, and that’s why he hadn’t called for help. I told myself a lot of things, but none of them were helpful or comforting in the least. As soon as Sulamon was ready, I climbed up into my harness, and we soared up into the sky. I told him we were looking for Rylan and Talon and to keep an eye out for them, but of course, he made no reply. I couldn’t tell if he’d heard me or understood me at all.

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I began to call out to Talon in my mind, hoping that he might somehow hear me if we got close enough. And of course, I obsessively called Rylan on his communicator, trying to will him to answer my calls. When I found him, I wasn't going to go easy on him this time, I promised myself. I'd been far too lenient with him. I imagined myself dragging Rylan to his feet, my hands fastened in his shirt because I wanted to shake some sense into him. I imagined myself leaning over him, shouting down at him. "Just so we're clear," I'd say, "If you ever run away from me like this again, I'll lock you in your room." It didn't sound like much of a threat, come to think of it. 7

Then the next moment I was imagining myself taking him in my arms to kiss him and hold him close and never let him go. I'd locate him soon, because I had to. Did he really imagine there was any corner of the galaxy he could travel to where I couldn't find him?

He'd told me once that his omak had taught him to always look up at the stars and if he were ever lucky enough to see a "shooting star" then he should make a wish on it, because it might come true. I'd laughed and told him it was a silly idea and only for children. His so-called shooting stars were meteoroids, merely chunks of rock or metal from space that burned up as they entered an atmosphere. But I looked up in the sky now, hoping to see one, like it was some kind of talisman or sign that I'd find him, and he'd be all right. All the stars remained stubbornly still in the night sky, however, looking down at me without sympathy or movement, as Sulamon and I sailed through the night, all alone and growing more and more desperate.

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Rylan

It had been about mid-afternoon the day before, when we started back home, but almost at once, Talon started complaining about being hungry.

“I think I may actually be starving, Rylie,” he told me, trying his best to sound weak and pitiful. “It’s been sooo long since I had my first meal this morning.”

“All that fish you ate at the lake should have filled you up!”

“Maybe so, but it didn’t. There must be something you can feed me. I’ll land so you can look in your packs.”

Before I could stop him, he’d swooped under a large tree and landed on the ground. It was shady there and beginning to get a little cool. Right away, I started to worry about how late it must be getting.

“Talon, I told you I didn’t have any extra food in my packs, and I’ve already given you all I had. There isn’t anything until we make it back home. Are you sure we even came this way? Because I don’t remember passing that big canyon with the river at the bottom a little while ago.”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember because I’m so hungry. I think I’m getting too weak to fly. Maybe I have a brain fog.”

“Talon!” I shouted at him. “Don’t you dare try to pretend. You ate a ton of fish. And I don’t know where we could find youany extra food, so if we stop now, then it will be even longer before you eat again. It’s better to just keep flying and find our way home. Then when we get back, I’ll get the handlers to give you a sheep.”

“Tell them to give me a big one, then! Not what they usually give me. Sulamon gets all the big ones. Every time.”

“Sulamon’s not home, so you can have the biggest one they have.”

“Very well, but Rylie, I have a question.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“What would happen—not saying I am—but what would happen if I said I was lost and have no idea how to get back home?”

“What? You don’t know the way home?”

“Don’t get excited. I just asked what would happen. If I didn’t know.”

“Talon, you tell me the truth right now. Do you know the way home?”

“Let’s say I don’t...”

“Talon!”

“I wasn’t paying much attention on the way out to the new lake. You know, Rylie, I’m still a baby. Maybe you shouldn’t trust me so much.”

“I did trust you though, Talon. And you’re not a baby anymore. Now what are we going to do?”

“I can’t think straight. Maybe it’s because I’m so hungry. Let’s find me something to eat and then I can think about finding the way home again.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me?”

“I don’t think so, because I don’t know what that is.”

“Are you trying to make me do something for you so you can get your way?”

“Oh. I don’t think I would do that.”



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“Mmm hmm. Can’t you eat some more fish?”

“I could...if we saw another lake. But I’d rather have something else to eat.”

“Quinn is right. I’ve spoiled you!” I pulled out my communicator to call Quinn, but I couldn’t get a signal, and I began to feel the first little bit of panic. These mountains were seemingly endless, and they all looked pretty much the same. Just vast stretches of green trees and rolling hills with no landmarks anywhere except for lakes. So many lakes. Talon was right. Neither of us had been paying close enough attention when we came this way the first time, and I shouldn’t have left it mostly up to him.

I remembered from when I was a child, and I got lost one time when my friend Kareb and I went for a hike in the woods. We had tried for hours to find the trail again, until we finally heard Kareb’s father calling for us. He had scolded us when he caught up to us and told us he’d walked around for hours searching.

“If you ever get lost again,” he’d told us. “Just sit down where you are and stay put. Wandering around aimlessly like you did can waste your energy, make it harder for the rescuers to find you, and even lead you into more dangerous situations. Somebody will find you if you don’t keep wandering around.”

I told that to Talon, and he agreed. Mostly.

“But what do I do about dinner? If we stay here, we can’t find me anything to eat. I could die, Rylie.”

“You’re not going to die because you miss one meal. And besides, I don’t know if

there is anything up here for you to eat.”

He seemed to think about it a minute or two and then said, “Maybe goral.”

“What?”

“Goral. I’m pretty sure that’s its name. It’s a wild bov-something. Quinn told me.”

“A wild bovid?”

“Maybe. They have hooves and big horns, and they live in the high mountains. Maybe we could fly around a little and look for one. If we see one, I can get it for my dinner.”

“Maybe. But we might get even more lost.”

“If we don’t feed me soon, I could get sick and weak and then we couldn’t fly at all.”

“Oh, all right. Let’s do it then, but we need to be strategic about this.”

“How do we do that?”

“We need to make a plan. Do you see any big trees we could use as a starting point? Then you can fly around it in a wide circle, and let the circle get a little wider each time you go around.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll try. This tree is pretty tall, but it looks like all the others. Do you have anything you could drop down on top of it to show us it’s the right one?”

“Maybe the netting that’s attached to the harness? Can we pull that off?”

I scrambled around to tug at it and got enough of it loose so that Talon could reach it with his teeth. He pulled off a big piece of it with a loud ripping noise.

“Okay, fly up and I’ll drop this netting on top of a high branch.”

It worked like a charm, and I managed to drape the torn piece of netting over the highest tree branch I could find.

I called down to him. “Okay, fly out a little way and then start turning so we can circle the tree in a wide loop. I’ll look out for any goral I can see.”

We flew in a big circle like that until it began to get too dim for either of us to see very much, and I had to make him go back. We hadn’t seen any sign of goral or any other kind of animal, but I told Talon we had to land before it got any darker.

He was still grumbling about it as he landed back under our tree. It was getting colder, but I decided to do what Kareb’s father had said years ago and just stay put. We could shelter under these trees, and I could huddle close into Talon’s body to stay warmer. It didn’t work that well with cold-blooded dragons, but it was all I had.

Then suddenly as we huddled there together, I saw the shadow of a huge object passing over us. I looked up and it was glowing in the fading sunlight, just like Talon was to a lesser degree. I urged Talon farther back into the shadows with me until we could see who or what it was.

“Oh look, Riley,” Talon said. “It could be Quinn coming to save us.”

“Shh...it isn’t Quinn. That’s another golden dragon like you. Only a really big one. Stay back—those golden scales of yours are shiny, and they might see us. I don’t know who that is, so let’s find out first before we show ourselves. You go farther back in the shadows and be as quiet as you can. I’ll peek out.”

He moved back as far as his growing bulk would allow him to, and I crept over as close as I could to the edge of the shadows under the tree and looked up, keeping my body under cover as much as I could in case someone happened to glance down. A big part of me still held out a sliver of hope that it was someone I knew coming to look for us, but no one I knew would be coming on a Golden dragon.

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The shadow circled around again—I could see the shine moving through the treetops—and then suddenly it appeared plainly overhead as it came back around, like it was searching for something like we had been. It was a Golden dragon, like Talon, only much bigger than Talon and fully grown. It was every bit as large as Sulamon. It sailed majestically past, and I could see people on his back. They were too far up for me to see who any of them were, but there was a rider, sitting where I usually sat up between the dragon's shoulders, and then there was a kind of sling over his back, made of the same netting as we used for our harness packs. Clinging to the netting were at least three or four people on the side I was looking at, with probably more on the other side to balance out the weight. I ducked quickly back under the trees, so they didn't see me or even a glimmer of my face in the growing dark as I gazed up at them. Once they passed over, I stepped out from under the tree to see if I could still see it and figure out which way it was flying. I had to crawl up to the very top of the ridge to see, but thankfully, those shiny scales of the big Golden shone in the last rays of sunlight. I saw his wings dip down as he disappeared below the treeline. I thought at first that I'd lost him, but then as clear as day, I heard what had to be his voice, calling out in a high, thin tone, very like Talon's voice.

I couldn't quite make out the words, probably because it wasn't in any language I understood anyway, but it sounded like he was complaining quite loudly about something. I went back to Talon to tell him about what I'd heard.

"Talon," I whispered. "Be very quiet and don't call out or make noise. They're not far away. I'm going to go through the woods to spy on them if I can and see who they are. They might help us, but then again, they might not. So until we know for sure, we should be careful. I've never seen any other Golden dragons, and I think Quinn said he hadn't seen one in years. Something very strange is going on. We got you

from the Thaliens, and now they have tried to rebel against my grandfather. These may be some of the Thaliens on the run and hiding out from Tygeria.”

“Wait. That sounds dangerous. Are you leaving me here? By myself?”

“Yes, Talon, but you’re perfectly safe as long as you stay quiet. Don’t call out for me or make any noise. I’m going to get closer and figure out if we can trust them. Maybe they have food for your dinner.”

“I don’t think they do. That’s what the big dragon was saying. He’s hungry and wanted them to feed him. I think they had been looking for something for him to eat.”

“Just stay here and don’t come after me. Promise me.”

“I won’t,” he said, but he sounded unconvincing.

I left Talon behind in the shadowy woods and began walking in the direction I’d seen them flying. I walked for a longer time than I thought I would have to and began to think that I’d gone in the wrong direction. But just about the time I thought about turning around and going back, afraid I’d get lost again, I began to hear the distant sound of men talking to each other on the other side of the rise I was headed up. I crept closer to the top of the hill and then got on my knees and crawled to a vantage point to look over the hill into a shallow valley below.

The “valley” was like a bowl in a way, or a declivity between two mountain ranges, and would be almost hidden by the thick forest and tall trees if anyone were looking from above. I slowly moved down the side, darting between tree trunks and trying my best to stay under cover of the foliage and the shadows brought on by the quickly approaching darkness.

To my surprise, I could see it was a rather large sized camp. From my vantage point

looking down into it, hidden by the trees and shrubs, I could see men in green uniforms like those King Travon and his Thalian soldiers wore that day in the warehouse when I'd first encountered Quinn. That had to be who they were. These soldiers were now bustling about, building up their fires outside their tents and setting up cooking pots outside. Some men sat around the fires. Others carried water in buckets from a stream on the side of the camp. All the tents seemed to form a circle of sorts around the largest tent in the center of the camp. Young boys acting as messengers ran back and forth and smokefunneled up into the gray sky from a dozen or more campfires, but the smoke was quickly swallowed up and incorporated into the low clouds hanging overhead.

The truth of what I was seeing slammed into me—this was indeed a large Thalian encampment, judging from the green uniforms. But why were they here on Horvath? If the Thalias were there openly, then why were they hiding in these remote mountains and why hadn't I heard about it? It would have been on the media, certainly, and Quinn would have known about it and maybe not discussed it with me, but surely, he would have at least made mention of it. I crouched there in the encroaching darkness for a while, just trying to wrap my mind around the idea. I was surprised to see it was almost completely dark, which meant I must have been there for much longer than I'd thought. I had to get back to Talon, because knowing him, he was already panicking. I glanced back down toward the camp before I left, and there on the far side of it, lying on the ground under a grove of trees, were several large, Golden dragons. All of them were adults, according to what I could judge from their size. They seemed to be as large as Sulamon, though it was hard to tell since they were all lying down.

They had to be here secretly, because I couldn't imagine Horvath giving them a place to hide out from the Tygerian forces, even if Travon's father had originally been from Horvath before he married the Thalian queen. That might give him some claim to Horvathian citizenship, for all I knew, but from what my omak-ahn had said, Travon was on the run, after being involved in a coup attempt against the Axis. Blake had

said that Davos and Mikos would be taking care of it, and I knew what that probably meant. I needed desperately to get out of there and find my way back home so I could contact Quinn. He'd know what to do and how best to get word to my grandfather.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Quinn

I was feeling desperate. I'd been flying for hours on Sulamon, resting when I thought he was getting too tired, but then afterward moving on, deeper and deeper into the mountains. Surely, Rylan and Talon hadn't strayed so far, but I'd searched all the closest lakes and even followed a river for a few miles and had seen no sign of them. It was getting close to sunset, and then we'd have to stop for the night. Starlight was barely enough to navigate by in these mountains, let alone conduct a search, and there was even the possibility of meeting wild vetami, which usually ran in packs.

I'd been calling out in my mind for Talon for some time now, getting a little more frantic all the time, when suddenly, I heard a faint voice calling back. I was so startled to hear it after waiting so long I jerked hard on Sulamon's reins, and he turned his head sharply to look at me, as if wondering if I'd gone crazy. Maybe I had and this was just my imagination. I flew around in a wide circle, listening intently and calling out again and again to Talon.

Then I heard it again. A faint voice calling to me and getting a little louder as we traveled in a northerly direction. I called again, "Talon! Where are you?"

Sulamon had heard him too by this time, and he was straining at his harness to reach him.

That's when I heard the faint answering reply. "I'm here in the trees. I'm all alone in the dark and so hungry. Rylie left me!"



His words almost stopped my breathing, because I knew Rylan would never leave him willingly. Something was badly wrong, and I had to find Talon quickly to see what was happening. “Yell out again and describe what you see around you!”

“Just trees. Should I move out from under them? Rylie told me not to.”

“Yes, move out if you can, so we can see you. Sulamon and I are both searching for you.”

There was a little pause, and then, “I’m here now in the clearing. Can you see me?”

Sulamon had slowed way down, showing me yet again that he did understand at least some of what was being said around him, even though he didn’t always respond.

“Can you fly straight up in the air, Talon? Just fly up if you can and hover. Don’t stray from where you last saw Rylan.”

“I’ll try.”

There was another little pause and then Sulamon made a sound deep in his throat and began flying faster. I could hear Talon’s voice in my head, much louder now.

“I see you!”

His golden scales were a small speck in the distance, but we could see the faintest glimmer of him now in the scant light of the stars. “Wait there for us. Don’t fly away from where you are!” These trees were so plentiful, and the forest so thick, I was afraid we might lose the spot where Talon had last seen Rylan. Where was he? What had gone wrong, forcing him to leave Talon? I was frantic with worry.

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We flew right up to Talon, and he came up to Sulamon, stretching his long neck and rubbing his head on Sulamon's chest. Sulamon made little huffing noises.

"I'm so glad to see you," Talon said. "I was getting scared."

"Why? Where's Rylan?"

He glanced up at me. "He went to find the men in the woods."

My heart actually stuttered to a stop for a moment. I felt it shudder in my chest before slamming back into rhythm again.

"Men? What men? Talon, show me. Quickly!"

He turned and flew back downward, landing in a small clearing beside a big thicket of tall trees. "He left when we saw the big dragon flying over us. It was the same color as me. Then we heard the men's voices. He went through there and told me to stay here until he got back."

I ran toward the little opening in the trees that he'd indicated and peered in. It was so dark that I thought if I'd stuck in my hand, I'd have left a hole when I pulled my hand back. I turned to go look for a light in my packs, my heart pounding frantically. I could hear Talon chattering to Sulamon.

"There were a lot of men. I hope they didn't hurt Rylie."

"What kind of men? Tell me what you mean, Talon. Go slowly but tell me."

“A big dragon the same color as me flew by overhead while we hid from it. There were men riding on it—a lot of them. I didn’t know them. Rylie watched where they went down through the trees and then he told me to stay here while he went to look at them.”

“Look at them?”

Damn it, I was going to kill him! Nothing was going to stop me this time. No, I was going to lock him up in the house and only let him out when I was home to watch over him. He was a fucking menace! It was just like him to take these ridiculous risks, like charging after strange men in the woods.

I think my heart might have stopped right then if we hadn’t heard a loud rustling in the trees at that exact moment on the far side of the thicket. I grabbed my weapon as Rylan stepped through the foliage, pushing it aside. His eyes scanned the clearing in front of him for a moment until recognition suddenly lit his beautiful face.

“Quinn! Oh, thank the gods, you’re here!”

I ran to him, scooping him up in my arms and crushing him to me. I think maybe I hadn’t realized how scared I’d been until that very moment. I could hardly catch my breath. My hands were shaking as they slid over both sides of his body, checking him out, making sure he was intact and unhurt. I kissed him hard, pulling him to me, so relieved that he was all right, and I had him with me again. He trembled under my touch, and for a moment, neither of us could seem to speak at all. Finally, I pushed him gently away—but didn’t let go of him—and looked down into those gorgeous blue eyes.

“I thought you’d left me. I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“We got lost. We just wanted to go to the lake, the one we usually go to, but Talon

and I were talking on the way, and I got distracted. We flew over it, so I thought we could find another one close by. We finally found a lake we hadn't been to before, but then after spending most of the day there, we got lost and couldn't find our way back home."

"And I was so hungry. Do you have any food with you?" Talon asked, his voice hopeful.

"Yes, I brought you something." I hurried over to Sulamon, who was standing patiently, still loaded down with my packs. I found the wrapped parcels of meat I'd brought and quickly got them out for both dragons. Feeling guilty for being so distracted, I realized that Sulamon must have been starving too. Rylan came over to help, and we got them fed before I could finish asking Rylan any more questions. I thought it best not to remove Sulamon's packs just yet, in case we had to fly away in a hurry.

First things first, though. I found a small packet of food and a little pouch of fresh water for Rylan and I to share. He fell on it so quickly that I knew he must have been starving too and just hadn't said anything. We sat down beside the dragons to eat. After a moment, I asked him to tell me between bites just what he had seen.

"There's a camp, right over there through those trees, maybe some six or seven hundred feet away, but hidden in the trees. There are soldiers there in tents. Maybe a hundred or so. I think they're Thalian, but it doesn't make sense, because there are so many. It looks well established, but it couldn't be, could it? My grandfather said he had found out about the rebellion only recently. And how did they get on this moon and bypass all your systems?"

"What systems?"

"Detection systems? So you know when you have intruders."

“Rylan, I hate to break it to you, but there is no stealth in space. Space is really fucking big, and we can only monitor a tiny part of it. Which is to say, if a ship landed here, especially somewhere remote, it likely wouldn't be seen.”

“That's crazy.”

“We might detect a heat signature, or an electromagnetic one. But a ten kilometer by one kilometer asteroid recently passed through this entire solar system, and no one detected it until it was on its way out again. The astronomers estimated that ten or so of these things pass through the solar system every year and we don't even see them. We more than likely would not detect spacecraft in the outer solar system either without being extremely lucky. When we get to the inner solar system, we are a bit better at detecting, but only a bit. Let's say we have a pretty good history of missing things more than we do of finding them, and that goes for most planets and moons.”

“Well, there were no ships I saw, but there were vetami. Mostly big ones, the size of Sulamon, but I saw some smaller ones too. And all were Golden. They were keeping them in a pen under the trees, way on the far side of the camp, away from the tents. I don't know for sure who it is, but they're wearing green uniforms and consorting with dragons. Are there any ports that aren't as busy as the one we came in at? Some place they could land and not be noticed?”

“No, of course not. There's an old, abandoned airbase deep in these northern mountains, but it's in complete disrepair. It hasn't been used in over twenty years.”

“Have you seen it lately? Maybe someone fixed it up.”

“But why would anyone do such a thing?”

“To have a place to hide their ships?”

“Think of what you’re saying. That would take an extensive and elaborate spy network, operating right under our noses. The scale of such an enterprise would be enormous.”

“Not necessarily. If the leaders are bold, and maybe a little desperate and determined, they could do it, I think. Imagine if they either obtained the funds or siphoned them off from other projects to repair the old base enough to allow a few ships to land. By paying people off to look the other way just in case someone got lucky, as you say, then it could work. They’d be coming in high in the mountains, which are really remote as I’ve discovered. And if they came in at night, under one of the really thick and extensive cloud covers you have here on Horvath...I think it might be possible. They could build a camp in some remote spot, like the one I saw. They could move in the dragons and camouflage the ships, leaving the ships at the docks and traveling by dragon to their camp. I know it sounds farfetched, but it depends on how desperate they are.”

“But to what point? What would these people want to do?”

“Maybe they might want to overthrow your queen.”

I gasped in shock and just stared at him, my mouth falling open.

“Hear me out,” he said. “You’ve told me that a lot of Horvathians wanted a change in

leadership after the king died and think the queen's son will never be properly ready to lead, even after his birthday. I know you've been worried about a coup."

"Yes, but that would be an internal one. Not one from outside our planet."

"What if it is internal? Or a mixture of both? What if some of the ones who were unhappy about the queen's son taking the throne thought of a new king, an older man for example, who might have some kind of distant but legitimate claim to the Horvathian throne. Or one they could claim as legitimate. A claim that they could embellish and exploit. Someone like Travon of Thalios, for example, who is related to the royal family. Like I told you, I saw those soldiers wearing green uniforms like the Thalias wore on Lycanus 3. And there was a huge tent in the middle of the camp. Travon could be inside it."

I felt as if my head were spinning. He was right about it seeming extremely farfetched, but what if some of his theories held even a grain of truth? No one ever visited that old, abandoned airbase anymore, and they hadn't for years as far as I knew. There had been some recent talk about refurbishing it, but it had been voted down by the parliament. The votes against that plan had come from the Conservative side, the side that was unhappy about my aunt being Regent. I hadn't paid much attention to that at the time, because they were always unhappy about something or another. But what if this was more serious than just dissension? What if that had been the first rumblings of treason?

I hadn't been paying attention the way I should have been to things for a while now. I'd realized that when I saw how far out of control Bentine had become, the colonel I'd fired, along with his cohort Lieutenant Mythe. Both of them had, in effect, disputed my right to do what the hell I wanted to do with Talon and waltzed onto my property to take Talon back to the TrainingCamp. It had been an extraordinary thing for them to do, and I wouldn't stand for it.

Since my father died, leaving me in charge of the Special Warfare Riders or the SWR, I had, admittedly, not been paying close attention to politics. My uncle, the late king of Horvath, had designated me as the Riders Command Leader, a title he'd created for me, saying "he didn't trust anyone else to do it." It was a commission I took seriously.

Now I wondered what the source of his distrust had been. Before I could discuss it with him, my uncle had died. He had been a popular ruler, but there were many who thought he had been far too liberal in his views. Before his funeral, after hearing of some of that dissension in the Parliament, I had given a fiery speech about how the Horvathian army would throw its full support to the queen if there were any signs of trouble, and traitors would be arrested by military forces and summarily executed. Things had been much quieter since then, and I had thought that solved the problem, but what if it hadn't? What if the traitors had simply gone underground, all the while still scheming and making their own secret plans?

"I have to see for myself, Rylan. You stay here and keep the vetamis quiet. I'm going for a quick look."

"They may have sentries after dark."

"I'll be careful. If I'm not back in an hour, you take Sulamon with you and go back for help. He'll lead you out of here and take you back home. Call the base and speak to my second in command, Captain Brodor."

Rylan made a scoffing noise. "We're not leaving you."

"Yes, you damn well will! You'll do as you're told."

"When has that tone of voice ever worked with me, Quinn? I'll be here until you get back, and if you don't get back, then I'll come looking."



I growled at him, but he was completely unfazed by it. “Well, go on then,” Rylan said, “if you must. And we’ll be here when you get back. But make it fast and be careful, or else...”

“You’ll come looking,” I said, with as much sarcasm as I could get into the words.

“Damn right I will,” he said, and stepped over to press a sudden kiss to my lips. It was supposed to be just a quick kiss, I think, but as usual, the moment his lips touched mine, so much heat sparked between us that I was surprised something didn’t catch on fire. He gazed up at me then and I claimed his mouth again in another searing kiss. I’d thought for a few moments that long day that I’d lost him, and it had been devastating. Now that I had him back in my arms, I couldn’t take any more chances on losing him again.

As it turned out, I didn’t even make it to the camp before I was captured. It was fully dark by then, and I’d thought I could sneak up on them like Rylan had done, but this time they had sentries in the woods. And I had the terrible misfortune of stumbling right into two of them.

Of course, I fought them, and I killed one of them right away, though the other one hit me with the butt end of his weapon, stunning me a bit. I kept on struggling anyway, until two more soldiers ran up and one of them pressed the barrel of his weapon to my temple and growled something me that I knew was a serious threat to my life. Only then did I finally stop struggling with them and just shot them filthy looks instead as I knelt on the ground, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

All the while I was calling out in my head that I had soldiers on me and for Rylan and the dragons to leave at once. As clear as day, I heard a deep sob come from Sulamon’s throat that almost broke me.

“We’ll get him back, Sulamon!” I heard Rylan say. It must have been filtered through

Sulamon or Talon. “We have to! Tell him we’re coming for him!”

I heard a rumble come from Sulamon’s chest, and then he and Rylan must have had some private conversation I couldn’t hear, because in the next second, I knew that Sulamon was leaving. I felt it through our connection, the leaping up in the air and beating his heavy wings to lift him up into the sky. I was concentrating so hard on it that when the sudden blow to the back of my head came, I slumped instantly to the ground as it put me out like a light.

## Chapter Sixteen

I came around, bound and beaten and lying upon the cold, hard ground. Someone saw I was awake and shoved me roughly up to my knees, landing a few kicks on my hip to take with me. King Travon was standing in front of me, a little apart from the other men, wrapped in a thick fur coat against the mountain breezes. He looked just as villainous as I remembered.

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“Why are you here? How did you find out I was on Horvath?” Travon asked, firing the questions at me, his voice as cold as I remembered. “How is it you keep interfering with me?”

“I know all about you, Travon. And I know you’re here running from King Davos and the Tygerians. They know it too, by now, and I hope they catch you and split you open like a rotten piece of fruit, right down the middle with one of their blades. You’re as worthless as your father always was.” Not strictly true, of course, but I was hopeful that Rylan would escape and get word to my men and to his grandfather, in roughly that order.

He crossed over to me quickly and hit me with his open hand. Easy for him to do since my hands were tied. One of his men came forward to kick me in the back of the head for good measure. Unable to catch myself on my knees, with my hands behind my back, I hit the ground hard but managed to sneer up at him. “Fucking coward! Untie my hands and try that again.”

Instead, he sent two of his soldiers over to do his dirty work. They hit me and kicked me a few more times, and I laughed up at them, just to mock them.

“Is that the best you can do?”

“How did you find us here?” Travon shouted, spittle flying from his mouth in his agitated state. “Where’s that Moravian boy you were with on Lycanus 3? What did you do with him?”

“What makes you think I did something with him?” I said, addressing the last

question and ignoring the first ones. “Besides he’s none of your fucking business.”

He kicked at me again, but I rolled to my side on the ground, missing some of it. I had no idea how much time I might have lost while I was knocked out, and I was glad to hear he didn’t know where Rylan was. Maybe Rylan and the dragons had gotten clean away, though I held out little hope that Rylan would have had sense enough to leave me to my fate and go for help. I was terrified that he’d get himself captured.

“Take him!” Travon shouted, and the soldiers dragged me to my feet and then past the big tent that Rylan had mentioned. He’d said that it was located in the middle of camp. Hostile faces watched me on all sides as I was dragged past them, but none of them looked familiar. Soldiers were all around, none of them looking particularly alarmed, which again gave me hope that they didn’t know anything about Rylan.

We kept going toward a big tree on the edge of camp, and I saw to my horror that they were already through with any interrogation efforts, because they were throwing up a rope to hang me. An old-fashioned method of execution, but effective, for all of that. They had thrown down a crate underneath a noose they’d fashioned from the rope, and it was hanging there waiting. They must have put it up while Travon was questioning me. Apparently, they were taking no chances of me getting away from them and providing information on their whereabouts.

I tried not to make any of this too easy for them, struggling against them when they tried to get me up on the crate and kicking out at whatever I could reach, but with my hands bound, there wasn’t much I could do. They were trying to get the noose around my neck, but I kept going limp and dropping to the ground, so they had to haul me up again. Soldiers from the camp came to surround us, jeering, ogling me and shouting advice to the ones trying to hang me. No doubt they all wanted to get a good view of my imminent execution.

The noose was finally mostly fastened around my neck, half choking me to death.

They hadn't done it properly, and I stood more of a chance of breaking my jaw than my neck. I looked out at the crowd, and I swore I caught a glimpse of Colonel Bentine's ugly face at the back, his beady eyes avid and his mouth wide open, screaming along with the other members of the bloodthirsty mob. I thought perhaps I recognized a few other Horvathian soldiers in the crowd near him as well. If I managed to somehow get out of this, their heads would roll.

By twisting my neck, trying to stall for time, though I had no real hope of rescue, I managed to make the noose slip up too high, and they came over to adjust it again, cursing me. Just then, a commotion behind the mob caught my attention. A huge plume of black smoke indicating a fire was streaming down the row of tents, billowing in huge, inky clouds as it came closer. I watched in surprise and joy as the flames flared up bright orange, engulfing everything they touched. Sulamon was winging his way toward me, the source of the fire streaming from his open mouth as he lit up the camp with his terrible inferno.

Complete chaos took over as men ran screaming to get away from the flames and the sparks that were spewing down on them and their tents. He swooped closer and I saw him grab up a soldier who was firing at him. He bit him in half and got him stuck in his teeth. As I watched him, he spit the pieces of him on the ground and shook his massive head, splattering the crowd with flame. The crowd watching screamed in abject horror as they watched this grisly display, and then he reared back and loosed yet another huge jet of flames that came streaming from his throat. He incinerated another entire row of tents, some with people inside. Their anguished screams added to the chaos.

Over me, there came another dark shadow. and I looked up to see Rylan come swooping down on Talon's back. Rylan's beautiful face was fierce as he spotted the noose, and they swept toward me low enough that Rylan leaped down to the ground from Talon's back, landed in a rolling jump and pulled out his knife as he scrambled up beside me on the crate and cut the rope with a few strong hacks of his knife.

Meanwhile, Talon flew in circles around our heads to guard us, and Sulamon continued to wreak havoc on the camp, leaving it in absolute ruins. Almost the entire camp was on fire at this point in the proceedings.

No one seemed to even think of fighting them, because like Talon, none of their Golden dragons breathed fire, and they seemed to be more peaceful and not nearly so dangerous and savage as Sulamon and the other Reds. Sulamon landed near me, looking exhausted, but after making sure Rylan was safely back up on Talon's back, I leaped up on Sulamon's broad leg when he offered and lay down low over his back, yelling for Rylan to do the same and take cover. A few blasts from disruptors were finally being aimed our way from the surrounding trees. I glanced over and saw Rylan lying low over Talon's shoulders, urging him to fly straight up into the sky.

Sulamon flew past the smaller Golden but stayed close to him as we soared up over the decimated camp and up above the trees. Soon we were beyond the range of their weapons and winging it toward the south and home. I had to trust Sulamon to navigate the way, because my eyes were almost swollen shut by this time from the beating I'd received. By the time he landed some hour or so later, I was almost unconscious and slumped across his back, the reins wrapped around my wrists to keep me from falling. When and where we landed, I wasn't sure, but I was with the ones I loved best in the universe. They had saved me, and if I died then and there, I would have been content.

I didn't die, though, and when I awoke, Rylan was bathing my face in cold water, exclaiming softly over all the bruises, as I lay stretched out on the ground beneath some trees. He saw that I was awake and solicitously held a cup of water to my mouth. I choked down a little and found that I was aching all over. I was alive, though, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

"Sulamon and Talon have gone into the lake," Rylan told me, "to find some fish. They're going to bring us some back, and I got us a fire going so I can cook ours

when they get here.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Close your eyes and rest until they get back and I get some cooked. I found your medicine kit in your packs and gave you an injection for the pain. I put some cold packs on your face too.”

I was still feeling achy enough and I was out of it enough that I didn’t argue much. The next thing I knew, I was awakening again with a start, forgetting for a moment where we were. I sat up, holding onto my sore ribs and took a look around. The cold packs had taken down some of the swelling, and I could see Sulamon and Talon taking a nap nearby, with a huge pile of fish bones beside them. Rylan was in front of me, squatting beside the fire, roasting a big fish on a forked branch. He had stuck the fish through the ends of the stick and was cooking it to golden perfection. I could have eaten it raw at that point, actually, because I was starving.

He heard my stomach growling and glanced back at me, grinning. “It’s almost ready. How are you feeling?”

“Like somebody beat me and kicked me half to death and then tried to hang me.”

He laughed and scooted over closer to me. Groaning, I sat up beside him so he could feed me pieces of hot, delicious fish with his fingers, in between gentle kisses. I pretended to be annoyed by the kisses, but I don’t think I was fooling either of us.

After a while, he stopped and caught my eye. “I have to go back, Quinn,” he said softly.

“What? What are you talking about? We barely escaped, and you’re certainly not going anywhere.”

“Don’t you see? They won’t be expecting us to attack again, but it’s why we have to. I need to take them by surprise and finish this thing before they leave this moon. That king tried to kill you, and he wants to expand his kingdom and do even worse. There’s no telling where he’ll go next. He employs mercenaries and it may take my grandfather a while yet to catch up to him if he gets away from us here. We can’t take a chance on him getting away.”

“But Sulamon is exhausted. And none of this is your responsibility. Wait for my men to arrive.”

“Sulamon’s better since he had some fish and a rest, and of course, it’s my responsibility. This moon is my home now, and besides I need to avenge you and what they tried to do to you. If I don’t go back and finish this thing, they’ll get away. Travon’s options are limited, but I think we’ve badly hurt him and got him on the run. I need to finish what we started.”



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“No, you don’t. It’s out of the question.”

“But don’t you see? My family is already involved in this and that horrible man tried to get my father involved in his schemes. I think he wanted my grandfather to get angry about it, so my father would have little choice but to join his dumb rebellion. I mean, he must be stupid. The entire Alliance of planets couldn’t stop my grandfather years ago, and he’s only stronger now. I think he wanted to take me with him so he could threaten me and keep me hostage to control my grandfather’s response.”

“Maybe there’s truth in that, but you’re crazy if you think I’ll let you go alone. It’s out of the question. If I agree to this, then we go together.”

“No. You’ll only slow us down. You’re too hurt.”

“I can make it. I can ride Sulamon, because he responds better to me than to anyone.”

“You may be right. Sulamon does listen more to you than anyone, but he listened to me too, didn’t he? I’m the one who told him to set fire to all those tents while I saved you. He’s smart. And Talon said he was furious about them hurting you. Talon can go with us and help. The Dragon Riders may not make it in time to help us.”

“You called them? How did you get a signal out so quickly?”

“When we left you here, Talon flew me up out of the trees and straight up above the mountains. I got through to them on your communicator. I told them you needed help and to get here as fast as they could. They’re using the signal to track us.”

“But what about Talon? He should stay here since he can’t fight.”

“Yeah, but I was thinking...what if I armed him in some way too?”

“How would you do that?”

“Why couldn’t he drop things on the soldiers shooting up at us? Explosives if we had them, but big boulders for sure.”

“I never thought of that. Bomb the soldiers from above? By dragon? Do you think we could do that? Would Talon be up for it?”

“I think Talon can do anything. Besides, we have them on the run now. Let’s press our advantage and keep them busy so they can’t leave. There are rocks everywhere up here,” Rylan went on eagerly. “We could put some of them in the net and then tie it in front of him, and he could throw them down. We’d have the element of surprise too. I just wish we had explosives he could drop on them.”

“The boulders would be enough if they don’t shoot him. You need to provide cover for him with my disruptor. And if you think I’m letting you go without me, then you can think again. I’m doing this!”

Rylan threw his arms around my neck and kissed me, trying to shut me up, and I tried to slow him down a little. “We wait for the Riders, though. I think we’ll have until morning before the Thaliens can regroup enough to try to leave Horvath. You’re giving them too much credit. Besides, Travon won’t leave until he can get inside the remains of his tent to clear out his gold. He was keeping that close, for sure. He’ll think he has some time while we gather more men.”

“You think he had gold with him?”

“Of course. And he won’t leave without it. You’re right, Rylan. We have to finish what we started. But we need to wait until the others get here and not push our luck.”

To my shock, he smiled and nodded. “Okay, then. I know you’ll just be an ass about it if I don’t.”

Things went exactly as we’d planned for once. The Riders arrived only a few hours later, full of concern about the shape I was in. By this time, the pain medicine Rylan had given me had worn off and I wasn’t doing particularly well. We all agreed I needed to stay back. One of the medics stayed to work on me, while the rest of them—with Talon, Rylan and Sulamon leading the pack, took off to finish what we’d started. I was nervous and worried. and I knew I would be until they returned, but Rylan had done everything right so far. How could I keep standing in his way?

From the stories I heard later, the Thalian soldiers had been trying to regroup and were even setting up a new camp with the few remaining tents when the Riders and their dragons swooped down on them. Sulamon and the other Reds had laid down their fire streams along the rows of tents and then turned to come back to lay down more fire on the row behind that. Talon occupied himself by dropping down small boulders on top of the fleeing soldiers as they tried to shoot up at the Riders and their dragons, while Rylan provided even more cover by shooting down at them. The screams and shouts of these men added to the general chaos of the fires.

“It all went like clockwork,” Rylan had claimed, whatever that meant. He said it was a human saying for when things went the way we wanted them to. We did manage to get a call out to contact King Davos on his private line and give him the good news.

The Reds had been fierce in their attack on what was left of the Thalian camp, and they managed to destroy it pretty effectively. They swept down on the mercenaries and showed them no mercy, sparing only the Goldens still in their pen. The camp was left empty of any living souls and in complete ruin.

Talon and Rylan went to speak to the Goldens and calmed them down as much as he could. We soon found out that they understood and communicated very much like Talon, though none of them were quite as chatty as he was. After we released them from the pen, they were able to follow us back to base. They didn't seem to have human attachments, like our dragons did, so they were all a bit feral and frightened. In this case, it was a blessing, as they had no attachments to grieve over and no allegiance to the Thaliens, who had all been wiped out to the last man.

## Epilogue

### Rylan

It was a few days after we got back home that Quinn got ready to leave for camp again, now that things were more or less back to normal. Quinn was doing much better and recovering from his injuries. Over the next few days, the Riders were able to confirm that King Travon's lifeless body had been found in the woods, near the edge of camp, struck down by some of the big rocks that Talon had dropped on him and his entourage. All the Horvathian traitors had been rounded up too, though most of them had been killed in the fight. Colonel Bentine wasn't found, though it was suspected he was among the bodies that were burned beyond recognition inside the tents. It would take some investigation to discover which members of the Conservative Party had been backing King Travon, and if my theory about them wanting to substitute him for the new king had been true. So far nobody was talking, but the queen has suspended Parliament until she could investigate any traitorous activity. Quinn was confident he would be able to ferret out the truth in time.

He was anxious to get back to the Riders Training Camp, and after I watched him packing up his things, I wandered out into the main living area and sat on the sofa to start reading. I was trying to be calm about it and hide my resentment. No mention had been made about me coming with him. He came in the living area and stood near the bedroom door, watching me carefully.

“I’m leaving in a few minutes,” he said, watching me closely. “But I’ll be home in a week and conducting interviews in the capitol. You should go with me when I return. The queen would love to see you and thank you in person for all you’ve done.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said. “Be safe, but I’m not sure if I’ll be able to go with you to see the queen. I can try to be here, but it depends.”

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He frowned at me. “Try to be here? What do you mean? Where else would you be? What do you mean by, ‘it depends?’”

“Oh, on when my grandfather is picking me up. He offered to give me a ride to Moravia as soon as he finishes his investigations on Horvath. I’m not sure when that will be. Since you’ll be busy with your training camp and Parliament, I may as well go for a nice, long visit with my parents. Grandfather said Talon will fit in the cargo area of his star cruiser, since it’s not too long a trip. That way, I can keep riding him on Moravia, and he won’t be missing me and pining for me while I’m gone.”

“But...what about me?”

“Oh, will you pine for me too?”

“No. Because you’re not going anywhere.”

“Quinn, that’s unreasonable, don’t you think? You don’t need me here.”

“Who said I didn’t?”

“I overheard you speaking to the queen on your communicator. I heard you tell her quite clearly that you’d be gone most of the time from now on, and that I would ‘settle in’ and get used to it. I’m trying to learn to do that. You said that you’ll only come home for visits, because you’ll be busy with the Goldens. I want to accommodate all that by finding my own things to do when you’re gone. I thought you’d be happy for me. You surely don’t expect me to sit around all day and twiddle my thumbs, I hope.”

“I don’t know what that means. But yes, I expect you to be here, thumbs and all. At our home, like a proper mate.”

“Oh, so I’d be convenient to come home to.”

“No, damn it. There isn’t anything convenient about you and there never has been. But I want you here anyway.”

I started to open my mouth and tell him my thoughts on that, but then he crossed over to the sofa, sat beside me and took my hand in his. “Don’t you see, I can’t breathe right when I’m worried about you. Like when you left me, and I couldn’t find you anywhere. I had pains right here the whole time I was looking for you,” he said tapping his chest and looking tragic.

If he hadn’t had that look he got when he was irritated over something I’d done or hadn’t done, as if I’d inconvenienced him, then I think it would have meant a lot more. He might have even pulled it off.

I looked up into his beautiful jade green eyes, and it was my turn to have trouble breathing. I’d do almost anything he asked of me, but that was a slippery slope. I had to stand up for myself or lose myself entirely. I had to be strong and not give in to him on everything. We needed to get this straight between us or this marriage might not work. And I desperately wanted it to.

“I didn’t mean to leave you after we argued. I was mad, I admit. But I would never just take off like that without talking to you first. Talon and I simply got lost.”

“You can’t ever leave me, Rylan.”

“I know. But this isn’t like that. This time, you’ll know where I am, and that I’m safe. I’ll be at my home on Moravia.”

“This is your home. Wherever I am is your home. And I want you to be with me. Moravia is too far away. It won’t work, don’t you see?”

I smiled at him, putting all the love I felt for him in it. He blinked at me a couple of times and said, “Your omak-ahn was right about what he told me.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Just something he said. That you’d smile at me in a certain way, or you’d do or say something that would let me know for sure that you’re the one, and that I can’t live without you. I think it happened while you were cooking me that fish on the mountain.”

“Of course, I’m the one. I could have told you that. Did you ever doubt it?”

He shook his head and smiled at me. “Maybe a little.”

“Then you were wrong. I’m the only one for you. But you said it’s not possible for me to be with you at the camp, right? That’s what you said. You won’t be here, and I can’t go with you to camp.”

“Well, I changed my mind. I want you to come with me. You and your little Golden.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“You know, Talon’s not so little anymore. He’s grown almost as tall as Sulamon.”

“Whatever.”



“Whatever what?”

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“Whatever you say. Whatever you want. Whatever you need to hear. I changed my mind, and I want you to come and be with me. I think I need to rethink this idea of the Riders as some kind of—what did you call it? ‘Warrior monks,’ I think you said, with no lives outside of our work. Why should we not build housing for our mates there at the camp? So we could go home most nights and still keep our mates by our sides. Just because we’ve always done things in a certain way doesn’t mean it’s the best way.”

“Exactly! But do you really mean that?”

“Yes, I do. I’ll let Talon work with the other dragons, like your grandfather suggested. Talon was an amazing help when I was looking for you. And even Sulamon seemed better at communicating when he was with us. Anyway, it couldn’t hurt, and Talon has the new Goldens to try his lessons on now too.”

“Well, this is...different. Do you really mean all this?”

“Yes and no. I mean it, but I’ll probably hate every second of it at first. You may have noticed, Rylan, that I’m not what most people would call a flexible person. But I can learn new things, right along with Sulamon. I still hate the idea of you being in that dirty camp with no privacy and all of the soldiers ogling you all the time. I don’t think you realize how attractive you are. I want you here at home where it’s safe, and I hate the idea of you being in danger. But you’d be in my bed at night, and that would make up for a lot.” He heaved a big sigh. “The bottom line is that I’d hate being away from you even more, so there’s no real choice.”

“And this would be for everybody, so you wouldn’t have to worry about the other

men being jealous of you having your foreign husband with you.”

“That’s right. Though I finally realized I really don’t care what they think anymore. Not enough to be miserable without you.”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say. This is totally new.”

“When I couldn’t find you, I stopped caring what anyone else thought. I don’t care. Besides, you’ve more than proven yourself in battle, Rylan. The way you saved me from those Thaliens who were about to hang me... It was smart and brave and amazing. I’ve been foolish to deny it for so long. Say you’ll come with me today when I go.”

“But won’t I be in the way?”

“Of course, you will. But come with me anyway. I’ll manage if you will.”

I threw my arms around his neck to pull him down and kiss him for a long time. He sighed and didn’t fight it too much after the first few seconds.

“You can’t do this at camp,” he said, after a while as he came up for air. “Not all the time, anyway. We’ll all need to be discreet.”

“I understand. And I’d love to come with you. I know that all the mates will love it. In fact, I never want to be parted from you again. But you need to be sure about this. What if Talon and I will get on your nerves?”

“Oh, I fully expect you will, but there’s nothing to be done about it. Now get your things together, and I’ll go let Talon know. He can eat a few snacks to hold him off until his next meal. A flock of sheep should be enough to hold him off until we get there.”

“He’s a growing boy.”

“What about you? What will be enough to hold you off?”

“An hour or so of you making love to me before we go should do it. We could stop along the way, too. I can take a blanket with us. Then of course, after we get there, we could take a ‘nap.’” I wagged my eyebrows at him.

I laughed at the look on his face and jumped up on top of him to wrap my legs around his waist and kiss him again.

“Tell me you love me.”

“I can’t be doing that all the time. It’s unseemly.”

“I don’t care. I need you to do it at least once a day.”

He sighed heavily. “All right. Once. At night. After we’re in bed.”

“Let’s practice it now.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I want to hear how it sounds.”

I smiled as he growled and then leaned up, bumping my chin with his nose and letting his head fall back to give me access to his throat. He moaned long and loud as I licked him and nibbled at him, and then he turned the tables and began to lick me and bite down on my neck, laving his tongue over my mating bite and giving me little love bites all around it. My neck would be covered in his marks if he kept this up.

I pushed him away. “Tell me.”

“All right. I love you. Are you happy now?”

“Say it again, like you mean it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:36 am*

“No, you said I only had to do it once.”

“We’re practicing.”

“This is silly and indulgent.”

“Is it? What about this then?”

I pushed down my trousers to take myself in hand and stroke myself. Then I laughed because of the look on his face and how he was so torn between being afraid someone would come in and see me and wanting to push my hand aside and take over himself. He groaned and tried to hold my hand to stop me from continuing but wound up doing exactly that. He began to pull off the rest of my clothes and put his hands all over me. In seconds, he fell down on top of me and his fingers were sliding between my ass cheeks. Things progressed quickly from there.

He made love to me more than just once as it turned out, and I made him tell me he loved me many times before we were done. It was actually a while before we left for the camp. But I don’t think either of us was really in that much of a hurry at all.

The End