



# Pierce

**Author:** *Ava Benton*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** A group of dragons traveled from Scotland to the New World a millennium ago to guard a treasure that none could know of. Their homes and lives are hidden from the world of humans and supernatural beings. Until Pierce saves the life of a woman during an avalanche. And now he's put the entire legacy on the line. Jasmine isn't your average girl. She's a part of the fae. And now some damned dragon gave her his blood to heal her. Didn't he realize that dragon's blood is toxic to the fae? His dragon brethren don't care if she lives or dies—actually, they'd just as soon as un-complicate matters and see her dead. But that's not so easy for her or the dragon that saved her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 52

1

Pierce

It was the silence that startled me into wakefulness.

Not that life in a cave was ever truly silent. There was always noise somewhere, the constant flow of life through what only appeared as cold, dead, lifeless rock to the untrained eye.

Yes, the rock could be quite cold. But it lived. It shifted, it creaked. Thousands of years of rain and snow had worked their way into the cracks and crevices.

Patient, so patient, chipping away over time until a network of veins ran through the mountains and filled the tunnels long since carved with the echoes of dripping and trickling. In the winter, the water froze and swelled and strained, and the rock groaned in protest. There was never complete silence.

Even so, compared to what I and the rest of my family heard every minute of the day, the ambient noise was deafeningly quiet. There had never been a day of my life when I didn't hear the heartbeat of my clan resonating from deep in the core of the planet.

It was the rhythm of my existence and had been for a millennium. Dragon heartbeats. But now, the sound was gone.

Not softer, not drowned out by some other noise.

Simply gone.

The dragon within me questioned this, instincts on full alert. I had learned to listen to those instincts.

Even so, my immediate assumption was that the problem was with me. That there was something “off” with my senses.

Granted, it would be the first time, but there wasn’t exactly a rulebook for our lives. There was no telling what might happen to someone like me. I told my inner dragon to listen for even the faintest trace of a beat before I climbed out of bed in search of answers.

At first glance, my suite of rooms could be mistaken for a luxury suite at any fine hotel—granted, I was only basing my assessment on what I’d seen on television and in movies, but I felt it was a fair one.

The major difference was the lack of windows, naturally, but the lighting both in my suite and throughout the maze of tunnels carved into the mountain were fitted with sensors which automatically brightened and dimmed the brightness according to the time of day.

It provided the illusion of living in the outside world, at least. Something I hadn’t done since we left the original clan. I wasn’t sure what existing in almost constant darkness would’ve done to my psyche over a century or two. And luckily, I didn’t have to.

Not that we never left the caves—in fact, I’d be leaving today. It was my turn to drive into town for supplies later that afternoon. Still, being able to open a window and get a feel for the day’s weather was a small luxury I’d taken for granted prior to moving to our subterranean home.

The touchscreen display screen installed inside the door to my bedroom told me what I needed to know, but there was nothing like finding out for myself.

It was a cool day, and rain was predicted. I would have to keep that in mind while dressing. Granted, even very cold weather had little effect on me. I was a walking furnace.

I used the touchscreen to access my music library and turned on a little old-school Metallica to get me started and drive away the anxiety which was slowly wrapping gripping me.

Still, no matter how loud or driving the song, I couldn't shake the feeling of there being something wrong.

The lack of a steady beat in my head reminded me of the time the generator failed and plunged the caves into darkness for a short while.

The generator's buzz was something I had grown just as accustomed to as I had the ever-present beating of the hearts of my dragon kin.

Hearing that beat was my connection to the rest of the clan, even though we were thousands of miles apart.

I showered quickly, in a hurry by then to check in with my family. It was Cash's turn to guard the cave, which meant he had been up through the night. He'd be able to tell me when the beats ceased—if they had at all for anyone but me.

I dressed in a tee and jeans, my normal uniform, and slid into trainers before grabbing a zippered sweatshirt and leaving the suite.

It was early, barely dawn, but I liked getting an early start. I only felt accomplished

when I did so, even though there wasn't much to accomplish for any of us.

We had our particular jobs, but none of them took up much time. Mine was to be sure the generator was running smoothly, and the backup power was in place—we had learned that lesson the hard way back when the lights went out, and we were left with nothing to do but light candles and try to fix the problem.

My only other responsibility besides taking my turn at guarding the cave was keeping stock of our supplies and driving out to purchase them.

That wasn't what was on my mind when I began the trek out to the mouth of the cave. It was a long walk through a maze of corridors I had committed to memory centuries earlier. Like a map inside my head.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

My feet carried me past the suites occupied by my family members, then around the corner and down the corridor to the common area and the game room. The library was to the right, and filled floor-to-ceiling with more books and scrolls than I could possibly hope to read if I had another several centuries to do it.

The meeting room, originally intended as a throne room of sorts before we agreed there would be no set leader among us. The clan had its royalty, but there was no reason for us to carry on that tradition once we left the homeland. There were far too few of us, for one.

When a few hundred dragons needed governing, there was cause for a ruler to rise.

We were six. Just six.

We hadn't even found our mates yet.

The longer I walked, the closer I came to the mouth of the cave and the more prominent the scent of moisture. The rain had already begun.

I heard the sound of water pelting leaves as I stepped out and pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt in an attempt to stay dry.

"Cash?" I called out.

He couldn't have gone far.

The sound of heavy footsteps filled the air before I caught sight of his gold-tinged

scales through the trees just beyond the cave mouth. I waited for him to shift back to human form—it only took a few seconds.

“What is it?” he asked, sounding perturbed.

We rarely shifted from dragon form while we were on guard duty, but I reminded myself that it would take less than the blink of an eye for him to shift back if trouble arose.

It wasn't as though I didn't have a good reason to interrupt him, either. “Do you hear it? The heartbeat?”

His brow furrowed, and I could tell in an instant that it wasn't just me.

It was all of us.

“It disappeared overnight,” he explained. “One moment it was there, and the next...”

“Gone.”

“Right.”

“Nothing happened before that? Nothing to catch your attention?”

He shook his head. “Nothing at all. Just silence.”

It should've made me feel better, knowing I wasn't crazy or losing my senses. Instead, I felt much worse.

Supplies would have to wait for the time being. I traced my steps and hurried back to the heart of the caves, where the rest of my family was likely sleeping. They wouldn't

be for long.

When I reached the control center, I sent out an alarm which would sound on all the touchscreen systems. They would hate me for it—I was the only early riser—but they would understand in time.

I waited for the four of them to join me. When they did, rubbing their eyes and scrubbing their hands through their sleep-mussed hair, I didn't waste time with preambles.

"The heartbeat is gone," I said. "Cash confirmed that it stopped overnight, with no warning or identifiable reason."

Fence scratched at the stubble which covered his cheeks. "Has this ever happened before? I don't remember a time when I didn't hear it."

Smoke shook his head. "I've never seen anything about it in the scrolls." My brother, the amateur historian.

"Does it mean they're dead? All of them? That's not possible." Gate looked around at the rest of us. "Is it?"

"No way," Miles said, shaking his head. "There has to be an explanation."

"Sure. For the first time since any of us has been alive, we can't hear the heartbeat of our clan." I shook my head. "Everything has an explanation, of course. The question is whether the explanation is one we can live with."



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

“Mary would know. Wouldn’t she?” Smoke asked. “Or she’d be able to find out.”

“How would she find out something about our clan?” Fence shook his head. “I don’t think so, man. She’s a human. She doesn’t know about our world.”

“No, but she has connections all over,” Smoke countered. “And she owes us one.”

“You’re not seriously thinking about calling in a favor from, what, forty years ago?” I asked with a laugh. “She probably doesn’t even remember.”

“She’s the one who swore she’d do anything she could to help us. We saved her life.”

Miles shrugged. “I guess it’s worth a shot, right? She has the resources. Might as well put them to use.”

“It can’t hurt,” Smoke added.

“Yeah. I guess not.” I watched as Smoke pulled up his Skype account. Mary was listed there as one of his contacts.

I didn’t know they kept in touch—then again, I had little time for that sort of thing. I liked being able to access my music, movies, TV, that sort of thing. But social media? Chatting? Even message boards made me roll my eyes and wonder why people couldn’t find better uses for their time.

I was in the minority among my family, however. We waited, looking up at the monitor on the wall.

When Mary answered the call, it shocked me to see how she had aged. I reminded myself that as a human, she would show the effects of the past forty years.

Living among those who shared my blood tended to lull me into forgetting the natural rules of the outside world.

“Well, well, well.” Her smile was the same, even if the rest of her was not. “To what do I owe this early wake-up call?”

Smoke cleared his throat, embarrassed, and I realized a second later that she was sitting with her back to a wooden headboard. “I’m sorry. We didn’t consider the time difference.”

I winced when I remembered she was somewhere in the Midwest, two hours behind us.

“It’s all right,” she chuckled. “No harm in an early morning. And for you to call me, all grouped together like this, it has to be something important. What can I do for you?”

Smoke glanced around at us, and we nodded in agreement. “There seems to be a problem which we all just picked up on today. Is there any way you can reach out to our kinfolk back in Scotland?”

“Scotland?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“We think there may be a problem there,” I explained, leaning in so she could see me.

“Pierce. It’s been a long time,” she murmured with a smile.

Yes, very long. And your hair has gone from golden blonde to almost entirely white.

Time was cruel. It ravaged beauty. Even so, there was a grace and dignity about her which hadn't existed in youth.

“What sort of problem?”

“We no longer hear the heartbeat of the rest of the clan,” I replied. “I know it sounds strange, but—”

She held up a hand to stop me. “I don't attach much to the way things sound,” she grinned. “If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's to withhold judgment. So. This heartbeat. I assume it signifies the well-being of your kinsmen back in your father country?”

“Correct,” Smoke affirmed. “I have no idea how to reach them, or else we'd do it ourselves. There's no telling if they've even adapted to modern life. They could still be living in the forest, for all we know. Using fires to cook with and warm themselves by.”

“I can see why you're concerned,” she frowned. “I'll do everything I can to get in touch with my contacts in Scotland. It shouldn't be difficult to locate a clan of dragons. I should think they would stand out.”

“You might be surprised how well they hide themselves,” Miles warned her.

“We'll take our chances.” She offered a smile of sympathy. “Try not to worry too much. I'll get back to you as soon as I've heard anything.”

We ended the call then, to give her back the privacy we had thoughtlessly invaded.

I broke the uneasy silence which settled over the room.

“Well, time to brave Costco,” I announced, striding from the room.

There was nothing we could do until Mary got back to us, anyway. None of us were used to sitting back and waiting for somebody else to solve our problems, however, so I had the feeling it would be a long, tense wait.

For once, I was glad it was time to pick up supplies. It would give me something to do.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

2

Pierce

Oh,the humanity.

I walked through the oversized store with a cart already overloaded with food. Six full-grown dragon shifters needed all the sustenance we could get our hands on.

I thought back to the days in Scotland, how we had to hunt to stay alive. A trip to Costco wasn't unlike one of those hunts in many ways.

Was it ever not busy there? That was the first question which always came to mind when I entered the store. No matter the day of the week we chose or the time we ventured out, there were always throngs of people from all walks of life milling about.

I passed a woman wearing a smock and a nervous smile, offering free samples of some frozen concoction.

The shoppers gathering around her brought to mind a group of jackals at a watering hole. They practically elbowed each other out of the way in their greed.

The meat case was a free-for-all. People eyeing the cuts, considering their options, firing questions at the employees behind the window. Did they have anything better back there? Could they trim more of the fat off a ten-pound roast? What about cutting a pork loin into chops? I rolled my eyes and elbowed my way through.

Even though I knew very well why we couldn't have supplies delivered, it never stopped me from fantasizing about how lovely it would be to let technology handle everything for us.

Simply picking up a delivery at the mouth of the cave every other week or so. Not ever having to come into contact with humans if I didn't want to.

No such luck. A lot of good it would do us to announce our presence to the rest of the world. That was what my brothers and cousins were kind enough to remind me of the first and only time I tried to helpfully suggest we let twenty-first-century conveniences make life more, well, convenient.

"Sure!" Fence had yelled, throwing his hands into the air. "Let's invite the United States Postal Service to the front door! Let's put it on record that six men live in a fucking cave!"

The rest of them had laughed or sneered or scoffed, though I was willing to bet every single one of them had wondered at least once if they could get out of making the twenty-mile trip.

"All right, all right," I had replied, trying to wave him off. "I get it. It's a bad idea."

The dragon inside me growled dangerously when I faced the prospect of choosing a checkout line. All of them were at least three carts deep.

I wondered if the risk of discovery was truly more dire than the threat of the dragon escaping my control and wreaking havoc. The human world would find out about us. They'd know all about us after I tore the building down and buried the occupants alive.

It was a fantasy, of course, but it was all that kept me sane whenever I had to interact

with humans. They were all the same: greedy, lazy, ignorant. Obnoxious. They went out of their way to please themselves but very rarely thought of the basic needs of others.

I wondered how much of what they purchased and hoarded like starving vultures actually went to use. Could any family honestly find use for a case of canned peas? Or a carton of deodorant sticks? They bought, and they stored, and they guarded their stockpiles with the same vigilance as my family and I guarded the cache we'd been assigned to guard, locked deep beneath the mountain in which we lived.

But it wasn't the same thing.

We weren't greedy, and we didn't live in fear of some far-off, unlikely doomsday. It was our job to guard it, as it had been ever since its arrival in the New World.

Naturally, it wasn't considered the New World back then, over a thousand years earlier. Even so, the Vikings had buried their mysterious stockpile deep within the mountain and called on the world's fiercest dragon shifters to guard it into eternity.

The tunnels and rooms in which we lived came later. The creature comforts we'd adapted to, even later than that.

"Having a big party?" The girl ringing up the items on the belt dropped a comical wink.

Like we were suddenly friends, in on the same joke.

"I enjoy buying in bulk. It's economical."

She didn't seem to notice my flat, just-the-facts tone of voice—either that, or she chose to ignore it.

“You’re not much like most of the folks who come in here, you know.”

You have no idea, lady. “Oh? And how’s that?” I wouldn’t normally have asked, but her assessment was intriguing.

What did she see about me that I tried to hide from the world?



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

“You’re much better looking for starters.”

Ah. That. I should’ve known. Humans only saw what was right there on the surface, never what existed underneath.

“Thanks very much,” I replied, though it wasn’t much of a compliment.

I had gotten an eyeful of the inbred, bucktoothed, beer-bellied slobs who did their shopping there and was hardly impressed.

She wasn’t finished, either. “That dark hair, paired up with those beautiful hazel eyes?”

“Genetics,” I grinned.

“That body isn’t genetics,” she purred.

I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I’m just fortunate that way. I hardly ever work out.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true.” And it was. My muscular build was common to all of my breed.

“Hmm. If you don’t spend your free time working out, what do you spend it on?”

I grinned as I handed over the cash for the sale. “I keep myself busy.”

She visibly deflated when I didn't follow up with an invitation to see for herself what I did with my free time and handed over my change without another word or even a smile.

It wasn't that I wouldn't have liked to ask her out if I was into human women with overworked hair and too much makeup.

Hell, she might even have been a good time, and I could've used a good time. The dragon roared within me at the thought of having a woman.

But not just any woman, and that was the problem. The cashier was right about my looks and my body.

I could've had just about any piece of ass who crossed my path. And many had tried to get into my pants—a few had even succeeded. Yet it never ended well, because none of them were the right woman—my fated mate. So I'd stopped trying after a few hundred years. It wasn't worth the hassle.

The rain was coming down in earnest by the time I finished loading the bags of food and other supplies into the truck, and the image of flooded roads flashed before my eyes as I left the parking lot and turned in the direction of the mountains. Of all the days to go out.

It didn't get better the longer I drove—in fact, by the time I reached the winding uphill drive leading to the mouth of the cave, the road was little more than a massive mud puddle. I had the benefit of a heavy, four-wheel-drive truck.

The rusty little car in front of me, however, did not.

“What are you doing?” I called out, knowing the driver couldn't hear me but needing to express my disapproval anyway.

The little two-door was barely managing the turns and kept slowing down when it hit particularly muddy patches.

I could've powered through much faster if it weren't for those patches.

"Why did you bother trying to make this drive in this weather? And what the hell are you doing up here, anyway?"

That was a fair question, too, since there weren't any campgrounds in the area that I was aware of. Perhaps one had just opened, or the driver had simply forgotten to check the weather forecast before taking a scenic mountain drive. Regardless of the why, the trip was becoming more dangerous by the second.

And that was when the road began to give way.

"Oh, shit!" I yelled, jackknifing as I hit the brakes and turned ninety degrees to avoid driving straight into the wall of mud coming down the side of the mountain and flooding the road.

The driver in front of me wasn't so lucky, leaning on the horn in one last, desperate attempt to signal for help before the mud swept the car up and pushed it across the road.

I watched in horror as the car came to a stop just inches from tumbling over the edge of a cliff and hundreds of feet down to the forest floor.

My body started moving before my brain could quite catch up.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

I was out the door and halfway to the car before I could question my decision. Not that there was a question of whether or not I should try to help. I knew I should—even if it seemed completely insane as I ran to the edge of the cliff.

“Hey!” I shouted over the driving rain which seemed to drown out everything but the thudding of my heart.

No answer.

The car was moments from falling over the edge. “Can you hear me?” I shouted louder, straining my voice. There was no way around it. I had to get closer.

My feet slipped on the wet, slick mud and I scrambled but managed to stay on my feet as I struggled to reach the car.

It was half-covered, with only the passenger door and hood still exposed.

I could just make out the shape of a girl behind the wheel. An unconscious girl with red hair and a nasty cut on her head. Blood trickled down her face, and I understood why she had leaned on the horn when I saw the way her body had fallen against the wheel.

She wouldn’t be able to get herself out of there.

I looked up at the side of the mountain, where the mudflow had started, to be sure there wasn’t a fresh wave coming my way before grabbing for the door handle.

A human wouldn't have been able to pull it open with mud rising a quarter of the way up the side, but I'm not human.

I pried it from the car, metal screeching in protest, and threw it aside before reaching for her.

I caught a glimpse of the crumpled metal door sailing through empty air as it fell down, down, down until wind-swept trees swallowed it.

The car started to shift the moment I added my weight to it, and I felt it sliding inch by precious inch toward the edge and beyond. I tore the belt in pieces rather than fumbling for the button to release it, and wedged my hands under the girl's arms.

"I hope you don't have a back or neck injury," I growled as I lifted her limp body from the seat and her head lolled against her shoulder.

She slid easily across the vinyl seat, her ass dropping into the mud the moment it cleared the inside of the car.

I heard the mud coming before I saw it, sounding like a freight train as it barreled down the side of the cliff above our heads and took trees, shrubs, and rocks with it.

And us.

It was coming for us.

The mud sucked at my feet and held me in place for just a second too long. That one second made the difference between getting me and the girl out of the way in time to avoid being swept over the cliff and getting caught up and thrown over the edge.

I let out an incoherent yell as we went airborne, hurtling off the cliff, and through thin

air. I lost my grip on her and watched in horror as she tumbled, still unconscious, just out of my reach.

She hit a boulder and bounced off just before I did. I scrambled to catch any part of her, but it was no use.

Her red hair was like a flag as it billowed behind her, the only streak of color in an otherwise mud-painted world.

Once again, I started before my brain could catch up with what I was doing.

And what I was doing was shifting into my dragon, clothing shredding as my body swelled and expanded and lengthened, as my wings unfurled and caught air and allowed me to swoop down past the girl and beneath her, catching her on my back before she could hit the trees.

I sailed over the trees easily, gracefully, triumphant in the knowledge that I had saved her.

What I was going to do with her was another story.

3

Jasmine

The last clear,conscious thought I had before I hit my head on the steering wheel was: This is it. The end of my life.

And damned if it didn't all flash before my eyes, just the way it was supposed to in a person's final moments. I saw everything. All my choices, good and not so much. Every opportunity I had to do something I really wanted to do, but didn't. Every time I let my temper get the better of me and every time I felt a stab of guilt when I did. Every time I settled for less than what I really wanted or deserved.

That was the thing about the end-of-life review. Nobody ever knew when it was coming, and it could be pretty damned depressing when the person having it thought they had all the time in the world to do things the right way.

And then, I'd slid into unconsciousness—or, rather, it had slammed into me. I figured that was it. No more. End of the road.

Except it wasn't. In fact, things only got crazier after that.

The first thing I was aware of after that was the roar of wind in my ears.

That, and the sensation of flying. Was that how it happened after death? Did a person literally fly away to wherever the next destination was? No, we didn't believe in that sort of thing, not in my family.

But maybe we were wrong, because damned if I wasn't flying.

My stomach dipped and dropped in relation to my position in the air. Only I wasn't doing the flying. That much, I was sure of.

I didn't want to open my eyes, though. Some instinct told me not to. It was better to let things happen the way they would and open my eyes when it was over.

It was the roar that got to me. The roar and the flapping of wings.

I must be imagining this. No way this is really happening. And if I'm imagining it, that means I can open my eyes and not worry about what I see. It's all part of whatever's going on in my head. Or I really did die, and that means nothing bad can happen to me anymore. I have nothing to be afraid of. No consequences.

I opened my eyes.

And immediately closed them again.

"What is happening?" I screamed, clinging to what felt like leather to keep from plummeting down.

Slippery, moving, breathing leather.

What was it? And why was I on top of it?

I opened my eyes again and looked around.

I could see the trees below me, and the side of the mountain. And out of the corner of my eye, a wing roughly the size of a mainsail, flapping up and down.



I froze.

No way. It couldn't be. But it was.

I could hear it flapping, could see the thin membrane of the brown wing which I realized a split second later was attached to the brown, scaly, moving creature I was sprawled out on.

A dragon.

Either I was having an end-of-life hallucination, or I was still back in the car, unconscious, having the craziest dream anyone ever had.

I screamed again, and the sound barely reached my ears before the wind ripped it away.

I was riding on the back of a flipping dragon.

Maybe it heard my scream and felt the need to reply, because it roared and the roar shook its body and made its sides move in and out.

And it made me lose consciousness again out of sheer terror.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

4

Pierce

It is her.

She is the one.

Things were so much simpler for my dragon.

When I thought like my dragon, everything was black and white. Good and bad. There were no shades of gray, no nuances, no weighing of the facts. Yes or no. Right or wrong. The end.

Which was what made it so simple for him when he announced that the girl on my back was my fated mate. The one we had been waiting for.

My human brain cried out in protest.

No way. After a thousand years on this side of the world? My fated mate is back in the father country, back where the clan once lived. How could she possibly be here?

The dragon roared in response. This is her. She is the one.

He was never one to mince words. He knew what was, and that was that. There was no reasoning with him, no making him understand that what he claimed was impossible.

All of us, my family and I, had come to an unspoken understanding many years earlier, when it was clear we would live our lives away from the rest of the world.

When we realized that bringing anyone else into the caves would mean bringing them close to that treasure—a treasure that we'd never even seen—we had been tasked with protecting.

No one could be brought to the caves. It simply couldn't be done. The risk was far too great. It would mean allowing an outsider to know our secrets and possibly share those secrets with other outsiders.

It could mean failing our mission—and none of us took that sort of thing lightly. We were given a duty, and we were going to see it through.

It was like a common language for all of us when we understood nothing else about each other, when our personalities clashed as they were likely to do after a millennium of living together. When all else failed, we understood our duty.

Things had gone well, for the most part.

Until this very day.

No. Things will still go well.

It wasn't easy to think as my human self while I was in my dragon form. His consciousness threatened to overtake mine and very easily could if I allowed myself to let go. Sometimes I did, just for the hell of it. When thinking as a human was too much for me to bear. It came in handy whenever it was my turn to guard the cave for a day.

There was no sense in contemplating life as a human while lumbering around in front

of the cave's mouth.

I fought my dragon as I climbed up the mountainside, close to home by now.

She was still on my back and, except for a few minutes of wakefulness, had missed almost the entire flight. That was for the better. She might have fallen off in a panic otherwise.

I only heard one or two screams. Her weight was still firm against my back, heavy in unconsciousness.

What to do with her? I couldn't take her home, that was a fact.

But I couldn't leave her lying on the mountain, either. She had a head injury, and I hadn't had the chance to see what the fall from the cliff did to her.

I remembered her hitting the boulder just after I lost my grip. She might die from exposure even if her wounds didn't kill her.

The nearest hospital was miles away, and the only road down the mountain was washed out. How was I supposed to explain getting her to the hospital?

How could I walk up to the emergency room as a human, naked, holding her draped over my arms? I'd earn myself a trip to the psych ward while I was at it.

Take her. Make her ours.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

The dragon wouldn't let up.

I tried to ignore its incessant voice, not to mention the cravings stirring in my loins.

As the dragon, it was harder to ignore what she was doing to me.

I could smell her, could feel her warmth against my skin. She was so small and helpless, and I could take her so easily. It could be over in an instant, and she would be mine forever, the way it was meant to be...

I shook my head, snorting hard in frustration. There were much more important things to consider, and the calling of my darker needs wasn't helping.

As soon as it was safe, and I knew the worst of the climb up the mountain was over, I came to a stop and arched my back to allow the girl's body a safe slide to the ground.

She landed in a heap. I turned to look at her, my sharp dragon eyes taking in every inch of her skin.

My desire rose again, stronger than it had been in centuries. She wore shorts in spite of the chill in the air, and her lean, smooth legs brought saliva to my mouth.

There was a small waist and full, firm breasts under the hoodie. I could make out their shape thanks to the way the wet fabric clung to her.

I could also make out the blood which soaked one shoulder of that hoodie. That splash of red was enough to wake me from the semi-trance the sight and smell of her

body put me under.

She needs help.

I shifted back to human, and the dragon roared in disapproval, but he'd have to deal with it. As a human, I could kneel by her side and check her over a bit more carefully.

Her head had stopped bleeding, but her shoulder hadn't. I peeled back the sticky cotton to find the wound still oozing. She must have done it when she hit the boulder—I didn't remember it looking that way when she was in the car. I wondered if there was a break. What if it became infected?

I looked around, at a loss. Like there was anything around me that would provide answers. What was I supposed to do with her? She needed help, but I couldn't get her anywhere. If I let her go, she would tell people about the dragon who carried her to safety. Then again, who would believe that? But how else could her rescue be explained?

Her car was on the forest floor by now, washed off the road. There was no other way for her to get down the mountain. The police would want to know. Word might get out on the news, on the internet.

The girl who claimed a dragon saved her from certain death.

What would happen then? It didn't take a genius to follow the scenario to its natural conclusion. Anyone aware of the that which we were guarding would know there were dragons present in the Appalachian Mountains. They'd find out the general location and start their hunt. We'd be exposed, in danger. It would risk our mission. We had worked hard and made countless sacrifices, and she could undo all of it.

But she's ours. She's meant for us. The dragon wouldn't stop insisting on being

heard.

She's too big a risk. I have to let her go, I thought.

A roar of outrage filled my head. She is our mate! You will not allow her to die!

"What am I supposed to do?" I shouted out loud, my voice echoing off the mountainside and throughout the valley below.

I heard myself asking the same question again and again, until the echoes overlapped and eventually faded into silence.

I looked down at her again, torn between self-preservation and pity. And the constant nagging from the dragon, though I did what I could to keep him to a dull roar. He wasn't helping.

I couldn't leave her. It was as simple as that. I'd never forgive myself. I'd always know she was there, that her beauty was rotting under the sun and rain and snow, that the animals would get to her before long and tear her flesh to pieces.

With that image in my head, I lifted her as gently as I could and made the decision to create a very big problem for myself.

We hadn't used the cells for almost as long as I could remember, not since the very early days when we faced discovery by a group of hunters who'd stumbled upon us and tried to attack.

It had been no contest, but those who had survived the fight had spent the rest of their short, miserable lives locked up inside a separate series of tunnels connected to the rest of our underground compound but existing on the other side of the mountain. The tunnels were divided into six separate cells, each lined with iron bars. I hadn't even

visited them in more than a hundred years, but used to sometimes escape there for the sake of being alone and hearing myself think.

Television, video games, internet and the like had made it easier to entertain ourselves and stay out of each other's hair when needed, but that wasn't the case only a century earlier.

There was an entrance on the opposite side of the mountain from the cave mouth where Cash still stood sentry, and I wasted no time getting there. The sooner I had her inside, away from the risk of discovery, the better.

And that meant keeping her from the rest of the family, too.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

I wasn't sure how that would be possible, seeing as how we were so entwined in each other's lives, but there had to be a way. They would never understand why she had to be here. They would never forgive me for putting us in danger.

Tell them she's ours, the dragon demanded.

Ignorant bastard, single-minded as always. Black and white. Right and wrong. She was ours, and that was all there was to be considered. No gray areas, no concern for the other dragons I called my brothers and cousins. They didn't matter. It was all so easy for him.

And what if I did tell them? Like it would matter in the face of the bigger picture. Putting us all in jeopardy. Ten centuries with them had stripped away all illusions. They would care about survival and duty. We had no duty to this girl.

The tunnel was dark, windowless of course, without the lighting or air filtration systems we used in our underground maze. She wouldn't suffocate, but the darkness would become a problem. I would have to bring candles in for her, and bedding which would prove more comfortable than a pile of rags on the floor. It would have to do for the time being. I lowered her carefully, cautiously, still fearing internal injuries.

What was I thinking? Caring about her comfort, hoping I hadn't worsened any invisible bleeding she might be suffering. Digging myself deeper and deeper.

There was no time to think about it. I had to get back to my suite, shower, and dress and make a point of covering up for my absence.

The truck would still be sitting on the road, if it hadn't succumbed to the mudslide, so I had an excuse for coming back empty-handed.

I ran barefoot down the long, dark tunnel which would eventually lead to a wooden door that sealed the cells off from our home.

With any luck, the other side would be empty, and I'd be able to get to my room without notice. If any of the others saw me, they'd want to know why I hadn't used our normal entrance—and, of course, I should have.

I should've flown around to the mouth of the cave and told Cash about the mudslide as though there were no further complications. I was already slipping up, not thinking clearly.

I would have to get my story straight if there was any hope of getting away with keeping my prisoner a secret.

5

Pierce

An hour passed before I could get back with supplies for her. I had to explain what happened to everything I'd purchased at Costco—Fence and Miles offered to go back to look for the truck—and clean myself up before I had a chance to gather things for her.

Blankets, dry clothing which was much too big for her, but at least it was clean, bottled water, candles and flashlights. I had no idea what she'd need, if anything, but it was a start.

She was still unconscious when I arrived. I wished I knew if that was a good or bad thing. Should she still be out like that? Should I wake her?

I made a more comfortable pallet for her and moved her to it, then used my pocket knife to cut the hoodie away from her shoulder rather than trying to pull her arm out of the sleeve.

The caution I used with her, the gentleness she inspired in me... it was all a surprise. I had never been a gentle person. None of us were. There was too much of the dragon in us to concern ourselves with tenderness or caution.

She brought out something in me I wasn't aware of until now.

I was just as gentle when I poured fresh water over the wound to get a better look at it

without dried blood getting in the way. It appeared to have stopped bleeding, but I could see the shoulder joint clearly. The wound was far too deep for me to do anything about it—anything humans were accustomed to doing, at any rate. Sewing, that sort of thing. I wasn't a surgeon, and I had never suffered a wound I couldn't recover from on my own, thanks to my blood.

My blood...

The sound of footsteps further down the tunnel stopped my thoughts in their tracks. There shouldn't have been anyone else here, ever. There was no reason. I moved closer to her, protective.

"I thought so." Smoke and Gate stepped out of the darkness.

Smoke's scowl was clear even with his face still half in shadow. "I heard the noise out here before you showed yourself to us and thought you must've stopped here for some reason."

"You're a regular detective." I , turned back to her.

Well, they knew. It was bound to happen.

Her breathing was shallow and rapid, like she knew she was in danger without being conscious. Just how much danger remained to be seen.

Not much, I hoped. I would hate to have to fight either of them for her sake or any other reason, but I would do it if they pushed me far enough.

"What's she doing here?" Gate demanded, walking into the cell and standing over the two of us. "Where did you find her?"

“She was swept up in the mudslide on the road. Her car was dangling off the cliff. I pulled her out before it went all the way.”

“Why didn’t you just let her go?” he asked.

My head snapped up, and I glared at him.

“Would you be able to sit by and watch a car plunge off a cliff without so much as trying to help?” I whispered, afraid of waking her.

“Knowing that the car was driven by a human? Yeah, I would. Like they’ve ever done anything but hunt our kind.”

“I don’t believe you. I know you would’ve at least tried.”

He didn’t argue. “I sure as hell wouldn’t have brought her here!”

“He’s right,” Smoke agreed, entering the cell.

He was always the voice of reason, the one who measured his words and decisions more carefully than the rest of us. I normally respected that—in the moment, with the girl lying helpless and in need of my protection, my temper flared and the dragon roared inside me.

“Easy for you to say.” I stood up to face the both of them with my hands balled into fists. “I couldn’t leave her to die out there. The road was useless. I had to shift to catch her before she hit the trees—”

“You shifted?” Smoke grunted.

“You let her see you?” Gate’s jaw dropped. His eyes moved, focusing on her.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

“She was unconscious for almost all of it,” I argued, even as I knew my argument was falling flat. They wouldn’t want to hear it. “Hell, she has a cut on her head. I could always tell her she imagined it.”

“If she even wakes up at all,” Gate pointed out, looking at her again. “She’s probably all banged up inside.”

“Look at that wound on her shoulder,” Smoke said, bending to get a better look. “It’s wide open. She’ll get infected. That could kill her.”

“What if I healed her?”

“What if you what?” Gate’s voice boomed in the tiny space. “Have you lost your damn mind? It’s bad enough you brought her here, with us, and let her see your dragon. Now you want to heal her?”

“Why not? Our blood can heal just about anything.”

“Impossible,” Smoke muttered, shaking his head.

“It’s not impossible, and you know it.”

“I don’t mean that it isn’t possible your blood could save her,” he clarified. “It absolutely could, and we all know that. But you can’t save her! You can’t run that risk.”

“Don’t the rest of us mean anything to you?” Gate asked, eyes wide and wild.

“Doesn’t our mission mean anything? I don’t know about you, but I haven’t been living in a fucking cave for the last thousand years, half a world away from the only place I ever thought of as home, protecting something from the ones trying to find it only to have you ruin everything because your cock twitched at the sight of a pretty girl.”

Smoke stepped between us before I got my hands on him.

“Enough. Both of you.” He pushed at me, moving me back a few steps away from Gate, who looked mad enough to kill.

I knew exactly how that felt.

He looked back at my cousin, then at me. “Don’t you see what this has already done? I mean, is this girl’s life worth tearing us all apart this way?”

“It’s not my fault he can’t handle this like an adult,” I growled, staring daggers over Smoke’s shoulder.

Gate glared right back.

“This isn’t like you.” Smoke took my shoulders and steered me slightly, so I was looking at him instead of at Gate. “You’ve always known what’s right, and you’ve acted from that place. You’ve done just as much as anybody else to ensure our safety and the success of our job here. You have to know how potentially dangerous this girl is.”

I couldn’t lie. It would only make things worse. “Yes. You know I do.”

“And yet, she’s here. How can you explain that?”

Tell him she's ours, the dragon ordered.

I could almost see him in my head sometimes, especially when his voice was as clear as it was just then. His presence was so strong, it threatened to overwhelm me. Even so, I couldn't give in. Calling her my mate would only make things worse.

"I suppose I can't explain it," was all I said.

It sounded lame, half-hearted, but I had no choice. It would take a little more time for me to make sense of the conflict tearing me in pieces. I didn't want to speak too soon.

Gate's voice was low, foreboding. "I'm warning you. Don't even try to heal her. You'll only make things worse."

"I'm warning you," I snarled in reply. "Don't warn me. Don't ever try to tell me what to do again. I don't want this to end badly, but it will if you ever try something like that again."

"Enough." Smoke's voice cut through the tension like a whip. He sounded like an exhausted father driven to distraction by his quarrelsome children. "I think the rest of the family should hear about this. Miles and Fence should be back soon, and it's my turn to stand guard after Cash's shift is up. The three of them need to hear about it, too, and we can arrive at a decision once they know."

"I see. This is a democracy now?"

"I thought it always was. Anything one of us does affects the rest of us." He frowned. "When did you forget that? Or was it always a matter of convenience for you?"

I didn't know what I say. I searched for the right words but came up empty.



No matter how my dragon roared and thrashed and demanded satisfaction, my human side couldn't deny the truth of what Smoke was saying.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

There was no excuse for what I was putting the family through except what the dragon was telling me: the girl was my mate, the one I had long since stopped waiting for because I was sure she would never exist—and even if she did, there was the problem of us finding each other when I spent my life in a cave.

“I couldn’t leave her there, and I won’t let her die here.”

Smoke held eye contact for a beat, like he was waiting for me to change my mind or come to my senses. When I didn’t, his shoulders fell along with his expression.

He knew there was no getting through to me. “Fine, then. Gate will be back with the others—it’s my turn to keep watch outside.”

“All right.” I stared at Gate as he left, and he shot me a dirty look.

I wished things didn’t have to devolve the way they had. We weren’t on opposing sides and never had been, but a wedge had suddenly worked its way between us. Maybe between me and the rest of my family. The thought made my heart heavy, but some things meant more than avoiding friction.

Like her.

Every moment her wound was exposed to the dank, moldy air of the cells put her one moment closer to infection, then death. I couldn’t allow that after already risking so much to bring her there, including my relationship with my family.

Just like I couldn’t risk them killing her to protect us.

Would they do that? The dragon in me roared in fury at the thought of it, and it was a struggle to keep my head on straight long enough to think things through.

I could never think straight when he was on the rampage, and just now he wanted me to tear through our home and upend everything in sight.

Especially when I considered that they might, in fact, kill her in order to remove the threat of her alerting the outside world to our presence.

Or let her die. They might overpower me, find a way to subdue me.

One dragon was strong, but five against one was still unfavorable odds, and I had the feeling all five of them would be against me. They could allow her to die in that cell. She wouldn't be the first, only the first in a long time.

I was running out of time. I had to make a decision. As I watched her, lying there on that pile of blankets without another person in the world to stand up for her life, there was no question about what I needed to do.

I lit one of the candles and rinsed the blade of my knife, which I'd just used to cut off that blood-soaked hoodie, then held it over the flame to sterilize it before sliding it across the inside of my wrist.

Instantly, blood flowed from the cut. I wasn't worried about it—I'd heal just as quickly as I healed from everything else. What worried me was getting enough blood onto the girl's wound in time to heal her.

I held my arm over her shoulder and watched as blood poured out, covering her wound.

"Come on," I whispered, watching, waiting for the healing to start. "Come on. Close

up.”

Instead of the muscles and skin knitting themselves together, the way I had imagined it, my blood began to sizzle as it worked its way into her muscles and tendons.

Her eyes flew open just before a soul-searing scream split the silence.

6

Jasmine

I was on fire. My shoulder was burning, exploding in pain, and I wanted to die.

The only thing I could do at first was scream in shock and agony. My whole existence centered around the torture I was going through, all centered in my right shoulder.

“Stop it!” I screamed, beating at the dark figure who hovered above me with my good hand.

It was like hitting solid rock.

He didn’t give—there was no softness to his body. He didn’t flinch, either.

“Please! You’re killing me! Please, stop!” I gritted my teeth as a shriek raced up my throat.

I could hear my voice doubling, tripling, filling the shadows with the sound of my agony.

He moved, finally, to pick up a candle and hold it close to my face.

I recoiled in fear, thinking he was doing it to burn me someplace else, on some other part of my body that he hadn’t already destroyed.

“Stop it!” he ordered in a sharp voice, and I turned my face toward his.

Dark eyes probing mine, looking for answers. Dark hair, smooth, tanned skin. A strong face. A handsome one. The face of a demon because he was torturing me and it would kill me because ohmigod, it hurt more than anything I had ever been through or could ever imagine.

“Please... please, help me. I’m dying...” I couldn’t control my whimpers of pain and panic.

I forced myself to look down at my shoulder and bit back another scream as the sight of my sizzling flesh greeted my eyes.

“I can’t understand you. You’re talking gibberish.”

Of course.

I wasn’t speaking English. He expected me to. And just like that, it all became clear. Every bit of it.

I hadn’t imagined the flight on the dragon’s back. He was the dragon, and he had dragged me to his cave or lair or whatever it was. And he thought his magical blood could heal my wounds.

It would have, if I were human.

All this went through my fevered brain in a flash before I made the deliberate switch to English.

“Please, make it stop,” I whispered, staring up at him through the tears filling my eyes.

I couldn't stop them any more than I could stop the sizzling of my flesh where his blood had touched me.

"What's happening?" he asked, grimacing in horror as he watched the effect his blood had on me. "I've never seen this before! I thought it would help you. I thought you might die if you became infected."

"I wouldn't have died if you hadn't done this," I gasped, turning my head back and forth as a fresh wave of pain tore my brain to pieces.

I would go insane before his toxic blood killed me. How could I hope to keep sane while being tortured?

"What do you mean?"

I barely managed to gasp out my answer. "I'm fae, you stupid jackass!"

His eyes flew open wide. "You're what?"

"Fae. Not human." I writhed in pain, which sent a fresh, stronger wave of fire running through me. "Your blood... it's going to kill me. It's poison to me."

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

Sweat broke out on my forehead, along the back of my neck. I felt it soaking into my hair along with the tears which ran freely down my face.

“How can I save you?”

I shook my head, unable to think through the haze surrounding me.

The burning was starting to spread from my shoulder down to my elbow.

It would eventually spread throughout my body as the effect of his blood had time to work its way through me. It would rot my flesh and shut down my organs.

The thought of waiting to die while I rotted from the inside out was enough to make me consider asking him to kill me straight out. I would beg him to kill me before I'd let death take its time.

Alina.

Alina could save me.

Only I didn't know where I was. I would have to go to her.

“Please, help me get home. I have to get home to my kind. We have a healer. She'll know what to do.”

“That's not possible.”



I was sure I must've heard him wrong.

There was no way he would do what he'd done to me, then deny me the chance to live.

“What do you mean, not possible? They live right outside Roanoke. It's easy to get there—I think, anyway. I don't know where we are exactly.”

“And there's a reason for that,” he replied with a scowl. “You're not supposed to know where we are, and nobody else can know we're here.”

Because he was a dragon.

“Look. I understand. You're who you are, and I'm who I am. Neither of us lives in a safe world. We have to watch out for humans who would put an end to us. I get it.”

I would've said anything to get him to let me go. I would've promised anything in the world. So long as the pain ended.

“You don't understand. There's much more to it than that for me, for my family.”

“Family?”

“Yes. My brothers and cousins. They all live here with me, and none of them will let you go, either.”

It was a nightmare.

I was here, and they wouldn't let me go, and I was living in a nightmare. It was the only reason. Or I died in the car, and I was in hell. Was there such a place? There had to be, because that's where I was just then.

Staring up at a gorgeous, but evil, dragon shifter.

“But... I won’t tell!” I whispered.

I felt myself slipping over the edge of sanity into sheer panic as I reached for him with my good hand, the one whose arm didn’t yet feel like it was I flames.

My hand closed around his wrist, clamping down hard when another wave of pain burned through me. “I swear it. When one of us makes a promise, it’s a solemn oath. It means our very lives. I’m bound to my word. You must believe me.”

His eyes were hard, but there was a spark of something behind them.

Sympathy?

That had to be it. He had gone so far as to share his blood with me in the hopes that he’d save my life. There had to be goodness inside him. I had to play on that, plain and simple.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

“I’m dying,” I whispered, and a tear rolled down my cheek and collected in my hair along with the others.

“I want to help you,” he admitted.

It sounded like saying the words out loud gave him pain—but that pain was nothing compared to what I was going through, so it meant little to me.

“So, please, do. I’ll die here. I’m dying now. I can feel it. The burning... it’s already spreading through my arm.”

His handsome features contorted in a grimace as he fought with himself. Something was still holding him back.

“What do I have to say to convince you?” I asked.

The candle didn’t provide much light, so most of his face was cast in shadow when he looked away.

“There’s nothing you can say,” he muttered. “You have no idea what’s at stake for me.”

“More than my life?” I asked before I winced, grinding my teeth.

I had to control my breathing. I just had to. The more panicked I became, the faster my heart raced and the faster the toxic blood would spread through me.

“That might be how they see it, yes.”

“But it’s not how you see it?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you worked hard to get me out of that car—and you could’ve died, too. The last thing I remember was the mud sweeping the car up and pushing it toward the edge of the road. I was close to the edge. And I bet the car’s somewhere on the forest floor, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t hang around long enough to find out.”

“No. You flew me here. I remember a little bit of that, too.”

“What’s the point of reminding me of these things?”

I would’ve shrugged if I could’ve moved without screaming. As it was, I needed to stay perfectly still if I wanted to speak clearly. I couldn’t move and speak at the same time.

“Because you’ve tried so hard to keep me alive. You can’t let me die like this.”

“There’s nothing I can do. I can’t run the risk of somebody finding out where you are.”

“And I just told you I wouldn’t tell.”

“And I’m telling you if it means nothing to me that you’ve promised this, it’ll mean even less to my family. They already hate me for bringing you here, or they will.”

I couldn't leave. Asking to leave was a waste of time. If he was tough, the rest of the would be tougher.

I wondered how many there were. With my luck, a hundred. All dragons.

His eyes lit up. "I could bring your healer here. Just tell me where to find her, and I can use a blindfold. She won't ever have to see where we're going."

I wanted to jump at the suggestion—but it was no use. I could see why he didn't want to let me leave when it put it that way.

I wasn't about to let any strangers, especially a bunch of dragons, know where my kind lived. We kept ourselves secret for a reason. My heart sank.

"It's useless," I whispered before squeezing my eyes shut.

Two more tears trickled out when I did. At the rate I was crying, I'd die of dehydration before I rotted.

"That's no good, either?" he asked.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

I could hear the disappointment and frustration in his voice.

“No. I can’t tell you where they live.”

“But you would lie there and heap guilt on me for not wanting you to leave. What if I make all the same promises you did? I’ll never tell anybody where your people live. I’ll never breathe a word.”

“You don’t have to be nasty. Not now. Not after what you did to me.” I turned my head away with a groan. “You should’ve let me die.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if you might be right, after all.” He shot up suddenly and walked out of what I realized was a cell, complete with iron bars.

I would’ve called out to him, begged him not to leave me alone there, scared and in pain and worried that things would get a lot worse, if I could’ve called out to him without the pain only getting worse.

I stared up at the ceiling, which looked like it had been carved from solid rock. I needed to distract myself. If I thought about the poison, I’d start to panic again. Panic meant pain.

Who created the cell?

The tunnel I heard the dragon’s footsteps fading down was a long one.

How much more were there?

Did he say that was where they lived?

I couldn't remember—everything was a blur.

I was going to die there.

That much was clear.

7

Pierce

For the firsttime in a thousand years, I punched one of the cave's interior walls. Nothing in all that time had ever taken me to the point of blinding, searing rage.

Nothing until her.

You cannot let her die!The dragon roared in no uncertain terms. He would make sure I heard him—and listened.

Only nothing he said made the first damned bit of difference if she refused to go along.

“She’s the one who wants to die,” I snarled before tightening my hand into a fist and slamming it into the rock again.

It did little to ease my anger and certainly did nothing to harm the wall.

I heard Miles and Fence talking as they came back from salvaging the truck.

“We could use a little help here,” Miles grunted as he carried two boxes full of meat to the kitchen.

I followed, along with Smoke and Gate.



“You sure that’s still safe?” Smoke asked.

“Oh, yeah. It’s cold. But I guess we could always have Pierce go back for more once the road’s clear,” he joked. His smile faded when he saw the obvious tension between Gate and me. “What did I miss?”

“I’ll leave this in the walk-in for now.” Gate carried the meat to the walk-in refrigerator. We needed something that big to contain the amount of meat the six of us went through.

“Coming through!” Fence dropped two boxes of various supplies on the floor. “Whew. That mudslide was no joke. I’m sorry, buddy, but your truck’s a total loss. It was up to the windows and starting to seep inside.”

“There’s a bigger issue right now.” Smoke threw a glance my way.

“You could say that.” Gate came in rubbing his hands together to warm them.

“I wish you would keep your opinion to yourself until everybody has a chance to hear the story,” I growled.

“What story?” Fence looked around the room. “I swear, you go out to salvage what you can after a mudslide, then come back to something like this.”

“I’ll cut right to the chase. A girl was trapped in the mudslide. I saved her before her car went over the edge and brought her back here.”

“You what?” Miles’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah, yeah, it was a no-no. You don’t have to tell me.”

“But you did it anyway?” Fence looked around like he was trying to make sense and hoping one of them could help him. None of them could.

“I hope you don’t think you’ll keep her here like some sort of pet,” Miles said, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“It’s worse than that,” Gate chimed in. “He wants to heal her, rather than just letting her die.”

“What if she lives and she reveals us?” Miles moaned, slapping his forehead with the heel of his hand.

“It’s worse than that,” I confessed. “She won’t try to reveal us—at least, I don’t believe she would—because she has secrets of her own which she’s trying to keep.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that she’s fae.”

The kitchen erupted. “You rescued one of them?” From Miles’s voice, he might as well have been talking about a rodent.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:11 am*

“You know as well as I do that there’s no way to tell just by looking, and vice versa. I didn’t know she was fae until...” I realized I’d just incriminated myself, but it was too late.

“Until when?” Gate’s whisper was cold, menacing.

I squared my shoulders and looked each of them in the eye as the dragon in me roared in defiance.

Let them try to punish us, he growled, straining for a good fight.

We hadn’t been in a good fight in far too long, and it didn’t matter that we were facing our family. He wanted to draw blood over the girl.

“Until I tried to heal her, just now. When we were alone again.”

It was as if I’d just dropped a bomb. The four of them stared at me, slack-jawed.

Smoke was the first to recover. “Why would you do that?”

I could see how hard he worked to keep himself under control. His dragon wanted justice just like mine wanted blood.

Gate exploded before I had the chance to reply, hurling himself across the room.

Miles barely caught him in time to prevent a brawl.

“Let him come!” I shouted over the chaos.

Smoke reached my side in an instant.

“Calm yourself,” he warned.

I shook off the arm he threw in front of me.

“No! He’s the one who needs to be calm!” I looked across the room to where Miles and Fence had Gate cornered. “What is it with you?”

“With me? You’re the one putting our lives at risk, and you’re asking me what my problem is?”

“Gate, come on,” Smoke called out. “It’s not that serious. Not yet. We have to cool ourselves off if we want to move past this.”

“There is no moving past this!” he exclaimed with a laugh.

“That’s up to you.”

“Come on,” Fence said, glancing my way. “This isn’t the end of the world. Pierce was doing what he thought was right.”

“You’re on his side now?”

“I didn’t know there were sides. I thought we were all in this together.”

“I thought we were, too,” Gate sneered. “Until one of us started making major decisions without asking any of the others what they thought. Bringing outsiders in here after all this time. What have we been working to protect, then, if this is

possible? Why have we held ourselves back from the rest of the world all this time if things were always going to come to this in the end?"

For the first time, I heard the desperation in his voice.

It never occurred to me that some of us might've taken our solitude better than others. Would I have rather been with others every so often?

Yes, but not enough for it to get under my skin and stay there.

Gate clearly didn't feel the same.

I nodded to Smoke in reassurance that I wouldn't start a fight.

He backed away to give me room to move.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Listen,” I said, holding my hands up in a defensive gesture but also to show him I meant no harm, “all I know is that the girl needed help. You know how it is with us. You wouldn’t have been able to let her go over the cliff any more than I would. None of us would’ve stood idly by and allowed another person to die that way. There wasn’t any time to think.”

I sighed, letting my hands drop. “But it’s more than that. There’s something... something about her. I don’t know what. My dragon seems to know, or at least have an idea.”

“You mean...” Fence’s eyes lit up. “Your mate?”

“Impossible,” Miles shook his head. “It’s been too long for that. We’re all too old.”

“We’re still breathing. We’re not too old. And hey, I don’t know that I believe it any more than you. Truly. But the dragon wanted this. For us to save her. To heal her. In the moment...” I shook my head, looking at the floor rather than looking any of them in the eye.

We didn’t exactly hang around, discussing feelings all the time. It was new for me to share with them how I felt on a deeper level. I had to search for the right words to explain something I didn’t fully understand.

“In the moment, there was nothing else to do. I felt desperate. Like everything hinged on her living.”

“And now?” Gate didn’t sound any less furious, but at least he wasn’t challenging me

to a brawl.

“Now? I still feel the same way.” My mind went back to her in the cell, suffering. “Only there may not be anything else I can do for her. Did any of you know that our blood is toxic to the fae?”

“You mean, you’ve poisoned her?” Smoke asked.

“Something like that. I’m not sure. She says I did, and her shoulder looked worse than it had when I left her. Not that it matters,” I added with a growl. “She wants a healer. I’ve already told her there’s no way for her to leave, but when I offered to bring somebody here, blindfolded even, she refused that as well. She won’t tell us where they live.”

“Just like we can’t let anyone know where we are,” Miles mused. He looked sorry for me. I wished he wouldn’t.

“If she won’t allow you to help her, there’s nothing you can do.” Gate shrugged. “I’m sorry. I am. But maybe this is the way things are meant to be.”

“Can’t you see it’s impossible for me to accept that?”

“You may not have a choice,” Smoke pointed out, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, but you can’t force her. If the prospect of death isn’t enough, what is?”

“I wish I knew.” I looked around, desperate for them to understand. “I wish you knew what it means to go through something like this. I’m powerless, but the dragon won’t let her go. He keeps telling me there’s got to be some way to save her, because she’s ours.”

“It means that much to you?” Fence asked.

“You would know if you’d ever been through it. I can’t shut him up. It’s never been like this before.” I held my head in my hands, as if that would block out the incessant demands of the beast within me.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the girl in the cell, her big, luminous green eyes staring straight into my soul. That morning, I hadn’t known she existed.

Standing in the kitchen with my family, I knew in a deep and unfamiliar part of my heart that the world wouldn’t be the same without her in it.

“I could talk to her, see if there’s any way we can meet in the middle—though I can’t imagine a middle ground right now,” Smoke mused. “It’s one or the other. Live or die.”

“No. I don’t want you involved in this—not that I don’t trust you or believe in you,” I added when a frown touched his face. “If she dies before we can get help to her, I wouldn’t want you to feel like it was your fault. I brought her here, and I’ll handle the consequences.”

One corner of Gate’s mouth quirked up in disbelief. “Easy for you to say right now.”



8

Jasmine

I didn't know what was real and what wasn't anymore. Was I still in the cell? Had the dragon let me go? Sometimes I would open my eyes, and I'd be outside, in the sunshine, soaking the rays into my skin and letting the energy flow through me.

The sun always rejuvenated us—my sister called us “solar powered,” and we would laugh about it. I used to feel sorry for humans, knowing the sun didn't do for them what it did for me. But they didn't know any better, and creatures who didn't know what they were missing weren't suffering.

All was well. The pain was just a dim memory. It was a beautiful day, and Papa just held a meeting of all his advisors, so Alina and I had slipped out of the house—it was so boring in there—and gone off together to explore some of the crumbling old outbuildings along the edges of the property.

We weren't supposed to go there, not alone, but what Papa and all his advisors didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Alina was running just ahead of me, giggling and whispering to me to run faster. I could never quite keep up. Her hair, so blonde it was nearly white, streamed behind her like a flag.

I must have tried to move in my sleep—or was it a hallucination? The movement sent a fresh bolt of agony up my arm and down my right side. It was spreading. What was spreading? I wasn't sure. Some part of me knew, but I didn't want to think about that.

We were having too much fun. Where was Alina? How did I end up in a cave? Were there caves on the property? I had never seen any or heard of them, but they had to be there if I was in one.

“Alina?” I shouted, but it came out as a hoarse whisper. She would never be able to hear me.

I closed my eyes, and I was with her again. She popped out from behind what remained of an old stone cottage.

“I’m right here, silly,” she laughed before disappearing again.

I tried to follow her, but the ground was all covered in weeds and tangled vines. They kept catching my feet, wrapping around my ankles, tripping me and threatening to pull me down.

“Alina, help me!” I scream-whispered, falling.

She was far away by now. She didn’t know I needed her. No matter how hard I fought or how loud I tried to scream, it didn’t matter. She was too far.

My head rolled from side to side, and the images got all mixed up. I was outside, I was inside. It was dark, it was light. I didn’t know where I was for sure. I didn’t know how to get home. Sweat rolled down my neck, between my breasts. I groaned when I tried to move my arm, and it felt like trying to lift lead. Burning, boiling lead.

I opened my eyes, and there was that ceiling again, high above my head. I could barely make it out in the fading candlelight. It was burning low.

I had been in and out for a long time. I raised my good hand—attached to an arm which was heavier than it should’ve been, which told me the poison blood was

spreading—and touched my forehead.

My hand came back slicked with sweat. A fever. That would explain the dream.

I jumped at the sound of a throat being cleared.

“Who’s there?” I gasped.

My throat was so dry. My mouth, too. My tongue was like sandpaper. A very tall, very hulking figure emerged from the shadows on the other side of the cell and came closer.

“I’m called Smoke.” He knelt beside me and frowned when he saw the condition of my shoulder. “That doesn’t look good at all.”

Be careful. Remember what the other one said: it doesn’t matter to them whether you live or die.

I licked my dry, cracked lips. “It... doesn’t feel good, either.” Just that little bit of speaking left me winded. This couldn’t go on much longer, and I knew it.

So did he. I could see it written on his face. “What’s your name?”

“Jasmine.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

“And I’m about to die in this cave. Who could’ve predicted it?”

He frowned. “You don’t have to die, you know.”

“I thought you didn’t care.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

He sighed like a man forced to admit something he wasn't proud of. "Frankly? I don't."

"Charming," I grimaced.

"But Pierce does. My brother. He cares. Which means it matters."

Pierce. He looked like a Pierce, too. "Your words don't matter. If he won't let me leave, he can't care very much."

"If you're not willing to let us fetch your healer, you must not care very much, either."

I shot him a withering look—to my surprise, he smiled. "See how that works? It goes both ways."

I wanted to tell him how wrong he was, but it wasn't possible. He made a good point. I couldn't believe I had to die because my clan would never forgive me for announcing our location.

It was also unfair, and I wasn't thinking clearly which only made my sense of anger and injustice worse. "I wish it would just happen, then. I wish I would just die. I can't take the pain anymore."

"My brother would never forgive me or the others if he knew we didn't do everything in our power to help you." His forehead creased in a frown. "Are you sure there's nothing that can be done? Did he float the idea of a blindfold past you?"

“Yes.”

“And? Your healer would never need to know.”

“But you would know where my clan lives.”

“Damn it.” He punched his palm. “I can see why he was so angry with you.”

“Was he?”

“You have no idea. You have a way of getting to him. I didn’t understand it until now.” He reached for a bottle of water and uncapped it, then lifted it to my mouth. “Here. You look thirsty—your lips are cracking.” It was a brief respite in the middle of my agony. “Jasmine. You’re right. You’re going to die. It doesn’t look as though you have much time left. Do you really want to die? Don’t think about the pain right now. Think about... your life.” When I finished drinking what little I could get down my throat, he lowered the bottle. “Is your life so bad that you don’t care what happens to it?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I don’t want to die. I want the pain to end, but I don’t want to die.”

“I thought so.” He looked out through the bars, down the tunnel.

I could just make out the sound of footsteps as someone approached.

Smoke jumped up and moved to the other side of the cell. Like he didn’t want whoever was coming—likely Pierce—to see us so close together.

Why was that?

Sure enough, it was Pierce who entered the cell.

I saw the resemblance between him and his brother, though Smoke seemed kinder. Or saner, maybe.

Instead of glaring at me, he glared at his brother. “You came in here to convince her to talk to me?” he growled.

“What if I did?”

“I told you not to.”

“I chose to go ahead on my own,” Smoke smoothly replied.

Muscles jumped in Pierce’s jaw. “So, what? You don’t trust me to get her to come around on my own?”

“You weren’t doing a very good job up to this point,” Smoke reminded him.

I almost smiled--if I’d had the strength, I would have. I would’ve said the same thing if they weren’t both ignoring me. I wanted to remind them who they were talking about, but that would’ve meant expending energy I didn’t have.

My life was slipping away.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

When Pierce turned to look down at me, I could've sworn his eyes were about to burn holes in my head. "I thought you didn't care," he said, still speaking to Smoke.

"I told you I don't. I meant it. I thought I might do something decent on your behalf."

"You don't have to do me any favors."

I held his gaze, as much as I wanted to give it up and die then and there. To close my eyes and let things happen as they would.

For some reason, he made me want to hold on. Not to give him what he wanted, though. Almost to spite him. He was so nasty, and there was so much venom in his stare.

I gathered all my strength. "Promise me something."

"What is it?"

"That none of you will harm my clan if I tell you where to find them."

His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. "You're going to tell me?"

"Swear, first. Swear no harm will come to them. You'll leave them alone and only take the healer. You'll bring her here with your blindfold, but nothing else—I mean, nothing to subdue her, nothing to make her sleep. Nothing to hurt her. Understand? You have to swear it."



He nodded. "I swear. You have my vow."

I shifted my eyes to look at Smoke. "You, too. Swear it."

"I swear."

"And you'll never go back there, unless it's to return the healer. And when you do, again, you'll cause them no harm, and you'll never, ever tell where you found them. Swear it."

"We swear."

I couldn't believe what was about to come out of my mouth. But it was the only way I would live through the day. "My sister. Alina. She's the healer. She lives with my clan outside Roanoke, as I told you before. I can give you the location. It's a big house, an old one, deep in the woods. There are no other homes for miles around it, and humans tend to pass it by thanks to the charms we placed on it when we settled there. But you'll be able to see it. I think."

"You think?" Pierce asked.

"I wouldn't exactly know for sure, would I? You're the first dragons I've ever known." He had a way of bringing out the worst in me without trying. At least, it didn't seem like he tried.

"We'll do our best." Smoke pulled Pierce's arm, leading him out of the cell. "How will we know her when we find her?"

"She looks like me, but her hair is blonde. There's a tower at all four corners of the house, and her room is in the west wing, facing the lake. It's where she keeps her potions and herbs, too, and she spends most of her time there."

The discussion exhausted me. I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, so I let them close. The pain was still there, still as strong as ever. Sleeping would make it better...

“We'll be as fast as we can, Jasmine.”

I decided I liked Smoke a little more than I liked Pierce right then, if only because he seemed concerned.

Pierce, on the other hand, seemed irritated. Put out. Like it was my fault we ended up in this mess.

But didn't Smoke say he only cared because Pierce cared so much, I asked myself as I slid into unconsciousness.

9

Pierce

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked as we pulled up to the area where we’d find Jasmine’s home, And her kind.

I couldn’t see a house anywhere nearby, but the trees were thick enough to hide just about anything.

“You’re the one who almost killed that girl, and she seems to matter a lot to you.” Smoke slammed the door once he stepped out of the Jeep.

It was the only vehicle we owned which would allow us to make it up and down the mountain without use of the main road.

“She does. I just wanted to be sure you were up for what we’re about to do.” I fell in step beside him as we left the winding road which cut through the middle of the woods and made our way through the even darker darkness under the crisscrossing branches above our heads. “You can wait in the car if it would make you feel better.”

“Since when have I ever stood down in the face of a fight?” he asked. “If anything, it’s been too long since the last one.”

“You’re right—though I doubt this will be a fight,” I added. “I mean, there’s nothing either of us can’t handle.”

“Even so, there’s no way of trusting the fae.” He eyed me up. “You’re sure you can trust her?”

“I’m sure.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I know Sunday follows Saturday?” I asked, exasperated. “You’re driving me crazy with all these questions, and I have enough on my mind.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asked anyway, like I hadn’t spoken at all.

“I can’t explain it. You know how strong our instincts are. It’s the same with this. My instincts tell me she’s the one I’ve been waiting for. She’s my mate.”

“I’m glad for you, if that’s the case. I just wish she were somebody a little less complicated.”

“You and me both.” And she was dying as we discussed the matter. “We need to hurry.”

“We’re already practically running.” He looked around, back and forth, scowling. “We’re supposed to have arrived. I mean, this is supposed to be it.”

We were standing on the edge of a clearing, trees towering above us, and all around the circle of empty land lit by the nearly full moon. “Well, somebody cleared this at some point,” I said, squinting hard. “I don’t understand. Shouldn’t we be able to see it?”

“You would think, right? I was sure we would be able to.”

Desperation left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Jasmine was dying. She needed us. Me.

“I have an idea,” I whispered when inspiration struck.

“Please. Feel free to share. I’m at a loss.”

The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on me. He was normally the one with all the answers.

“I’m about to feel like a real ass,” I muttered before walking straight forward.

I hoped the darkness was enough to conceal my movements as I crossed the clearing with my hands stretched out in front of me at waist level. I hoped they would catch the wall before my face did.

I hadn’t walked a hundred paces before something stopped me.

Something hard, unyielding, though there was nothing in front of my face but open space.

I blinked.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

What had just been open space had become a wall. A stone wall. A tall, stone-and-mortar wall.

I shook my head to clear it a little, just in case I was imagining things.

I wasn't.

I turned to find Smoke running up to me.

"Holy shit!" he breathed. "It appeared out of nowhere, as soon as I saw you hit it!"

"Glad I wasn't walking any faster than I was."

We crouched down and made our way to the back of the building to get a better idea of what we were dealing with.

The size of the place was staggering. It was easily the length of two football fields and six stories high. There was a tower at each of the four corners, just as Jasmine had said.

I wondered how old the place was—time had worn the stones smooth long before tonight.

Only a few of the windows were lit, and we crawled beneath them.

I didn't hear any voices coming from in there and couldn't help but imagine them lying in wait for us. Was that it? Were they waiting to attack? Like spiders in a web.

“Which tower was it supposed to be,” Smoke whispered.

“The west wing, facing the lake.” I looked to my right. “The lake’s that way, and west is...”

“This way.” Smoke led the way to the tower in question.

The roof was easily a hundred feet off the ground and maybe even two hundred.

My depth perception was all out of whack, and I would’ve bet it had something to do with the numerous charms cast on the mansion.

I touched one of the large, smooth stones to solidify it for myself.

A light glowed in the top of the tower.

“That must be her,” I whispered. “You ready?”

I looked over to find him already climbing, using the stones as handholds. I scrambled to catch up. Soon, we were each at a separate window without so much as breaking a sweat.

She was in there.

A beautiful girl who looked a lot like her sister, except for the hair. While Jasmine’s was a flaming red, hers was wheat-blond. She tossed it over one shoulder before bending over a table, hands working at something I couldn’t make out. She was barefoot, wearing a simple, linen dress. A creature of nature, fae, as her title implied.

I leaned back to look at my brother, who stared in the window like a Peeping Tom. He practically drooled.

I blew a short, sharp whistle through my teeth to get his attention, and he nearly fell from the wall, but it got him looking at me.

I jerked my head in her direction, eyebrows raised, and he nodded.

The windows were both hinged on either side, two panes meeting in the middle.

I swung the glass open and hauled myself inside the round, stone-floored room.

She whirled around with a gasp, eyes round with terror.

The girl must have been deeply involved in her work to escape noticing two grown men hanging outside her window.

“Who are you?” she breathed, looking back and forth, back and forth. Every inch of her body was coiled like a spring, tense with fear.



## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

I held my hands up. “We’re not here to hurt you, Alina.”

“How do you know my name?” Her voice was deep, warm, but breathy. Musical.

“Your sister sent us. She’s very sick and needs your help.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Really? What’s her name, then?”

“Jasmine. She looks just like you, but she has red hair. And until this morning, she drove a rusty, two-door car which was swept off the side of a mountain by a mudslide.”

Her already pale skin went white as a sheet of paper. “Is she...?”

“Alive. I got her out of the car before she went over, but she’s badly injured. Very sick. There’s poison in her blood.”

“Poison?” She looked at Smoke, needing clarification.

“It’s a long story, Alina. We need you to come with us as fast as possible. She’s rotting inside—her words, not mine. She said you would know what to use in a case like this.”

“Where is she?”

“Our home,” I explained. “Not terribly far from here, but far enough. We couldn’t risk bringing her because the drive is too rough, with the main road washed out as it

is. You'll have to get everything together and come with us. Now."

It was mostly a lie, but I had to give her something she would believe long enough to come with us.

She didn't hesitate. I had to give her credit for that—I liked a person who could act decisively, and there was never a better time for it than now.

Glass-doored cabinets stood against the walls, holding a number of vials and jars and tubes. Some of them even glowed in deep, jewel tones. I couldn't imagine what use she would have for so many potions and elixirs. The scent of herbs hung heavy in the room, ready to be used for filling even more jars.

She pulled out a canvas apron and unrolled it until it was flat on an unused table. There were pockets sewn in which she filled with bottle after bottle, jar after jar. Along with them, she packed clean cloths and bandages.

All the while, she muttered under her breath.

"Told her and told her about going off on her own, but would she listen? No. And what happened? She got herself into exactly the sort of situation I've been warning her about for years. Driving that piece of shit car around on a mountain."

Smoke snorted at that, then coughed as if he was trying to cover it up.

"Hurry, please. She was already close to..."

"Death?" Alina whirled around like she did when we first entered the room, a jar of what looked like mud in one hand.

"I didn't want to use that word, but yes."

“My stars.” She swallowed hard, but kept moving. “Why did you have to break in like this? Why couldn’t you ring the doorbell?”

“That’s a long story, too, and I’ll be happy to tell you anything you want to know when we’re on our way.”

Yes, I was sure Smoke would be happy as hell to talk to her for hours.

I couldn’t ignore the way his eyes followed her every movement.

“Who are you?” She wrapped up the apron and slid it into a bag which she slung across her back.

“It’s a—”

“Long story. Yes. I know. But I think you should clue me in before I leave my home with you.”

“And we can’t tell you until we leave.” I untied the bandana from around my wrist. “Also, you have to wear this.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Alina. Please. Your sister is dying, and she needs your help.” Smoke took the bandana from me—wrenched it away, more like—and held it out to her. “She told us where to find you. She told us you’re a healer. And yes, we know you’re a member of the fae. We mean you no harm, but there are those in your world who would wish us harm. And we can work this all out later, but for now, you need to put on the damn blindfold and come with us. Quickly.”

She blinked.

They held each other’s gaze for an endless moment.

“Fine.” She pulled it from his hand and tied it over her eyes and around her head.

Smoke examined her closely, probably more closely than he needed to, to be sure she couldn’t see. Finally, he shrugged.

“All right. Come on. You’ll have to go down the wall on one of our backs.”

“I’ll what?”

It didn’t matter if she was skeptical. I took her by the hand and led her to the window.

“We need to leave.” I did the deciding for her, turning my back and wrapping her arms around my neck before doing the same with her legs around my waist. “There’s no doubt the two of you are related,” I grumbled as I climbed out the window.

“What’s... that... mean?” she asked through gasps for air. Her heart beat wildly

against my back as I climbed down the tower wall.

“She never stops asking questions and stalling, either.”

We were on the ground in no time at all, but I couldn’t let her go with the blindfold still on.

“Hold on tight, now.”

She did as I asked, to the point where I wondered if she was trying to strangle me. She would once she knew what I had done to Jasmine.

“How did you do that?” she asked as Smoke and I ran through the woods.

“Do what?”

“Climb up and down like it was nothing? And with me on your back?”

“You don’t weigh very much,” I pointed out.

“I don’t respond to flattery, so don’t waste your time.”

Smoke snorted again. “I’ll tell you about it in the car. I promise. So long as you don’t touch that blindfold.”

“I won’t.”

“Your sister’s life depends on it.”

“I said, I won’t.”

And she wouldn't. Her heart beat faster than ever at the mention of Jasmine. She loved her sister, was devoted to her.

Good thing. We would need that.

I helped her into the back seat and rolled my eyes when Smoke climbed in beside her instead of driving, as he had to get us there.

"I guess I'll drive," I muttered, getting behind the wheel and hitting the gas the moment the engine turned over. It was better that way—my brother drove like an old woman most of the time. He'd never go fast enough for me.

"All right. I'm in the car. Can you tell me now who you are and why I'm wearing this damn thing?"

"Promise you won't flip out," Smoke implored.

"You're asking for a lot of promises."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“We’re dragons,” I announced, cutting the wheel hard to the left as I turned onto the road leading to the mountains.

A dark road, little traveled, perfect for me to tear down at breakneck speed. I heard Alina and Smoke grunt as they crashed together behind me.

“You’re what?” she shrieked. “And slow down a little! You’ll kill us before we get there!”

“Dragon shifters,” I clarified. “And I didn’t know your sister was fae before I tried to heal her with my blood.”

“You what?” Her voice pierced my ears, just like the accusation in it pierced my soul. “I thought you said you saved her!”

“I did, but she had a gaping shoulder wound. You’ll see what I mean when you get there. I was afraid of infection. I didn’t know she wasn’t human—you didn’t know what we were when you first saw us, did you?”

“Dragon blood. No wonder she’s dying. Go faster!”

“I thought you wanted him to slow down!” Smoke shouted over the roar of the engine.

“That was before I knew what you did to her! Go! Go!”

I went.

It took the better part of two hours for Smoke and I to get to the mansion. It only took me forty-five minutes to get back up the mountain and into the cave.

Smoke led a still-blindfolded Alina while I ran ahead.

Please be alive please be alive please be alive.

The dragon in me was silent for the first time in forever while my own silent prayer ran on repeat.

Miles was in there, and he didn't look hopeful. But he didn't try to stop me from rushing in, either, which told me she was still alive.

And she was. Barely, but she was. Her chest rose up and down slowly, so slowly. But she was breathing.

"We're back," I whispered, stroking the side of her face before I could stop myself. "Jasmine, I brought Alina to you. She'll help you."

"She's been muttering to herself for hours," Miles murmured from the doorway. "Dripping sweat, too. But I don't think she was ever conscious."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing," I whispered, still touching her face.

She was hot as the hood of my truck on an August afternoon. I could only hope she wasn't already too far gone.

"Here she is." Smoke guided Alina into the cell before removing her blindfold.

She blinked hard as her eyes adjusted, then looked around. When she saw Jasmine, she let out a cry of dismay and fell to her knees, going through her bag to pull out the



potions.

“I can’t believe you did this to her,” she spat, glancing at me with hate in her eyes.

“Do you think you can heal her?”

“I’ll do my very best. But I’ll need you to help me.”

“I’ll do anything.”

She nodded. “You’re damn right, you’ll do anything. You nearly killed my sister—and you still might have, at that.”

10

Jasmine

“Jasmine? Wake up. It’s me. I’m here.”

I could hear Alina—but was she real? I’d spent hours going in and out. Or was it minutes? There was no way of knowing. Time was something I had lost the ability to keep track of. I tried to open my eyes, but it was no use.

“I don’t even know if she can hear me,” Alina whispered.

I heard a lot of movement, and I knew she would be rushing around the cell—lighting candles, checking on her supplies, making sure she had enough of what she needed before she got started. I could see her in my mind’s eye as clearly as if I were watching.

I licked my lips and struggled to get air into my lungs, which felt like they didn’t want to expand anymore. They were giving up.

“I... hear... you...” I croaked out.

My voice was barely audible and reminded me of nails on a chalkboard. Harsh, cringe-worthy.

“Hold on,” Alina urged. She took my hand. “Squeeze. Show me you still have some strength left.”

I tried, but it was no use. Just touching her was painful. I let out a weak whimper, and she let go.

“You barely brought me back with enough time,” she snapped.

I wondered who she was snapping at. Which one of them. Did they both come in with her? Were the rest of them there? Did they all want to see me die? Would it be entertainment for them? I whimpered again.

“It’s all right, Jas,” my sister whispered.

“Alina... please...”

“I’m going to take care of you,” she replied. There were tears in her voice. “Just hold on a little longer, and I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt anymore.” She whispered instructions and feet shuffled back and forth once she did.

She was angry. Beyond angry. Enraged. She saw what Pierce’s blood had done to me. If I’d had the strength, I would’ve urged her to hold onto her temper long enough to save me.

“Jasmine? I’m here.” Pierce’s voice, close to my ear. “I want you to know I didn’t intend this. Please, know that I didn’t. I wanted to save you.”

“I know.” I did know. I could feel it. He thought he was doing the right thing, and I couldn’t blame him for that.

It wasn’t his fault that we couldn’t tell each other’s true nature at first glance.

“Here. Drink this. For the pain.”

I couldn't have opened my mouth faster.

Alina touched the edge of a small bottle to my lips, and a cool, almost minty liquid poured out into my mouth. I swallowed carefully, my throat swollen, and within moments the pain faded away. It was there, and then it wasn't. I would have wept if I could've managed it.

There was a reason why I had to drink the painkiller first, and I knew it a minute later.

"I need you to prop her up," she instructed. "Put your knees under her shoulders. I have to get closer to the wound."

If it weren't for that blessed, beautiful numbness, I would've felt every bit of, and it might have been what finally pushed me over the edge into the great beyond.

As it was, I still felt minor discomfort when Pierce lifted me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered when I winced.

I only shook my head to show him it didn't matter. I rested in his lap, with the smell of him all around me and the warmth of his body under me.

"Hold the candles closer," Alina muttered. "Damn, if she wasn't in such bad shape, I would've moved her someplace else."

She touched my shoulder, and I barely made out the sensation of her applying a foul-smelling paste to my wound.

I turned my face away with a shudder.

“It’s all right,” Pierce said, stroking my hair. “You’ll be better soon. Just relax as best you can for now.”

“That’s right, Jasmine. Listen to him.” Alina’s voice was as soft and seductive as a lover’s kiss, and I knew in the back of my mind that this was all part of the healing even as the rest of me sank willingly under her spell.

She was comfort and calm and peace. She was an end to pain.

All I had to do was follow the sound of her voice while Pierce’s strong-but-gentle touch lulled me. It was so good to be without pain again. I had almost forgotten there was such a feeling.

11

Jasmine

When I woke up, time had passed. A lot of it. Enough so that when my eyes opened, and I looked around, I was no longer staring up at the ceiling of a hand-carved stone cell. The ceiling was a warm white, with lightbulbs mounted inside. They gave off a warm glow. It was pleasant, comforting. And completely foreign.

I turned my head to the side. A bed. I was in an actual bed. A comfortable one, too. It cradled me the way I imagined a cloud would.

The room around me was much bigger than the cell, and completely modern. A flat-screen TV on the wall, a sound system mounted underneath. On the wall beside the door was a screen which gave readouts of all sorts of information: weather, the date, the time, the temperature inside the room. The walls were painted in a soft gray, while the bedding was deep blue and white.

I ran my hands over it, relishing its softness.

I realized I was moving without pain. It didn't hurt at all. Was I still drugged? I had to be, unless I'd slept for an entire week. I squinted carefully and concentrated on reading the date and time. If memory served, the accident took place on a Wednesday morning. According to the screen, it was Thursday afternoon. A long sleep, for sure, but not enough time for me to have healed completely.

I was wearing a thin, cotton shirt which was at least four sizes too large and

practically floated around me. It made checking out my shoulder easier—it practically hung out of the loose neck hole.

I could hardly believe how quickly my muscles had started to repair. Skin covered the wound again, too. There was a lot of discoloration, but it was no longer rotting. I was sure I had never been so relieved to see anything.

A slow, gentle stretch told me there was still a lot of discomfort and tightness, but I could move without nearly passing out from the pain. It was an improvement.

I got up slowly and walked to the display on the wall. Was there a lock on there somewhere? How was I supposed to get out of the room? And where was this room, anyway? Not a hospital, certainly. It would've made sense if I were still in the caves with Pierce, but this room was a pretty serious departure from the cell I remembered.

There was an open door to my right—curiosity drew me to it and through it into a bathroom even nicer than those at the mansion.

A set of marble steps led to the sunken tub with its whirlpool jets, surrounded by candles. Four glass walls outlined a shower stall large enough for a half-dozen people to use at once. The floor was comfortably warm under my feet. Heated? A nice touch.

I couldn't still be in the cave. No way was there anything this luxurious under that mountain. Even so, there was something about the place that I couldn't put my finger on. Something off. I stood still and held my breath to listen closely.

And I heard it. A subtle, gentle dripping. Water was dripping and trickling through the walls, the ceiling, even under my feet. There was a groaning, too, the sound of tons of rock pressing down on another few tons of earth.

I'd heard it in the cell, when I was so sure I was going to die.

I was in the same place—just not the same area.

It felt like a stupid thing to do, but I had to do something. “Hello?” I turned in a circle, eyes searching my surroundings. No cameras, no speakers. No handle on the door. So there was little chance of anybody watching me, but no chance of getting out of here.

Little hairs stood straight up on the back of my neck. Had Alina saved my life only for me to spend the rest of it locked in a very comfortable prison?

There was noise on the other side of the bedroom door. Panic pushed a breathless scream up through my throat—I was just about to open my mouth and let it out when the door slid open, and a smiling Alina walked in.

“I didn’t think you’d be up and around so soon!” She came to me, took my face in her hands and peered closely. “You look good. Your eyes are clear, your color’s back.”

“Where—where are we?” I whispered, closing my hands over hers.

Lines creased her smooth forehead as her brows knitted together. “We’re still with them.”

I didn’t need to ask who she meant.

“You’re staying here, too?”

“Sure. I have the room next door.” She grinned. “This is pretty sweet, huh? Who would guess they lived like this?”

I didn’t want to hear about it. “When will we be allowed to leave?”



Her smile faded. “You should be more concerned with getting better.”

“I feel fine.”

“I know you feel that way, but that’s because I’ve been dripping tonic down your throat every four hours since I got here. Your last dose was...” She checked out the screen beside the door. “It’s only been two hours, give or take. You’ll start feeling different in another hour or so.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired,” I groaned.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with my bedside manner yesterday,” she muttered before turning me in place and pushing me in the direction of the bed.

“Thanks for reminding me. I would rather not think about yesterday, if you don’t mind.” I settle back in, though I didn’t want to. I wanted sunlight and fresh air. I wanted movement. I didn’t want to lie in bed—even when it was almost sinfully comfortable.

“Maybe it’s better if you give yesterday a little thought, even if you don’t want to.” She tucked me in absentmindedly, talking as she did. “You’re the one who insisted on driving around when you knew it was going to rain buckets all day long. You shouldn’t have been out, especially not in that tiny little excuse for a car.”

“Ugh. My car.” I rolled my eyes and let my head drop onto the pillow. “It’s gone for good.”

“I can’t pretend I’m upset for you.”

“No, and I wouldn’t expect you to,” I muttered.

“Papa never wanted you to drive that thing.”

“I’m sure Papa would have been glad to know it’s a snarl of twisted metal now. It’ll probably make a nice little home for a family of skunks.” I had to chuckle, even though the thought of being without my car made me miserable.

It was my only connection to something real, something beyond the world I had been raised in. The world that had always held fascination for me.

“I’ll sleep better at night knowing you’re not on some dark, unmarked road in that rusty old thing.”

“No. I’ll be here. In this cave.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “When can we leave?”

She grimaced. “I don’t know. Not until you’re better, at any rate.”

“When will that be?”

“I can’t tell the future.”

“You’re evading the question.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She whispered, too, leaning in close. “I don’t know if they’re going to let us go. Or when.”

My heart froze for a second before beating again. Just the thought of living here forever... “No. That can’t be.”

“Tell them. They make it sound like we’ll be here forever. And they’re not happy about it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were.”

I pushed her away with surprising strength, considering what I had just been through,

and stormed over to the closed door. “How do I get out of this room?”

“Jasmine, you shouldn’t—”

“How?” I looked at the screen beside the door and finally noticed the button labeled OPEN. I jabbed my finger against it, and the door slid open.

“Jasmine, you should be resting.” Alina closed a hand around my elbow which I shook off.

No way was I about to allow them or anybody to keep me prisoner.

“I’ll rest later. Where are they?” I marched barefoot down a long hall, warmly lit by electric lights the way the room and bathroom were.

Where did they get power from? The walls were the same carved rock as back in the cells, not like the bedroom. I passed several closed doors before hearing the deep, male voices which carried down the hall.

I headed straight for them and soon found myself in what looked like a game room.

Smoke and another brawny man with thick, dark stubble covering his cheeks were deep into a video game—judging from Smoke’s groans and curses, he was losing.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Next time, we’re playing chess,” he grumbled as his player died. He punched his opponent’s arm, only somewhat playfully.

Two more men played air hockey at a large, wooden table in one corner. There were old-fashioned arcade games along one wall and a glowing, blinking juke box in another corner which played light, soothing jazz in contrast to the testosterone clogging the air.

None of them noticed me.

I cleared my throat.

“Oh.” One of the air hockey players froze in place.

His opponent took the opportunity to score on him before turning to see me there. He froze, too.

“Where’s Pierce?” I asked, suddenly very aware that I was dressed in nothing but a vastly oversized t-shirt.

“You look much better.” Smoke rose, smiling. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah, thanks. Where’s Pierce?”

Just like that, his mood shifted.

Like I cared. His brother was the one who got me into the mess I was in.

“He’s around here somewhere.”

Alina stood next to me—just like that, he went back to smiling again.

I glanced her way to check her reaction and saw that she was smiling, too.

What’s this all about? They might as well have been the only two people in the room.

“She only wants to find out what the plans are for the two of us to leave,” she explained in a soft voice. Softer than the voice she’d used when we were talking in the bedroom. What did I miss between them?

The guys exchanged a look which hardly filled me with hope. “Uh, that’s not an easy question to answer,” the scruffy one said. He was dark-haired and tall and muscular, just like the rest of them. Had Pierce or Smoke called them a family? They had to be related, unless all dragon shifters looked the same. Just another reminder that I was hopelessly out of my depth with them.

“Why not? It seems pretty easy to me.” I looked at my sister, whose cheeks went deeper red every second. “Hey, Alina. I’m feeling a lot better. This was all a lot of fun, but I think it’s time for us to go home. Do you think I’m well enough to leave?”

“It’s not a question of whether you’re well enough.” Pierce’s voice.

I turned to find him behind me, standing in the doorway. Scowling.

What a surprise.

“What’s it a question of, then?” I fought with myself to keep from paying too much attention to his eyes, his magnificent cheekbones, the way his biceps and pecs strained the seams on his t-shirt.

Seeing him in full light, while conscious, was a completely different experience from what I remembered from the cell.

“There is no question. You probably don’t remember because you were in and out at the time. I guess it’s understandable.” He took a step closer to me—slowly, like he was approaching a frightened animal.

I stood my ground, even though my insides quaked. I was challenging a dragon. A dragon I had ridden while he flew me to his cave. What the hell was my life turning into?

“Just come out with it,” I hissed. “What are you trying to say?”

One eyebrow arched, and he tipped his head ever so slightly.

I recognized that look: As you wish, madam, though you won’t like what you’re about to hear.

“So be it. You can’t leave, Jasmine. It’s not possible now.”

12

Pierce

Tell her more. Tell her she's ours. Tell her there's no way she'll ever leave because she belongs to us.

I wanted to. I needed to. Every fiber of my being told me to. But I couldn't. Not just because my family stared at me like they were waiting for me to make an ass out of myself, but because the sight of her in my t-shirt and nothing else set my pulse racing fast enough to make it almost impossible to speak.

Take her. Take her now. Take her until she forgets there's a world outside of ours. Until she can no longer take a breath without smelling us on her skin.

Lust burned deep in my core, threatening to engulf me if I didn't give in to it.

She didn't give me or the dragon the chance to let the desire consume us.

She glared at me. "You must be on something. Or there's some strange chemical pumping through whatever ventilation system you have set up here. Right? Is that it?"

I frowned, looking over her shoulder to where Smoke and Fence stood by the couch.

They both shrugged.

"No...?" I replied. "That's the situation. You're not leaving. I've already told you



this. I'm sorry you didn't remember or didn't believe me when I said it, but that doesn't make it any less true."

"You're insane! You honestly think I'm going to stay here just because you tell me I have to?" She looked at Alina. "Hello? A little help here?"

"I don't know what to say. I mean, I don't want to stay here, either..."

I noticed the way Smoke winced when she said it.

"So why are we still here? We don't have to be. We don't want to be." Jasmine turned to me, hands on her hips. "What, are you going to turn into dragons and block the way?"

"Would you like us to?" I snarled.

"Hold on, hold on." Smoke dropped his controller and came to my side. "Relax. You two can work this out."

"No, no, let him speak for himself," Jasmine countered. "He can hardly help but sound like a roaring, raging creep."

"I can roar a lot louder," I growled through clenched teeth.

"I know you can. I've already heard that, remember?"

"All I did was save your life!"

"And then you almost killed me! And now, you won't let me leave! What was the point of saving me for this? If this is all there will ever be, why didn't you just let me die?"

Her chest rose and fell in time with her fast, shallow breath. When she was angry, the color in her cheeks almost matched the color of her hair, and her skin warmed up, which only made her scent stronger.

I didn't know if I should throw her off the nearest cliff or throw her to the floor and take her the way the dragon demanded.

Alina slid an arm around her shoulders. "You're just upset."

"Don't tell me how I feel, damn it. I know how I feel, and I'm not just upset. I'm fucking pissed off, and I have no control over my life, and this is bullshit. All of this is bullshit!" Tears filled her eyes. Her chin trembled.

Even though I was sure she would throw a right hook if I so much as touched her, I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around her and tell her it would be all right.

She didn't have to feel hopeless. Life could be good for us—no, it would be good. I would make it good.

"You'll understand in time." What a complete jackass thing to say. The worst thing I could've said.

Even the dragon groaned in disgust.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“In time?” Her voice was barely a whisper. A dangerous whisper, at that. “In time? How much time do you expect me to give you, Pierce?”

“The rest of your life. Nothing less than that. And the sooner you get used to it, the better.” With that, I walked off.

I left her standing there before I said or did anything I would regret later.

In the moment? Hell, yes, I wanted to put her in her place.

The dragon wanted the same thing. How dare she not want to be my mate? She had no idea the honor which came along with such a position. She knew nothing about our long history, about the royal blood which flowed through our veins.

“Pierce! Wait, please!” Alina followed me through the tunnel, catching up once we reached the kitchen. “That could’ve gone a lot better.”

“Oh, do you think so, Alina?”

She frowned, and I immediately felt sorry for snapping.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I wanted to apologize for my sister.”

“Do you ever get tired of taking care of her?”

Her mouth opened, then snapped shut. Lines appeared between her eyebrows.  
“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“No. I don’t.” She shrugged. “I love her, and she’s worth it.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“What? That I love her, or that she’s worth it?” She grinned. “I mean, you took care of her. Didn’t you? You risked everything to bring her here, and you didn’t have to. Nobody was holding a gun to your head, were they?”

“Nobody’s ever done that, and nobody would ever be allowed to get away with it.”

“You know what I’m saying, Pierce. You took a chance—a massive chance. One which could’ve meant destruction for your family. You knew that at the time, but you did it anyway. What does that tell you?”

“That I’m just as insane as your sister says I am.”

“Come on. You know what I’m saying. There’s something special about my sister, and you feel it just as strongly as I do. Just for a different reason than I do.”

“Does she have this effect on everybody she meets?” I couldn’t believe it, but I half-hoped she would say yes.

No matter what my damned dragon wanted, the girl wasn’t worth half the trouble I had been through because of her. Knowing she was one of the fae gave me hope that she’d put a spell or charm on me. Something which would explain the pull I felt toward her and get me off the hook.

“No. She doesn’t. Just on the people who love her.”

“I don’t love her.”

She shrugged. “If you say so.”

“How could I love her? I don’t know her.”

“I saw the way you held her when I performed the healing. How gentle you were. You care, at the very least. You care deeply. I’m sure it has something to do with the dragon side of you—I don’t know anything about that, of course,” she added, speaking so fast her words ran together.

“Are you sure you don’t know anything about that?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what you mean.” She blushed, just the way she had when she was looking at Smoke. “And stop changing the subject, please.”

“Fine, fine. The subject is your sister. I’m not sure what you want me to do about it. She can’t leave. There’s nothing I can do about that. It’s bad enough you want to go.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“I want to go, and I have to. There’s no way around it. My father will want me back—no way he’s going to let both of us stay forever.”

Yet another problem I didn’t have the time or energy to take on just then.

“She’s the one who’s going to have to get used to it. I can’t do it for her. Maybe she’s the one you should be talking to right now, not me.”

“You could be a little kinder,” she said, as I took a step backward and tapped the touchscreen to close the library door between us before she had the chance to tell me even more about how wrong I supposedly was.

One more tap locked the door—only somebody who knew the code could get in at that point, and it was unlikely that any of the other guys would give the code away. Not to somebody who didn’t belong here.

The library was Smoke’s domain, not mine—not that I was there to get any reading done.

I flopped down into one of the old leather chairs, so dusty that a cloud of it floated around my head.

I waved it off, cursing under my breath. Maybe Jasmine could be trained to tackle the cleaning around there, since she clearly had no desire to be with me.

Change her mind, the dragon urged. She wants us. Didn’t you smell her need? She’s ripe and ready and full of desire, and she only needs us to pluck her off the vine and

sink deep inside...

“Enough,” I growled, shoving the image of Jasmine’s warm, curvy, naked body out of my mind.

I kept picturing her beneath me, writhing against me, moaning my name as I plunged into her wet heat. That would never happen. She hated everything about being there, and she certainly hated me for saving her fucking life.

I knocked the chair backward as I stood and winced when it crashed to the floor and kicked up even more dust.

Nothing was going right.

Starting with the moment, I decided to get out of my truck and find out if the person in the car needed help. Yes, she needed help—but I needed it even more, because of her.

There was another loud, crashing noise. It didn’t come from inside the library this time.

“What’s going on?” I stepped out into the tunnel, head swiveling back and forth.

“Damn it, Jasmine! I told you to take it easy!” I followed the sound of Alina’s voice and found her in the kitchen with her sister.

Jasmine was on the floor, eyes closed, broken dishes strewn around her.

“She collapsed,” Alina babbled as I crouched down beside the two of them. “She wanted something to eat, and I told her to go back to bed and let somebody bring her something—especially since she doesn’t know where anything is around here—”

“And she insisted on doing it herself because she doesn’t want any of us doing anything for her,” I finished with a groan of disappointment and disgust. “Come on. Let’s get her back to her room.”

I slid my arms under her shoulders and behind her knees before lifting and cradling her against my chest.

She was so warm, so soft. So stubborn and hell-bent on destruction. The most challenging, ridiculous person I had ever known.

Everything that would ever matter to me until the end of time.

As I carried her down the tunnel, her eyes fluttered open.

She looked up at me. “I don’t want to be here,” was all she whispered before her lids slid shut and her head sank down against my shoulder.

I could only shake my head. “Yeah. Tell me something I don’t know.”



13

Jasmine

Two days passed before I dared show my face outside my room.

I couldn't imagine what they must think of me. Not that it mattered, or so I told myself. I wasn't trying to make friends with anybody, even Pierce.

Especially Pierce. My jailer.

Passing out in the kitchen made me look like a fool. I shuddered every time I thought about it. I came off as a spoiled brat who stomped her feet when she didn't get her way, when nothing could be further from the truth—at least, that wasn't how I saw myself. Not normally.

My situation brought it out in me.

Pierce brought it out in me.

He couldn't be bothered to see my side of things. He would rather order, demand, drop bombshells in my lap about never being able to go home again as casually as he would tell me it was sunny outside. Like it was a fact. Something I had no say in.

Alina was no help.

I couldn't even count on her to stand up for me.

She was too busy seeing things from Smoke's perspective, which only left me feeling lonely. Betrayed. And that pissed me off.

On the second day, I walked the length of the room again and again, back and forth, chewing what little was left of my nails. A habit I thought I'd broken years earlier.

Then again, I thought I would spend the rest of my life in the real world. Where there was sunlight and moonlight and fresh, non-recycled air. I would've given just about anything to smell car exhaust. I was that desperate for something real.

There had to be a way to get out of there. I could hike down the mountain if I had to—it wouldn't be my first hike, not even close. The boots I was wearing during the crash were in the closet, so I'd be in decent shape. There was plenty of bottled water in the kitchen, I had seen it just before losing consciousness like an idiot. I could take a bottle or two and start off whenever the mood struck.

But if you couldn't handle making yourself something to eat, what makes you think you can handle a miles-long hike?

I couldn't ignore that voice in my head. It made a good point, too, but two days had made a huge difference in my energy and strength. I could go half the day without even thinking about taking something for the pain and even then, I barely needed a few drops of one of Alina's potions to manage it.

That wasn't the same as a hike, though. It felt like miles as I paced back and forth for hours on end, but even that was nothing like what I might encounter in unknown territory.

I wish I knew where I was. What to expect when I left the cave. I didn't even know how to leave the damn thing.

That realization was what planted an idea in my head. Only the tiniest seed, something which would have to develop, but I could give it time as long as there was an end in sight. Something to work toward.

If I could get him to trust me, maybe flirt with him a little...

It was enough to get my boots on and me out of my room.

Nothing had changed, either. I found the rest of the dragons in that game room of theirs. This time, the scruffy one was playing pinball while another one watched. Smoke sat in the corner with a book, his feet up on an ottoman. Another pair watched what could only be an action movie on the big-screen TV. I cringed when a building exploded, and several bodies flew through the air.

They were all too busy to notice me. That was fine. I walked past the open door and further down the hall, wondering where Pierce was. Not to mention Alina. Were they somewhere together? I frowned at the idea, then wondered why I was frowning. She had the right to spend time with them if she wanted to, and I couldn't have cared less what he did. It's because he's holding us captive, I told myself. Once again, loneliness set in. If she could spend time with him, it meant she was all right with how they were treating us. I was on my own.

The kitchen was empty. Where could they be together? I took a bottle of water from the several cases stacked in one corner of the room before filching a banana from the counter. I could still hear the roar of the TV from the game room and the laughter of whoever was watching. I couldn't hear my sister.

It was time for a little exploring. I polished off the banana in a few bites before continuing down the tunnel. It seemed to stretch on infinitely with no light at the end.

How did they get in and out? There were more closed doors on that end, plus a few

open ones. What was behind them? What the hell did a half-dozen dragons do all day? How did they support themselves?

Alina and I lived off of what our parents gave us, which was more than enough. Did they have wealthy parents, too? Or was it like in the old legends Mama used to tell us while she tucked us into bed? Stories of dragons who guarded treasure with their lives. Did they use their treasure to supply themselves with every creature comfort imaginable?

I chuckled at the way my imagination was running away with me. I hadn't thought about those old stories for as long as I could remember.

What would Mama think if she knew I was wandering around an underground compound, if she knew dragons wanted to keep me hostage for the rest of my life? Maybe it was better that she was gone. Papa, too.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

He would've started a war against the entire species if either of his daughters had fallen victim to one of the shifters. Both of us? He would've brought down the entire mountain rather than see us held captive for all eternity. He had his principles.

Thinking about them wasn't helping. I had to find my way around so I'd know how to get out when it came time to escape. And if I ran into Pierce, it was time to turn things around so he'd loosen up.

If he thought I was at least willing to be his friend, he might give me space—which would give me the chance to slip out and run as soon as my strength was back.

I needed to believe it. It was all I had to hold onto.

The tunnel went on and on, stretching out in front of me for what felt like miles. And there was still no light at the end. It had to curve, somehow, or slope gently enough upward that I wasn't aware.

I uncapped the water and poured a little on the floor—sure enough, it trailed slowly behind me, so slowly that the angle couldn't be very steep at all. I kept going.

Another few minutes later, a pinpoint of light appeared in front of me. I walked faster, desperate to feel sunlight on my face, to fill my lungs with fresh air. Was it really that easy to get out of there? Simply walking uphill until I reached the mouth of the cave? I couldn't wait to find out.

Pretty soon, the recycled air gave way to something fresh. A scent I would always associate with the color green.

A forest. I jogged the rest of the way and didn't stop until I was outside, in the open.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, relishing the warmth of the sun's caress. I felt my energy improve almost instantly, along with my outlook.

There was no way I could consider living in a cave when being outside made me who I was. It was in my blood. I couldn't help it any more than I could help the color of my eyes or the way my hair frizzed up in humid air.

I couldn't stand around like this all day, of course. I had to learn more about my surroundings. Where was the road? Was there any other way out? A path, maybe. Even that would be better than climbing straight down the sheer face of the mountain.

The sound of a great deal of air moving around at once sparked a vague memory.

I knew that sound.

Like sheets billowing in the wind. Where else had I heard it before? There was no chance to give it much thought—almost as soon as I heard the sound, something blocked out the sun. Something big. Scaly. Breathing. Flying.

I had a flashback to that moment in the air, flying on the back of a dragon.

This dragon, the one who landed in front of me and leaned down until we were face-to-face.

I couldn't breathe. It was too big, so much bigger than me. One of its massive feet—were they feet? I didn't know—was bigger than half my body. It could've easily taken a swipe and sent me flying into the rock behind me, crushing me to a bloody pulp. Or it could've sent me off the mountain, hurtling through the air. Either way, I'd be dead.

My heart was in my throat, and I could hear it pounding even over the loud in-and-out of the dragon's breathing.

Its breath was hot, and strong enough to stir my hair. It watched me closely, eyes moving back and forth, observing the way I would observe a ladybug walking across a leaf.

Except I didn't think its interest was based on mere innocent curiosity.

The dragon was Pierce. I couldn't make the image of his human form match up with what I saw in front of me, and I wondered how much of his consciousness remained. Did he even know who he was looking at?

Just then, he nodded his huge head. Like he could read my thoughts. It had to be coincidence—just me letting my imagination get the better of me again.

He didn't want to hurt me. I could feel that much. His big, amber eyes peered straight into mine. Waiting for me to do something.

So, I did something. I reached out with a hand that shook a little more than I wanted it to and barely touched the tips of my fingers to the scales on the bridge of his snout.

They were smooth, warm. Tough as leather. He stayed still and allowed me to touch him, and I only let out a shaky breath after I lifted my hand away. I hadn't realized I was holding it.

He snorted lightly. Laughing at my nerves?

I tilted my head to the side and shot him a withering look.

He snorted again.

“I want to see the rest of you,” I announced, even though my insides were watery and my knees knocked together.



*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

Curiosity was practically killing me. Just what did a full-grown dragon look like? He was kind enough to stand still while I walked a slow, thoughtful circle around him. I had to crane my neck to catch sight of the ridges which ran from the base of his skull to the tip of his tail, where they turned into sharp spikes. He was way taller than me while he was sitting with his smooth belly touching the ground. His legs were thick with muscle under their scales, and the curved talons at the end of his feet were each as long as my legs. Maybe longer.

And his wings. I remembered their translucence from my first flight on his back, the way the gray light shone through them. They were folded against his back just then, but they had an impressive span when they were spread.

I ran a hand over his side as I walked from back to front, and I could feel the way his sides moved with each deep breath.

A living, breathing dragon, and I was touching him.

It had the strangest effect on me. I wanted to do more than just touch him. When would I ever have an opportunity like that again? Standing in front of a dragon, with the heat from his body warming me in a way the sun never could.

He turned his head, neck bending gracefully to look behind him to where I stood, dwarfed.

He was beautiful.

Looking into those big, amber eyes which seemed to know me so well solidified the

desire which danced around the edges of my awareness.

I almost couldn't admit to myself what he stirred within me. This beautiful beast. A living, breathing connection to a time I couldn't even imagine. Those eyes had seen so much, and they were looking at me. Into me.

A shiver ran up my spine.

"Can I...?" I gestured to his back, pointing up, chewing my lip. Was it considered rude to ask a dragon for a ride?

If it was, he didn't seem to care. Instead of flying off or roaring at me, he stretched his neck out flat and lowered it until it was flat on the ground.

I took the hint—it was the easiest way for me to climb on, and even then, I grunted and huffed as I mounted him like I was mounting a horse. An extremely large, extremely scaly horse. Without the benefit of stirrups or a saddle.

I eased my way back, careful to raise myself over the ridges which rose up from his spine. I realized quickly that I could hold onto one of them like I'd hold onto a pommel. It was better than nothing.

"Is this far enough?" I asked, and he turned his head to look back at me again. If I hadn't known better, I would've sworn he was smiling.

My thighs gripped him tighter than ever. I wasn't sure I liked that smile. Like he was about to show me a thing or two.

Sure enough, we were off the ground in seconds and soaring up, up, up.

I screamed, but it wasn't entirely in terror. Exhilaration, for sure, and sheer joy.

First, we were climbing up to the top of the mountain, and suddenly we were plummeting down in almost a free-fall.

I shrieked and clung to him even tighter as my stomach dropped and the wind whipped through my hair.

“Pierce!” I screamed, but the wind carried it away.

Not that it would’ve mattered if he’d heard it—he was in control, and maybe even showing off a bit.

We banked, gliding in a smooth circle around the outside of the mountain. I could see the entrance where he must have brought me in, on the opposite side from the place where I’d come out and found him. It was overgrown, half-hidden.

I wouldn’t have known it was there otherwise. I guessed that was the idea.

Looking out, there was nothing but mountains and trees for miles and miles all the way out to the horizon. It was like they lived in their own world—which, again, I guessed was the idea.

They needed somewhere they could have the freedom to do this, to spread their wings and soar. If I could fly, not much would stop me from doing it all the time. I didn’t know why Pierce bothered to ever shift into his human form if this was the alternative.

Who would tether themselves to a fragile, two-legged existence? This was freedom, this was power.

I let out a whoop of pure joy, and the dragon roared in response. At that moment, we were together. United.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment when he landed. It would never be long enough for me, no matter how long or how far we flew.

My heart hammered wildly as I swung my leg over his neck and allowed my body to slide over his until my feet touched solid ground. I realized I was grinning like an idiot, but nothing could've wiped that smile from my face.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

He looked down at me, waiting. I wasn't sure what to say. What could I say that would encompass all the emotions rushing through me?

"Thank you," was all I could manage.

He nodded again, before I decided to go back inside. It was easier than wondering what to do next, or how to feel. I made the long walk back through the tunnel in a daze, still coming down from that natural high.

"Where have you been?" Alina called out as soon as she saw me.

She came running, and it was clear from the way her eyebrows nearly met over the bridge of her nose that she was furious.

"I was... outside," I mumbled, gesturing down the tunnel. "Pierce took me for a flight."

She let out a huge sigh and relaxed. "That's why your hair looks like you just went through a hurricane. I'll help you brush it out back in your room." She took my hand.

I pulled away. "No. I'll do it. I want to be alone right now." I couldn't have her with me while I was trying to process everything.

It didn't even occur to me until I was back in my room with my hairbrush caught in a snarl that I had forgotten all about my plan to cozy up to Pierce while I was out there.

14

Pierce

Something changed after that flight.

Not that she wanted me to know it. She continued to put up a front of being angry, sullen, put-out by the sheer fact of my existence.

I didn't press the subject, because the dragon knew what she didn't want to admit: she felt the connection between us. And it excited her.

She's ours, she's ours, take her and make sure she knows it.

Night and day, he urged me, pressing the subject every time she and I went back out for another flight.

She was an addict, admittedly, always looking for the next opportunity to take to the skies. I could hardly concentrate on flying when all he wanted was for me to pin her to the ground and take her.

"She's lucky we're not visible to the humans when we fly," Gate grumbled after the fourth such flight, referencing the spell placed on us prior to our leaving for the New World.

He waited until she was back in her room, at least. I guessed I should give him credit for his discretion.

“We’re the ones who are lucky, remember,” I said with as good-natured a smile as I could muster before stretching out on one of the game room sofas. It was just long enough to hold my entire body without having to hang my legs off the end. “There’s no way we could’ve existed out here for this long if humans could see us circling the mountain while they were hunting or hiking or whatever it is they do. There’s not a bird in the modern world as large as we are. We would stick out.”

“You know what I mean.” He turned his attention to the chess game he and Smoke were in the middle of, pondering his next move.

Yes, I knew what he meant.

He was still unhappy, but at least I knew his unhappiness ran deeper than he wanted to let on. It wasn’t personal. He had nothing against Jasmine or me. He wanted his mate. It was one thing for all of us to be alone when we were all alone.

The mere fact of Jasmine’s presence reminded him of what he didn’t have.

It didn’t help that we were becoming closer, either.

The four days which had passed since that first flight had been full of more than just shifting and flying. We had sat together for long stretches of time, just in front of the cave mouth, while she soaked up the sun. I told her how old we were, and in the most general of terms why we had left Scotland. I told her about my family so she would know them better—after all, she’d be there for the rest of her life, whether she liked it or not. I wasn’t stupid, however. I didn’t bring that up anymore. For her part, neither did she.

Smoke returned from getting drinks and tossed me a bottle of water. “Any thoughts on how you’ll get out of the trap I set for you?” he asked Gate with a knowing grin.

“You set a trap for me?” Gate asked, looking at the board again.

I hid my smile.

Smoke turned his attention to me. “I was just telling the others while you were out that Mary checked back in with me. There was a big storm out where she is, and it knocked out communications for several days.”

“Is she all right?”

He nodded. “Yes, but it took time to get everything back online. She has to check again with her contacts, to see about what’s happening with the clan.”

Shit. I had forgotten all about the missing heartbeats. It was still silent. Funny how their absence didn’t matter nearly as much as it had at first.

All talk of Mary and the clan ceased when Alina entered the room.

Smoke’s posture changed, and his eyes lit up. He drew her to him like a magnet.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, turning her attention to me.

“Why? What did I do?”

“Nothing—for once,” she grinned. “I wanted you to know that I just examined Jasmine, and she’s completely healed. Like new.”

Just like that, there was a pit in my stomach. The dragon roared as I sat up. “I’m glad,” I replied.



*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“So, there’s little reason for me to be here anymore. Or for her to stay.”

Smoke stood.

So did I.

“Wait a minute...” he said, then stopped himself.

I felt sorry for him at that moment, but his problems weren’t my problems. I had other things to think about. Like my mate.

I took a deep breath and tried my best to think straight in spite of the dragon’s roar in my head. “I thought you understood,” was all I could say.

“I understand that she needed to be here while she healed. But she can’t spend the rest of her life flying around on a dragon’s back. No offense.”

“And I told you and your sister that there’s no way for her to leave. You can, now that she’s better, but not her.”

“She doesn’t know where we are. She’s no more likely to reveal your location or even your existence than I am.”

“Where is this coming from?” Smoke asked.

I saw him standing there, shaking with rage and frustration, and I wondered how loud his dragon roared.

Her expression softened. “I’m sorry, but this is the way it always was. Just because I’ve enjoyed spending time here with you doesn’t mean I can stay forever. This was never about forever. Both my sister and I have responsibilities. We have lives. We can’t walk away from them.”

“What responsibilities?” I was barely able to hold myself back from throwing her against the wall and yelling in her face until terror broke her down.

Who is she to tell us what to do? Who is she to act as though her responsibilities are more important than what we need?

For once, I didn’t disagree with the dragon’s way of thinking. This girl was nothing. Only one of the fae. She didn’t have our royal blood. She was nothing.

But wouldn’t that make Jasmine nothing, too?

Alina’s deep, sympathetic frown did little to ease my growing rage. “She hasn’t told you?”

“I don’t know anything about her.” And that admission turned my blood to ice. I knew nothing about her.

She hadn’t shared one piece of herself with me.

Our connection ran deep, at a primal level—but there was something to be said for her trusting me enough to tell me about her life. Otherwise, we would always live as master and slave, owner and captive. I didn’t want that sort of future, no matter if the dragon cared or not.

“Maybe you should ask her, then. She’s in her room.” Alina stepped aside to let me barrel past.

Miles and Cash were just coming in, smiling.

I pushed my way past them, too, and went straight to the closed door. I didn't think twice before entering the code to open it.

"Hey!" she squealed, spinning with her arms crossed in front of her.

I realized all at once that only a pair of panties stood between her and nakedness.

The dragon urged me forward. Throw her onto the bed, pin her down, drive her into it, tell her she's ours, tell her, tell her, tell her.

"What's your sister talking about when she says you have responsibilities? What is it you want to go back to out there?"

"Can I put something on, please?"

"Sure." I didn't move.

"Can you turn around?"

“No.”

We stared each other down.

“Fine. I will.” She turned her back and dropped her arms. I took in the sight of her perfect, full, firm ass and dug my nails into my palms as the dragon demanded I touch her. Grab her. Fondle and squeeze until she squealed in pain.

It was almost a relief when she slid into a pair of sweatpants, then covered up her smooth, creamy shoulders and back with a t-shirt.

“Now.” She turned back to me and sat on the edge of the bed, hands folded. “What did you want to talk about?”

“You know damn well.” My fury hadn’t cooled in the moments I’d spent waiting for her to dress—if anything, it was worse than ever.

“You want to know about the life you’re keeping me from? Is that it?”

“What could I possibly be keeping you from?” I sneered.

She shook her head, making red hair spill over her shoulders.

I caught the scent of the shampoo she used and it went to my head, spinning around and inflaming my dragon more than ever.

“Your fatal flaw is your pride,” she mused.

“What’s that mean?”

“You should ask Smoke about it, since he’s obviously a deeper thinker than you.”

“If you’re trying to hurt my feelings, you’re wasting your time.”

“Are you sure about that? It seems to me right now that you’re throwing a tantrum because you can’t get your way.” She sighed, crossing her legs. “You think your life is the only one that matters. Your world is all there is. I hate to break it to you, but my sister and I have a family—a clan—of our own, and since our parents died, we’ve taken over their positions.”

“You lead your clan?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Why is that so hard for you to understand? Because we’re women?” She scoffed, but didn’t wait for me to reply. “No. It’s not cut-and-dried. Our uncle is acting leader, but Alina is a highly-respected healer who cares for every member of the clan.”

“And you?”

“I’m my uncle’s advisor. He’s training me, I suppose you could say.”

“So, you don’t actually have a position right now. You’re only learning.”

“Something like that,” she scowled.

“And if you never go back, nothing’s actually been lost. Your uncle will still have his position, and your clan will still be under his leadership. Right?”

“You don’t understand. It’s not that simple for me.”

“What else is there?”

She didn’t flinch or even blink. “I’m promised in marriage. I’ve been promised since the day I was born.”

No! It means nothing! Tell her it means nothing! Nothing that’s happened to her until now matters!

“That doesn’t matter now.”

Her mouth fell open—then, she laughed. “You’re kidding. How can you say that with a straight face?”

“Don’t laugh at me,” I barked.

The laugh ceased immediately, like I had flipped a switch and turned out the lights.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Your life isn’t the same anymore. The sooner you understand that, the better. You are not the same person you were before the mudslide. Why do you insist on fighting what we both know is true?”

“You think you know it, but that doesn’t make it true.”

Her body betrayed her. I could see it. Sense it. Feel it. Instead of glaring at me, she shifted her focus and stared over my shoulder. Instead of clasping her hands, she rubbed her palms on her thighs. Nervous. Arguing with herself.

“You and I both know what happens when we fly together. You change. You’re free. Isn’t that right?”

“Who doesn’t feel free when they’re flying?”

“It’s deeper than that. You know it. I feel it when you’re on my back.” I took a step toward her. Then, another. “You never feel more like your true self than when you’re connected to me that way. You trust me to take care of you, and I do. And you push me higher, harder, faster. You make me better without even trying. This is the way it’s supposed to be, the way life is supposed to work for the two of us. When will you quit fighting it?”

“Stay where you are,” she whispered when I was only a few feet away.

“Why do you keep pushing me away?”

“Because I have to.”

“You don’t want to.”

“Don’t tell me what I want to do.” She turned her face away. “It’s not entirely up to me, and I just told you why. I belong to someone else.”

“You’ll never belong to anybody but me.” I stood in front of her and took her face in my hands, turning it back to me. “Don’t you feel it?”

She closed her eyes. “No. I don’t. Just because I like flying with you doesn’t mean we’re meant for each other.”

“Look at me, Jasmine.”

She hesitated, but finally opened those big, green eyes of hers. I could’ve drowned in them. One word, and I would’ve been her slave for life.

She refused to understand. It would all be so easy, if she would only stop fighting what was a fact.

“Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t feel, deep inside, that this is where you belong.”

She started trembling. Her chin quivered. Her eyes went bright with tears. “Don’t do this to me. You’re only making it harder.”

“You’re the one who’s making things harder than they need to be. There’s not a person or a force on Earth that I wouldn’t gladly wipe out of existence if it meant your happiness. There’s not a thing you could ever desire that I wouldn’t move mountains to get for you. Nothing has to stand in our way. Nothing but you.”

I leaned in, while drawing her face closer to mine, and she didn’t resist.



Her eyes closed, her lips parted.

I let myself finally give in to just a tiny piece of what I'd craved since the moment I laid eyes on her when I took that first taste of her sweet, willing mouth. It was bliss, the way her lips moved against mine, the shockwaves of pleasure that ran through her body and into mine when I slid my tongue inside and swept around, exploring and feeling and drinking in her essence.

Her sighs sent a surge of blood straight to my cock, and the way her hands ran through my hair told me this wasn't an accident. It wasn't a crazy, breathless, in-the-moment mistake she would regret later.

She wanted me the way I wanted her. At a deep, instinctual level, she knew what I knew: we were meant for each other.

Just as suddenly, something changed.

"No." She twisted her head away. "No, stop this. We can't."

Don't let her do this! She is ours! We need to possess her!

After that, it was all meaningless roaring in my head, rage and frustration and the agony of thwarted desire.

I pulled her to me, but she pulled back again.

"I said, no. No, Pierce."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

There was no mistaking that. I stood up, painfully aware of the erection straining against my zipper.

My head spun, still wrapped in lust. “How can you keep pushing away what you and I both know is true?” I asked, slightly breathless.

She was even worse off than I was. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, her cheeks burned with color, her lips quivered.

I could smell the desire blooming between her thighs—it was so strong, so demanding, I had to take a few steps away from her for fear of it overtaking my senses.

“I can’t let myself when I know what I know. I already told you.” She shook her head. “I’m promised to Bradley. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You had nothing to do with that promise. You said it yourself, it was a promise made when you were born.”

“It was a blood oath. You must understand how serious that it. Your species assigns just as much importance to rituals as we do, especially when blood is involved.”

“There must be some way.”

“If there is, I’m unaware of it.” She was as close to looking like she was about to cry as I had ever seen her. “Please, Pierce. Don’t make this any more difficult than it already is. I have to go back, or else risk breaking the blood oath made when I was

born. I have no idea how bad things could become if that were to happen, but I know it would risk a war within my clan. Maybe..." she bit her lip. "Maybe with you, too."

There was nothing to say to that.

I left the room in spite of the dragon's demands that I do no such thing.

I understood what my dragon, in his single-mindedness, couldn't comprehend.

Taking Jasmine as my mate could bring war to our family.

Unless there was a way around the oath.

15

Pierce

“There’s gotta be something we can do.” I stood in the center of the library, staring down at my brother.

He sat with his elbows on the arms of the chair, fingers tented under his chin as he stared into space. The way his forehead creased told me he wasn’t daydreaming.

I had told him the whole story, every bit of it. I wouldn’t normally have opened up like that—none of us would have, it wasn’t our nature—but he was my brother and probably the smartest man I knew, and I needed help.

The thought of flying straight to that mansion outside Roanoke and tearing it to the ground appealed to me more than I could say. Brick by brick. Crushing anyone or anything who dared stand in my way.

That would cause her pain, which was something the dragon didn’t understand. Subtleties of emotion were lost on a creature that relied on instinct to survive.

“I wish you would say something,” I muttered when Smoke remained silent for longer than I liked.

“I’m thinking,” he snapped.

“Could you think a little faster?”

“No, in fact. I can’t. This isn’t simple. There are too many moving pieces.”

“I have to have her.” I could barely choke the words out. “You know that, right?”

“I know it.”

“As long as we’re on the same page.”

His head snapped up, eyes meeting mine. “Page.”

“What?”

“Maybe there’s something about blood oaths in one of the scrolls or books. Something I can use.” He stood, elbowing his way past me. “I mean, there’s over a thousand years of wisdom in this room. There has to be an answer.”

“Can I help?”

“No.” He looked at me and grinned. “Make yourself scarce. You’ll only slow me down. I have a system here. I know where everything is.”

I felt less than hopeful as I looked around.

The library looked like a tornado had torn through and always did. Stacks of books piled as high as the eye could see, so many they covered up the books already lined up in double rows on the shelves which lined all four walls. Smoke used a ladder to get to the tops of the stacks.

“If you say so.”

“Stay close by,” he advised, hurrying up the ladder to examine one of his thick, dusty

books.

“You couldn’t pay me to stay away,” I promised as I left.

Having him on the job gave me a measure of peace. I trusted him with more than my life. I trusted him with my fate.

I hadn’t spoken to Jasmine since that scene in her room earlier in the day. I wasn’t sure I trusted myself. Knowing her taste, her scent, could only make it more difficult to maintain a distance between us. The dragon could only handle so much rejection without lashing out.

I had to fly, to work off some energy. Nothing cleared my head the way that did. I broke into a run halfway down the tunnel. Anything to get away from there, away from her, away from the silent questions of the rest of my family. The dragon waited, anticipated his chance to take over for the second time in a single day. Unlike the others, I looked forward to the days when I spent twenty-four hours guarding the entrance to the cave and the treasure inside.

I peeled off my clothes and left them in a heap by the cave’s mouth. The dragon stretched, taking over my form, expanding until my body could no longer hold it. I closed my eyes and let the change move through me. When I opened them again, I saw as the dragon saw: sharper, clearer.

My wings unfolded, and I crouched, then sprang. In moments I was airborne, flapping the bulky-yet-delicate appendages to take myself higher. I was deliberate in my movements, working hard, determined to exhaust myself before I returned to the compound. It would be better that way. I couldn’t face her or any of them with a war raging inside me.

Jasmine would be mine. It was inevitable. I would spend the rest of my life with her. I

had never felt complete before meeting her. I had never known what it was like to care for someone else more than I cared for myself—I knew duty, I knew honor, I knew the responsibility of protecting my family and the treasure we guarded. But I had never known what it meant to throw caution to the wind and go out of my way to help someone when it could mean destruction for me.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

The worst part was knowing I would do it all again in a heartbeat, even knowing the way things had gone up to that point.

I would risk Gate hating me forever, sowing discord in my family, bringing an outsider to the cave if it meant saving Jasmine. She was all that mattered.

What I couldn't do—wouldn't do—was let her go.

It was as though she heard me thinking about her.

She might have, for all I knew.

No sooner had I shut down the thought of letting her leave me than I detected motion at the rear entrance of the caves. Where I had first brought her in.

She couldn't do anything to hide that red hair of hers. It stood out like a beacon.

I dove, shooting straight down like an arrow. She only felt my presence at the last second, when I was close to reaching the ground. I landed with a crash so hard it shook the trees.

Instead of dashing back inside, she ran for the trees.

You think you can get away from me? I roared in my head, while the roar which came out of my mouth had no words. Nor did it need any.

Birds took flight all around me, beating their wings in their haste to get out of the way



of my rage.

I was the dragon, and she didn't know what happened when the dragon's passion was fully roused.

I stretched one of my wings out in front of her, blocking the way.

She stopped dead in her tracks, falling on her ass and scrambling back to her feet.

"Please!" she called out to me.

I heard the terror in her voice and liked it.

She was right to be afraid. If she were any being but the mate I had waited my entire life for, I would've made short work of her and tossed aside whatever was left for passing animals to feast on.

She looked up. "Please, Pierce! It's better this way!"

Better? She thinks this is better? Running away from us?

I roared again, or the dragon did. Maybe we both did. It was impossible to separate us now.

I decided to make it easy. Rather than leaving her to have a one-sided conversation, I shifted back to my human form. Soon, we were face-to-face.

"Oh, wait a second." She held her hands up to her face when she realized I was completely naked.

"I've already seen most of you, so don't worry about seeing me. Aren't we beyond

this point yet?”

She lowered her hands slowly, but I noted the way she didn't dare allow her eyes to drift lower than my chest. “I didn't know you would be out here.”

“Obviously. Well done, sneaking out the back like that. Where we would be less likely to spot you. Don't you know one of us is out here at all times?”

“Yes, I knew that. I thought I could get into the trees before whoever was on duty caught sight of me.”

“Why are you doing this? After everything we talked about—”

The color rose in her cheeks. “Yes. Yet another example of how you don't listen, Pierce. Just because there's something between us, you think it erases everything else. Nothing exists except you and what you want. That's not the real world—at least, it's not the world I live in.”

“This is what you want. Isn't it? Don't deny that we're what you want, because I feel what's happening to you. I feel the conflict.”

“There's more to life than what we want, Pierce. There are sacrifices, too. Isn't this a sacrifice?” She gestured to the cave. “Living here all these centuries, cut off from the rest of the world. You have a duty. Right? I know that means something to you, or else you wouldn't be here.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“Of course, it means something. It used to mean the world to me, before I met you.”

Her shoulders fell as she sighed. “Pierce. I wish I could make you understand. I have a duty, too.”

“That doesn’t absolve you from trying to run away without saying a word. Could you have lived with yourself if you got away from me?” I closed the distance between us and saw the way her body trembled harder with every step I took.

She wanted to run—I could smell the fear all over her, but there was another scent. Just as strong, maybe stronger. I had smelled it earlier, in her room. Desire.

“I didn’t want to,” she whispered. “You have to believe that. I thought if I took myself out of the picture, you could go on without me.”

“That could never happen. The sun would burn out, the mountains would crumble, before I would ever be able to go on without you.”

I cupped her face, and she tilted her head to lean it against my palm with a tiny whimper.

“This is already complicated enough. Please, Pierce. We can’t make it worse.” Her body told another story.

The desire built until her scent surrounded us both, wrapping us in a cloud of deep, primal need.

I could almost hear her heart pounding as I stroked her warm, flushed cheek with my thumb. The end was inevitable.

I only waited for her to admit it.

“Pierce?”

“Yes.”

“I need you.”

16

Jasmine

I didn't care anymore if it meant upsetting my uncle or the clan. I didn't care about going back home.

Leaving the cave had been the hardest decision I'd ever made—and I was glad he caught me.

It wasn't until he did that I realized how much I'd wanted him to. I didn't want to leave him, not really. I only wanted to make it easier for all of us.

It didn't matter when he stood so close to me, touching my face and staring into my eyes. It didn't matter when every instinct pushed me closer to him. Some much deeper need existed in my soul, a need I hadn't known existed before I met him. A need only he could fill.

"I need you," I whispered again, and I wrapped my legs around his waist when he lifted me in his arms.

It felt so right, wrapped up in him like that. I held his face in my hands and kissed him hard enough to make my lips sting.

He growled in response, forcing them apart to thrust his tongue inside as he had earlier. And just like earlier, a flood of warmth spread between my thighs and a delicious ache sparked there.

His hands cupped my butt as he carried me back into the cave, to the cells where I had first stayed.

My fingers dug into the muscles of his shoulders and back—he was so big, so beautifully thick and hard as the rock all around us. But warm, moving, breathing.

His body was carved perfection, and just as massive in its human form as it was when he was the dragon.

He didn't let go of me. Instead, he lowered us both to the blankets and stretched out on top of me.

I wanted my clothes off. I had to touch all of him with all of me.

He peeled off the sweatshirt, the t-shirt, the oversized pants from his closet. His hands slid over my body, and every inch he touched sent me closer to the edge of utter bliss. I closed my eyes, letting my head roll helplessly from side to side as he swept me up in passion.

“So beautiful,” he growled, his lips skimming my curves.

My thighs, my hips. My stomach. His mouth closed over one nipple, drawing it up into a point before biting it playfully. Or not-so-playfully. The dragon wanted satisfaction, too. It didn't matter who did it because my body responded just as strongly either way.

I arched my back, giving him more of me. All of me.

His mouth left my skin, and his eyes met mine. Even in the almost total darkness, I could just make out their gleam. Or were they the dragon's eyes?

“I want you. Now.”

I barely recognized his voice. It was like being in the cell with an animal. Instead of frightening me, the thought sent fresh wetness flowing between my already swollen, tender folds.

“Yes,” I gasped, letting him roll me onto my knees.

The power in those muscles of his, the strength. He maneuvered me like it was nothing. I barely made out the sound of tearing cotton as he shredded my panties. His hands gripped my hips as something wide and hot and hard slid through my slick cleft.

I let out a cry of pure, unbridled lust when I felt that blessed pressure, a cry which turned into a scream of pleasure as he pushed his way inside me. Instantly, my body clenched around him as an orgasm washed over me, leaving me gasping and moaning even as it surprised me with its speed.

He didn't wait for me.

It was just as hard and fast and urgent as he had promised. His fingers pressed into my hips and held me steady as he pumped in and out, ramming his length inside me until our bodies slapped together in a furious rhythm.

I gave myself over to it. All my passion, everything in my soul, all of it. I let go of myself and stopped thinking of anything but what he was doing to my body. And the deepening connection of our souls.

It was like the dragon was in the cell with us.

A roaring filled the air, overlapping with my grunts and squeals of pleasure. He filled

me so completely, almost to the point of pain just like the way he held me so tight was almost painful. But not quite. And I liked it.

My body responded to it. So did the deeper, darker part of me that he unlocked.



## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

I threw my head back and cried out louder than ever as another orgasm hit me like a tsunami, making my sheath grip him tighter than ever.

“Yes... yes, Jasmine...” His voice was a hoarse growl.

The dragon’s voice. One of his hands left my hip and trailed down my back, and somewhere in there, I thought I felt the sting of claws against my sweat-slick skin, but I had to be imagining it. He took my breast in his palm, kneading it, pinching the nipple until I cried out. Not for him to stop, though; I wanted more.

He pulled me up on my knees, leaning my body back against his.

One of his arms snaked around my waist and tightened like a vice, and he used it to move me up and down his impossible length while the other hand slid its way over every inch of me until it found my clit. I howled in almost mind-bending, unthinkable pleasure when he made contact, coming again.

It went on and on as he played with me, still fucking me like the animal he was, growing and building and wiping every inch of the old Jasmine away until I was sure I would die in his arms because nobody could stand that much. It would kill me.

But it didn’t.

I screamed until my voice broke, but it didn’t kill me.

And when his grunts got louder, faster, his thrusts harder than ever until he nearly broke me apart, I knew he was coming to the end. I welcomed it—not because I

wanted it to be over. I wanted it to never end. But even more, I wanted to know I had brought him to release.

“Mine!” he roared in my ear, his breath as hot as his cock. “Say it!”

“Yours!” I gasped, letting my head drop back on his shoulder. “Yours, Pierce!”

He roared again, wordlessly, before latching onto my shoulder and biting down. It didn’t hurt. It surprised me more than anything else.

And it was all wrapped up in his final thrust, slamming me down on him as he slammed up into me, and my core clenched one more time as I came along with him. His arm tightened around me, and I dug my nails into his thighs until the spasms passed.

I opened my eyes only to see the darkness of the cell. Everything had changed. I wasn’t me anymore. I was myself and his mate at the same time. I would never be anybody else’s.

“Jasmine...” he breathed, touching his forehead to my shoulder.

I cupped the back of his neck in my hand and held him there while I fought to catch my breath.

“My Jasmine.”

“My Pierce,” I whispered.

It sounded good and felt even better. My Pierce. There was no question of ever leaving him. It was an impossibility. I raised myself from his lap and eased myself down until I was stretched out on the blanket.

“I’m sorry about your shoulder. I didn’t think. It came over me too fast.” He touched it with gentle fingers. “Your bad shoulder.”

“It’s all right. I’m all healed up anyway, and it didn’t hurt. What was it all about? Your way of marking me?”

“Something like that, yes.” He stretched out, facing me. He was still breathing a little fast. “I had no idea it would be that good, or I might have thrown you to the ground earlier.”

“I’m glad you managed to hold off,” I whispered, “or else I might not have wanted it as much as I did.”

“But you did want it.” It didn’t sound like a question, though I knew it was one.

He was too proud to admit his uncertainty—and the fact that he was uncertain at all told me what I needed to know.

He loved me.

For the first time, he worried whether somebody else was happy and satisfied.

I decided to make it easy for him. “I did, and I will again. Soon, if possible.”

“How soon?” He took my hand and guided it.

He was already hard again—and even though I should’ve been exhausted past the point of even thinking about it, my body responded with a fresh rush of warmth.

“I’m afraid this might kill me,” I smiled as he rolled me onto my back, settling himself between my legs.

“But what a way to go...” he growled softly before brushing his lips tantalizingly against mine.

### Epilogue

Jasmine

Smoke looked glad to see us when we returned—until his expression changed to one of knowing. And disappointment.

We had made a point of walking around to the main entrance, where Pierce had left his clothes before shifting.

If he showed up buck naked with my hand in his, it would look a little suspicious. I was still shy enough to take steps to hide our activity.

It didn't matter.

"I see." Smoke stared heavily at Pierce, who only shrugged. "You're lucky I found something, then, since you barged ahead without waiting for me."

"You found something?" Pierce nearly ran after him.

I followed them to the library, where a massive, leather-bound book was open on a table far too small.

Smoke pointed, and Pierce bent to examine the words on the ancient, weathered page. "I can barely make this out. I haven't read that language in centuries."

"I'll help." Smoke read aloud. "If a blood oath is made, only the altering of the blood

involved may break it.”

“The altering of the blood involved?” I asked, looking from one of them to the other.

“I don’t understand.”

“I do.” Pierce was beaming from ear to ear when he straightened up. “It means that when I mixed my blood with yours, it changed your blood from what was used to make the oath. You’re no longer the same as you were when your father promised you.”

“The composition of your blood has changed,” Smoke explained. “All your sister did was treat the toxic effects of dragon’s blood. But see, here,” he added, pulling out another huge volume, “when a dragon’s blood is mixed with another creature’s, it alters the composition. You’ll always be part-dragon, even if it’s a very small part.”

I was glad for the presence of a sofa behind me, because my legs buckled at the knees and sent me down onto it. “Holy shit,” I whispered. “Do you think this will work?”

“It has to. Unless...” Smoke trailed off, cutting his eyes in Pierce’s direction like he was reluctant to voice his thoughts.

“Unless what?” I prompted.

“Unless you feel an emotional bond with the man you’re promised to.” He grimaced, waiting for the potential fallout.

There was no reason for him to worry. “Oh, no. I can’t stand him. I never could. We’re oil and water.”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“She’s sure. I can feel it.” Pierce’s relief was evident.

Then again, so was mine.

Smoke cleared his throat before leaving the room—I made a mental note to thank him for all his hard work as Pierce sank down beside me and wrapped me in his strong arms.

“There’s no reason for you not to stay now,” he whispered, stroking my hair.

I rested the side of my face against his chest and could hear the steady beat of his heart. It was like music. “Good thing, because I’m not going anywhere.”

“Not ever?”

“Never, ever. I meant it when I said I was yours. You know I am. Forever.” I straightened up, looking him in the eye. “There’s no getting out of this. I hope you don’t regret it.” I’d have to figure out what to do about my clan later, but my heart knew where it belonged.

“How could I ever regret being with you?” He kissed my forehead, my cheeks, then my lips.

I melted against him, sinking into his kiss like I would into a feather bed. I could still feel him on me, in me, the effects of what we did in the cell still fresh. My body sang with him.

“I love you, you know. Even if you inadvertently almost killed me.”

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

He rolled his eyes. “While I was trying to save your life for the second time. You tend to forget that part.”

“And I always will,” I teased.

“You’ll never let me live it down, will you?”

“No. Not ever.” I giggled at the look of mock pain on his face.

We both turned in surprise at the sound of footsteps.

Alina looked elated and stricken all at once. “You have a way to break the oath to Bradley?”

When I nodded, grinning, she barely choked back a sob.

I rose, with Pierce behind me.

“What is it?” I asked.

Smoke entered the room, frowning deeply.

And there I was, deluding myself into thinking the others would be happy for us simply because we were happy. Was I selfish to assume they would be?

“This loophole only covers one of you.” Smoke nodded at me. “You. Not your sister.”



I closed my eyes briefly as the truth sank in. Of course. There was no reason for Alina not to go back. Especially since I was staying.

They couldn't get away with keeping the both of us.

"It would open a whole new world of trouble," I murmured when it was all clear.

My sister looked heartbroken, and I understood why because I felt the same way.

We had spent our lives leaning on each other, trusting one another when there was nobody else we could trust.

We were each other's secret keepers. The best of friends. And there was no way we could be together once she was gone.

"I don't want to leave you." She took my hands and squeezed hard, searching my face with anxious eyes.

"I know. I don't want you to leave. I don't know what life is like without you." I looked at Pierce, who deliberately looked away.

I knew I was putting him in a bad position by even hinting that I wanted him to do something about it. I didn't want to press.

Smoke did the talking. "If you don't go, it would mean extreme danger for you, your sister, and the rest of us." He sounded like a man convicting himself to death.

Only his sense of honor was strong enough to send Alina away. The deep attraction between them was obvious. I wondered if they were fated mates, too. Stranger things had happened.

“I know that.” Her big, luminous eyes filled with tears. “It’s just that I’ll be alone, and I’m not looking forward to it.”

“I thought you had an uncle.” Pierce didn’t sound unsympathetic, but his dragon had what he wanted.

His dragon would advise Pierce to keep his nose out of any further conflict. How I knew that, I’d never be able to explain. Something about mating with him had unlocked insight into his thoughts. It was unnerving and exciting all at once.

Alina and I both rolled our eyes. “He’s our uncle by blood, but there’s no affection,” I explained. “He and Papa never exactly got along. He was the tight-fisted one, the one who would rule the clan with an iron hand if he ever managed to get his hand around it. And he has now.”

“If anything, we remind him of Papa, and he hates it.” Alina shuddered, rubbing her hands over her arms. “He gives me the shivers. Not in a good way.”

“And you’ll be alone with him.” Smoke’s jaw tightened until I was sure his teeth would crack under the strain.

“He would never hurt us,” I jumped in, and Alina shook her head adamantly in agreement. “He’s just not the warm, loving type.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 10:12 am*

“We’re all we have,” she whispered.

My heart ached until I was sure it would break open. I enfolded her in my arms and held her tight. Would it be the last time I ever hugged my sister?

Fence and Miles came in, followed by Cash. I could tell by the looks on their faces that they all knew.

“You realize you can’t tell anybody in your world about what happened here,” Miles explained.

“I know.”

“They can’t even know where Jasmine is,” Fence added. “Or that you were with her.”

“Believe me. I get it.” She let go and ran a hand under both eyes to catch the tears which didn’t get the chance to reach my shoulder. “I’ve already considered what I would have to do once it was time to go. I think it will be best to say I looked for Jasmine and never found her.”

I shuddered.

Pierce’s arm slid around my shoulders.

“I guess that makes the most sense,” I agreed in a soft voice. “Pretend I died. You were staying in the mountains while looking for me, but you eventually had to give up hope. It’s not as if we could call the police to search for me. There wouldn’t be a

record anywhere of my accident or disappearance. It's the easiest solution—if you think you can pull it off.”

“It's a matter of life or death for all of us,” she reminded me. “I always perform best under pressure.”

“That's true. You saved my life when I was at death's door.”

“Don't remind me.” She hugged me again, and I fought back the grief crushing my chest.

It was bad enough without me showing how tough it was to lose her. I made it a point to smile when I leaned away from her.

“It's all going to be fine. You're going to be fine.”

“I know. And so will you.” Her chin quivered just the same.

So did mine.

I couldn't help but look at Pierce again. He was frowning as he watched us.

He felt sorry for us, I could feel it.

“Isn't there any way I could still have her in my life?” I whispered, hoping against hope.

All he did was look at the rest of his family with a deep sigh.