



Ashfall (Firebound #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He fell from the sky like a god of fire. She was sent to expose him.

When wildfire expert Ember Vale arrives at the edge of an inferno in Arizona, the flames aren't the only thing acting strange. Suspicious fire patterns. Inconsistent reports. And the Blackstrike Unit—an elite team of smokejumpers with eyes that burn a little too bright.

Especially their leader, Dax Fane.

Dax is everything Ember doesn't trust: powerful, controlled, magnetic. But when he drops from the sky to lead his crew into hell, she sees something inhuman in him... something that calls to her. She was sent to investigate. She never expected to be hunted by fire or claimed by fate.

Dax knows Ember is his mate the moment their eyes meet. But he's cursed, bound to a dragon side that grows more unstable by the day. Claiming her might save him. It might also doom her. Especially when a rogue dragon rises from the ashes, bent on revenge, and targeting Ember to get it.

With a wildfire closing in and secrets igniting around them, Dax and Ember will have to choose, duty or desire, survival or surrender. Because the only thing more dangerous than this fire... is the way she makes him burn.

Welcome to Firebound. Where the smokejumpers are dragons—and the only way to tame the flames is to fall in love.

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Page 1

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PROLOGUE

DAX

Above the Coconino National Forest

Mogollon Rim, Arizona

Present Day

The fire breathes beneath me, a living thing—hot, reckless, hungry.

Smoke punches upward in towering columns, dense and churning, clawing at the stars that haven't even risen yet. The trees scream in silence, their limbs cracking and curling as flame devours them from the inside out. I ride the heat currents above it all, wings slicing through air thick with ash and memory.

This place knows me.

And I know what's coming.

I bank left, keeping my altitude just above the wall of smoke that stretches across the Mogollon Rim. Below, the canyon glows like a furnace—orange veins of fire snaking through the forest floor, pulsing like magma in the earth's bloodstream.

It shouldn't be burning this way. Not this fast. Not here.

This isn't nature losing control. This is someone taking it. I've seen enough fire to know the difference.

The wind presses against me, and I adjust—wings stretching, catching the current as I scan the perimeter. My senses extend outward, tuned to every flicker of heat, every unnatural surge of flame. I inhale and taste more than smoke: accelerants, buried resentment, rage that's festered too long.

I should land. Should return to human form, check in with my men—my team. The Blackstrike Unit is already mobilizing. Every one of them is a dragon, like me. Every one of them walks a razor's edge between duty and destruction.

That edge gets thinner by the year.

For men like us—ancient, cursed, barely leashed—it's the mate bond that keeps the beast in check. That mythical thread between dragon and fated mate, the only thing that quiets the hunger, the fury, the fire inside.

For over a thousand years of war, exile, blood, and flame, I have searched, but never found her. Not in all the centuries I've carried this burden.

I've burned kingdoms to the ground. Fought gods masquerading as men... and men masquerading as gods. Buried brothers who didn't deserve to die. Now I lead a unit of those like me—warriors bound by oath, masked by myth, risking everything to save a world that would hunt us if it knew we existed.

Even so, I can't stop this fire alone. Not this one. Not what's coming.

The air changes, pressure dropping. A second pulse of heat flares to the north—unnatural, exact. That's no lightning strike. It's a second ignition point. Someone wants this forest gone.

I roar, the sound swallowed by the wind and lost in the smoke. Below, trees crack and collapse, helpless.

And I feel it again. That clawing guilt. That impossible weight.

I am the oldest of those descended from my clan. I know of only one who is older. I was there when our dwindling numbers forced us to retreat from the world of men. I carry the legacy. The curse. The command.

Every time my men jump into hell, I wonder which one won't climb out. Which one will burn out from within. Which one will lose the battle to the dragon in his blood.

And every time, I swear it won't be today. Not if I can stop it. Not while I still breathe.

I angle my wings and dive, a shadow cutting through smoke and heat. The fire has a master, and I am he. This time I will not wait for fate to intervene.

CHAPTER 1

EMBER

C oconino National Forest

Mogollon Rim, Arizona

Present Day

The truck hums beneath me, tires grinding over gravel as I wind up the narrow mountain road. Pines lean in close, their tops scorched and skeletal from the last burn. Smoke clings to the air like a warning.

I've got maybe three miles left before I hit base camp. My stomach's already tight.

I adjust the rearview mirror. Catch my own eyes—tired, clear, unflinching. I look more like my dad every day.

The memory hits hard. Sharp and sudden.

We were in the garage. Late. The busted carburetor sat between us like a puzzle we both hated but refused to quit. He had grease up to his elbows. That quiet rumble in his voice meant he wasn't just talking. He was teaching.

“You walk into that camp, any camp,” he'd said, “and they're gonna look at you sideways. Not just because you're a woman. Not just because you're young. But

because instead of soot in your lungs, you went to college and got a degree. You've got plenty of ash and soot in your veins as our family have been firefighters for generations."

I remember how I crossed my arms, chin up, already defensive. He saw straight through it.

"They'll think you haven't earned it. Like book smarts make you soft. Like fire gives a damn where you learned to fight it."

He wiped his hands, turned to face me square.

Locked eyes like he was handing me armor.

"But listen to me, Em. You have earned it. Every damn bit. Don't let their resentment crawl inside your head. You're not less than them. You're not equal, either. On your worst day, you're better."

I blink, hard, snapping back to the road. A trailhead sign zips past. I'm almost there.

Camp's gonna be tense. Crews overworked, air full of ash, nerves shot to hell. And here I come—clipboard, badge, the arson investigator no one asked for. They'll see a college girl in clean boots and decide I'm dead weight before I even say a word.

But I hear him in my head, clear as anything.

'Don't forget who you are.'

I don't. Not for a second.

I press harder on the gas. Let them underestimate me. I may not breathe

fire—yet—but I’ve got sparks to spare.

The air here smells like scorched earth and bullshit—hot pine sap gone acidic, charred ozone, and the subtle bite of ego-sweat from the command tent. It's the scent of disaster wearing aftershave and pretending it's under control.

"Vale," the base commander barks the second my boots hit gravel. His voice is all caffeine and contempt, the kind of tone that says he thinks my presence is both an inconvenience and a threat to his chain of command.

He's shorter than I expected, built like a bulldog in a uniform that's seen better days. Bloodshot eyes, red nose, and a permanent grimace that probably predates the wildfire season. "You're late."

"I'm sorry if I kept you waiting—blame the wind." I brush a few flakes of ash from my jacket and offer a small nod. "I'm here to investigate the cause of this fire and several others like it. I know I'm federal and not part of your chain of command, but I'd like to think we're working toward the same goal."

He grunts and hands over the clipboard like it weighs more than it should. "You'll be shadowing the Blackstrike unit. They're already mobilizing. Don't slow them down."

His tone makes it clear he expects me to be a problem. I keep my expression neutral, glancing at the clipboard before looking back at him.

"The smokejumpers?" I ask, more curious than combative. "You're putting me with the team that jumps into wildfires for fun? That's your idea of integration?"

I don't mean it as a dig. Just trying to understand what I'm walking into—and maybe lighten the mood before it burns.

"They're an elite unit—the best. You'll like their team leader," he says, though there's a flicker of something else under the words—something tight around the eyes. Respect, maybe, but the kind that's edged with unease. "Blackstrike does things their own way. They get results, but they don't always ask permission first. Fane especially. Damn good at his job, but not exactly a fan of protocol." He scratches at his jaw, then mutters, mostly to himself, "Whole damn unit gives off a vibe—like they know something the rest of us don't."

Yeah, because that's what people always say right before introducing me to someone who thinks rules from others are just polite suggestions and their rules and orders are to be obeyed without question. In my experience, men like Fane believe that teamwork means 'do what I say and don't ask questions.'

Guys like that tend to bulldoze through a chain of command like it's made of smoke and duct tape, leaving scorched policy and frazzled superiors in their wake.

I tuck the clipboard under my arm and scan the horizon, already bracing for whatever version of chaos this Fane guy brings with him.

The fire licks the edge of the ridge, a boiling, snarling line of orange swallowing trees like matchsticks. It doesn't look random. It appears someone intentionally drew it on the terrain. The kind of fire that doesn't just destroy—it carves. Like a message. Like a warning. I narrow my eyes and squint against the smoke. The wind changes direction just enough to let me glimpse a slope already devoured to black, the flames still crawling forward with surgical purpose. Someone lit this, and they knew exactly where it would go—and where they wanted it to touch.

I turn and start walking, boots grinding over brittle earth, toward the sound swelling in the distance. It's not just noise—it's a living thing. A deep, relentless roar that fills the hills like thunder caught in a loop, shaking the ground, pressing against my chest with every step. The fire isn't just burning. It's screaming.

The fire isn't just noise—it's a presence. A force that pulls at something deep in my chest. It doesn't scare me. It dares me. Challenges me to come closer, to see what it's hiding. Some people chase storms. Me? I chase the burn.

"You're not briefed yet," he snaps, stepping closer like proximity equals authority. His chest puffs out a little, shoulders squaring up. It's a classic move—trying to reassert dominance with posture and volume.

He might be the biggest voice at this base, but he knows he's not the biggest presence anymore. Not with Blackstrike incoming. Still, he's clinging to his scraps of control like they matter. Like he needs me to remember he runs this place, even if he's not really the one calling the shots.

"Brief away, Commander," I say, keeping my tone neutral, flat. No heat, no challenge. Just enough compliance to keep him from puffing up any further. Let him have his moment. For now, I'll play along. Doesn't mean I've forgotten who actually has the authority here.

He grits his teeth, clearly resenting that he even has to explain this to me. "We've had six fires spark up across a hundred-mile radius in the last forty-eight hours. Too fast. Too exact. No lightning. No campers. No idiot kids with fireworks. Someone's starting these. And they know what they're doing."

He crosses his arms like he's bracing for my skepticism, but I just nod. He's not telling me anything I haven't already guessed. Still, he leans in slightly, like proximity can make him seem more important. "This isn't some random nut job with a grudge. It feels calculated. Coordinated. And it's making us all look like amateurs."

There it is. The crack beneath the command. He doesn't like being out of control, and whatever's out there lighting up the Rim has knocked him sideways. He's used to being the one giving orders, the loudest voice in the room, the guy with the final say.

But the Blackstrike Unit doesn't answer to him. And neither do I. That eats at him—not enough to show open disrespect, but just enough to make every word he spits feel like a warning. He's trying to reassert control over a situation that's already too big for his authority.

My pulse kicks, a beat of adrenaline riding up my spine. "Serial arson?" The question comes out low, measured, but my brain is already racing. Patterns. Targets. Intent. Someone is playing god with gasoline and topography—and doing it with a terrifying level of control.

"Feels like it. But no evidence. Nothing sticks... not until now. I've got half my crew running on fumes, three hot zones flaring up at once, and the damn governor breathing down my neck for answers I don't have. Blackstrike's the only unit that can hit drops this deep, this fast, but even they don't loop me in. They operate on need-to-know—and apparently, I don't. But I'm telling you, Vale, something's off here. It's too clean. Too coordinated. And it's got me losing sleep and pulling favors I didn't know I had."

"And what makes you so sure this one's different?" I ask, though I already suspect I won't like the answer.

His jaw ticks. That flash of irritation again. Not at me this time, but at the situation—at being blindsided, outpaced, and forced to rely on people he can't command. He opens his mouth, then hesitates. Whatever he wants to say, he doesn't quite have the words for it. And that, more than anything, tells me how far out of his depth he really is.

Before he can answer, a roar splits the sky—deep and thunderous, too guttural for jet engines, too fluid for rotor blades. It hits my chest like a war drum made of bone and old gods. Primitive. Wrong. Heads jerk upward all around us.

Radios chirp to life, voices clipped and confused. Even the commander flinches like someone walked over his grave. For a half-second, he forgets to posture. And in that pause, I see it clearly: fear.

Not of the fire. That, he understands—knows how to contain, how to predict, how to survive. But what's coming out of that sky? That's different. That's something older than fire, older than fear.

It's not just a threat—it's a reckoning. And even a man who runs a base like a fortress knows when he's staring down something that doesn't play by human rules.

He nods toward the sound and shakes his head. "I don't know what to think anymore, but Fane and his unit believe... hell, I don't know what that secretive group of arrogant... Forgive me. I've been under a lot of pressure. In any event, that's Dax Fane, leader of the Blackstrike Unit,. They call him the dragon."

I shade my eyes and look up just in time to see something black and massive banking through the smoke column. It moves like a predator in flight, every movement of its wings a calculated decision. Not just fast—precise. Lethal.

Whatever the aircraft is that he's flying looks as if it was carved out of obsidian and nightmares, matte black with no markings, a sleek, impossible silhouette that seems to cut through both cloud and flame as if neither could touch it. It doesn't fly over us. It owns the sky.

Then a shape detaches from it—not ejected, not launched, just let go, like gravity answers to it. No parachute. No emergency gear. No hesitation.

Just a man—or something that looks so close, it almost passes for one. Broad-shouldered, dense with muscle, falling like a meteor with purpose. He doesn't brace. Doesn't scream. Just plummets through smoke and flame like the sky itself handed

him over to the earth.

He doesn't just fall—he descends, like the world makes room for him. The wind curls around him, moving like smoke that knows who it belongs to. Fire pulls back, coiling in place as if reluctant to touch him. Trees groan in the distance, not from flame, but something older—a presence returning to ground not walked in centuries.

The whole damn forest seems to hold its breath. Not in fear, but in recognition.

At the last minute, some kind of chute—if you could even call it that—deploys in a sudden, controlled burst. Not nylon. Not standard issue. More like something engineered in a lab no one admits exists. It slows his descent just enough to keep the landing from being lethal, but not enough to dull the force.

He hits the earth like it owes him something. The impact rumbles through the soil and into my boots, vibrates in my bones, and sends a blast of scorched wind outward. Knees bent, one fist embedded in blackened dirt, his head is down like a predator taking a breath before the strike. Steam rises from the ground around him like the earth itself is exhaling in relief—or surrender.

When he moves, it's with the kind of deliberate power that says he's used to being obeyed—by people, by flame, maybe even by fate itself. Not cocky. Not performative. Just certain. Like gravity adjusts to him, not the other way around. There's a stillness in him that speaks of ancient violence barely caged, and every movement says: obey or burn.

And then he stands. No gear. No burn marks. No blood. Just raw muscle wrapped in black tactical fabric molded to every lethal line of his body.

Of course, the walking inferno would look like sin on two legs.

His shoulders roll with a predator's grace, steam curling from him like he didn't just fall from the sky—he claimed it. The way he moves, the way he exists, it all feels too big for one man. Like the ground should split open and offer something in return just for holding him upright.

I take a step back, heart thudding too fast. His presence doesn't just press—it brands. Like heat off a forge, yes, but it sinks deeper. Into bone. Into instinct. My mouth goes dry, my fingers twitch like they want to reach for a weapon I don't carry.

He's tall, broad, and carved with the kind of presence that doesn't walk into a room—it takes it. Dangerous in a way that doesn't feel modern at all. Ancient. Like if he wanted to, he could unmake the world—and I wouldn't stop him in time.

Then his eyes lock on mine. My breath catches for a heartbeat, like something primal in me just recognized something equally ancient in him. His irises flash—not just glow but burn for a second. Liquid amber. Molten. Impossible.

A blink later, it's gone. Brown. Normal. My rational brain scrambles to explain it... a trick of the light, a flash reflection, an adrenaline-fueled hallucination. Pick your poison.

"Ember Vale?" he asks, voice low and rough, like gravel soaked in smoke and whiskey.

His gaze sweeps over me—quick, clinical, dismissive. Like he was expecting someone else: taller, meaner, definitely male. When I don't match the picture in his head, it shows. He clocks me, files me under non-threat, and moves on like I'm part of the gear manifest.

I glance at the scorched ground between us, then back up at him with a crooked smile. "Not even a handshake? No brooding one-liner about destiny or danger?" I

shoot a look at the base commander. "You guys really don't go in for small talk or Hallmark movies, do you?"

He doesn't smile. Doesn't blink. Just radiates a kind of quiet command that skips right past reason and hits something primal. Some part of me wants to push back. Another, deeper part wants to drop to my knees in front of him without question.

He doesn't have to raise his voice. Doesn't need words. Everything about him is commanding .

He steps forward, gaze steady, voice a low rumble like distant thunder. "Dax Fane," he says by way of introduction. "You're with me now."

It's not a request. Not a greeting. It's a declaration. Like he just claimed territory. Or me.

I square my shoulders. "Says who?"

"Says me," he replies. "Unless you'd rather chase the fire from behind a desk."

Smartass. Alpha. The kind of man who probably bench-presses fallen logs and thinks foreplay is issuing commands. And yet—damn it—he's annoyingly hot. The kind of hot that makes you question your career choices and your moral compass all at once.

"Fine," I snap. "Lead the way, Smokey. But don't think I'm following you anywhere without answers."

His lips twitch—not a smile, exactly. More like the barest ghost of satisfaction, as if he expected resistance and is pleased I didn't disappoint. It's the kind of reaction you'd expect from someone who enjoys being challenged just enough to keep things interesting. A flicker of something dark, patient, and quietly predatory that feels more

intimate than a grin ever could—like he's already ten steps ahead, just waiting for me to catch up.

And just like that, I'm in... or at least I think I am. Either way, I follow the dragon.

CHAPTER 2

DAX

She's mine.

The word doesn't rise—it detonates. A single, blinding truth that scorches through every cell in my body the second my boots hit the ground. I've waited centuries for this. Lifetimes. I watched other dragons fall into the bond, watched them claim and be claimed, while I fought my wars, buried my dead, and told myself fate had passed me over.

But now—now she's here. Real. Breathing. Smart-mouthed and fire-eyed and standing in my territory like she belongs. My dragon doesn't just recognize her. Every part of me starved for meaning, anchor, and her flares up like dry brush ignited.

My dragon doesn't growl or stir. He erupts. A wildfire behind my ribs, clawing for release, roaring one word over and over through my blood like a chant forged in flame.

It's not just attraction. It's elemental. It sears through every layer of me with the quiet ruthlessness of inevitability. I feel it in the coil of my muscles, the ache behind my teeth, the tightening in my chest like I can't take a full breath until she's under my protection. Claimed. Marked. Mine.

My dragon circles inside, snarling, wrapping itself tighter with every second she

remains untouched by me. The bond doesn't whisper. It commands . It ignites fast and merciless, threading heat through my skin and dragging every buried instinct screaming to the surface, telling me to take her, keep her, burn for her. And still—I hold the line. Barely.

The moment I set down, I knew. No hesitation. No doubt. Just the quiet, brutal clarity of instinct: my fire recognizes hers. Not just a flicker of interest or attraction. It's deeper. Ancient. My dragon doesn't whisper; he bellows. His voice echoes through my bones, a primal demand that drowns out logic.

She's here, she's real, and every buried hunger I've silenced for centuries claws to the surface in a single breath. There's no easing into this. No negotiation. Just a truth I feel in every cell: the wait is finally over.

Except she isn't dragon-forged. She's human. It's all grit, tempered in tragedy and sharpened by suspicion. And it calls to me, anyway. Hard.

Ember Vale. Arson Investigator. Civilian. A complication I didn't ask for but can't ignore. My dragon surges beneath my skin the second she looks up at me—head tilted, chin up, eyes defiant like she expects a fight and isn't remotely afraid of it. That alone makes my breath hitch.

I tap my comms unit. "Kade, Rafe—report in. Perimeter grid north and west. Full scan, 300-foot radius. Check for fire signatures with abnormal fuel behavior."

"Copy," Kade's voice crackles through. Cool, efficient, reliable. "Already tracking them. We've got three hot spots showing acceleration beyond natural thresholds."

Rafe breaks in a beat later. "That eastern ridge line's moving too fast. There's no natural source for the spread rate. You thinking arson again?"

"I'm thinking worse," I reply. "Keep your heads on a swivel. If you see anything out of place—glyphs, burned patterns, runes—I want it flagged and logged."

"Copy that," Rafe says, his tone suddenly sharper. "If this is like the last one, we might not be dealing with just fire."

"Exactly," I say. "And stay alert. We've got a fed on-site."

"Understood," Kade says. "What about her?"

"She's with me," I say, voice low and final. "Eyes open. No mistakes."

Ember's got a mouth on her, I'll give her that. Intelligent with enough bite to draw blood if I let it. She talks like she's fireproof. And gods help me, I want to believe she is. I shouldn't find this amusing. My focus should be elsewhere. But my beast purrs at the challenge like he wants her beneath him and roaring.

I grit my teeth and lock down the urge to claim. Not yet. Not with her still trying to figure me out, still skeptical and human and beautifully defiant. My dragon roars inside me, snapping against my control like a beast denied a feast it's waited over a thousand years for. He doesn't understand caution. He doesn't care about consent or pacing. He just sees her—sees that she's ours. I shove him down, jaw tight. The instinct to mark her, to press her to the ground and brand her with heat and power, is a razor under my skin. But I won't be that monster... not yet anyway.

Behind me, the rest of Blackstrike is dropping into the valley, one by one. Silent shadows in fire-resistant tactical gear—dragons in human form, each one a weapon tempered by centuries of control and pain. To the outside world, they're just elite firefighters. Legends. Ghosts. But if the truth ever got out? Humanity wouldn't thank us for saving them. They'd hunt us to extinction.

My men trust me to lead. To hold the line. To keep our secrets buried beneath smoke and ash, our enemies burning in the wake, and our beasts leashed just enough to walk among the humans without losing control.

But mine hasn't been in check since the moment I saw her.

That fragile grip I've kept on my instincts, on my dragon, on the fire itself—it snapped the second I locked eyes with Ember. I've held the line through blood, battle, and betrayal. But the bond doesn't care about discipline. The dragon doesn't care about consequences. He only cares that she's here—and that every second I don't claim her feels like burning alive from the inside out.

I glance sideways. She's studying me like I'm a lab sample she's not sure won't explode. Smart woman. She's not wrong.

"The base camp commander indicated you don't play well with others," she says dryly, falling into step beside me without asking permission. Her stride is quick, confident. No flinch, no hesitation. "Should I be flattered I'm the exception, or worried I'm next on your hit list?"

"I haven't decided yet." I don't look at her. I can't. The scent of her—smoke, adrenaline, and something clean and female underneath—crawls over my skin and makes my control slip another inch.

"Charming," she mutters, but her tone has teeth. "Are you always this friendly, or am I just lucky enough to bring out your sunshine-and-rainbows side?" Her words are laced with sarcasm, but there's curiosity beneath them too—like she's poking at the surface to see what cracks open underneath.

"I don't do friendly." I stop walking, turn to face her fully. "I do results."

She blinks once. Doesn't back down. "You sound like a recruitment poster for an emotionally unavailable cult."

That gets me. A snort slips free before I can stop it. Her mouth tips up at one corner—smirk, not smile. My dragon paces inside me like he's decided she's not just mate worthy—she's our fated mate. And if I don't keep a tight leash on him, he'll make that very clear in very public ways.

"You poke hard enough, you might just find a soft spot," I say, voice low, rough. "Although you can probably expect to burn your fingers in the process."

I break eye contact first, forcing my focus back to the wildfire. We're standing near the edge of a ridgeline overlook. Below, the flames chew through old-growth pine with surgical intent—too direct, too focused. This isn't a natural spread. It's a fucking strategy.

"Smoke pattern's wrong," I mutter, narrowing my eyes as the fire creeps in unnatural lines.

The column rises too clean, too symmetrical, like it's obeying something. I've flown over enough hellscape to know the difference between wildfire and warfare. This is something else. Someone is guiding this, designing it. The smoke curls like it's following orders—sharp edges where there should be chaos. And every instinct in me screams this wasn't just lit. Someone planned it.

"Yeah." Ember steps closer, shielding her eyes with one hand as she scans the burn. "It's moving in deliberate vectors. Controlled intensity. Like it's skipping trees."

"It is." I gesture toward the map display being projected via my wrist device. "There. There. And there. Same acceleration curve. That's not wind. That's ignition zones spaced for maximum spread."

“Which would mean... multiple ignition points,” she finishes, voice lower now. “Shit..”

I nod once. “We’ve seen similar signatures upstate and in Colorado, Oregon, and Montana as well. Whoever’s behind this is moving fast.”

“You think it’s one guy?”

“No. I think it’s one dragon.”

She laughs. Short. Bitter. “Right. Let me guess—‘dragon’ is your code word for ‘ruthless ex-military with a god complex and a flamethrower fetish’?”

If only. That would be easier than the truth. But there’s no world in which I tell her what I really mean. No one outside Blackstrike knows what we are—and keeping it that way is the only reason we’ve survived this long. She wouldn’t believe it, anyway. Not yet.

Just to make damn sure she doesn't start putting pieces together the wrong way, I add, "No code. Just means this guy knows what he’s doing. That kind of precision? It’s surgical. Too clean to be random." I watch her face, measuring. She nods, skeptical but accepting. Good. Keep it simple. Keep her safe. For now.

I glance at Ember and tap my comms again. "We need to keep eyes on the fed. She’s not just any fed. I ran a quick background on her. She comes from a prestigious line of firefighters. I imagine she has ash and soot flowing through her veins.”

There’s a beat of silence.

Then: “Better than fire and brimstone. I guess I didn’t know we were babysitting.”

“Not babysitting,” I growl. “Keeping what’s mine safe.” Fuck. I didn’t mean to say that over an open channel. “Someone assigned her to the unit specifically to shadow me.”

Dead silence on the comms. Then Rafe, ever the smartass, cuts in: “Copy that. Watching the... asset. Closely.”

I kill the channel.

Ember squints at me, her expression caught somewhere between confusion and challenge. “I heard that. ‘Keeping what’s yours safe’? That’s how you see me? Like I’m some... thing now? Something you have to protect? Seriously?”

She’s not yelling, but there’s an edge in her voice that wasn’t there before. She doesn’t like it—this possessive streak I haven’t even tried to hide. And she doesn’t trust what it means. Not yet.

I turn back to her slowly, letting the heat in my gaze meet the challenge in hers. “Not a thing,” I say, voice low. “Not property. Not baggage. But you’re in this now. You’re in it with me... with my unit. That makes you mine to watch over, whether or not you like it.”

Her eyes narrow, color rising in her cheeks as she nods. “I don’t—but only because I’d rather you focus on containing this fire. Your unit has a reputation. People say when Blackstrike shows up, it’s the last real shot at stopping a wildfire.”

I step in, just close enough that she has to tilt her head back to meet my eyes. The change in proximity tugs something low in my gut. Her scent hits me—smoke, heat, and something feral underneath that makes my breath hitch. She might not trust me, but she’s not afraid. Not of me. And damn if that doesn’t make her even harder to ignore.

Her pupils flare. She's not backing down, but her pulse flutters at her throat, betraying her. That tiny give—subtle, instinctive—hits me harder than it should. My dragon shudders beneath my skin, coiling tighter, teeth bared. He wants to lunge, to claim, to throw her down and brand her with fire and truth and dominance until she forgets how to breathe without him.

But this isn't the time.

She deserves a choice. Understanding. Not to be swept into the inferno of my hunger without knowing what she's stepping into. I clench my fists at my sides, forcing the beast back down, grinding against every ounce of instinct that screams take. My hunger is so intense that it's a miracle I haven't scorched the air between us merely by standing still. The restraint isn't noble. It's war. And I'm losing.

She doesn't respond. Doesn't run either. Just watches me with something sharp and electric in her eyes. Her jaw sets, not in fear—but in defiance, curiosity, maybe even interest, she doesn't want to admit. I see the gears turning behind those eyes, weighing whether I'm a threat or something worse: a truth she doesn't want to name yet. The part of me that wants to step closer—bridge the distance and make her see—fights the part that knows this moment isn't for taking. It's for waiting. Watching. And letting her choose.

Gods help me, I want to kiss her and set the world on fire at the same time. The need claws at me, ragged and relentless, stoked by every breath she takes too close to mine. I want to press her against me, burn my name into her skin, taste the heat rising in her blood. But we don't have time. Not now. Not yet. The fire calls, and as much as my dragon wants to make her ours, duty still holds the leash—for now.

The wind catches, carrying more than just heat and ash. It curls around me like a warning, sharp and fast. My senses spike—heat signature, air density, vibration underfoot. The change is subtle, but the message is clear. The fire isn't just spreading.

It's being directed. Something's changed. Something's coming . My dragon goes still, listening. Watching. Every instinct I've buried sharpens in a flash of heat.

Something's wrong. Very wrong. My dragon senses it before I fully register the change—a movement in the smoke, the air pressure, the rhythm of the fire. There's another flare in the distance—too far from the primary burn line to be random. Too soon, too clean, too calculated. Another ignition. A deliberate one. And that means someone's not just setting fires. They're sending a message.

“Get back to base,” I bark. “Now.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I said so.” My tone leaves no room for argument. “You're not equipped to go where I'm going. I'll circle back for you later.”

She opens her mouth, probably to argue—but I'm already moving. I can feel her frustration crackle behind me, but this isn't a debate. This is war.

Once I'm out of eyesight, I sprint for the cliff line, tearing off the tactical harness as I go, the gear falling forgotten into the dirt. Fire pulses under my skin, scales pushing to the surface like they've been clawing for release since the second she arrived.

Heat explodes from my chest outward, a violent surge that rips through every nerve ending with a fury that's more instinct than thought.

Flames coil around my body in a spiral of gold and red, engulfing me in a blaze so intense it steals the breath from the air.

I lift my head to the heavens and roar—a sound that cracks across the canyon, ancient and unrelenting—as wings burst free, searing, and scaled.

Fire surges from within, not just around me. There's no pain, only the familiar rush of supremacy igniting through every cell—a surge of power as fire becomes form, and human becomes dragon. It's not transformation. It's revelation. It strips away the human shell without tearing, without breaking. There is only heat. Light. Truth.

The fire folds over me, golden and alive, cloaking who I was and unveiling what I am.

A dragon—ancient, unbound, and unleashed.

The sound that tears from my throat scatters birds from the trees, sends tremors through the earth. It's not just a cry—it's a warning.

I charge from the cliff's edge, limbs coiling, releasing. One bound. Then another. My wings flare wide, catching the heat- thick air as ash and cinders swirl around me. In an instant, I'm airborne—scales gleaming, wings slicing through the wind. The updraft lifts me higher, faster. The ground falls away. Fire below. Sky above.

And in between? Me. Exactly where I belong.

Wings tearing through ash, eyes scanning for the source of the newest threat. Below me, Ember is still on the ridge—shielding her eyes against the light and smoke, completely unaware of what just took to the sky. She sees the heat signature maybe, a dark, unknown shape. She may hear the roar, but not the truth.

Not yet. The fire will keep my secret—for now.

But it won't hide me forever. The moment she sees the truth, everything changes.

And gods help anyone who tries to come between me and what's mine.

CHAPTER 3

EMBER

The ground still vibrates under my boots long after Dax vanishes over the ridge. The sound of his retreat—all raw power and fury—echoes in my bones.

Arrogant bastard. Gorgeous? Yes. Intense? Absolutely. But the way he just barked at me like I was one of his grunts? Oh, hell to the no!

Still, I get it. Fire doesn't wait for feelings. Timing matters. Precision matters. Every second counts when the wind turns and the trees go up like matchsticks. Fine—he had a point. I lacked the equipment needed for what he was doing and charging after him in a fire zone would have been suicide.

But that doesn't mean I enjoy being ordered around like some rookie who doesn't know how to read a fire line. I've made my career standing toe-to-toe with infernos and bureaucrats alike. Being told to stay put? That burns worse than the smoke.

So okay, he had a point. Doesn't mean I'm not planning to make one of my own.

Back at the base camp, the air hits like a wall—thick with smoke, sweat, and a kind of aggressive energy that makes my skin itch. Testosterone clings to every square inch like it's been baked into the dirt. Radios crackle. Boots crunch over gravel. Someone barks a report and gets barked at in return. The tension here isn't just because of the fire. It's something else. Deeper. Like everyone's waiting for the next command or the next explosion, whichever comes first.

And I'm supposed to play nice in the middle of it.

The base commander stomps past me, muttering just loud enough for me to hear. "Supposed to be Fane's problem." He stops short, catching himself. "I'm sorry. Fane was supposed to be working with you..."

"No need to apologize. You have a lot on your plate, but I'm supposed to be here as part of the solution. I'm here to try to stop whoever or whatever is turning the Rim into a testing ground."

"So you're sure it's arson?" he asks.

"Aren't you?"

"Yeah. Too many similarities between too many fires."

"Exactly. I really don't want to be the source of any concern for you or the rogue leader of Blackstrike."

"Rogue?" the commander chuckles. "Sounds about right. He's abrasive and a pain in the ass, but nobody is better at what they do."

"Agreed. Please don't worry about me. I'll get what I need without risking anyone."

The commander nods before turning to stride away. He doesn't know it, but I've walked into hostile situations before—federal briefings, courtroom depositions, post-incident reviews where everyone wants someone to blame. But out here, it's different. Here, very few see me as an authority. Most see me as a disruption or an outsider. I'm not, but I understand where they're coming from.

I take a deep breath before heading toward the first teams to respond. I pick the group

that looks the least annoyed by my presence and the most likely to give me more than grunts and blank stares. As I approach, they fidget—uncertain whether to salute or pretend I'm not there.

"Ember Vale," I say, keeping my voice cool. "I'm the arson investigator assigned to the fire. I just need a few minutes of your time. It would really help. You guys were the first ones to respond?"

One of them nods. He's tall, lean, maybe mid-thirties, and his eyes flick to my badge, then back to my face. "Yeah. We came in from the ridge. The smoke was already curling in patterns we didn't like."

I bring my clipboard up and jot it down, but my attention moves from his words to the posture of the others—shoulders tight, jawlines hard. They're alert. Guarded. And not just from the fire. They've seen something, or at least think they have. Or they're hiding something. Maybe both.

I press them for more by weaving questions between small talk and field data, probing for cracks in the wall they've clearly been taught to maintain. One guy hesitates for just a second too long when I ask about the ignition point timing. Another keeps his gaze too carefully on his boots. There's a rhythm to field interviews—you can tell when answers are honest, when they're filtered, and when they're rehearsed. These are filtered.

By the time I move on to the next group, I can feel a certain level of resentment that I'm poking around their turf or worse, looking for someone to blame. But layered under that? I sense a certain level of respect—the kind men show a storm cloud they're not sure will break or blow past.

Most of the next crew is as tight-lipped as the first. One guy—tall, lean, with a scar that says he's danced with flame and survived—gives me a bit more. "The burn's

wrong," he says. "We felt it as soon as we got here. It's like it was waiting for us."

Interesting. Not just the words—they spark something deeper, a low hum in my chest I can't explain. That kind of phrasing—waiting for us—isn't casual. It's not something a firefighter says unless he feels it in his gut. And I've felt that before, in other cases that never added up. Flames behaving like they had intent. Like they weren't just burning—they were watching. A setup. A snare. A test.

After gathering what info I can, I head inside the ops tent; I spread the topographic maps across the table and overlay the fire progression reports. The familiar sound of static and hushed comms chatter fills the space, grounding me. This is where I do my best work—not in front of cameras or in courtrooms, but here, elbow-deep in data, watching fire reveal its secrets.

The patterns jump out at me like a slap to the face: mirrored flares, unnatural arcs, skipped fuel zones. Fire rarely moves like this. It consumes. It spreads. But this—this feels guided. Intelligent. Strategic. Like someone mapped this fire on a board and made sure it hit exactly where it would hurt the most.

Either the forest spontaneously combusted with GPS precision, or someone's got a real thing for chaos. I suspect it's the latter.

I've seen fires behave with intelligence before—but only once. And that case never left me.

In the foothills just outside Denver three years ago, the blaze had moved like it had eyes, bypassing open fuel to circle an old ranger outpost. No change in direction of the wind had explained it. No lightning, no humans, no equipment failure. Just fire that knew.

We couldn't prove anything. No cause had been found. No suspect. The investigation

had disappeared into red tape. But I remember the look on my supervisor's face when I brought him the early report. Not shock. Not disbelief. Recognition.

That same feeling creeps up my spine. But this? This feels like the same signature. It's almost a perfect match.

I trace the looping path across the map with my finger, connecting arcs and flares like points in a hellish constellation. It's not random—it's deliberate. Someone's painting with fire, and every burn scar is a signature. A pattern ripples outward, destruction pulsing from a single source. This isn't just arson—it's evolution. Precision. Whoever's behind it is learning, refining their reach with each new blaze.

The real question isn't how. It's why.

Why this place? Why now? Who has the knowledge—and the patience—to wield wildfire like a scalpel instead of a sledgehammer? It's not chance. Someone orchestrated this, a controlled chaos.

Fire as a message. Fire as a weapon.

And the deeper I look, the clearer it becomes—this isn't about destruction alone.

Someone's guiding the flame.

I feel him before I see him. Dax doesn't announce himself. Just steps into the tent like he owns the air I'm breathing. I don't have to turn to know it's him—the room changes. The temperature, the weight of the silence, the pull on the back of my neck like a current sliding under my skin. He stops a few feet behind me, and I swear I can feel his eyes tracing every inch of my spine.

Of course, he shows up like Batman, minus the cape, but fully armed with a broody

glower and a healthy dose of sex appeal. God, I need to get a grip... or get laid. Probably both.

"You always sneak up on women working?" I ask, not looking up from the maps, though my pulse has already noticed him. "Or is this some alpha male dominance thing, where startling your federal liaison counts as foreplay?"

"Didn't realize you needed warning," he says, voice low. Rough. A little too close. But there's a flicker in his eyes—amusement, like he finds my snark more entertaining than irritating. The corner of his mouth quirks upward—not quite a smile, but close enough to rattle me. He looks like he's holding back something sharp and amused, like a man who just discovered his favorite game has unexpected teeth.

I glance over my shoulder, arching an eyebrow. He's shirtless and damp from whatever hell he launched himself into and got out of. "You radiate ten feet of male dominance. Pretty sure it counts as a warning."

His lips twitch, like he wants to smile, but doesn't trust himself with it. "You didn't flinch."

"I don't flinch," I shoot back. "Especially not for smokejumpers who drop out of the sky and play classified with arson data."

He steps around the table slowly, gaze flicking from the maps to me. Closer now. Too close. "You left out data," I say, tapping a section of the map. "Here, and here. Four ignition points in a triangle. That's not wind. That's math."

He doesn't blink. "Not everything makes it into the report."

"Yeah? And what makes the cut? Whatever you feel like sharing?"

"Some things are off paper for a reason."

"You mean you don't trust me."

He lets out a quick breath, almost a scoff. "Trust isn't the point," he said. "You're here to observe, not to receive briefings like my teammates. I don't know or trust you, but I trust fire. And it's telling me we're in deep."

I cross my arms, heart pounding even though I refuse to show it. "Then maybe it's time you stop hiding what you know," I say, more measured now, less challenge and more invitation. "You and your team clearly know more than you're saying. I'm not here to step on toes or undermine your command—but if we're not sharing intel, we're wasting time. We need to work together on this, not circle each other like rival packs. Because if what I'm seeing is even half right, we're already behind."

His voice drops. "You're hunting something bigger than you think, Ember. You just don't see it yet."

My name on his tongue does strange things to my insides. But I hold my ground. "Then show me. Stop talking in riddles and show me what the hell we're actually up against."

He holds my gaze for a beat longer, like he's weighing something heavy. Then, just as suddenly, he steps back. "Soon." His eyes—dark, hooded, gleaming like he knows something I don't. He pulls back, turns on his heel. "I'm heading back to our base. I'll see you in the morning. try to get some sleep."

By the time I reach my assigned tent, the sun is setting low, and my nerves are shot. I haven't eaten, haven't rested, and my brain is buzzing.

Laptop open, I pull old case files—arsons logged across five states, some officially

closed, others marked unexplained or unsolved. I flip through report after report, my eyes scanning for anything that even remotely mirrors what I saw on that ridge.

And then I find it. The pattern. Not just similar. Identical. Same heat bloom configuration. Same ignition geometry. A triangle that shouldn't exist in natural fire spread. It shows up in Oregon, then Colorado, then Idaho. Two years ago, Montana. Last year, northern California.

Different forests. Different crews. But the same eerie surgical spread. The same refusal of the flames to follow wind logic or terrain. Controlled chaos. And in every case, the local authorities brushed it off as an anomaly or blamed a lightning strike with no obvious point of origin. Convenient. Clean. Too clean.

I lean back and stare at the screen, the pit in my stomach deepening. This isn't just one arsonist. It's a strategy. And whoever's behind it has been testing us for years.

I think of Dax. Of his silence. The data missing from the Blackstrike reports. That kind of tight, practiced restraint doesn't come from confusion. It comes from experience. From exposure. They know more about these fires than they're letting on. They are deeply involved in something I haven't been allowed to see. They're hiding or protecting something. The more I see, the more I'm thinking it's not just classified—it's dangerous.

The Blackstrike Unit is famous or infamous, depending upon who you ask. They're secretive but effective. And I don't know which one scares me more.

I rub my eyes, exhausted, when a knock at the tent pole startles me.

A volunteer from the kitchen pokes her head in. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but Commander Fane said to make sure you ate."

She sets the tray down—sandwich, fruit, protein bar—and something else. A small piece of polished amber rests on the napkin, catching the light like frozen sunlight. I stare at it, a strange prickle working its way up my spine.

“He said to tell you it helps with grounding,” she murmurs, already stepping back.

Grounding? What does that even mean—emotionally steady? Spiritually anchored? I have no idea. But the weight of it feels deliberate, like it’s meant to hold something in place. Maybe even me.

I eat the food. I don’t want to, but I do. And after, I lie back on the cot, the piece of amber still clutched in one hand.

Sleep comes fast. And so do the dreams.

Fire. It crackles in a rhythm that shouldn’t be natural, moving like it breathes—inhaling, exhaling, watching.

The flames dance in patterns, spiraling outward from my feet like they’re drawing runes in ash.

Wings cut through the smoke above, massive and impossible, shadowing everything in gold and crimson. They beat once, slow and soundless, stirring the surrounding haze in a vortex of heat.

The fire parts in their wake, revealing flashes of shape and muscle and scale too vast to comprehend. It isn’t just fire I’m dreaming of. It’s something inside it. Something alive. And it knows me.

I stand in the middle of the blaze, unburned but surrounded, the heat kissing my skin instead of consuming it. The fire glides over my arms like silk made of sunlight,

warming me from the inside out. There's no sky. No ground. Just the flame that wraps around me like a lover's hands—curious, reverent, possessive.

The scent of charred cedar mixes with something darker, muskier, ancient and intimate, like the memory of skin against skin in the dark. My breath hitches, not from fear, but from anticipation. I should feel terror. But all I feel is the pull—deep, elemental, inevitable.

A voice stirs—not in words, but like thunder in my blood, velvet and flame intertwined. It coils low in my belly, warm and pulsing, brushing against the inside of my skin as if it knows every secret I've buried. It feels like breath on my neck, lips at my ear.

“You already know,” it whispers.

Then come the eyes. Molten gold locked on me through the smoke, glowing with heat and something more primal. They don't blink. They don't look away. They burn into me—through me—like they know every secret I've never spoken aloud. There's no malice in them, no threat. Just certainty. Claiming. Like they've stared into me before and memorized every line. Like they've been waiting for me to return.

I reach forward—and wake up gasping. My skin is damp with sweat and my heart's racing. No reason. No logic. Just a dream. Except it doesn't feel like a dream. It feels like a warning or a promise or maybe a memory... one I haven't made yet.

CHAPTER 4

DAX

The morning sun slices through the haze, burning away the gray in harsh, unforgiving beams that cast jagged shadows across the scorched ridge. The air is sharp with the tang of smoke and ash, still thick despite the fire having moved on. From this height, the terrain spreads like a battlefield below me—blistered earth, blackened trunks, and veins of glowing amber that pulse like a dying heartbeat.

And yet, something deeper hums beneath it all. A dissonance that scrapes against every instinct I own. It vibrates in my bones, like a chord struck out of tune in a song I've known for centuries. The burn pattern is too clean. Too deliberate. Lines of devastation curve with unnatural grace, sweeping across ridgelines like brushstrokes with a purpose. The fire didn't just move through here—it chose a path, or had one chosen for it. Everything in me says it wasn't nature that made that choice. It was a message. One meant for me.

"Faster than it should've been," Kade mutters beside me, eyes scanning the burn perimeter with cold calculation. "We were only in the air ten minutes. This line should've been crawling, not sprinting."

"There's no way that kind of acceleration came from natural fuel," Rafe adds, flicking his gaze toward me. "Unless trees learned to self-detonate overnight."

Kade huffs, but there's tension behind the humor. "I don't like it. It feels off... like it was waiting for us."

Rafe snorts. "Everything feels off lately. And it doesn't help that she's showed up."

"She has nothing to do with this," I say evenly, voice like steel under strain. "The pattern was forming long before Ember stepped into the picture."

Kade shoots me a sidelong glance. "Still... she's asking the right questions, and I think she sees more than even she knows."

"Too many questions," Rafe mutters.

I don't bother correcting him. They're both right—and both underestimating her. That's the danger. Because her record indicates that Ember isn't just sharp—she's relentless. She's the kind of person who doesn't stop once the scent of truth hits her nostrils. If they keep brushing her off, if they treat her like a temporary complication, she'll find her way straight into the fire we've spent lifetimes trying to contain. And I won't always be fast enough to pull her back.

We circle our home base, wings slicing through the wind, then descend in a slow, spiraling arc. Our claws touch down with barely a sound, talons carving into the ash-soft earth. In a synchronized rhythm honed by centuries, we shift—three bursts of light and fire erupt around us, no fanfare, just truth made visible—dragons vanish and the dust swirls around the space where men return.

The flight was brief—just enough to bleed off the blaze still crackling beneath our skin, to smooth the wild edges of our instincts until thought could lead again. The wind tore past our wings, crisp and sharp, carrying the char-stained scent of burning pine and scorched earth. From the sky, the world below looked like a battlefield left to smolder—blackened scars etched into forest and rock.

For a short while, we weren't leaders, soldiers, or ghosts bound by human rules. We were dragons—watchers from above. And in that stillness, above the chaos, we could

finally see the shape of the war no one else realized had already begun.

We stand there for a moment in the aftermath, breathing hard, steam rising off our skin from the fading heat of the shift. Scales retreat into flesh. Wings furl and dissolve into nothing, leaving only silence and the scent of smoke. It's never clean. Never simple. The shift leaves a rawness in the soul, a reminder that we walk in borrowed skins. Each transformation is a reminder that our human faces are masks—necessary to blend, to hide. It's a lie we must live to protect the truth of what we are.

Bare feet on soot-covered stone. The wind carries ash to our doorstep now, swirling it into lazy spirals that cling to our skin. The heat from the shift hasn't completely left us, a lingering warmth that seeps into muscle and bone. We move with the precision of ritual, unhurried but efficient, each of us grabbing our supply packs from the cache tucked behind a jagged basalt outcrop.

We dress in silence. Kade puts on his jacket with practiced ease, his expression unreadable but his movements clipped. I pull on my clothes and step into my boots, the thick soles grounding me back in the human world, even as my mind still buzzes with dragon-sense.

Jackets zip. Velcro hisses. Fabric rustles as we settle into the shape we've chosen for the day. Kade rolls his shoulders, the motion stiff from old wounds and older battles. Rafe adjusts his collar with the same quick, clean motion he always uses—habitual, efficient. I pull the zipper of my jacket all the way up, locking myself back into the armor of skin and silence.

But in the quiet that follows, the only sound is the wind, and the heartbeat of the fire, pulsing low and steady beneath our feet.

Rafe leans over the holographic fire progression display projected on the table in our

field command center. Flames dance in real-time across the grid, rendered in searing reds and volatile oranges. He points to the north flank—a stretch of terrain marked with low-fuel density.

“Look at this segment,” he says, his brow furrowed. “North flank. No fuel bed there. Even so, it torched like a blowtorch hit it. Like something fed it from underneath.”

Kade leans in beside him, eyes narrowing. “That’s limestone and scrub. Should’ve smoldered, not surged.”

“It burned clean and hot,” Rafe adds. “Too clean. Like it was lit with intent.”

I study the image, jaw tight. The heat signature pulsing in the overlay is too symmetrical, too sharp. It glows like a brand on the grid—clean arcs, intersecting lines, too deliberate to be coincidence. My mind flashes back to the last time I saw a pattern like this: the ruins of a fire-scorched village deep in the Alps, Malek’s twisted legacy still steaming in the frosty morning air.

And far too familiar.

Kade and Rafe exchange a glance but say nothing. We kill the projection in sync, the image vanishing with a hiss of static. No words needed. Just the crackling quiet that follows a realization no one wants to name. We step out into the rising heat, the world beyond the tent pressing in around us like smoke before the flame.

Kade zips his jacket. “Feels like the old days. Right before shit went sideways.”

Rafe grunts. “Only this time, the smoke isn’t the only thing trying to choke us.”

“We’ve seen this before,” I say. “Last year in Wyoming. Before that, in Lassen.”

Kade nods. “Same behavior. Triangulated burn paths. Precision flares. Containment curves ignored.”

Rafe runs a hand through his dark hair. “You think it’s him?”

I don’t answer right away. The name has been clawing at my thoughts since yesterday, gnawing at the edges of my control like an ember smoldering under wet ash. Saying it aloud would give it power—make it real. It’s not just history. It’s personal. It’s the monster that nearly took everything from me and left scorch marks on my soul. To even think his name now feels like inviting the past to burn through the present and set fire to everything I’ve rebuilt since.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But Malek’s pattern fits. And if he’s not dead like we thought... then we’ve got bigger problems than fire.”

Kade shifts on his feet, his silence saying more than words. Rafe finally breaks the tension.

“And the fed?” he asks. “She’s in deep. Smart. And stubborn.”

“She’s also mine,” I say simply, the words slipping out with more steel than I meant.

Kade glances at me. “You gonna tell her?”

“When the time’s right.”

“Is that before or after she figures it out on her own?”

I shoot him a look that ends that line of questioning. I can’t afford to slip. Not yet. Ember is already under my skin. Her scent lingers like smoke and citrus, bright and sharp and wild, threading through every breath like a warning and a promise. She’s

more than a curiosity. More than a distraction. She grounds me in a way I forgot was possible—pulls the dragon back from the edge without even trying. She’s an anchor I never thought I’d find... and a temptation I can’t afford to lose control around.

“I need to think,” I say, stepping back from the table. “Keep tight. Report if anything changes.”

I leave before they can ask more questions and head for the clearing carved into the ridge—our designated drop and launch point. I shrug off my gear, boots thudding against the packed dirt like a warning to the earth itself. The wind tugs at my shirt, dry and restless, charged with something more than static. I breathe in deep, and the scent of scorched pine and ash floods my lungs. Beneath it, something older stirs.

The pulse of my dragon beats faster with every breath I take, echoing in my chest like a war drum. My skin tingles, the air around me tightening, vibrating with anticipation. Magic hums low and insistent, curling up from the ground, threading through my bones, waiting for permission.

I step to the center of the clearing with slow, practiced movements. The air thickens around me, sharpening with heat and magic as I place each item down in a neat, familiar pile. The wind brushes across my bare skin, already charged with energy, with the fire that lives just beneath the surface. I close my eyes and breathe, steady and deep, grounding myself in the coiled flame at the center of my being. It's there, always—fierce, patient, ancient. Waiting. I open myself to it, give it space to rise.

The ground vibrates beneath my feet, the first tremor of change rippling through me. And then the fire comes.

It begins as a spark in my core, then rushes outward—consuming, revealing. Flame coils around me, not burning but transforming. The fire sings in my blood, wild and ancient, as wings unfurl in a blaze of gold and ember.

I rise, massive and primal, the blaze still licking along my flanks, casting ripples of heat into the sky. My wings unfurl fully—vast, golden, edged in shadow—and beat down with the force of a thunderclap. The air buckles beneath me. Ash and dust whirl outward like a shockwave as my claws leave the earth. Another beat of my wings and I surge upward, slicing through the smoke-heavy sky like a blade through silk. Fire spirals from my nostrils as I climb, fierce and unrelenting, part of the storm I was born to command.

The wind parts around me, streaming past my wings with a sound like distant thunder. Smoke curls below like serpents slithering through the canyons, their movements too precise to be natural. Heat rises in shimmering waves from the charred landscape, distorting the ridgeline. From the air, the full path of the fire becomes undeniable—arcs too perfect, ignitions spaced like symbols. Too clean. Too efficient. Too targeted. It's not just wildfire down there. It's a message written in flame, and I'm the one meant to read it.

I veer toward the eastern ridge, sharp eyes scanning for signs. My shadow passes over the terrain far below—cliffs, canyons, deep burns too symmetrical to be random.

And then I see it. A secondary ignition source. New burn. Smaller, but recent. Fresh. Someone's baiting us.

Memories slam into me: Malek's last stand, the way his fire tore through a village like vengeance incarnate. The roar of a beast that wanted the world to burn just because he couldn't have it. I'd watched him fall. Swore I'd ended it. But fire doesn't lie.

And neither do these marks. The scorched earth here isn't random—it's deliberate. Circular burns etched in a spiral pattern, overlapping just enough to mimic natural spread to the untrained eye. But I see it for what it is. The ash still radiates residual heat, warmer than it should be. There's a sulfuric undertone in the air, acrid and

unnatural. Not wildfire. Not even dragon. Someone seeded this fire—to lure, to challenge, and to send a message only our kind would understand.

I bank right, circling once to lock the coordinates into memory. And that's when I feel it—Eyes. Not hostile. Not supernatural. Human.

My gaze tracks back down and there—just for a second—I see her. Ember. Standing at the edge of a rocky outcropping near camp, her hand shielding her eyes as she stares up.

She doesn't see me for what I am. Not fully. But she senses it. The flicker of awareness in her posture, the way her gaze lingers in the sky a second too long—it's all there. And it's dangerous. Not just because of what she might uncover, but because of what it stirs in me. If she keeps looking, keeps pressing, the truth won't stay buried. And if she gets too close—emotionally, physically—she won't just expose me. She'll unravel me. She feels the wrongness in the air. I'm getting to know that look—the crease in her brow, the stubborn set of her jaw.

She's close... too close.

I climb higher, pushing against the thermals as the updrafts buffet my wings. The smoke rises in dense columns, curling around me like a veil, cloaking my form from sight. Each beat of my wings sends pulses of heat through the thick air, a soundless roar vibrating down my spine. The sky grows darker as I ascend into the low-hanging clouds, the world below disappearing in a haze of flame and shadow. One more surge of power, and I vanish into the storm-slick sky, nothing but a flicker of gold swallowed by gray.

But the fire below hasn't finished with her... and neither have I.

CHAPTER 5

EMBER

I t's just a shadow.

That's what I tell myself, anyway, because the alternative makes little sense. Not here. Not now. But it doesn't feel like a bird. It doesn't even feel like a paraglider. It feels—wrong. Too big. Too smooth. The way it moved, cutting across the sky in a straight, powerful arc... my instincts don't buy coincidence.

If that was a paraglider, I'll eat my badge and wash it down with jet fuel.

I brace a hand above my brow, peering up as smoke snakes through the sunlight. The clouds are low today, weighed down with heat and ash. The silhouette disappeared so fast it might have been a trick of light. Might have been.

I blink up at the sky, shielding my eyes from the glare slicing through the clouds. The smoke is thick, curling in lazy streams through the canyon, but something moved up there. Not a bird. Bigger. Broader. It moved with a grace that didn't belong to machines or wingsuits, carving a slow arc above the ridgeline like it was scouting.

High and fast and gone in the blink of an eye. It didn't drift; it moved with intent. It wasn't buffeted by the wind or scattered by turbulence. It cut through the air like it owned it. I squint harder, watching the sky, waiting for the shape to reappear. Waiting for logic to step in and explain it away. But it doesn't.

There shouldn't be anyone flying near an active fire zone. The thought alone pisses me off. Paragliders, ultralight pilots—anyone reckless enough to hover near this kind of chaos should have their license revoked and their head examined. Fires are unpredictable. One change in the wind, one rogue flare, and you're ash in the trees. It's idiotic. Irresponsible. And the fact that someone might be doing it on purpose? That makes my blood boil.

I follow the direction it moved, climbing the path east along the ridge. My boots crunch over loose stone, the incline steep and slick with windblown ash. The fire line burned close through here last season—charred stumps still jut like blackened teeth from the soil.

Eventually I reach a bluff, the only flat space nearby. It's half-stabilized with gravel and emergency netting—exactly the kind of place someone might try to land if they were stupid or desperate enough. But it's empty.

I circle slowly, scanning every inch. No gear. No chute. No drag marks. Not even a goddamn boot print. Just disturbed dust and the wind tugging at my sleeves. Nothing. And that kind of nothing sets every nerve in my body on edge.

A sudden gust cuts through the trees. I freeze, every nerve in my body locking up like a pulled wire. A gust of wind that had tugged almost playfully at my sleeves now presses down like a weight, thick and charged, as if the atmosphere itself is holding its breath.

That's when I hear the snap.

It's faint but unmistakable—a brittle, splintering crack like glass under stress.

Beneath my boot, the crusted edge of a flare pocket gives way, crumbling in slow motion. A thin wisp of sulfuric heat escapes like a hiss, curling around my calf, and

the ground beneath me heaves with terrifying promise. I don't have time to react. Just one heartbeat, one breath, and then the floor of the ridge starts to buckle.

"Shit—"

A gust of heat surges beneath me, and for a split second, I register the ground dissolving beneath my boots. The world tilts. My arms pinwheel, grasping for balance that isn't there. The ridge drops out from under me, and panic floods my chest. I'm falling. Not far yet—but far enough. My foot scrapes empty air. My brain screams that I've screwed up, that I'm in real, gut-twisting trouble. And then gravity takes hold.

Then arms. Hard. Fast. Impossible.

One second I'm falling, heart in my throat, the next I'm caught in mid-air like I weigh nothing. The grip is iron—unyielding and absolute. I jolt against something warm and solid, a chest that doesn't give, a chest that feels like it was forged in fire and anchored in place just for this moment.

The wind still howls in my ears, but I'm no longer moving. My breath catches. His scent—smoke, sweat, and something sharper, more primal—floods my senses. The world spins, but his arms are the only thing holding me together.

My fingers instinctively clutch at his shoulders, needing the solid feel of him to remind me I'm not still falling. His muscles are like steel beneath my palms, coiled with tension. For a second, I just hold on, grounding myself in the impossible reality of being caught mid-air like a feather.

Dax. Strong hands clamp around my waist, lifting me off the collapsing edge like I weigh nothing. It's not just fast—it's surgical. Controlled. A surge of power that shouldn't be possible. One second I'm airborne, the next I'm slammed back into heat

and muscle, steadied against a chest that feels more like reinforced steel than flesh. Hot. Solid. Absolute.

Dax. The name sears through me as surely as the fire I almost fell into. Every part of me is aware of him—the press of his body against mine, the heat that rolls off him in waves, the overwhelming strength coiled in the arms locked around me. He holds me too tightly, too long, like he doesn't want to let go.

His breath is rough against my ear, hot and unsteady. I can feel his heartbeat—or maybe it's mine—pounding between us like a second alarm. My skin is on fire where we touch, my pulse an unrelenting drumbeat. Even so, I don't pull away. I can't.

“Let go,” I mutter, though my voice betrays me, a little too breathless, a little too close to a moan.

Heat pools low in my belly, unwanted and insistent. My skin buzzes where he touches me, and I hate how easily my body responds to his—like I've been waiting for this exact contact. I don't want to feel it. Don't want to crave the closeness or lean into the solid line of him. But my fingers tighten in his shirt anyway, and I curse the traitorous flutter in my chest.

“You trying to get yourself killed?” he growls.

I lift my face toward his, hand fisting in his shirt. I don't mean to. It's reflex. Instinct. And it's a terrible idea. Every cell in my body is screaming for space, for clarity—instead, I'm leaning closer, caught in his gravity. His eyes are molten, fierce and focused like he's already memorized the shape of my mouth. His breath grazes my cheek, warm and intimate, his mouth inches from mine, and every breath between us feels stolen. If he leaned in—if I let him—we'd both burn.

He steps back first, putting precious inches of air between us, and I hate the sting of

disappointment that flares in my chest. It's sharp and petty and absolutely ridiculous, and it coils low in my belly like a dare unmet. I shouldn't want him to stay that close. I shouldn't miss the heat of him or crave the brush of his breath. But I do. And losing it feels colder than it has any right to.

"Are you always this dramatic or just when women are falling for you?" I snipe.

"You weren't watching your step," he says, jaw tight.

"I was watching the sky."

He folds his arms. "This is an active zone, not a sightseeing trail."

"Right," I snap. "Thanks for the lecture, Commander Obvious."

Something dark flickers in his eyes—anger maybe, or something older, deeper. But he doesn't rise to the bait. He just stares, jaw locked, gaze unreadable. There's too much silence in him, too much weight. Like he's measuring me. Or deciding if I can handle the truth he's not ready to give. The stare holds longer than it should, laced with a tension that makes the air between us feel charged, heavy with things unspoken.

"What the hell were you doing up there?" I ask. "I know you saw it too. That shadow."

He doesn't blink. "We've got thermal currents over the ridge. A vulture probably caught one."

"A vulture? Are you serious? A pterodactyl maybe. But that thing was no vulture, and you know it. Don't lie to me."

“I’m not,” he says, but there’s hesitation under the surface, like he’s testing the weight of the words before committing to them. His voice is calm, too calm, and that just pisses me off more. “You saw something strange, fine. But not everything unexplained means someone is lying to you or hiding skeletons. We’ve got more at stake out here than what’s on paper. That shadow? Probably nothing. But if it’s not, I’ll find out. That’s my job.”

“Then stop hiding things.”

He doesn’t flinch. “We’re not hiding anything that threatens your investigation. But we don’t open our playbook to outsiders either. You want to work with us, earn that access. Until then, I share what’s necessary. No more. No less.”

“I think,” I say, matching his tone, “that your unit sees a lot more than it reports. That you’re playing by your own rules. And that you’re either obstructing this investigation or you’re running your own.”

His jaw ticks.

“This isn’t some conspiracy,” he says, voice low. “It’s a fire investigation.”

“Bullshit,” I snap. “This is arson. Coordinated. Intentional. And if your unit isn’t behind it, then someone’s working damn hard to make it look like you are.”

We stand locked in a silence that crackles like tinder—dry, brittle, one breath away from ignition. The air between us pulses with things unsaid, heat and accusation hanging like storm clouds just waiting for a strike. His jaw is tight. My hands are fists. Every instinct screams at me to push harder, demand answers. But something in his stare holds me back—a warning, maybe. Or a promise.

Then I turn and walk. Not because I’m done—but because if I don’t, I’ll say

something I can't take back.

He doesn't stop me.

Back at my tent, I kick the dirt off my boots with more force than necessary and slam the flap shut behind me like I can shut out the whole damn day. The heat still clings to my skin, soaked into my clothes like residue from the fire—and from him. My heart hasn't slowed. My thoughts haven't settled. The adrenaline hasn't burned off so much as mutated into something hotter, harder to control.

I pace once, twice, then drop into my camp chair like the ground might give way next. My fingers tremble as I flip open my laptop, the keys clicking louder than they should. Everything feels too loud. Too close. Too uncertain. One man, who shouldn't affect me so deeply, has already tangled me up in his web.

I connect to the satellite uplink, fingers flying over the keys with a sense of urgency that borders on desperation. The hum of the connection stabilizing is the only sound in the tent, a low mechanical heartbeat that feels too calm for the chaos in my head. When the screen flickers to life, casting a pale glow across my face, I lean in like it might give me something solid to hold onto. I don't waste time. Can't afford to.

"This is Vale," I say. "Field ID 7896. I'm calling to escalate priority. I believe the wildfires are intentional, possibly linked. I also believe I'm facing internal obstruction from the Blackstrike Unit."

The voice on the other end pauses. "Obstruction?"

"They're hiding something," I say flatly. "There's a pattern in the omissions, in the way they operate just outside the margins. They're protecting someone—or something—and it's interfering with my ability to get straightforward answers. I need backup. And I want a full file on Dax Fane—every redacted line, every classified

mission, everything the agency hasn't told me."

The line goes quiet. Too quiet. No static, no clicks—just dead air stretching longer than it should. The kind of silence that doesn't just suggest hesitation—it screams it. My skin prickles with a slow, creeping chill. They heard me. They're deciding what to do with that information. And suddenly, I'm not sure who I can trust—on this call, in this camp, or even back in D.C.

CHAPTER 6

DAX

I watch her go, her hips moving in a defiant sway that makes my dragon rear inside me, claws dragging at my skin from the inside out. She doesn't just walk away—she prowls or stalks... at the very least, strides. Ember claims space like it's hers by birthright, each step a challenge, each motion laced with fire. And it guts me.

I want to chase her, wrap my arms around her from behind, tilt her head back and show her exactly what she does to me. Pin her down. Make her listen. Mark her. Make her mine—in every scorching, undeniable way. But I don't. Because one wrong move and I'd destroy the fragile boundary, we've barely built. And gods help me, I want her too much to risk that. Not yet.

I don't move. I can't move. Because if I follow her now, I won't stop. The second I reach for her, I'll lose the battle I've been fighting since the moment I saw her standing there in the smoke, defiant and burning like she belonged to the fire. What's roaring under my skin isn't just lust—it's the dragon, clawing to the surface, hungry for her scent, her submission, her soul.

My fists clench. Heat rolls off my shoulders in waves, curling like smoke from skin just shy of ignition. She's triggered every instinct I've spent hundreds of years learning to leash—instincts carved into my bones when the world still bowed to fire. It's about fire knowing where it belongs. And she—Ember—is where my fire wants to rest.

She doesn't know. She can't. Not yet. And gods help me, she smells like fire and temptation and the kind of warmth I thought the centuries had stolen from me.

My chest tightens with the weight of everything I can't say, can't show. I turn from the path she took and storm the opposite way—into the trees, away from sight, away from the edge I'm dangerously close to falling over.

Not again. Never again... I've been here before.

Somewhere in Central Europe

Centuries Ago

She was young, mortal, and mine. A dark-eyed farm girl from a mountain village whose laughter used to make me feel like a man and not a monster. For three seasons, I watched her. Brought her gifts in secret. Guarded her lands with fire when bandits circled.

And then the rains didn't come. The sky stayed dry for weeks, then months, turning their soil to dust and their hopes to ash. The river shrank to a trickle. Livestock fell. The crops withered in the fields, stalks brittle as bone. The villagers, once wary but content, turned fearful, superstitious, and cruel. Desperation makes monsters of men—and their eyes turned to the cliffs where they knew I watched.

They remembered the dragon in the cliffs—the silent sentinel they once feared but tolerated. But now, in their desperation, fear turned to blame. And they remembered the girl he watched. The one who wandered too close to the edge, who smiled at shadows and came back with wildflowers from places no one else dared walk. They whispered she had been marked, that her womb was cursed or blessed, depending on the elder you asked. They decided the fire on the mountain wanted her. And they gave her to me.

A sacrifice, they said. They dressed her in white, painted her with ash and crushed petals, and tied her hands with twine. Only by offering her—by letting her blood soak the earth and her screams fill the sky—could they please the gods. They didn't ask if she was willing. They didn't care.

I came down from the sky like fury incarnate, a streak of gold and flame against the darkening clouds. My wings beat thunder into the air as I descended, ash swirling in my wake. I landed with a quake that sent the villagers scrambling, screams echoing across the ridge. But I didn't torch them. I didn't roar. I didn't take vengeance.

I came for her.

She was bound at the edge of the stone altar, trembling but proud, her eyes searching the heavens. When they met mine, I saw it—recognition, terror, and something else. I scooped her into my claws, cradling her carefully, and soared away before they could comprehend what had happened. I brought her home. To safety. To truth.

She screamed when I landed; her cry echoing against the stone walls like a dying prayer. Her eyes met mine, wide with disbelief—and for a heartbeat, I wondered if what I had seen had been hope. A fragile, flickering thread of it, wrapped in awe and trust.

Until I changed. Until I shed the beast and became the man. Until I stepped from flame and smoke, naked and powerful, and she saw not just the dragon—but the monster beneath. Until she realized what I truly was, and the hope shattered like glass.

She ran. Terrified. Her scream echoed down the walls of my lair as she stumbled through the rocks, her bare feet slicing against stone, her sobs breaking something ancient in me. She didn't look back.

When she went back to them, they greeted her like a savior. They wrapped her in wool and righteousness. And they came for me—with torches raised, with rusted blades and a holy man's fury, convinced they were cleansing the earth of a monster.

I didn't kill them. I could have. I could've turned them all to ash with a single breath. But I didn't. I let them chase me from the cliffs I'd called home for over a century. I let them take the place where I once dreamed of something gentler.

I left. My home. All of it gone.

Mogollon Rim, Arizona

Present Day

I stare down at my hands, now shaking—scarred knuckles dusted in soot, fingers trembling with the weight of everything I've lost and everything I want. The fire hums under my skin, too close to the surface, itching to rise. My palms curl slowly into fists, and the ache in my chest deepens. This isn't weakness. It's memory. It's restraint. It's the furious need to hold myself together, when every cell inside me demands I burn.

I will not lose her. Not to fear. Not to fire. Not to the past that's clawed at my heels for centuries. Not to the regret that still haunts the edges of every choice I make. Ember deserves better—truth, protection, choice. I'll give her that, even if it breaks every instinct I have to wait. Even if it burns me alive.

The ridge above the canyon is quiet when I join the rest of Blackstrike. The pine-sweet wind brushes past us, thick with the scent of burned earth. The unit's already assembled—Kade, Rafe, and Jace—all of them leaning over a digital map spread across a mobile ops table, their expressions grim. They glance up as I approach, their eyes sharp with questions, but none of them voice the obvious. Not about the tension

on my face. Not about Ember.

Jace offers a slow nod, the only greeting I get. It's enough. We speak more with silence than words, and right now, there's too much heat in me for civility.

Kade breaks the silence. "We've reviewed the flare pattern on the eastern slope. You were right."

I nod once. "It's him."

Rafe whistles low. "Malek's alive."

"As alive as he ever was. And twice as dangerous."

Jace crosses his arms. "Why now?"

"Because we've gone soft," I say. "Because we let the world forget what we are. And he never did."

Kade mutters, "He's not after fire. He's after exposure."

I meet his eyes. "He wants the world to burn. Not just forests. Us."

They fall silent. Each of us thinking the same thing: if the humans ever learn what we are—what we've always been—none of us will survive. Not because we're weak, but because fear is a fire that spreads faster than any blaze we've ever dropped into.

Once the truth is out, they won't see protectors. They'll see monsters. Weapons. Threats. And then it won't be fire we're fighting—it'll be extermination.

"Ember?" Kade finally asks.

“She’s not ready.”

“She’s getting there,” Rafe murmurs.

That night, I lie in my bed at the base, the dark pressing in around me like a second skin. The quiet isn't peaceful—it's weighted, pulsing with everything I'm trying not to think about.

But there's no rest. Not tonight. Not when her presence still haunts every sense I have. I can still feel the tug of her fingers in my shirt, her grip firm and desperate. I still smell her—wild and hot, a cocktail of adrenaline, smoke, and skin that shouldn't be this intoxicating. Still hear the sound she made when I caught her, that soft, broken breath between a gasp and a moan.

It replays in my head like a looped prayer to a god I don't believe in. And I want more of it—more of her. Too much more.

My body won't let it go. Neither will the dragon inside me. I stir restlessly, close my eyes—and then the dream takes me.

She's standing in the middle of fire.

Naked.

Glowing.

Flame kisses her skin, gilding and glistening it. Her hair tangles over her breasts, her thighs bare and slick with heat. Her lips part as she looks at me—not in fear, but in hunger.

I go to her.

She doesn't step back.

I press her against the cavern wall, one hand cupping her jaw, the other trailing down to her hip. Her breath hitches as I grip her, lift her, press between her thighs.

She's wet.

For me.

My cock is already thick and pulsing, hard with need. I sink into her, inch by inch, as she arches and moans and begs for more. She claws at my shoulders, wraps her legs around me, and rides the edge of fire like she was born for it.

She's mine.

I mark her with teeth and tongue, claim her body in every way but one.

I don't shift. Not yet. Not here.

But I feel the dragon in me rise, wings unfurling in the dark of my mind.

She moans my name. Her release tears through her like lightning.

I follow—spilling into her with a groan that shakes the dream to pieces.

I wake with a gasp, sweat slicking my skin.

My cock is still hard, painfully so, the sheets damp with release.

I clench my fists, driving them into the mattress beside me. Fire flares under my skin.

“Fuck.”

The room seems to smolder, and all I can think is how badly I want to make that dream real.

CHAPTER 7

EMBER

The pieces aren't just falling into place. They're snapping together with precision, each one locking into the next with the cold certainty of a loaded weapon. It's not coincidence—it's design. Calculated. Intentional. Like someone built this firestorm with purpose, and I've just found the safety catch.

The files from the past four years are a mess—redactions sliced through them like surgical incisions, whole pages corrupted like someone wanted the truth to rot from the inside. Conveniently missing logs. Metadata scrubbed. But one name keeps surfacing like smoke in the wreckage: Dennis Price. A wildfire tech who knew how to dance at the edge of legality—brilliant, reckless, the kind of man who didn't just flirt with danger but made out with it in a back alley.

He had a knack for incendiary tech, drone calibration, and predictive fire modeling. Too smart for his own good. Two years ago, he got flagged in a disciplinary review—experimental flare tech used outside regulation protocols. No formal charges. Just silence. Then nothing. Not a trace. Like he burned out of existence, or someone made damn sure it looked like he did.

I sit back in my folding chair, rubbing a hand down my face, heart thudding with the cold excitement of something dark clicking into place. It's a thread. Maybe even the thread.

Dennis Price had access to remote ignition systems—tech that always seemed to

outperform expectation, even in simulations that should've failed. It was as if the fire listened to him, like he understood something elemental the rest of the department couldn't explain or replicate. It was as if he had enough technical skill to start a fire without ever lighting a match.

A note in one file said he'd become obsessed with 'nonlinear ignition anomalies'—fires acting without predictable logic, burning against the wind, behaving like they had will. That's not tech. That's... something else. And I don't like how it sits in my gut.

I pull out my phone and dial the number from memory. It rings twice before a gravel-rough voice answers.

"You got two minutes," the contact says, already cagey.

"I'm looking into Dennis Price," I say, keeping my tone light. "Word is he used to have someone local? Girlfriend?"

There's a pause—too long. I hear the flick of a lighter, the inhale of a cigarette.

"She's still around," he finally says. "Keeps to herself mostly since Dennis left. Lives just outside of Flagstaff. She doesn't talk much... unless she's drinking."

"And when she is?"

Another pause. Then: "She gets... weird. Starts rambling about things Dennis said. Secret testing sites. Weather that wasn't right—lightning with no clouds, wind that reversed direction mid-burn. Said he was obsessed with some damn symbol. A spiral. Drew it everywhere—napkins, notebooks, her walls."

My hand tightens on the phone. "Did she say what it meant?"

"She thought it was some kind of marker," the contact mutters. "Said it showed up at fire sites—on scorched bark, rocks, even old maps. Claimed it wasn't natural. Swore it was a message. Said fire could be... trained. Like it was waiting for the right leash."

I feel the hair rise on my arms. A symbol. A message. A beast on a leash.

"Thanks," I start to say, but I realize I'm talking to dead air—my two minutes are up.

I'm halfway packed and heading to the SUV when the gravel crunches behind me—deliberate steps, measured and heavy like a warning. I don't need to turn around to know who it is. The air is different when he's near, like the pressure changes. Like heat remembers its master. My pulse stutters, equal parts anticipation and exasperation. Of course it's him.

"Going somewhere?" Dax's voice is low and smooth, but there's steel threaded through it—a warning dressed in silk. It wraps around my spine, tightening something low in my belly. His tone never rises, never breaks, but it doesn't have to. It curls into me like smoke and heat, impossible to ignore.

"I need to follow a lead," I toss over my shoulder, not even bothering to slow down. He doesn't need the details, and I don't need his permission.

"You're not cleared for solo fieldwork outside of the perimeter." His voice stays even, but I catch the flicker in his eyes—displeasure, unmistakable. He's used to people falling in line, not walking off without so much as a nod. And that I didn't defer, didn't check in? It needles at him. I can feel it like static on my skin.

I stop, slowly turn, and give him the look. "That wasn't a request. I'm not here to play firefighter, Dax. I'm conducting an arson investigation. That means chasing leads wherever they take me. With or without clearance. With or without backup. Price's

ex-girlfriend is supposedly in Flagstaff, so Flagstaff is where I'm headed."

His jaw tightens. He watches me for a beat too long, like he's biting back ten different orders he knows I won't take. "Then I'm not letting you out of my sight." His tone is clipped, his control razor-sharp—but barely. "You may not be here to fight the fire, but that doesn't mean it won't come for you. Besides, you were assigned to me, so I'll make sure you don't get hurt."

"I don't need backup." I flash him a tight smile, more teeth than warmth. "You're not exactly subtle, and I prefer my interviews without smoldering glares and alpha posturing. Try not to stomp too loudly when I'm actually working."

"Too bad," he says, with the kind of grim finality that makes it clear he doesn't care how I feel about it. "Because I'm not going anywhere. You may not want backup, but you've got me whether or not you like it."

I don't bother arguing. Not because he's right, but because I know exactly the kind of battle it would turn into—gritted teeth, stubborn silence, and him shadowing me anyway. And a part of me doesn't hate having him there. Doesn't hate the way his eyes track every move I make, like he's already claimed me. Even if I don't trust what he's hiding, even if I don't need his protection, that heat in his gaze? It lingers. And it makes it damn hard to pretend I don't notice.

Flagstaff is cooler than the canyon base but no less charged. The city lights are too sharp, too clean, like they're trying to erase the grit this place still clings to. It's a different kind of heat here—urban, humming beneath the neon.

We end up at a locals-only dive just outside the edge of town, a place that smells like spilled whiskey and worn in secrets. String lights dangle from the ceiling like lazy fireflies, casting shadows across pool tables scarred by years of poor bets. The jukebox is stuck in a loop of old country heartbreak, bleeding emotion into the walls

like it's part of the foundation.

Exactly the kind of place where truths get drunk out of people—where memories slip loose and secrets crawl into the open on the back of cheap whiskey. A place where the ghosts don't just haunt—they linger in ash and bar smoke. Dennis Price might've left more than a trail here. He might've left a shadow still burning at the edges.

Perfect.

Dax leans close as we step through the door. His voice is low and warm against my ear. "If Price's ex-girlfriend is skittish—and word is she is—don't spook her. Let me handle the approach."

I raise an eyebrow. "Because you're so warm and fuzzy?"

He grins, sharp and a little wicked. "Because I can be convincing when I need to be."

I don't doubt that, not even for a minute. Dax's breath brushes my neck—warm, slow, and far too intimate for a man I'm supposed to be keeping at a professional distance. I shiver, not from cold, but from the way his presence lingers like smoke—something dangerous that clings even after the fire's out. It's infuriating. It's intoxicating. And I hate how much I feel it.

We find the ex-girlfriend—Danielle—already a drink and a half in, nursing a half-empty glass of something amber and suspiciously strong at a high-top table in the corner. Her hair's piled up like she did it with a pencil, and her eyeliner's smudging from the heat. She eyes Dax, then me, then our proximity with a knowing smirk, like she's seen a hundred stories start this way and none of them ended with a handshake.

"You two together?" she asks, slurring slightly, her gaze ping-ponging between us with an arched brow and a grin that knows too much. Her voice carries the weight of

idle gossip and something sharper underneath, like she already knows the answer but wants to watch us squirm, anyway.

Dax's hand settles on the small of my back. Possessive. Subtle. Not the casual touch of a man playing a part—but the kind that makes your spine straighten and your breath catch. It says 'mine' without saying a word. And worse, my body doesn't recoil. It leans.

“Yeah,” he says easily, his voice dipping into something low and dangerous. “She's mine.” It rolls off his tongue with a possessiveness that sounds too natural—too convincing. Like he's not just playing the part. Like he believes it. Like he dares anyone to question it.

My body flushes, even though I know it's an act. My brain reminds me this is a cover, a tactic, a temporary lie to get what we need. We're so good at faking it, we should probably get an Oscar and a safe word.

But my body? It doesn't care. It reacts to him like it's been waiting. The heat pooling in my core has nothing to do with logic. His touch brands. It lingers. My skin burns where his hand rests, and I hate that I don't want him to move it. Hate that I want more.

I force my mouth into a tight smile, sliding onto the stool beside her like this is just another day at the office. “He's overprotective,” I say, injecting as much dry sarcasm as I can to mask the sharp edge of awareness thrumming under my skin.

“Hot, though,” she mutters, then leans forward. “You buying?”

We're two rounds in when Danielle starts to talk. At first, it's a string of half-laughed stories and offhand bitterness, the kind of drunken venting you can hear in a hundred bars across the state. But then something changes in her eyes—goes a little darker.

She leans closer, lowering her voice even though no one is listening.

"Dennis was paranoid," she says, tapping the rim of her glass. "Started acting like he was being followed. Said people were watching him. That his data wasn't just risky—it was dangerous. Said he saw a fire move. Not spread. Move. Like it had eyes. Like it was hunting something. After that... he spiraled. Wouldn't sleep. Wouldn't talk. Then one day—gone. No goodbye. No note. Just... vanished. Like he burned himself out on purpose."

It clicks with a sharp, almost painful clarity. This isn't wildfire by accident—it's wildfire by design. Someone's been testing fire behavior, not just with equipment, but with intent. Each blaze a field test. Each destruction site, a data point. They're experimenting. Refining. And when it gets too visible, too precise, they bury the evidence beneath a firestorm. Neat. Clean.

Ashes don't talk... at least not in words. That thought lands with a finality that makes my stomach twist. Because fire doesn't just erase evidence—it erases people. Intent. Truth. And whoever is behind this? They know it.

I draw a shaky breath, pushing back from the table, the weight of the realization still pressing against my chest.

"You okay?" he asks as we step away together.

"They're using fire as a message," I say.

As the words leave my mouth, something sharp flickers at the edge of memory—a scorched and distorted circular pattern carved into the side of a tree at a fire site two years ago. I'd dismissed it at the time. Called it vandalism. But now... it matches the sketch Danielle described.

“And Dennis was trying to decode it,” I murmur.

Dax steps closer. “Decode what?”

“A symbol—a spiral—I found at a different fire. I didn’t file it because I didn’t think it meant anything...”

“But you think differently now.”

I nod. “I do,” I say as I glance up at him. “You’re not going to try to stop me?”

“No.” He hesitates. “But I won’t let you do it alone.”

There’s something in his tone—raw, unspoken, and laced with a kind of hunger I don’t know how to answer. It settles under my skin like a secret waiting to be named, curling there with heat and weight and the whisper of something inevitable. I want to ask what he’s not saying—but I already know the answer would change everything.

The bar’s jukebox changes the music to something slow and sultry. It drifts into the air between us, thick and low, curling around my spine like temptation. Dax steps in front of me, close enough that I can feel the heat of his body radiating across the small space. His eyes search mine, heavy with things he’s not saying, then he extends his hand—not a command, not a plea. An offering. But the way he looks at me? It says everything.

“Dance with me.” His voice is velvet over gravel, low and edged with something that isn’t just desire—it’s command wrapped in a question. It snakes into me, warm and thick, lighting every nerve it touches. It’s not just the words—it’s the way he says them. Like he already knows I will.

I blink. “Are you serious?”

His eyes drop to my lips, then back up. “Deadly.”

I should say no, but I don't. I shouldn't take his hand, but I do—because apparently my self-preservation instinct is no match for six feet, four inches of heat and temptation wrapped in bossy dominance and that damn voice. It's reckless. It's stupid. It's exactly the kind of trouble I promised myself I'd never chase again. And yet, here I am—already falling into his gravity.

He pulls me in, slow and easy, like he's done it a thousand times in dreams I haven't let myself remember. Our bodies fit too well—like puzzle pieces shaped by fire and instinct. His hand settles on my lower back, fingers spreading possessively, drawing me closer until the space between us evaporates. The heat of his palm sinks into my spine, awakening every nerve.

It's not just a touch. It's a claim. The kind I've let no one get close enough to make. It's the kind of touch that speaks in a language older than reason, one I've spent years pretending I don't understand. Despite that, I don't step away. And when I exhale, my breath comes out shaky, as if trapped since the moment he looked at me like this.

It's a slow dance. Simple on the surface. But nothing about it feels simple. There's a tension threaded through every step, every brush of contact, like we're teetering on the edge of something combustible. His other hand finds mine—confident, warm, a tether I didn't ask for but don't shake off. My free hand rests on his chest, and I feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

Everything about Dax is firm, and unforgiving—muscle wrapped in heat and something deeper. But the way he holds me? It's careful. Intimate.

“You're not bad at this for someone whose idea of foreplay seems to be scowling,” I whisper. “This is probably a terrible idea.”

He nods. “Want to stop?” His voice is rough silk.

I don’t answer. I can’t.

We keep moving. One slow circle. Then another. The music fades into a distant hum, and the rest of the world disappears. It’s just him and me—heat and breath and the fragile silence wrapped between us. My breath syncs to his, like we’re tethered by more than just hands. My thoughts scatter like sparks, every one of them landing on him, burning holes in the walls I’ve spent years building.

His hand slides up with agonizing slowness. Fingers brush the edge of my jaw, a featherlight tease that makes my lips part involuntarily. They trail down the side of my neck, leaving a wake of heat that pulses just beneath the surface. His thumb strokes over my throat—slow, deliberate—like he’s feeling the thrum of my pulse, searching for the confession I won’t say aloud. It’s intimate. Dominant. Seductive. Like he owns the silence between us.

Everything inside me wants to press my lips to his and lose myself in the fire I know is waiting there. To feel his mouth claim mine with the same heat simmering in his gaze. I want to know if his kiss is just as dangerous—if it will undo me, burn straight through every wall I’ve built and leave nothing but ash and want behind.

My body aches, but then the part of me still thinking—the part that remembers how trust burns faster than oxygen—flares to life. A cold shiver races across my skin, dousing the heat like a water bomb dropped from a plane. It jerks me back to reality and I pull away from the edge I almost willingly stepped off. My heart pounds like I’ve just escaped something I wasn’t sure I wanted to survive.

Dax drops his hand, slow and reluctant, fingertips dragging against my skin like they don’t want to let go. But he doesn’t stop me. Doesn’t speak. Just watches—and for a split second, I swear his eyes flash gold, bright and wrong. It’s gone before I can be

sure, smoothed over like nothing ever happened.

It's just my imagination, I tell myself. It has to be. He doesn't speak—just watches, jaw tight, eyes shadowed with heat and something deeper I don't dare name. The silence between us is louder than any goodbye.

I turn and walk away without looking back. Behind me, I feel his restraint snap taut, like a leash on something feral held just this side of control. The tension clings to the air between us, charged and thrumming with everything he didn't say—everything I almost let myself want.

My steps quicken, but it's not the distance I need. It's an escape. From him. From the burn he leaves behind without ever touching flame.

CHAPTER 8

DAX

She walks away like she didn't just almost kiss me. Like she didn't tremble under my hands, her breath hitching when my fingers brushed her jaw. Her scent—a mixture of arousal, hesitation, heat, and denial—still fills my lungs. That sweet, stubborn challenge I can't stop wanting—can't stop watching. It clings to me, igniting every part of me that's been starving in silence.

We don't speak on the drive back to base. The tension between us crackles louder than the tires on the gravel. She stares out the window, arms crossed tight, like she's trying to rebuild every wall I just cracked. I keep my hands clenched on the wheel, jaw locked, replaying the way her body molded to mine—how close she came to giving in. When we finally pull into camp, she's out of the vehicle before I can kill the engine. No goodbye. No glance. Just distance. And I let her have it.

My dragon claws at the inside of my skin, furious I let Ember go. My fists flex, nails digging into my palms hard enough to break skin. The muscles in my shoulders bunch like I'm holding something massive back—and I am. My breath is shallow, my vision sharpening unnaturally, as if the shift is already trying to bleed through.

One wrong move, one more second of her scent thick in my throat, and the beast would break free. I grind my teeth and breathe through the fire coiling in my gut, forcing myself to stay human. For her. Furious, I didn't claim what's already ours. I taste her in the air—citrus and smoke, fire barely leashed—and it takes everything I have not to shift and go after her. Not to chase. Not to take.

She's not ready. And I swore I wouldn't destroy this—wouldn't scorch something before it had a chance to take root. But that doesn't mean I'm not watching. Not protecting. Not wanting. With every step she takes away from me, my dragon paces just beneath the surface, waiting for the moment she looks back.

Kade intercepts me near the edge of the ridge, his boots silent on the sand, the way only a dragon masking his presence can be. The tension on his face mirrors my own—jaw set, shoulders squared. He's not just bringing intel. He's bringing confirmation of the unease prickling down my spine since Ember walked away.

"Got something," he says, holding out a thermal map. "Same weird scorch marks we found upstate. Symmetrical. Controlled. Not natural. Not random."

I glance at the map. There it is again. The spiral. Just faint—ghosted into the heat signature like a brand, but unmistakable once you know what to look for. Not a random scorch. A deliberate shape. A message. And not just to us—to me.

My blood chills. A cold bloom spreads beneath my ribs—dread, memory, and something older. Malek wasn't just a rival. He was the line between restraint and ruin, the living proof of what happens when a dragon gives in to fire without conscience. He's back; the nightmare didn't end, it just evolved.

"Malek," I whisper.

Kade stiffens. "He's taunting you... us." He exhales slowly, jaw working. His gaze sharpens with something beyond tactical concern—genuine worry. "Then Ember's not just collateral. She's the key. The bait. The strike point."

"Exactly where he wants her." I look past him, toward the lights of town. "That spiral—it's not just a mark. It was the sigil of the Seraphon. Malek's cult. They believed fire should be sovereign. That dragons should rule, not hide. They claimed

flame was divine, that surrendering to it unlocked purity. The spiral represented the endless cycle—burn, rise, rule. Madness dressed in ritual."

Kade mutters, "He always did love a symbol."

I close my eyes, and the past crashes back like a firestorm—hot, unrelenting, and thick with the smoke of betrayal. Every flame, every roar, every strike echoes in my blood like it happened seconds ago. My heart beats to the rhythm of that final battle, and the weight of what I thought was over slams into me like an old wound torn fresh.

The canyon burned red around us, a battlefield carved from lava and rage. Malek's wings stretched wide, the span of a tyrant king, his flame lighting up the sky like a second sun born of fury. He laughed as he dove—unhinged, glorious, dangerous. A sound that once rallied armies beside me now twisted like a blade in my gut. We'd once fought side by side, brothers in fire. Now I fought to end him—and everything he'd become.

"You're clinging to a lie, Dax," he spat, circling above me. "These humans aren't our equals. They're fuel."

"They're the reason we haven't gone extinct," I roared back, launching upward.

Our flames clashed mid-air, detonating the sky in a blinding explosion of heat and fury. The surrounding air cracked like thunder, caught between two titanic forces, and firestorm winds howled through the canyon like screaming ghosts. I saw the madness in his eyes—wild, certain, unbreakable. He dove for my throat, but I twisted mid-air, wings snapping wide as I caught him off balance. My claws buried deep into his chest, tearing through scale and fury, and I used our combined momentum to drag him down, spinning in a death spiral toward the gorge. The fall was chaos—flames, snarls, blood. Then nothing but blinding light as we slammed into the rocks below.

At the last possible second, I wrenched free of him—tore loose from his grasp as the gorge rushed up to meet us. Wings flared wide, the force nearly tearing my joints from their sockets. Pain ripped down my spine, but I caught enough wind to veer off—skimming the rocks so close one burned across my flank. I tumbled hard, hit the canyon wall, and ricocheted out in a half-roll, half-flight that barely qualified as survival. It wasn't grace. It was raw instinct. It was desperation. But it was enough.

There was no body. Just fire, ash and silence.

I tried to follow the path of his fall, circling lower despite the pain raking through my wings. The fire charred the rocks below, and the smoke was so thick it stung even my dragon eyes. I searched for hours, scanning every crevice, every flicker of unnatural flame. But before I could get close, I was driven back—flames arcing like they had minds of their own, and projectiles—spears, burning arrows, fired from the cliffs above.

Followers of his cult, still hiding in the canyon. I barely escaped with my life. I told myself then he was gone. But I never saw a body. And now I know why.

Now I know why there was no body. I wanted to believe he was gone. That I'd ended it. That the scorch marks left behind were proof of victory—not warning. But deep down, some part of me always knew.

That kind of rage doesn't burn out quietly. It waits. Festers. Evolves. And now that it's back, I feel the weight of every second I let my guard down, pressing like molten stone in my chest. It was my mistake—believing the silence meant safety. That the fire had gone out.

I let myself rest. Let myself forget. And while I did, he rebuilt. Regrew. Returned. And now Ember's caught in the center, and I'm the one who should have seen this coming.

"Keep your eyes on Ember," I tell Kade. "He's not after us. He's after her."

Kade nods once. "And you?"

I bare my teeth. "I'll find the trap before it snaps shut." Even if part of me already fears that the moment she arrived, the trap was sprung.

For the longest time, sleep is elusive. I pace the length of the canyon floor, gravel cracking underfoot, heat rippling off my skin in waves. The stars above feel too close, the air too thin—like the world is holding its breath. My dragon coils beneath the surface, restless and watching, whispering her name with every inhale.

I burn. Not with fury. Not even with hunger, but with a need that scares the hell out of me—because I've felt it before. And I know what it cost me. The fire that comes with needing someone like this doesn't just warm—it consumes. And if I let it out, I might not survive what comes next.

The fire within coils low and tight, wrapping around my ribs until it hurts to breathe. It's primal, ancient—older than words. The kind of ache that doesn't just live in the body, but in the soul. The kind of need only a mate can ignite. And she has.

When I finally lay down to rest, the dream comes. I don't fight it. I don't want to.

She's in my dreams before I even realize I'm dreaming. Except it doesn't feel like a dream. The heat is too vivid, her voice too clear—as if she's standing right in front of me, whispering across the connection we've both tried to ignore.

In the gloom of my cavern, she stands before me, cloaked in nothing but wisps of smoke and a shimmering veil of moonlight, her silhouette dancing at the licking edges of my restless flame.

"You shouldn't be here," I rasp, my voice a low, feral growl echoing against the damp walls, a futile warning to us both.

She takes a step closer, her eyes locked onto mine, pools of ember reflecting the dance of the fire behind me. "And yet, here I am," she murmurs, her voice a soft, defiant chant against the crackling of the blaze.

My body ignites before my mind can grasp her audacity. Heat, swift and searing, courses through me, a primal response to her presence, as if she's the spark that sets my very soul ablaze.

She carries the scent of desire and wildfire, the promise of sweet surrender tangled with the thrill of dancing too close to the flames. Her fingers drift over my chest, leaving trails of lava in their wake. Each touch a silent provocation that threatens to shatter my last vestiges of control.

"You're dangerous," she breathes, her voice a mere whisper against the snapping of the fire.

I press her against the stone wall of my sanctum, every muscle taut and trembling, the feel of her body against mine igniting a fuse that's been smoldering for eons. The stone is warm from my inferno, but it pales against the blazing heat that pulsates between us. Her gasp is soft, almost worshipful, as I pin her, my frame a barrier of heat and hunger, every breath a war against the urge to claim her then and there.

"You have no idea," I grate, my voice a rumble of thunder barely contained.

She kisses me first, a desperate, ravenous kiss, like the inferno within her recognizes mine. My hands entwine in her hair as she arches into me, a soft moan escaping her lips.

Her skin is fire and silk, her breath a brand against my lips and throat. I explore every inch of her—slowly, devoutly—relishing the arch of her back, the quiver of her thighs wrapped around my waist, the way her nails rake across my shoulders as she draws me deeper.

Her body embraces me like it remembers me from lifetimes past, like we were forged for this, made to fit and burn and fuse until neither of us can tell where one ends and the other begins.

I move within her with the cadence of a man who's waited millennia—deliberate, reverent. Each thrust a vow etched in flame, every slide deeper, a bond tightening between us. It's more than just carnal; it's surrender, it's branding, it's the tempest held at bay until she unleashed it, and now I'm riding the precipice of devastation, begging the fire never to end.

She cries out my name, her climax colliding with mine in a conflagration of heat and claiming that sears us both to the core. Her soul brushes mine—radiant, fierce, unbound—and I feel her essence entwine with mine in a dance older than time, pure and consuming. For one impossible moment, we burn together, not as two beings, but as one—flame made flesh, bound in fire and want.

When I stir, I clench my fists around handfuls of ash, and the surrounding ground is charred, cracked, and steaming. The devastation is worse than before. The fire's getting harder to control, spilling out of me like it has a will of its own. Like the bond is deepening whether or not I want it to. The inferno raging within scorches the surrounding earth.

She doesn't remember the dreams. I feel it the moment she walks by the next morning—no flicker of recognition, no hesitation in her step. It shouldn't sting, but it does. I was inside her, inside the fire we both pretend doesn't exist. And she doesn't even know it happened. I tell myself it is better this way—that if she remembered,

she'd run. But that doesn't stop the ache in my chest, or the hunger gnawing deeper every time our eyes meet.

CHAPTER 9

EMBER

I can feel him watching me. It's not a glance or a passing look—it's a pressure, a heat, a hum that brushes across my skin like the edge of a flame held just shy of burning. It prickles under my clothes, coils at the base of my spine, and makes my heartbeat stutter like it's out of rhythm with the rest of me. Every hair on the back of my neck lifts, my pulse tripping like it knows something I don't. He's somewhere behind me, not making a sound, and still I know—he's there. Always there. Close enough to feel. Too far to touch. And yet somehow, it's like he never left.

Even though I don't look back when I walk past him in the morning. Even though I pretend I don't notice the way the air thickens, sharpens, tightens every time we're within six feet of each other. Like the space between us is charged with something volatile and unnamed—like the air has gone too still, too hot, heavy with the scent of smoke and static. I pretend like I don't see him. But my body reacts like it's under surveillance by something ancient and hungry.

And I hate how much I like it. The awareness. The pull. The way his presence skims across my nerves like a live wire, dangerous and addictive. It makes my pulse race in ways it shouldn't, not when I'm supposed to be focused on fire codes and chain of custody reports—not him. But it's there, undeniable, thrumming just beneath the surface of every breath I take near him. And the more I pretend it doesn't matter, the more it owns me.

I don't ask for clearance to head out alone. I'm not some rookie who needs a leash,

and I'm done letting Dax Fane's shadow dictate where I go, how I move, or what I investigate. I need distance—from him, from the weight of his stare, from the way my thoughts keep veering toward things that have nothing to do with ignition points or accelerant patterns. Out there, I can breathe. Think. Reclaim a little control.

According to thermal drift data and last night's updated reports, a flare zone cut across an abandoned watchtower northeast of base. The area had been dormant for over a decade—remote, overgrown, more rumor than resource on most maps. No recent activity. No reason for the heat signature to spike. Until now. Something stirred the ashes. And whatever it was, it wanted to be found—or feared it already had been.

I hike in alone, brushing past charred branches and jagged boulders, the air still thick with residual heat and soot. Ash clings to my boots, and every footstep sends up faint plumes that curl like smoke signals. The landscape feels haunted—like it remembers what happened here better than any report ever could. The tower groans above me, tall and skeletal, listing slightly to one side like it's been holding its breath for decades, waiting for someone to notice it still stands.

Then I see it—a spiral, seared into the metal like fire signed its name. I freeze mid-step, breath catching. Not just because it's familiar, but because it confirms what I've been circling for days: this was planned. It's deliberate. Patterned. Whoever left it wanted me to find it.

A bolt of cold electricity shoots through me—like my body recognizes the mark before my mind catches up. Not fear, exactly. More like a pressure behind my eyes, a signal that something isn't adding up. I've seen this before—maybe in old case files or buried somewhere in drone telemetry I barely skimmed. Now it clicks with eerie precision. That quiet buzz of recognition: this matters.

It's burned into the metal siding. Smaller this time, but sharp, perfect. Too exact to be

random. The edges shimmer faintly, still radiating heat. I crouch, holding my hand close, feeling the energy pulse off the surface. This wasn't just a message—it was meant to last.

Inside, the stairwell groans under its own weight, half-collapsed and ready to fall. I edge past the wreckage, boots crunching through ash and splintered wood. Then I spot it: the blackened husk of a drone, half-melted into the floorboards, wires curled like burned nerves. I brush the edge, and a pulse of static jolts through my fingertips. Sharp. Wrong. The circuits aren't just fried—they were silenced. Deliberately.

I flip the casing and find the signature buried under the carbon scarring.

D. Price

I go still. Of course, it's the fire guy with a mysterious past and a cult-symbol hobby. The engineer who vanished three years ago. The one who supposedly burned in a supply depot fire no one ever got a full autopsy report from. The one whose drone tech revolutionized wildfire reconnaissance—his software could predict changes in wind patterns better than any human analyst. The same technology that, if misused, could spark a firestorm instead of preventing one.

He's not dead. Or if he is, someone's resurrected his work—and is wearing his identity like a mask. The code, the drone, the signature—it's too specific, too personal. Someone wants me to believe Dennis Price is still out here. The scarier truth? Maybe he never left.

I don't get the chance to decide which it is. Because the tower lurches beneath me. A groan. A crack. A shudder. Then suddenly, what was once the floor is now... nothing.

I grab the window frame, legs dangling, pain shooting through my shoulder like a bolt of fire. Smoke kicks up around me, thick and blinding, curling into my eyes and

throat. My lungs seize, panic clawing up my spine. I can't breathe. My boots scrape for purchase, catching on nothing. I'm coughing so hard it feels like my ribs will snap, the edge of the window biting into my fingers. The drop yawns beneath me, wide and hungry. My grip slips a fraction—and fear explodes like static in my chest as my fingers give way completely. I'm falling.

And then I'm not. Because I'm in his arms—swept out of mid-air like I weigh nothing. One moment I'm falling, certain it's over, and the next I'm wrapped in heat and strength and something that feels suspiciously like safety. My heart stutters, caught somewhere between terror and disbelief, and I cling to him before I can stop myself, just to prove I'm still here.

Relief and frustration crash through me in equal measure. Because of course it's him. Of course, he shows up just in time, like some smug, too-hot guardian angel with control issues and a savior complex. The kind of man who won't let me fall but refuses to let me stand on my own either. And the worst part? Some traitorous part of me is glad it's him.

He catches me like gravity doesn't apply to him. One second I'm about to plunge into splinters and bone-snapping collapse—the next, I'm scooped from the air like a breath of smoke, crushed against heat and muscle and that impossible calm he wears like armor. His arms lock around me with instinctive precision, solid and immovable, like he's done this before. Like catching me was always inevitable.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he growls, not letting me go.

“I was thinking I didn't need a damn babysitter,” I snap, shoving at his chest. “But apparently you're glued to my ass now, so good job with the timing.”

His eyes burn like coals. “You nearly died.”

“Because someone wanted me to,” I bite back. “That floor didn’t just rot out. It was cut. Controlled. Just like the ignition patterns. Just like the drone. Don’t pretend you don’t see it.”

He doesn’t deny it. But his jaw ticks tight and telling. And that’s when it hits me; I’m right. He and his entire unit know more than they’re saying. Not just about the fire. About all of it. There’s something behind his silence, something almost... resigned. Like he’s carrying the weight of a truth too dangerous to speak aloud. And that makes me more suspicious than ever.

“You’re hiding something,” I whisper. Something big. Something dangerous. And I’m starting to think it’s not just classified files or drone data. It’s in the way he moves, the way he looks at the fire—like he understands it on a level no one else does.

He finally releases me, just enough so I can breathe—but not enough to forget the way my body fits against his. The way his scent curls into my skin like it belongs there.

“Maybe, and maybe I’ll show you,” he says.

“You planning a PowerPoint or are we going straight to an interpretative dance?”

Dax snorts. “I don’t dance.”

“You did the other night.”

Dax snorts again and turns away.

Back at base, I jerk my tent flap down harder than necessary, still shaking from the adrenaline. I pace twice before grabbing my sat phone and punching in the secure line

to D.C. When the connection clicks through, I steel my voice and deliver the report—terse and factual, but my fingers tremble around the receiver. The tower. The spiral symbol. The drone. The signature: D. Price. Each word leaves a residue of dread I can't shake.

I find myself getting stonewalled—hard. Every level of clearance I try to push through hits a wall of vague responses and changing tones. First it's protocol. Then it's jurisdiction. Finally, it's radio silence. Every line of inquiry dies on impact, and the message is loud and clear: back off

“Ember, this has escalated. You need to hold position,” says the man on the other end, his voice clipped and impersonal. “Let the local commander handle the rest.”

“Local command isn't handling shit. And I'm not standing down.”

He hangs up. I lower the phone slowly, the weight of silence settling heavier than the call itself. My stomach knots, cold and tight. That wasn't just evasion—it was orchestration. The way his voice clipped. The way he dodged. This isn't just red tape—it's a wall. A wall built to keep something hidden. I stare at the dead line, heart pounding. A cover-up? No. It's already in motion. The only question is how far it goes—and whether I'm already too deep to pull out.

I step outside, needing air. Needing space. My hands won't stop shaking, and there's a restless buzz under my skin, like my body's trying to outrun something my brain hasn't caught up to. The night air hits me like a slap—cold, sharp, but not enough to clear the fog. I pace the edge of the fire line, jaw tight, heart hammering. I need to move. To do something. But all I can do is breathe and try not to scream.

That's when I hear him. Dax. Low and deliberate, speaking in a language I've never heard before—measured, almost ceremonial. It rumbles through the trees like smoke over coals, pulling me toward the shadows without thinking. There's a tension in his

tone that makes every instinct in me go still.

The words aren't English. They're not anything I recognize. The moment they hit the air, something cold traces down my spine. My skin prickles—goosebumps, sharp and immediate—like my body understands the threat before my brain can translate it.

Guttural. Rhythmic. Old.

I freeze as he turns and our eyes lock.

And for just a second... he doesn't look quite human.

CHAPTER 10

DAX

She walks into camp like nothing happened. Like she didn't just dangle over splintered death. Like she didn't scream into smoke and flame and fall straight into my arms, trembling and defiant and branded into my memory like fire on stone. Ember Vale. Impossible woman. She walks past without a glance, all straight spine and biting pride, like she didn't just rattle the very bones of me. Like she didn't make me burn in ways I haven't in centuries.

But I can smell it on her. Shock, adrenaline—raw and acrid like scorched pine—and the sharp curl of her fear laced with something hotter: fury. And beneath that? Her scent, unmistakable. Wild and ripe with the kind of need she refuses to acknowledge. She can pretend all she wants, throw walls and sarcasm and distance between us, but her body speaks truths she won't say out loud. And my dragon hears every damn word of it.

My dragon is still pacing under my skin. Still seething that I let her walk away. He wants her—wants to claim, to mark, to protect. And I do too. But I can't. Not yet. She needs space, and if I push her now, she might bolt—not from the fire and her job, but from me. Or worse, she'd stop trusting me. And I need her trust more than I need her body right now. Barely.

It used to be easier. Back when humans offered what they didn't understand—when villagers lit pyres and left trembling girls at the edge of caves, praying for rain or harvest or mercy. I took what was given, yes. But I never hurt them. I'd let them cry

in my arms until the fear ebbed and both maiden and I could enjoy one another for a time. Then I moved them—somewhere safe. Somewhere clean. I made sure they had gold, anonymity, and lives untouched by what they'd seen. It was transactional. Controlled.

But Ember? She's not an offering. She's not trembling or grateful or afraid. She is my mate. She is fire wrapped in skin, sharp-edged and untouchable, a force that answers to no one. She doesn't yield—she commands. And that command, that will of hers, it unnerves me more than any sword or flame ever could.

I can seduce her—I know I can. I see the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not watching, feel the tension in the air whenever I'm near. But I don't want her because I claimed her. I want her to come to me. Willingly. Completely. Because that's the only way the bond holds.

She wasn't left in my care—she walked into the inferno on her own terms, eyes open, spine straight. And pretending I have any control over the pull between us is the biggest lie I've ever told myself. She wasn't left at my feet. I chased her into the flames—and I don't know if I'll survive what happens next. Not because she might reject me—but because if she doesn't... I'll never be able to stop wanting more.

She disappears into her tent, her silhouette swallowed by the canvas flap, and I don't move until I hear the quiet sigh of fabric settling back into place. My feet itch to follow. My dragon snarls at me to go after her. But I force myself to hold the line. Just for now.

I roll the tension from my shoulders, blow out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, and finally turn toward the tree line. The shadows are deeper there, thick with the scent of ash and cooling earth. I pull out the secure satellite phone clipped to my belt and duck behind a cluster of trees. It takes a moment to patch the connection; the signal flickering with static before it locks.

Kade picks up first. Rafe clicks in seconds later. Neither says a word, but I can feel the tension pulsing through the line. They know I wouldn't call unless it mattered.

I now know for certain, and it settles in my bones like molten stone: someone set this fire not to destroy land or resources, but to lure her in. This is personal. Deliberate. And Malek isn't just playing with fire. He's aiming for her, and that changes everything.

"She's lucky you got there in time," Kade says, his voice low.

"She shouldn't have been there alone," I mutter in the ancient language of dragons—I can't risk anyone overhearing what I have to say.

"Command cleared her," Rafe adds, switching to our language.

"Doesn't matter," I growl. "The trap wasn't random. It wasn't faulty infrastructure or some unlucky collapse. Someone lured her there and rigged that floor—timed it to fail when she was on it. That wasn't carelessness. That was precision. It was intended for her."

Kade's voice drops through the line, the static barely dulling the weight of his words. "You think it was him?"

"I know it was him."

Malek. The name rips through me like ash through lung—scalding, bitter, and impossible to ignore. It settles in my chest like something unfinished, something that should've burned out long ago. But now I know better. Now I know the fire never went out. It just waited.

I tell them what I saw at the tower—the spiral burned into the wall, the melted casing

of the drone that had no business being there. Someone changed the ignition code, calibrating it for maximum delay and directional flame—sophisticated, malicious, and deliberate. And then the signature: D. Price.

I hear the silence stretch through the line as the name settles over all of us like a shadow. Not just a signature—this was a provocation. A breadcrumb left with purpose. He wants us to follow. Wants us to see what he's building in the flames. It was a message. And maybe a warning. Or a challenge.

Rafe's voice is tight across the line. "So you're sure—Dennis Price is Malek."

I exhale slowly. "He shed the name, but not the fire. Reinvented himself right under our noses. And now he's baiting us. Testing how close he can get."

We fall quiet. The kind of silence that isn't empty—it's heavy, coiled tight with shared memory and dread. Across the line, I can almost hear Kade exhale, can imagine Rafe scrubbing a hand over his face like he does when the past gets too close. We've hunted Malek before. We failed. And now he's back, dragging Ember into the middle of a war she doesn't even know she's fighting.

Kade's voice cuts through the static, calm and dark. "Malek believed he could make fire sentient. That if you fed it right—fear, pain, chaos—it would start to answer back."

"And he wanted to be its voice," Rafe mutters. "Freak wanted to become the fire."

"He's not just playing with flame anymore," I say. "He's marking territory. Using symbols. Drawing Ember into it."

"She's the bait?" Kade asks.

I shake my head even though I know they can't see me. "She's the spark."

Rafe curses softly. "Then we don't take our eyes off her."

I nod once. "Double tail rotation. One of us is on her at all times. She can't know—not yet."

They don't respond right away. Just a click from Kade, a quick breath from Rafe—confirmation that they've heard me, that the order's understood. Then the line goes dead. Clean. Final. They're out there, scattered across different sectors, but I know they'll fall in line. They always do.

But before I can disappear into the night, I feel it... her eyes on me. A prickle between my shoulder blades, the subtle change in the air that only comes when she's near. It's not just awareness—it's a tether, one I feel tighten every time she looks my way. She sees more than I want her to. More than I'm ready for. And even from across the distance, that look sets my instincts clawing at the surface again.

I turn and find her across the camp, standing just outside the shadows, watching. The wind kicks through the trees, lifting her hair, and for a moment, I wonder—did she hear? Did she misinterpret a word, a tone, or something else she shouldn't have?

I don't wait to find out. I slip deeper into the woods, every step taking me further from her tent, from the tether of her gaze that threatens to unravel what little control I have left. The trees swallow me whole, shadows thick and familiar, until I'm sure I'm alone. Only then do I let go.

My body ignites from the inside out—heat crackling down my spine, fire washing over my limbs in a tide that consumes, then remakes. No bone-cracking. No grotesque morphing. Just a roar of flame and the rush of old magic rising from the core of me. The fire isn't just a transition—it's a memory of what I am, what I've

always been beneath the skin. The fire consumes my human shape like parchment, revealing what was never truly hidden. Wings unfurl with a whisper of scorched air, talons stretch and dig into the earth, and my eyes—no longer mortal—pierce the sky ahead. This is my truth. This is my form. This is my power unleashed.

I take to the sky alone, wings beating hard against the updraft, rising fast until the treetops vanish beneath a layer of smoke and cloud. The air thins and cools, sharp against my scales. Then I feel them—two more pulses of ancient power slicing through the dark.

Kade and Rafe join me above the clouds, their dragons flanking mine in perfect formation—fluent in the kind of wordless coordination only centuries together can create. We don't speak. We don't have to. The rhythm of war settles over us like an old, familiar cloak as we sweep the ridgeline below. Smoke spirals from fresh burns, dim embers glowing against the dark, flickering like war paint across our scales.

We fly in silence, wings slicing the wind, until we see them—charred spirals etched into the scorched earth. They aren't random. They're measured. Precise. Not just markings—runes. Burned into the land with purpose. The lines are too exact, the heat still lingering. This isn't just a sigil of intent. It's a ritual. A summoning in a language the world buried, but our kind never forgot. Malek's signature. His challenge. His war drum.

Ahead, more smoke coils skyward—too thick, too controlled to be natural. It moves like it knows we're watching. A figure takes shape in the haze: massive wings stretched wide, eyes burning like coals, a jagged smile cutting through the gloom. The air warps around him, humming with threat and memory.

Malek.

He doesn't speak. Just grins—that slow, taunting curl of teeth and smoke that twists

rage through my gut. His wings stretch wider, casting a shadow that swallows the ridge. His eyes lock onto mine. Time fractures. Past and present collide. I feel everything I lost, everything he took.

He tips his head. A dare. A reminder.

Then he vanishes, dissolving into the smoke like he was never there.

Kade's voice cuts through the silence, sharp and low. "We'll circle east. See if he's baiting us."

Rafe nods, already banking his dragon. "We'll signal if we find a trail."

Without waiting for my reply, they peel away—leaving me alone in the darkening sky, Malek's ghost still burning in my vision.

I don't land. I don't stop. I burn my way back to camp, wings shearing through the air like knives, panic dragging hard against the rage still curling in my gut. The image of Malek's grin flashes in my mind—taunting, certain—and all I can see is Ember, alone, unguarded, wrapped in danger she doesn't even understand. My wings beat faster, harder, slicing through cloud and smoke as if speed could erase the risk. The memory of her falling through that floor—it guts me. If I'm too late, if she's hurt...

No. I won't let that happen.

The sky howls around me, and still I push faster. Because I need to see her. Need to know she's still safe. Still whole. Still mine—even if she doesn't know it yet.

When I shift back, the air is still thick with the echo of his grin, with the burn of flight and the weight of panic that hasn't quite left my chest. I don't bother dressing. I don't even slow down. I'm fixated on her. I stalk across camp like a storm barely held in

check, the gravel hissing beneath my feet, the scent of smoke still clinging to my skin. Her tent glows dimly in the moonlight, and I know I shouldn't. I know she needs rest. Space. Time.

But I need to see her more. I need proof she's here. Breathing. Alive. I walk straight to her tent, every step tight with restraint, and I don't knock. I ease the flap open and slip inside, the canvas whispering against my shoulder.

She's curled in the low cot, the lantern left dim on purpose, casting a soft amber glow across her skin. One arm flung over her head, lips parted, lashes dark against her cheek. Vulnerable in a way I've never seen her, and it pulls at something deep, something old. The part of me that remembers cave walls and hoarded gold and the vow I once made never to lose another to fear.

I stand at the edge of the shadows, the restraint it takes to keep my distance stretched razor-thin. Every breath she takes tugs at me, her scent curling around my senses like a chain of smoke and longing. I ache to move closer, to kneel at her side and press my forehead to the warm, bare skin of her shoulder. To breathe her in and brand the moment into my memory like I've done with every fire I've ever flown through. But I know what comes next if I do. My dragon wants to wrap around her, protect her, claim her. And I—I want to. But that isn't the way. Not with her. Not yet. So I stay where I am, frozen in place, gripping my own will like it's the only thing keeping me human.

I should leave. I need to leave, but I don't. I stand there like a sentinel forged in fire, my pulse thrumming with something ancient, something dangerous. Because I'm already hers—even if she doesn't know it yet.

CHAPTER 11

EMBER

The light coming through the tent canvas is barely gray when I wake, my skin damp with sweat and a chill clinging to my spine. My breath catches, a tight flutter in my chest like something inside me knew to brace for something I hadn't seen coming. My body's tense, strung tight like a wire stretched to its limit, and it takes effort to pry my hands from the blanket. I sit up slowly; the cot creaking beneath me, muscles aching in strange places, like I'd been fighting something in my sleep. I glance toward the tent flap.

It looks... wrong. Not open. Not obviously disturbed. Just different. A few inches misaligned from how I closed it last night. A subtle wrinkle in the fabric. A crease where there shouldn't be. And something else—almost like the air inside the tent is heavier, still holding a breath that doesn't belong to me. I stare at it for a second too long, that quiet tickle at the base of my spine refusing to go away. Like someone was here. Like I wasn't alone.

I frown, but the unease keeps buzzing beneath my skin. Tell myself I'm being paranoid, that it's just sleep fog and overwork playing tricks on my perception. But that doesn't stop the icy knot forming in my gut—or the way I keep glancing over my shoulder like someone might still be here, just out of sight.

Still, I check my bag, moving slower than usual, as if expecting something to leap out at me. My laptop's untouched. My notes and laptop are exactly where I left them, even the pen I dropped last night resting at the same odd angle. Nothing looks out of

place—but the feeling lingers. Like someone slipped in and out without leaving a mark. I see nothing missing, but that doesn't mean someone didn't take something. Maybe someone was looking for something I haven't even found yet.

But the sense of being watched, of something lingering, won't go away. It threads through the air like smoke, curling into my lungs, heavy and invisible. I keep looking over my shoulder, half-expecting the flap to rustle again, to catch a whisper of breath that isn't mine. Like something came and stayed—just out of sight, just out of reach—but not gone. It's the kind of sensation that sticks to your skin, that whispers through your hair even after you've checked every corner and turned on every light. A low hum in my bones that doesn't fade with reason. It's not just a feeling anymore. It's a warning.

At breakfast, the sense only deepens. The mess tent buzzes with low conversation and the scrape of metal against tin plates, but it all seems to go still the moment I step in. The firefighters are unusually quiet this morning—too quiet. Nods are stiff, eyes slide past me too quickly, and whatever energy was in the room before seems to thin out around me. I try twice to spark a discussion—bring up the cluster patterns, the irregular wind anomalies, ask questions I know demand answers—but both times I'm met with polite non-answers. Shrugs. Deflections. As if they're following a script that tells them to keep their mouths shut. It's not indifference. It's avoidance. Like they're afraid of saying too much.

The third time, I don't waste my breath on subtlety. I cross the space between us and plant myself squarely in front of the base commander, arms crossed, jaw set. His crew might look the other way, but I won't let him. Not today. Not when I'm this close to something and he's acting like I'm the one lighting matches.

"We've got accelerant traces with no origin points, ignition signatures that don't match known patterns," I say. "This isn't wildfire behavior—it's controlled. Directed. Someone's building something with these fires."

He barely glances at me. "My priority is the blaze. Not your conspiracy theory."

"It's not a theory," I snap. "I'm not your problem—I'm your paperwork's worst nightmare... and oh yeah, a trained investigator who has closed more cases than anyone else in the department."

He lifts his coffee cup with infuriating calm. "Then prove it. Until then, I have smokejumpers in the air and a containment line on the brink. I don't have time to babysit a Fed chasing ghosts."

Fine. I bite down on the rest of what I want to say, the sarcasm itching on my tongue like wildfire licking at dry brush. But what's the point? His mind's made up. So I spin on my heel before I say something that'll get me booted from the base entirely.

I return to my tent, teeth clenched, still simmering from the dismissal. Every word the base commander said circles my thoughts like smoke, refusing to clear. I slam the flap shut harder than necessary, drop into the chair, and flip open my laptop. Might as well put my frustration to use.

I start filing the morning's report—status notes, site updates, fire line progression. It's mechanical. Pointless. Each keystroke feels disconnected, like I'm watching myself from a distance, going through the motions while something tighter, fiercer, coils in my chest. My fingers type, but my brain's stuck in a loop of fury and unanswered questions. The commander's dismissal. The silence at breakfast. The feeling that something—or someone—is actively trying to keep me in the dark. I'm not just frustrated. I'm done being handled.

Then, something strange catches my eye: a folder sitting in my downloads—Blackstrike Logs: Historical. I pause. I don't remember downloading it. I don't even remember seeing it.

Curious and suddenly uneasy, I open it. My pulse kicks up as the folder expands. Someone hid this; it wasn't a standard data dump or oversight—they buried it deep, hoping it would never be found. Like it was left here... or planted. The filenames alone raise red flags: dates that don't match deployment logs, operations tagged with strange identifiers. And deeper still? Dispatch entries I've never seen before. Some of them are marked as classified. Others... just blank. No timestamps. No authors. Just a date and a fire that shouldn't have existed.

It's a tangle of incident reports going back almost two decades. Someone filed, dated, and time-stamped some of them properly. But others—scanned copies of handwritten notes, brief summaries of unexplained hotspots—don't match up. Fire zones logged without official fire start codes. Time gaps. The Blackstrike Unit's deployments are documented in dispatches, but these lack corresponding events in federal fire records.

They're just missing... or erased... or hidden.

I don't hesitate. I grab my field jacket, shove the laptop in my backpack, and head into the trees to find Dax. Every step out of camp feels like stepping off the edge of something I won't be able to climb back from. But I need answers—and I'm done waiting for someone to hand them to me.

The sky is changing as I walk. It feels almost hushed and ancient. The scent of ash rides the breeze, mingling with the bite of pine. Dawn paints the sky in streaks of orange and smoke when I spot him near the far edge of camp. He stands like a statue cut from shadow, facing the ridge like he's waiting for something to rise out of it. Or someone.

Something in my chest kicks hard, sharp and sudden like a flare igniting behind my ribs. Because I think—deep down—I know what he's waiting for. Not a signal. Not a threat. Not a sunrise. Me. He's waiting for me. Like he felt me coming before I ever stepped into view. And now that I'm here, the air feels too thick, too charged, like

every second between us is one spark away from catching fire.

"What aren't you telling me?" I call out.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't turn. Just walks away.

"You shouldn't be here," he says quietly.

I step closer. "Too bad. I am. Want to tell me about these missing and inconsistent reports from your unit?"

That stops him. He turns and tilts his head, his eyes finally meeting mine, and the air between us tightens. There's something wild and sharp in them—something that flickers like restrained fire. Hunger. Fury. A knowing that cuts deep. It looks like it hurts to hold back, like every breath is a battle not to step forward, not to touch, not to claim. And I feel it. All of it.

"It's not safe," he murmurs.

"Not good enough, Dax. I found inconsistencies in your files. Deployments without events. Reports that were never sent to D.C. What the hell is going on?"

He opens his mouth to answer—something close, something vulnerable flickering in his eyes—but then stiffens. Hard. Every muscle in his body locks, his head jerking slightly to the side like he's heard something I haven't. His nostrils flare. His entire stance morphs—from intense to alert, predator-silent. Whatever he was going to say dies on his tongue, replaced by something far older: instinct, warning, danger.

A second later, his hand wraps around my arm, firm but not rough—grounding, but urgent. His grip sends a jolt through me, not just from the shock of contact but from the way his entire body radiates tension, heat, purpose. "Run. Now," he says, his

voice low and sharp. Not panic. Command. The kind that doesn't beg questions. It demands obedience.

We sprint into the trees, the underbrush tearing at my pants as he pulls me deeper into the forest, away from camp. My heart pounds like a drumbeat in my throat, and branches claw at my arms as we weave through thick growth. I barely keep up with him—he moves like he knows every twist of the terrain, every dip in the forest floor.

There's no time for questions. Just the sound of our footfalls, ragged breathing, and the ever-present sense that something massive and deadly is hunting the sky above us. Whatever he saw—whatever he sensed—has him running like the fire line's at our heels. And I trust that. I trust him, even when I don't understand why.

"What the..."

"Quiet," he hisses.

We stop only when he presses me back against a rock outcropping, shielding me with his body. My back hits the stone, but I hardly feel it—because all I can register is him. His body, his heat, his strength surrounding me like a shield forged from fire. My pulse thunders in my ears, adrenaline flooding every inch of me. But it's not just fear.

I'm confused—every survival instinct telling me to stay still, stay hidden—yet my body reacts to his closeness like it's the only safe place left. His breath brushes my cheek. The arm braced beside my head makes me feel caged, protected, wanted. And I hate that I feel it. I hate how my skin hums beneath his, how my hands ache to touch him back.

Because even now—especially now—I want him. And I don't know what that means.

Overhead, something passes.

A shadow. Massive. Fast. Wings.

The shape tears across the sliver of sky above the trees like a living weapon, blotting out light, and I freeze. My breath seizes in my lungs, my skin tightening like it's reacting to something more than wind or instinct. Every rational part of me screams it's a low aircraft—a spotter chopper caught in the updrafts—but another part, deeper and older, howls in protest. Something primal recognizes the silhouette. The wingspan is too wide, the sound too silent, the speed too exact. Not metal. Not man-made.

My knees nearly buckle. Not from fear. Confusion swirls through me like smoke—thick, disorienting. Because I shouldn't know what I just saw. And yet, some part of me does... and that terrifies me more than the shadow itself.

Dax locks his gaze upward, his body coiled like a predator poised to strike. He's not surprised. He's waiting. Not just for danger to pass, but for confirmation. For recognition. For the moment, the impossible becomes real. His posture isn't tense with fear—it's readiness. Like whatever is flying above us, he knows it intimately. And that realization crashes over me like cold water. Because he's not afraid.

Whatever that is, it isn't an unknown to Dax. He recognizes it instantly. Not with fear, but with grim familiarity—like an old nightmare returned. And I know—I know—he's seen it before. The look in his eyes isn't just recognition; it's personal. The kind of knowing that leaves scars. And suddenly, I'm not sure who or what I've aligned myself with, or whether I'm the one being protected... or kept in the dark.

I reach for him without thinking, fingers curling into his shirt, seeking something solid, something real in the chaos spinning around me. I don't know if I'm trying to ground myself or pull him closer—or both. And then we're kissing.

It's not gentle. It's not sweet. It's raw, consuming, like striking a match in a room already filled with gas. His mouth crushes mine with a hunger that mirrors everything building in me—need, confusion, fear, fury. My fingers clutch at his chest like I could hold back the storm inside me if I just hang on tight enough.

And for a few impossibly hot, blinding seconds, we burn together.

No warning. No breath. Just an eruption of heat—scorching, urgent, alive. Desperation clings to every movement, every gasp. His mouth slants over mine, rough and claiming, and I meet him with equal fire. Teeth clash, tongues twist, and it's messy, frantic, like we're devouring something we can't name. His hands slide into my hair, gripping, guiding, anchoring me against him. My fingers tangle in his shirt, fisting tight like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to the earth. The world falls away in a rush of blood, flame and need so raw it makes my knees shake. I don't remember moving. I don't remember who kissed who. Only the taste of him, the burn of us, and how I never want it to end.

All I know is we're pressed together, lost in a moment so intense it feels like it could rip the sky open. The world narrows to the heat of his body, the grind of his mouth on mine, the fire licking beneath my skin that refuses to be ignored. There's no thought, no doubt, just instinct and heat and the terrifying freedom of letting go.

Until it crashes over me.

Reality slams back like a slap of cold water. I recoil as if scorched, my breath shattering in my chest, and stumble back a step as if space will somehow clear the fog inside me. My lips tingle. My fingers are still curled. And all I can think is—what the hell just happened to me?

"I can't..." I start, breathless. "I don't..."

His eyes are dark. Blazing. The kind of heat that could consume, command, destroy—and rebuild. He looks at me like I'm already his, like the fight to let me go is a war waging behind his eyes. But he lets me go. Slowly. Reluctantly. Like releasing a lifeline.

"You're not ready," he says softly. Not accusing. Just... knowing.

I leave him there in the trees, the press of his body and the memory of his mouth still seared into my skin like a second layer of heat. My legs feel shaky, untrustworthy, like they're not entirely convinced we're done yet. My thoughts spin—wild and fractured—each step away from him thick with static, like I'm wading through fog. My heart doesn't just pound. It thunders, echoing with confusion, with something too fierce to name. Because something changed back there. And I don't know how to come back from it.

Back at my tent, I finish my reports, but the numbers blur, melting into meaningless strings across the screen. No one else seems to care about the why behind these fires. About the pattern, the symbols, the purpose. The truth lies buried in ash and smoke. No one but me. It's like I'm chasing ghosts while everyone else insists there's nothing in the dark. I'm starting to wonder if that's because I'm the only one who can—the only one willing to look deeper, to question what we've been told. Or maybe... maybe I'm the only one left who hasn't been silenced.

That night, I dream about fire. But not outside. Inside. It doesn't roar or rage—it whispers. It slides under my skin like molten silk, curling through my chest, threading down my arms, spreading through my veins like liquid heat. It coils behind my ribs, a slow, sensuous burn that hums with power and something that feels disturbingly like recognition. It licks at my lungs with every breath, hot and strangely soothing. I'm burning but not breaking. Alive in a way I've never been before.

When I wake, the room is dark, the air cool against my overheated skin. I think, for a

moment, the dream is still holding me—that sensation of fire beneath flesh is too real to simply vanish. But then I look down, and I see it. My skin glows—soft, ethereal, pulsing faintly like embers under the moonlight. A soft amber shimmer curls along the inside of my arms, tracing my veins like fire caught just beneath the surface. It moves subtly, like it's alive, like it's listening. I blink hard, rub at it, but it doesn't disappear.

Not until I touch it—and it fades, reluctantly, as if reluctant to leave me. The light dims, retreating beneath my skin like an ember curling deeper into ash. Even then, I feel the heat linger beneath my fingertips, humming faintly, like it knows me. Like it chose me. A secret burned into my bones, etched in flame and blood and something I don't understand yet. But it was there. And something in me knows—it still is.

CHAPTER 12

DAX

Pacing the length of the volcanic corridor in Blackstrike's home base, I swear the stone is going to wear a groove beneath my boots. Each step echoes with a tension I can't bleed off, a weight coiled too deep to shake. The cavern walls glow faintly with embedded embers, pulsing like a heartbeat—steady, ancient, alive. The sanctum hums around me, all molten silence and restless power, a sacred womb of fire and memory where the past never quite sleeps. Shadows dance across dragon-carved stone, and the air carries the scent of sulfur and stone—a reminder of what we are, and what I've tried to hold back.

But it's nothing compared to the storm inside me. A wildfire with no containment line, no safe perimeter. I shouldn't have let her kiss me—shouldn't have kissed her back with the kind of hunger that spoke more of centuries than seconds. Shouldn't have let my hands grip her like she was already mine, like her mouth belonged beneath mine, like the world would split apart if I didn't taste her again. And yet—I did. Because for the first time in many lifetimes, I felt whole.

I drag a hand through my hair, fingers catching at the nape of my neck where the heat pulses worst, trying to get my thoughts straight, trying to suppress the fire coiling tighter beneath my skin. It's not just physical—it's the dragon pushing, clawing, aching for her. Ember. My mate. My flame. The one I've been waiting for, across centuries of smoke and silence, of sacrifice and shadow. And I haven't even told her who—what—I am. I've kept that truth locked behind my teeth like it's too dangerous to say out loud. Because once I do, there's no going back. Not for me. Not for her.

It's time. I can't keep circling her like some ancient specter afraid of his own past. I can't let her walk headfirst into a storm laced with centuries of buried truths while I burn in the shadows. She's not some passing interest or fleeting temptation. She's the fire that calls to mine, the only one who might see the monster and still stand her ground. She deserves more than riddles and evasions. She deserves the truth.

Kade's voice echoes in my mind from the last time we spoke, just a few hours ago, over the secure line. He'd spoken in a clipped, low tone, as if he knew I wouldn't want to hear what he had to say, but needed me to hear it, anyway. We don't waste words—never have—but the weight behind his voice pressed deeper than usual. He said little, but what he said hit harder than I expected, like kindling finally catching fire after sitting too long in the smoke.

"You're not her savior, Dax," he said, voice tight. "You're her fated mate. Maybe it's time you stopped hiding. If she's your mate, she deserves truth, not protection. You want her to stand with you in fire? Stop shielding her from the heat. Ember is different, as are you. When the time is right, she'll be ready."

I grunted. "And what if she isn't? What if my revealing myself to her endangers the unit? What if I light the match and she burns?"

"Then let her burn with you," Kade said simply. "As for the team, we've survived being outed before, and we can do so again. But you? You won't survive losing your fated mate, especially if you lose her to silence."

He was right. And that's what terrified me the most.

The memory hits like a blade—clean, cold, final.

She had been beautiful. Soft-spoken. Her people offered her to the fire god of their mountain—not knowing the god was me. I took her because she was offered, because

I was lonely. I thought I could make her mine.

"She was scared, Dax," Kade had said years later, after I finally told him the full truth. "But she wasn't wrong to be. You never gave her time to understand what you were. You revealed yourself all at once and expected the bond to form and carry her through the shock."

"I didn't know better," I'd said, voice rough. "Back then, I thought desire was enough; that I could bend fate to my will; that somehow I could override her fear."

"Fate doesn't erase fear," he told me. "It just gives you something worth being brave for."

But when I shifted in front of her, revealed the beast beneath the skin, she screamed and ran. Ran back to the village. Back to the people who thought fire was wrath incarnate. Who came with spears and pitch.

The memory clings like soot. I shake it off as if it were ash, but the scorch marks linger under the surface.

Ember isn't her. Ember is fire-born, steel-edged. She doesn't run from the flame. She investigates it. She steps closer when others turn away.

And it's time she sees mine.

I return to the fire camp under moonlight, the wind thick with smoke and unease, the sky washed in shades of steel and amber. The low hum of generators and the distant crackle of fire give the night an edge, like something waiting to ignite. I spot her near her tent, silhouetted against the soft glow of floodlights, arms wrapped around herself like armor. Shadows obscure her eyes, narrowed as she expertly scans the camp, and her mouth sets in that familiar stubborn line that makes my dragon rumble with equal

parts admiration and hunger. She looks tired. Fierce. Untouched by anything that's tried to slow her down. And so damn alive it hurts to breathe.

"I need to show you something," I say.

She narrows her eyes. "Let me guess. Somewhere classified and completely off-limits to a federal agent?"

I nod. "Pretty much. But I'm inviting you back to the unit's home base. Which makes it legal. Mostly."

She crosses her arms. "Blackstrike doesn't let outsiders in. Not without a warrant or a blood oath."

"You're not an outsider. Not anymore."

Her eyes flicker, uncertainty clashing with curiosity. But she nods and follows me up to the helipad.

I offer my hand to steady her as she climbs into the chopper—an unnecessary courtesy, but she accepts it anyway, her fingers tightening briefly around mine. That single touch sears more than it should. She settles beside me, strapping in, her sharp eyes scanning the instrument panel like she's cataloging every switch and dial. She doesn't ask questions. Doesn't fidget. Just waits, like she knows something big is coming, and she's decided not to blink.

The rotors kick up around us, blades slicing the smoke-thick air as we lift into the night. The base disappears below us, swallowed by trees and dark. The only light now is moon-glow and the dull orange flicker from the horizon—the fire still eating at the edge of the forest. She watches it all, arms crossed tight, lips pressed thin.

Neither of us speaks.

The ride is silent except for the thrum of engines and the hiss of air through vents. I glance at her once. She's looking down—but not afraid. Focused. Ready.

And gods help me, more beautiful than anything I've ever seen against the backdrop of fire and stars.

When we land at the canyon sanctum, she steps out and freezes. "Holy shit," she breathes.

Carvings cover the volcanic walls—spirals, flame glyphs, dragons etched in obsidian with the precision of hands long turned to dust. The symbols seem to pulse faintly under the moonlight, catching the flicker of nearby lava vents that steam gently from jagged cracks in the earth, exhaling heat and whispers into the canyon air. The scent of scorched stone and ancient ash hangs thick, grounding every breath with weight and wonder. The air doesn't just hum—it resonates, alive with something primal. A slow, steady rhythm of power that vibrates through the soles of her boots and into her bones, as though the earth itself remembers what she has yet to learn.

She turns in a slow circle. "What is this place?"

"Home," I say simply. "Ours."

Then I take a step back. My chest tightens, breath thick in my lungs, heart pounding with the weight of what I'm about to do. My dragon pushes forward, not with violence but with certainty—a tidal surge of heat and destiny. Scales prickle beneath my skin, fire curls low in my gut. The space between us stretches taut, humming with unspoken truth and the risk that she might turn away like the first did. Even so, I let him rise. Because hiding from her would be a bigger betrayal than being feared.

"Don't be afraid... and don't run," I say as the shift begins to overtake me.

Flames rise around me, curling upward like a phoenix reborn, licking at my limbs in tongues of gold and crimson. The fire doesn't consume—it transforms. My skin ignites in a shimmer of molten light, not burning, but unraveling the shell of humanity until the truth emerges. Bones stretch, shift, reshape with a deep, ancient cracking that echoes off the carved stone walls. My breath turns to smoke. Power pours from my core in waves as wings burst forth—massive, obsidian-edged, catching the glow of the lava vents like blades of flame. Scales ripple across my form, each one hard as diamond and etched with age-old patterns. Heat radiates outward in pulses, reverberating like thunder in the earth. I am no longer a man. I am fire incarnate. I am a dragon.

I see her. Frozen. Eyes wide, pupils blown with shock, her breath caught somewhere between a gasp and a curse. Her mouth parts, but no sound comes out—just that sharp, silent intake that says her brain is scrambling to connect what her eyes are seeing with anything remotely rational. She doesn't scream, but she doesn't move, either. Disbelief, awe, and something far deeper hold her entire body in suspension—instinct whispers to her that the impossible stands before her, and it knows her name. She looks at me like the world just turned upside down and handed her the match.

Then she whispers, "What the hell are you?"

CHAPTER 13

EMBER

He's standing there, tall, powerful—and completely naked.

One second, he was a damn dragon, wings outstretched, fire clinging to his scales like he owned the flame itself. And the next, he's consumed by flames—and for a heart-stopping instant, I think he's burning alive. My breath catches, panic claws at the edges of my mind, and all I can see is fire devouring flesh. But then, impossibly, from the heart of the inferno, he steps forward—whole, human, and terrifyingly calm. Muscles taut, expression unreadable, steam still rising from his skin like a warning not to come too close.

I stare. Not at the nakedness—okay, maybe a little, the man is hung—but at the fact of it. The way his body is transformed. The fire. The raw, unfiltered truth of what Dax Fane really is. And even more unsettling—the fact that he let himself be engulfed in flames like it was nothing. Like pain didn't exist. My brain screams that anyone caught in that inferno should be dead, but he emerged from it untouched. Transformed. The image of him vanishing into fire replays in my head, not as awe, but as terror. Because part of me still hasn't let go of that moment—of believing, even for a second, that he was gone.

"Why... why are you naked?" I ask, my voice coming out too high, too tight. "Is that what happens when you don't buy fireproof clothes?"

Stupid questions, I know. But my brain is still rebooting. Because all I can see is the

moment he was swallowed by fire—gone in a burst of flame that felt like watching someone die. My heart hadn't caught up with the fact that he stepped out of it alive. Gloriously, impossibly alive. Naked, sure. But standing. Breathing. Real. And somehow, that's even harder to wrap my head around than the dragon part.

He exhales slowly, like he expected that question. There's the barest twitch at the corner of his mouth—humor, maybe. Not mocking, just... amused. Like he's relieved I'm not screaming or bolting for the nearest exit. "Clothes don't shift. Fire burns them away. Casualty of the process." His voice is calm, almost teasing. Grounding, if I'm being honest. And weirdly, it helps—because if he can joke, then maybe this isn't the beginning of a full psychological break.

I blink. Once. Twice. My brain latches onto the logic because it's easier than confronting the bigger thing—that I watched him burn. That for a split second, I thought I was witnessing a man incinerate himself. It wasn't the dragon that scared me. It was the way the fire wrapped around him like it belonged to him. Like he belonged to it. The flames didn't just touch him—they claimed him. And I'm not sure which is worse: that he survived it... or that he welcomed it.

Wait. Dragons are real? They can't be, can they?

I know because I just watched one turn into a man—watched the impossible unfold in fire and fury and emerge as flesh and bone. My logical brain is still reeling, short-circuiting with every beat of my heart. But the visceral part of me? The part that felt the heat, smelled the smoke, and saw him rise from it? That part knows exactly what it saw. No dream. No illusion. Just a truth that reshaped my world in a breath.

I cross my arms tightly over my chest, even though I'm not the one exposed. But it feels like I am—because the air between us is heavy with something raw and unspoken. I try to ignore the heat pooling low in my belly, the flicker of arousal curling through my spine at the sheer predatory grace of him, at the unapologetic

strength of his body.

He grabs a pair of pants from a nearby crate—of course he stashed them—and pulls them on without shame, without flinching. But I see it. The subtle hardening of his cock, half-swollen, unmistakable. And the worst part? My breath catches, not from shock—but from the part of me that wants to touch. To taste. To burn alongside him.

"And that?" I ask, giving a subtle nod of my head to his hard-on.

"Also a byproduct of the shift and the presence of one's mate," he chuckles before turning serious and quiet, thoughtful.

"Mate?"

"Fated mate, to be more precise. We don't have time for lengthy explanations, but we were destined to be together."

"You believe that?" He nods. "I don't know that I believe in such things."

"And a few moments ago, you didn't believe in dragons," he chuckles.

He reaches out for me, and I pull back. He isn't mocking me or being smug, just watching me, concerned as if he was worried I might break.

I shake my head slowly, swallowing around the tight knot in my throat. "I don't know." My voice comes out hoarse, like smoke's already filled my lungs. Because nothing about this is normal or okay—not the flames, not the dragon, not the fact that some deep part of me wants him, anyway. I'm terrified, not of him exactly, but of the fire that lives in him—and worse, of how much I crave its heat.

He nods once, accepting that. Giving me space, though his gaze never leaves mine.

There's no pressure in his stance, just quiet restraint—but it's the restraint of a man who could close the distance in a blink and take whatever he wanted. That should scare me. Maybe it does. But it also pulls at something low and hot inside me. And I hate that it makes me want to step closer. To press against him, to see if the heat coming off him would sink into my skin or consume me whole.

I pace. I need movement. I need oxygen. I need a damn minute. Because this is too much. Too fast. I've stared down wildfires. Watched men burn. Caught arsonists with accelerant under their nails. But I've never had the ground lurch beneath me like this—never felt my own reality tilt, like a plate cracked clean through the center.

My heartbeat won't settle. My hands won't stop trembling. And underneath the panic, the confusion, is something even more destabilizing: want. Pure, molten want. I don't know whether to scream, kiss him again, or run until the air burns out of my lungs.

Nothing prepared me for this. I was unprepared for the raw, elemental fear of watching someone willfully consume themselves in fire. Nor for the arousal threading through that fear like smoke curling tight around my ribs and especially not for the way my body responded to the heat, to him, even while my mind screamed this shouldn't be happening.

This moment—this man—shatters everything I thought I knew about fire, about danger, about desire. And I have no idea what to do with that truth.

He starts to speak. I hold up a hand. "Don't. Just—give me a second."

I pivot away and start pacing again, hard and fast, my boots scuffing against volcanic stone. My pulse is a riot in my ears, my breath shallow and quick. I press my palms to my temples like I can press the world back into shape. I walk to the edge of the carved platform, then back again, a caged thing trying to outrun the blaze inside her. The air tastes like iron and smoke. Everything smells like him. I clench my fists, open

them again, trying to breathe through the fire he left in my blood. Trying to remember who I was before all of this... and failing.

The silence stretches.

Then, finally, I stop pacing. "So let me get this straight—you're a dragon-shifter. This is your base. Your team? They're all like you?"

He nods once. "We took an oath a long time ago—to guard our existence, to protect humanity when needed, and to never reveal ourselves unless absolutely necessary."

"Define 'long time,'" I ask suspiciously, my arms still crossed. I already suspect his sense of time makes mine look laughable.

Dax grins, slow and unapologetic. "In some cases, hundreds of years. In others... thousands."

Thousands. My mouth goes dry. I can only stare, trying to wrap my head around what it means to live that long. To carry that much memory, that much weight.

"We did not always live in harmony with man," he says, softer now. "There were eras of conflict. Of worship. Of fear."

I raise an eyebrow. "So... virginal sacrifices?"

He lets out a breath. "Not our finest era. Nor was it humanity's. We never asked for offerings—they were given, usually out of fear or tradition."

"And what did you do with them?"

His gaze holds mine. "Enjoyed what was freely offered, when we could. But

devouring? Killing? That was rare and condemned. Most of us relocated those women—gave them coin, safe homes, anonymity. We weren't monsters... at least, not all of us."

I nod slowly. I don't know why, but it makes sense. Terrifying, ancient sense.

"So what changed?"

His expression changes—pride tempered by old pain. "We evolved. Or we tried. Our instincts never left us, but we adapted. We learned how to control the flame. How to work among humans without setting the world on fire. Most of us chose to protect, to serve. We created Blackstrike to serve as our cover—a frontline smokejumper unit for the most extreme fires. But it's more than that."

He takes a step closer. "We go where the fire appears to be unnatural. Where things go wrong. Where rogue shifters manipulate flame, push the balance too far. That's when we move in. That's what we are."

It sends a shiver down my spine. Because suddenly, the world feels a lot bigger—and a lot more fragile. Like every step I've taken until now has been across solid ground, and I've just realized it was thin ice all along. Everything I believed was possible, rational, explainable—gone. Replaced by a truth so old and raw, it hums in the surrounding air. Dragons. Fire. Fate. And me—standing in the middle of it, no longer sure whether I'm supposed to run or burn.

"And the secrecy?" I ask.

Dax's jaw tightens. "We're not meant to be known. The world wouldn't survive it. We're not fairy-tale villains, but there's a dark side to what we are. Without our mates, the fire inside us turns unstable. It starts small—heat rising, patience thinning. But eventually, we lose our grip on humanity. We burn out. We lose control. We go

feral.

"It's not just rage or madness," he continues. "It's deeper than that. Elemental. The dragon takes over. Reason disappears. We become exactly what the world already fears: weapons of destruction."

I raise an eyebrow. "So, what—you need a soulmate to stay sane?"

He hesitates, jaw flexing. "I've seen it firsthand. One of ours tried to fight the bond. Said fate was a lie. Thought he could manage on his own. But in the end, he couldn't tell friend from foe. He almost leveled a town before we stopped him. Took three of us to put him down. He died screaming—body and mind both gone."

A shiver creeps up my spine, curling slowly and deeply like smoke wrapping around my ribs. I don't know what hits harder—the horror of what he just described, or the quiet grief in his voice when he said it. That kind of loss doesn't just haunt a person. It hollows them. Leaves a burn that never fully heals. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. My throat is too tight, my thoughts too scattered.

What do you say to someone who's watched their own kind fall to madness and had to help end it? To someone who's seen what happens when the fire wins? The silence between us stretches like a fault line, and for once, I have no words to fill it.

Fear curls in my chest, sharp and cold—like a shard of ice piercing through the heat he left behind. This isn't just a myth. It's not some beautifully twisted fantasy I can dismiss when it gets too real. This is brutal, elemental truth. Life or death. His. Theirs. And suddenly, terrifyingly, maybe even mine. Because if he's right—if there's some kind of bond between us and if it's the only thing holding his fire in check—what happens if I say no? What happens if I run?

My mouth is dry. My mind is racing, chasing logic that's slipping through my fingers

like ash. I want to believe this is some elaborate delusion, a prank, something I'll wake up from with a jolt and a laugh. But I saw him shift—watched his body dissolve into flame and emerge reborn. I felt the heat. It wasn't imagined. It seared into my skin and etched itself into the space between heartbeats. No hallucination has ever left a mark like that.

"So I'm supposed to what—save you?" I ask.

He doesn't flinch. "No. But you're the only one who could."

"That's not comforting," I mutter. "That's pressure. That's insane. That's?—"

"Fire," he says. "It doesn't ask permission. It just is."

I glare at him. Then spin on my heel. Storming off feels good. Powerful. The stomp of my boots on the stone is sharp, defiant—punctuating my anger with every step. But the sensation fades quickly as I near the edge of the platform and the truth rears up like a wall. I stop cold, cursing under my breath as I stare out over the drop. Jagged canyon ridges stretch in every direction, cloaked in mist and smoke. No road. No path. No damn way down.

He flew me here in a helicopter.

Behind me, I hear him step forward, his movement smooth and unhurried, like he knew I'd hit the edge and have no choice but to turn back.

"You're not a prisoner," he says. "If you want to leave, I'll get you back. But before you do, you should see something."

I glance back, wary. "What?"

He walks over to a nearby stone table, carved into the dark basalt like an altar. Scattered across its surface are several charred notebooks, their covers brittle, corners curling from intense heat. I step closer, drawn despite myself. The pages are scorched and fragmented, but what's left is enough to make my skin crawl—scribbled equations I can't decipher, strange diagrams that pulse with something wrong, and symbols that look less like writing and more like warnings. Twisting spirals. Jagged lines. The kind of markings that feel older than language. The air around them feels colder somehow, like even the fire didn't dare consume whatever secrets those pages still hold.

"Dennis Price's logs," he says. "Before he disappeared, he left these. We found them at a burn site he never should've had access to."

I lean over, scanning the notes—and my eyes catch something: embedded GPS tags. Coordinates. As I trace the numbers with my fingertip, a chill skates down my spine. I recognize them. I've seen this region before in wildfire response reports—just north of a restricted zone buried deep in Forest Service records. A place flagged as unsafe because of unstable terrain and unverified seismic activity. But even then, there were whispers about odd burn patterns, erratic heat signatures, and sightings of strange symbols etched into scorched trees. Seeing them here, tied to Price's logs? It feels like confirmation of something I haven't wanted to admit.

"These lead into restricted federal land," I whisper.

Dax meets my gaze. "I think it's where he's been staging. Or hiding. Or worse."

I straighten. "I'm going."

His brows lift. "Alone?"

I meet his gaze, unflinching. "Yes. You already said I'm not a prisoner."

He steps closer, arms crossed, tension tightening his shoulders. "You don't know what you're walking into. That zone is dangerous, even without a rogue shifter waiting in the wings."

"And you think I haven't figured that out?" I snap. "It seems he's trying to attract my attention, which he's got. If he thinks of me as just human, he won't be anticipating that I'm any kind of threat."

Dax's mouth opens, but I barrel on. "Dennis Price knows the Blackstrike Unit. He knows you, your patterns, your tactics. If one of you shows up, he'll see it coming. But me? I'm just a 'mere human' to him. Disposable. Invisible."

He flinches at that—just a flicker, but I see it.

I press the advantage. "Let me go in. Let me be the variable he didn't account for. You want to catch him? Then stop trying to wrap me in bubble wrap and start trusting me to do what I came here to do."

For a beat, he doesn't speak. Then he sighs, long and low.

"You'll need a ride," he mutters. "Rafe is on standby. He'll take you to the SUV we left at the base camp. Take it to the location. We'll be better able to track you."

I nod, and within minutes, I'm in the air, the rotors screaming overhead as the chopper lifts off the ridge and banks into the open sky. The air is sharp with altitude and smoke, and adrenaline buzzes beneath my skin like an aftershock. I glance out the open side of the helicopter and see him—Dax—standing alone on the landing pad, arms folded, wind tearing through his hair, the firelight catching on the hard lines of his face. He doesn't move. Just watches me go. Like he's imprinting the moment. Like he already knows this is going to change everything.

CHAPTER 14

DAX

I watch the helicopter vanish into the horizon, its blades slicing through the rising smoke. The sound fades, but the tension in my body doesn't. Ember's scent lingers—ash, citrus, defiance—and it coils inside me like a fuse waiting to ignite. My chest tightens with something raw and dangerous. Not fear. Not frustration. Something deeper. Older. A need carved into my very bones.

The dragon in me snarls with hunger, with warning. Every instinct screams to follow, to protect, to claim. She's only just starting to understand what she's walking into. And she has no idea how hard it is for me to let her go—how close I am to flying straight after her, whether or not she wants me to.

Mine. The word claws through me, not just as a thought but a truth that pulses deep in my dragon's core—hot, demanding, elemental. Mine. It rolls through me like thunder, echoing with every beat of my heart. I feel it in my bones, in the fire stirring beneath my skin. The dragon inside me paces, restless and hungry. And gods help me, the part of me that's still a man wants her no less. Wants her with heat and hunger, yes—but also with something far more dangerous. Something that sounds like forever.

But she wanted space. So I gave her distance—for now. Every instinct in me howled against it, but I held back. Let her breathe. Let her choose. Because even though the fire between us is undeniable, forcing her closer would only push her away.

I call forth my dragon.

Flames lick up my legs, swirl across my chest, and I give in to the surge. The fire moves like it's part of me—curling with reverence and hunger. Skin gives way to scale as flesh is swallowed in flickers of molten light. My wings unfurl in a burst of heat, massive and sharp-edged, and I roar as the final wave overtakes me. The fire doesn't consume me. It frees me. With one powerful leap, I tear off from the earth, rising into the sky. In a breath, the man is gone. The dragon takes the sky, forged in flame and bound to the wind.

I follow from above, gliding silently over pine ridges and scorched valleys, riding the thermals in lazy arcs while keeping just high enough not to cast a shadow she'd notice. The forest spreads out beneath me in a patchwork of dark green and burnt umber, whispering warnings only a dragon would hear.

I watch Rafe land the chopper smoothly on a narrow service road and help Ember down with a practiced ease that belies the tension in his shoulders. He didn't seem to have said much, just nodded to her and led her to the waiting SUV stashed under camo netting near the tree line. I saw the way she paused at the door, scanning the horizon like she felt something—like she felt me. Then she slid into the seat, jaw set, gaze hard.

The SUV snakes its way along the dirt road below, inching toward the restricted coordinates, dust pluming up like smoke signals. She's getting closer. And so is the danger.

I don't need my eyes to know where she is. I could track her by scent alone—citrus, smoke, adrenaline. The imprint of her lives under my skin now, like her essence burned its way into my cells. But even without that, there's a pull—magnetic and unrelenting. A thrum in the marrow of my bones that vibrates with hers, resonating like a low drumbeat only my dragon can hear. A thread of heat I could follow in my

sleep, or in fire, or through the darkness of a thousand nights. I feel her. Always. Like she was forged into my being long before we ever met.

Kade's voice crackles in my ear through the comm embedded in my scales—his voice crisp even over the wind rushing past. He's airborne too, sweeping wide arcs over a separate grid a few miles to the east. I can't see him, but I can feel the familiar weight of his presence in the air, the old rhythm of our formation patrols falling into place like muscle memory. The sky is too still. The silence presses like a warning.

"Anything?" I ask.

"Nothing yet. It's too quiet."

Yeah. Too damn quiet. We're approaching the perimeter when everything explodes.

A roar shatters the sky—deafening, primal, laced with fury I haven't heard in years. It tears through the clouds, turning them to fire-tinged smoke. Heat blasts across my flank like a cannon shot, the searing pain snapping through my left wing joint. I spin hard mid-air, instincts kicking in before thought. Wings flare, body rolls into a defensive spiral. And that's when I see it—the shadow.

It drops from the sun, perfectly positioned to blind and disorient, a maneuver born of centuries of war. I squint through the searing light, instincts screaming just before my vision catches the glint of bronze—scorched and jagged, like molten armor. He's massive, wings outspread, and descending fast, using the sun as both shield and weapon. The fire trailing from his jaws isn't just a threat—it's a declaration. A challenge etched in flame, and I accept it with a growl that echoes across the sky.

Malek--he's been waiting for this moment... and so have I.

He dives with terrifying speed, the air cracking in his wake as if space itself is being

torn apart. The heat coming off him scorches the clouds, leaving a seared path as he plummets straight for me. There's no hesitation. No restraint. Just raw, focused violence hurtling through the sky. The kind that doesn't miss. The kind that kills.

I roll into a barrel twist and rise fast, the edge of the fire stream searing past me close enough to blister the air. The heat scorches my wingtip and singes the edge of my left flank. Pain flares, sharp and electric, but I don't slow. Rocketing upward, claws out, muscles locked, I ride the adrenaline and fire as one.

The sky shakes with the force of our flight. My own fire surges in my chest, building pressure behind my sternum like a detonator—furious, focused, ready to be loosed. The scent of burning pine and blood stings my nostrils. This isn't just a fight. It's a war cry given shape. And I intend to answer it.

He's faster than he used to be. More reckless.

But so am I.

We collide mid-air with the explosive violence of two storms crashing head-on.

Claws tear scale in vicious arcs. Fangs clash against bone with a sound that echoes like a cannon blast. The force of our impact sends shockwaves through the clouds, and the air is alive with fire, fury, and the sheer force of rage given form. Our wings beat against each other, hurricane strong, driving us into a violent spiral that tears through the sky in a blur of smoke and blood.

Flames erupt around us in jagged bursts, the world narrowing to claws, teeth, and survival. Every instinct screams to rip him apart—to tear him down and never let him rise again. To end him with the fire that has waited inside me for this very moment. But I don't. Not yet.

Not yet.

I slam into him from above, driving the full weight of my body down like a meteor of fury. His roar tears through the air as he's hurled into the treetops below. The impact shatters ancient trunks like matchsticks, splinters flying in every direction. A shockwave ripples through the low canopy, and then the forest ignites.

Flames leaping from tree to tree create a chain reaction of chaos, a ribbon of fire slicing through the green. Malek clips a rocky ridge on his way down, spinning out in a trail of smoke and fury before catching an updraft and clawing his way back into the sky with a snarl that promises this is far from over.

I dive to follow, tucking my wings in tight and becoming a missile of molten fury. The wind screams past me, claws slicing through the updraft as I drop like a meteor aimed at his spine.

The flames from Malek's last pass still rage below, licking at the tree line, and I thread through the rising smoke like a predator in his element. My pulse thunders in my ears, the scent of blood and scorched earth driving my instincts higher, darker. The sky narrows into a tunnel of movement and momentum—and at the end, him.

But I see her. Ember. Standing beside the SUV, staring up. Her face pale, lips parted. She sees the dragons—but she doesn't know. Not yet. Not who he is. Not what he wants.

I roar, drawing Malek's attention away from her. He lunges, teeth bared.

I let him come. Every part of me tenses, tracking the trajectory of his attack. Just as he reaches striking distance, I twist mid-air in a violent corkscrew, momentum giving power to my strike. My claws rake across his flank, tearing through bronze scale and sinew with a sickening rip. Blood splatters the sky in molten arcs.

Malek bellows in pain and fury, his body spinning sideways from the force of the blow. The air vibrates with the shockwave of our clash, and for a heartbeat, I feel the balance of the fight tilt in my favor—until his tail lashes back and catches my shoulder with a bone-rattling slam that nearly knocks me out of the air.

He screams, a guttural, broken roar that rattles the sky itself. Fire pours from his mouth in wild, sputtering jets as he writhes mid-air, struggling to maintain altitude. Blood streams down his side, blackened where it mixes with ash. He falters, wings stuttering.

For a heartbeat, I think he's going to crash—but then he catches a rogue current and jerks skyward in a sharp climb. I surge after him, but he spins, casting a blinding burst of flame behind him—a smokescreen of molten fury. When it clears, he's gone. Swallowed by clouds. A vanishing ghost made of fire and vengeance.

Coward.

Pain pulses through my wing—he clipped me deeper than I realized. It radiates through muscle and bone, a brutal throb that makes my flight shaky, my vision hazy at the edges. The sky wobbles around me, but I grit my teeth and force myself to stay airborne.

Even through the fog of pain, I see her. Ember. Still standing. Still safe. Probably plotting ten ways to kill me in my sleep—and I'd let her, as long as she keeps looking at me like that.. Relief hits harder than the wound. My rage rides high and hard, clawing to be unleashed again. My dragon wants to burn. Everything. But not her. Never her.

I land hard, claws gouging deep ruts in the earth, the impact sending tremors through the scorched soil. Smoke curls from my nostrils in thick, angry streams. My body shakes—not just from pain, but from the effort of holding the dragon back. Rage and

fire churn under my scales, barely contained. Blood drips from my wing, and every breath burns. I see her. Alive. Whole. And that should be enough.

But the sight of her—too close, too fragile—rips through my restraint. My eyes blaze, pupils narrowing to slits as a guttural growl tears from my throat. I snarl at her, feral and raw, a sound that carries the edge of a threat—and a desperate plea.

Flames shimmer beneath my scales, licking the edges of my jaw as I crouch low, body coiled and trembling. The dragon doesn't want to be calmed. He wants to claim, to possess, to wrap her in fire and never let go. I dig my claws into the earth to keep from lunging. I'm not safe. Not yet. And gods, I don't know if I ever will be again.

She doesn't run. She steps closer—and every inch she moves toward me tightens the vise of fear in my chest. Not for myself. For her. She doesn't know how close I am to snapping, how razor-thin the line is between restraint and ruin.

My claws are buried in the earth not to hold my ground, but to hold myself back. My fire roils beneath my skin, hunger and possession clawing to the surface. She should run. She should. But she doesn't. And it terrifies me in ways nothing else ever has.

"Dax," she says—just my name.

Her voice cuts through the fire like a stream of water—cool, clear, and impossibly steady. It doesn't coddle or soothe, but it centers me. Not soft, but strong. Certain. It grabs hold of the fraying edge of my mind and tugs, reeling me back from the cliff I didn't realize I was about to leap from.

She reaches out, slowly, like approaching a wounded animal. My rage resists—snaps and coils tighter, snarling just beneath the surface. But then her scent hits me again—warm citrus over smoke, threaded with worry and stubborn hope. It settles over me like a balm, easing the worst of the fury. And her eyes... gods, her eyes.

Steady, unafraid. They don't flinch, don't accuse, just see me. The beast. The man. All of it. And somehow, they accept it. Her presence doesn't douse the fire inside me—it tempers it. My fire dims, banked but not gone. Controlled. Because of her.

I shift.

Fire engulfs me again, curling tight as it draws the dragon back into the cage of flesh and bone. The heat peels away my scales, reforging skin and sinew—but it's not seamless. Not this time. My shoulder flares as the wound Malek gave me refuses to fully heal, raw and exposed. The magic cannot completely close the tear as skin bubbles and sizzles around it. I stagger, the pain lancing through me as the last embers fade, leaving behind blood, breath, and too much fire still coiled inside.

Naked, blood streaking down my arm and dripping from the still-sizzling wound at my shoulder, I stagger forward. The air bites at the raw, open flesh, each step sending white-hot pain lancing through my nerves. My vision blurs for a second, heat warping my senses—but then she's there. Ember. She catches me without hesitation, her arms slipping around my waist like she's done it a hundred times. I feel her warmth against my bare, scorched skin, grounding me in a way no magic ever could.

"I passed a cave," she says. "Come on."

She helps me into the clothing I keep in the SUV. My body aches with every movement, the heat from my wounds soaking into the seat. Neither of us says a word—the silence is thick, humming with everything unspoken between us. The tires crunch over loose gravel and dry pine needles as she guides the vehicle through narrow, winding paths only someone with insider knowledge would even think to take.

The trees press close, shadows deepening as twilight slips into night. Finally, we reach it—the hollowed stone that once served as a ranger outpost. Half-buried in the

side of a hill and overgrown with moss and memory, it sits like a forgotten relic of a world that no longer knows what lives in its shadows.

Inside, it's dark, quiet, warm. Safe—at least on the surface. The walls breathe with the heat of lingering fire magic and the faint scent of charred stone. Using the first aid kit from the SUV, she pushes my shirt out of the way and tends to my wound with silent hands, her touch gentle yet firm, lingering longer than it needs to. Her fingers tremble, just once—as if realizing she's touching a literal dragon and not a walking cautionary tale.

"Great, patching up fire-breathing alpha males wasn't in the job description," she mutters under her breath, when they brush the blistered edge of my injury where the skin still sizzles faintly with residual heat.

I grunt, more out of reflex than pain, and she hesitates, eyes flicking up to mine. But she doesn't pull away. There's fear in her—yes—but there's more than that too. Curiosity. Courage. Connection. She steadies her breath and keeps going. And I let her. Neither do I pull back. Because in that moment, her touch is the only thing keeping the fire in me from reigniting.

When her hand drifts up to my jaw, I catch it gently, threading my fingers through hers and guiding it to my chest—right over the place where the fire lives, where my heart pounds too fast beneath fevered skin. I can feel her pulse—fast, uncertain, echoing the chaos in my own body—but she doesn't look away. Her gaze locks with mine, bold and searching, as if she's trying to see past the damage, past the dragon, into the man I still hope I am.

"You came for me," she whispers.

"Always."

She leans in, each movement measured and magnetic, her breath warm against my lips like the first flicker of flame. Her amber eyes search mine—questioning, hungry, impossibly steady—and I taste salt and smoke on that quiet breath. For a heartbeat, time hangs suspended, and I could wrench myself back, remind her of the dangers we court. But I don't. I can't. Her nearness stirs something primal in my chest—a smoldering fuse that demands to be lit.

When our mouths collide, it's like wildfire unleashed. The kiss is fierce and inevitable, a conflagration of heat and longing that threads through every nerve. She moans—a low vibration that shudders against my lips and races down my spine. Her hands trail from my shoulders, fingertips digging in, curious and raw, as if mapping the territory of my skin. I respond in kind, my palms pressing into the curve of her hips with possessive intent, drawing her close until only our heat remains.

The firelight dances across her flushed flesh, gilding each contour in molten gold. Shadows flicker over her collarbone as I trail kisses, tasting the tang of sweat and the aftertaste of smoke. She arches beneath me, a silent invitation that sparks a growl deep from within me. My tongue traces her jaw, lingers at the hollow of her throat, and every feather-soft brush sets her pulse racing. Her nails rake down my back, pulling me closer—even as they draw strength from me.

Clothes become kindling in our frenzy—torn, yanked, ripped away without care. Silk hisses as it slides from her shoulders. Leather creaks and falls, forgotten. Fabric pools at our feet like discarded lies, each piece a surrender. And in their place, a realization sears through me—this isn't just lust. This is obliteration. Of barriers. Of hesitation. Of anything that once kept us apart. The destruction of fabric feels like a ritual, a shedding of the lives we wore before this moment, now stripped to nothing but fire and truth. The surrounding walls—emotional, physical, ancient—shatter beneath the force of us.

We're bare now. Not just in skin, but in soul. Exposed. Untamed. Her gaze finds

mine in the firelight, and something inside me growls awake.

Our mouths crash—no longer a kiss, but a storm. Wet, urgent, gasping. Her tongue meets mine with fierce challenge, and I answer with equal hunger. Every moan is a demand. Every gasp, a promise. She presses into me, slick heat and defiant curves, her nails carving marks down my back that will heal too quickly.

She grabs my hair and yanks, forcing my head back. Her voice is a whisper against my throat, hot and commanding. “Don’t hold back.”

A thrill tears through me—sharp, electric. She’s not submitting. She’s staking her claim. And damn if that doesn’t make me harder.

I won’t. I can’t.

My palms drag over her hips, lifting, claiming. Her thighs lock around my waist as I carry her to the stone wall, pressing her into it with a growl that vibrates in my chest. She gasps and arches, her nipples pebbling against my skin, and I feast on her—neck, shoulders, breasts. My teeth leave trails of bruised heat. Her hands are everywhere, greedy and relentless, pulling me deeper, closer.

But it’s not enough... not yet.

With one arm braced around her waist, I pull back slightly, just enough to meet her eyes—wild, gleaming, utterly unafraid. I tilt my head, letting the fire stir deep in my chest. Her pupils dilate as she realizes what’s coming.

I lower my mouth to where her neck meets her shoulder—the place where dragon and destiny meet. My breath stills. Then I exhale—not flame, but the soulfire that lives inside me.

It's warm at first. Then hot. A golden glow flares where my lips touch her skin, the flame whispering her name in ancient heat. She gasps—arches—trembles in my grip. But it's more than that. Her breath hitches, caught between wonder and fear, and her eyes flutter closed as if something within her knows this moment—has been waiting for it. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, anchoring herself in the shock of what's just passed between us. A glowing spiral etches itself into her skin, ember-bright and pulsing with power. Not the full bond. But the beginning. The mark of mine.

She stares at me, breathless. “What was that?”

“A taste,” I rasp, voice wrecked with restraint. “The rest comes later. When you say yes.”

Her eyes flash—daring, defiant. “I already did.”

My breath catches—sharp, primal. The dragon inside me lunges toward her like a spark to dry timber. Every part of me responds, drawn to the certainty in her voice like metal to flame.

And then we're moving again—desperate, raw, colliding in rhythm born from fire and instinct. I pin her to the wall, then lower us to the stone floor where our heat meets the earth. Every thrust is a possession. Every cry, a claim. Her body tightens around me like she was made to fit, and I lose myself in the blinding brilliance of her.

She writhes beneath me, sweat-slick and glorious, hair tangled, lips swollen from my kisses. Her laughter breaks through—breathless, wicked.

“You're not half as scary when you're naked,” she pants, fingers dragging down my chest. “Still intimidating. Just... sexier.”

I growl and nip her shoulder in retaliation, careful but firm. She gasps and arches, her

nails scoring my skin again.

“Careful,” I whisper against her ear. “Flatter me too much and I might make a habit of this cave.”

She rolls her hips and smiles like sin. “You say that like it’s a threat. But if you start monologuing again about destiny, I swear I’ll hide your pants.”

The air crackles with our magic, our fire, our need. The flickering light dances over us as we move—savage harmony, sweat-slick skin, whispered curses and bitten lips. The low rumble of embers and the echo of her name from my mouth match the sound of our bodies.

This isn’t just sex.

It’s ignition. The spark struck, the match lit—every thrust, every breath, a firestorm set to consume everything we were before this moment.

Something ancient stirs and settles beneath my skin. The dragon stirs, satisfied. Her presence grounds me, binds me, fuels me.

We burn. Gods, we burn.

And when she finally cries out, her body clenching around mine, pulling me into her release, I let go too—roaring her name, pouring every part of me into her until I have nothing left but flame and bone and soul.

We collapse, tangled and spent, breathing each other in. Her heartbeat flutters against my chest, a quiet, steady rhythm that calms the dragon inside me. In the distance, the soft drip of water echoes through the cavern, grounding us in the stillness that follows the storm we unleashed.

It's not the bond.

Not yet.

But the mark on her shoulder glows softly in the dark, pulsing in time with my heartbeat. A promise forged in fire.

She goes still when she spots it—low on her left shoulder, right where neck meets muscle. A mark. Faint, but unmistakable. Glowing. A spiral, like fire had left a message on her skin.

I can see it pulse. She runs her fingers over it, reverent and curious.

Her breath sticks. The air thickens, heavy and close, like we've crossed into someplace we shouldn't be. Like her world has been altered forever.

“So... does this come with a return policy?”

I laugh, low and wrecked. “No. You're mine now.”

Her eyes glitter with something far deeper than mischief. “Good.”

And as the cave quiets around us, our fire doesn't die. It waits.

Smoldering.

Ready.

Because this wasn't an ending.

This was the beginning of forever.

CHAPTER 15

EMBER

The cave still smells like smoke and sex. I stretch like a cat in sunlight, slow and indulgent, and catch my reflection in a slick patch of rock. My hair's a mess, my lips are swollen, and I grin at the sight. Damn right I look wrecked. I earned that look.

Someone should really market that as a candle—'Apocalypse Afterglow,' maybe. I should be embarrassed by how good that scent makes me feel—instead, I roll my shoulders back and grin. That smell? That's power. That's mine. I earned it, I survived it, and I enjoyed every molten, earth-shattering second. For once, I don't feel like I'm chasing fire—I am it. And gods help anyone who tries to put me out.

The air is cool as dawn breaks, filtered soft through the moss-choked mouth of the cave. My muscles ache in the best way—used, stretched, satisfied—and I'm draped half over Dax like some lazy jungle cat who just conquered her mate. Because I did. And hell yes, I'm claiming it. There's power in this moment. Sensual, slow-burning, and thoroughly mine. For once, I don't feel like I'm trying to keep up. I feel like the one setting the pace.

His arm is heavy around my waist, possessive even in sleep. One scarred hand sprawls across my hip like he owns it. Maybe he does. The fact that I don't mind that thought should probably worry me—but it doesn't. Not when his touch still hums under my skin like an echo. Not when his presence wraps around me like protection laced with danger. I should pull away. Should remind myself I don't need anyone to anchor me. But gods, it feels good to let go—for just this moment—and know

someone else is strong enough to hold me.

We dress in silence, the heat between us simmering but different now. Less frantic. More dangerous. Like an ember buried in ash, waiting for a breath to reignite. He doesn't rush. Doesn't speak much, either. Just keeps casting glances my way like he's waiting for me to bolt. Maybe I used to. But not this time. I've faced monsters. Danced with fire. And tasted power I didn't know I wanted. I'm not going anywhere. Not yet. Not until I decide the terms.

Kade meets us at the edge of the ridge just as the sun begins to climb. His expression says he's not going to ask questions, and I'm grateful for that. Without a word, he hands Dax the keys to the chopper and slides behind the wheel of the SUV we used to get out here.

"You good to fly?" Kade asks, with a glance between us that says he already knows the answer.

"Yeah," Dax says, low and firm. "Thanks."

We climb into the chopper, and I let the rush of air and the thrum of the rotors fill the silence. The trip back to Blackstrike's base takes less than an hour, but it stretches like forever. Dax pilots with practiced ease, but his jaw is tight, and he doesn't look at me once. I don't push. Not yet. My body still hums from what we shared, but my brain's already sprinting ahead—spirals, Malek, what comes next.

By the time we touch down at Blackstrike's base—tucked deep in the canyon, part hangar, part ancient volcanic shrine—the heat between us has cooled to something tense and quiet. Watchful. Waiting.

Dax doesn't say much. Just jerks his head towards the back and says, "There's a spare room with a shower. It's stocked with all you'll need. Get some rest."

Then he's gone, footsteps fading into stone. I follow his directions, finding the room easily. The walls are dark, volcanic rock—older than memory, the kind of place that holds its secrets close.

I strip and step into the shower, letting the hot water chase the chill from my bones. Steam curls around me, thick as the thoughts in my head. The heat soothes, but it doesn't clear the buzz under my skin. Every inch of me feels sensitized, electric—like the air before lightning strikes. I towel off slowly, absently, and then something catches my eye. I glance toward the mirror, the steam sliding away just enough for a clear view.

And I freeze. The mark is still there—it wasn't my imagination. Low on my left shoulder, just where the neck meets the curve of muscle. Faint. Glowing. Shaped like a spiral, like flame trying to etch a memory into skin. It pulses softly, a whisper of heat that makes my skin prickle. Not quite a burn. Not quite a bruise. But it's alive—throbbing with a residual power that feels foreign and yet intimately known. My breath catches. The air thickens around me, like I've just stepped into a room I'm not supposed to be in.

The heat isn't mine. Not fully. But part of it... part of it feels like a claim. Like something Dax left behind—not by accident, but by instinct. A brand without fire. A promise without words. My fingers drift to the edge of the spiral, and even the gentlest touch makes it thrum beneath my skin. Power. Connection. Danger.

The mark pulses again, syncing with my heartbeat, like it's fusing to more than just flesh. It's intimate in a way that makes my breath hitch, terrifying and seductive all at once. Part of me wants to cover it up. The other part wants to show it off like war paint. Because this isn't just a brand—it's a warning. A challenge. And maybe, deep down, a vow.

And gods help me, it doesn't scare me. It makes me feel... powerful.

“Well, that’s new,” I mutter, poking at it gently. “Should’ve come with a user manual—or at least a warning label.” It hums under my touch, like it remembers exactly who put it there—and why. It’s intimate, almost smug, like a love bite left by wildfire. “Thanks for the magical hickey, dragon boy,” I add under my breath, rolling my eyes at my reflection even as a thrill coils low in my stomach.

Down in the hangar, the rest of the unit is gathered—Kade, Rafe, and a couple I haven’t met yet. All broody, lethal-looking men with the kind of shoulders that say ‘I throw firetrucks for fun’ and eyes that say ‘I’ve seen too much.’

“So,” I say, crossing my arms and raising an eyebrow, “you all breathe fire, or is that just a Dax thing?”

Kade snorts. Rafe grins without humor. One of the others chokes on his protein bar.

Dax appears behind me, all heat and quiet command. “Don’t encourage her.”

I flash a smile. “But it’s so easy.”

Later that night, I sleep in Dax’s bed. Alone. He offered the space like it was sacred, and weirdly, it feels that way—like slipping into a heartbeat that isn’t mine but still knows my rhythm. The sheets still smell like him—smoke and cedar and something darker, addictive. I lie there for a while, tracing the spiral mark on my shoulder with idle fingers, trying to tell myself it’s just a burn.

But it’s not. Not really. It’s a tether. A promise. Maybe a warning. I’m not sure, but I am sure I want to find out.

Sleep doesn’t come easy, but when it does, it drags me under hard—and I dream. If they’re not nightmares, they’re close enough.

Malek. Dennis. They're the same. His face flickers between man and dragon—twisting and morphing like smoke in the wind. One second, it's the calm, calculating man with a clipboard and charm; the next, it's scales and fire and hunger with nothing human left. His eyes are cold and empty in both forms, like he sees the world as a pile of kindling waiting to be lit.

The dream yanks me back through memories I didn't know I'd filed away—charred forests, spiral symbols burned into stone and bark, fire lines too precise to be accidents. Every clue I brushed aside as impossible now flashes with brutal clarity. A trail of ash leading straight to him.

I try to move in the dream, to run or fight, but my body is frozen in place. Watching. And then his dragon head turns toward me—massive, horned, eyes glowing—and says my name.

I wake gasping, drenched in sweat, heart hammering against my ribs like it's trying to break free. The room is dark, quiet—too quiet. Every shadow feels sharper, closer, like something is watching. My fingers fly to my shoulder, and the spiral burns under my touch, pulsing like a warning siren embedded in my skin. It's not just a dream echo—it's real, searing through the memory and anchoring me to it. The line between nightmare and prophecy is blurring fast, and my gut tells me it's already too late to pretend otherwise.

When I wake, I'm already moving—heart still hammering, adrenaline from the dream scraping through my veins. I pull on the nearest clean clothes I can find, my hands shaking slightly as I shoulder through the corridors of Blackstrike's base. My bare feet slap against the cool stone floors, the echo sharp and quick like a warning bell.

I find Dax in the strategy room, hunched over satellite maps and coded overlays, the pale glow from the monitors painting harsh angles on his face. He looks up the second I step in, instantly alert—like he was already expecting me.

My hands curl into fists before I even realize it, the pieces snapping together like dry twigs in flame. The dreams. The spiral. The way I'd discovered Price had watched me back in D.C.

"Dennis Price is Malek, isn't he?" I already know the answer. It's written all over Dax's face, in the way his eyes darken, and his jaw tightens. But I need to hear it. Out loud. From him.

His jaw flexes, eyes narrowing like he's been bracing for this exact moment. He watches me like he already knows I've figured it out—and maybe he's relieved. Or maybe he's wondering if this is the part where I bolt. I don't. Not this time. He watches me for a long beat, reading the resolve in my stance, the fire in my voice. Then he nods slowly, the truth heavy between us. "Yes."

I cross my arms. "And you were going to tell me when? After he tried to flambé me again?"

"I wanted to be sure," he says, voice rough. "And I wanted you to choose what came next without being forced."

I pace, my skin prickling. "He knew me. Back in D.C., he followed my reports. Met with me. He was looking for weak points."

Dax stands, slow and deliberate. "He was looking for a bond either for himself or for someone within the unit. When he realized the bond was between us, he decided to use you to bait me, to claim you against your will or maybe both."

My blood runs cold. The memory of the aerial battle between Dax and Malek flashes behind my eyes—dragons colliding like thunder in the sky, fire raining down in arcs too bright to look at, too close to dodge.

I remember the heat on my face, the way the ground shook beneath my boots, and the helpless terror of knowing I was caught between forces that defied everything I understood. I'd never felt so human. So small. So breakable. And yet I couldn't look away. clashing in the sky, teeth and claws and fire lighting up the heavens. It wasn't just some fantastical skirmish. It was war.

If Malek's willing to take on Dax mid-flight, in broad daylight, then what the hell else is he willing to do? I saw what Dax looked like after. The damage. The rage. The barely contained fury. And now I know that fight was personal.

"Why me?" I ask.

"Because you're strong. Smart. Connected. And because he hasn't been able to scare you off or keep you from pursuing the truth. You challenged him. He sees you as a threat—or a tool. Either way, you matter to him now."

I stare at the maps, my thoughts running wild. "I've been circling a dragon this whole time."

Dax moves to my side. "You weren't the only one."

A long beat of silence stretches between us. It's heavy, not with discomfort, but with everything we're not saying—yet. I can feel his eyes on me, measuring the weight of what I just asked. My heart thunders in my chest, but I hold his gaze. I need to know he believes I can handle this—that I'm more than just something to protect. That I'm ready to fight.

"If I were a dragon," I whisper, "could I shift and fight him? For real?"

His eyes burn into me. "To shift, you'd have to bond. With me. It's not reversible. It's not safe."

"But I'd be stronger. Harder to kill."

He nods once. "Yes."

I meet his gaze, something fierce settling into my chest. "Then maybe it's time to stop running. And start hunting."

Dax's voice is low, dark, and certain. "Agreed."

CHAPTER 16

DAX

The fire sings differently out here. It's older, slower, and more deliberate, like listening before it speaks. Every flicker carries the weight of something primal, echoing through my bones. It doesn't rage or consume. It remembers.

I move past the outer wards of the canyon—far from Blackstrike's camp, past the lava-scarred cliffs and obsidian rises, into the ash-covered flatlands where no one but the truly ancient dare to go. The land here breathes with forgotten heat, the wind still tasting faintly of brimstone. The earth remembers out here. You can feel it in the heat beneath your boots, in the hush of the air so still it feels like it's waiting for something. The silence is stretched taut like old scars that never fully healed. This place is sacred. Dangerous. Forgotten. And it knows me.

Oren waits for me there. My pulse thrums with anticipation, an edge of unease threading through the heat in my blood. It's not fear—exactly—but something close. A deep, primal knowing that I stand in the presence of something older, wiser, and infinitely more dangerous. The kind of presence that makes the fire inside me go still—not dimmed, but waiting. Watching. Not Dennis Price or Malek, but Oren. The elder. The ancient. A being so old even the mountains whisper when he stirs. He is not a true part of the team, and yet it would feel incomplete without him.

Today, he's waiting for me, sitting like a statue molded from flame itself, coiled in dragon form, obsidian scales rimmed in silver, his long tail wrapped around him like a serpent guarding sacred knowledge. His breath steams in the air, each exhale

radiating heat. His eyes glow with that knowing, terrible calm—the kind of stillness that comes with power too great to challenge. This is what he truly is. What he always was. And there's no mistaking it now—this is the dragon history long forgotten, but the fire remembers.

"You come because you're scared," he says without preamble, his voice vibrating through the air like thunder wrapped in silk.

"I came because I need answers," I growl. "About Ember."

Oren shifts fluidly, seamlessly—fire blooming around him in a quiet roar, swallowing his dragon form whole. When it clears, he stands tall in human shape, naked and steaming in the open air. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't bother with modesty. Instead, he moves with deliberate grace to retrieve the robe lying folded on a nearby rock, slips it on without haste, and turns to face me, his ancient eyes and silver-threaded hair untouched by time or temperature. No pain. No transition. Full shift. Because that's the only kind there is.

"The girl carries your fire."

"Not fully. Not yet. The mark appeared after we—" I break off, jaw tightening. "There's a partial bond forming. But she didn't burn."

"And that frightens you."

"It should. It means something's changing."

Oren studies me for a long time, then nods slowly. "There was a prophecy, long before you were born, before any of us chose the sky over the sword. One human woman. Fireborn not by blood, but by bond. She would survive the flame, not be consumed by it. She would walk the razor's edge between creation and destruction.

The fire would answer to her, not claim her. A spark between control and chaos—tempered by heart, not heritage."

"You think it's her?"

"No, Dax," he says, stepping close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin. "I know it's her."

He turns without another word, vanishing into the ash and shadow as if swallowed by the breath of the earth itself. The air ripples faintly where he stood, the scent of scorched sage lingering like a memory. For a moment, the world holds its breath—no wind, no sound, only the whisper of something old and watching. Then he's gone, as if he had never been there at all.

I make it back to the main camp just in time to hear the roar—deep, primal, laced with fire and something that pulls at the marrow of my bones. Not just any roar. Ember's. It rolls over the canyon like thunder dipped in flame, and for a heartbeat, everything in me goes still.

The dragon in me knows. Something ancient inside me unfurls, instinct and recognition braided together like flame and breath. She's shifting—and my world will never be the same.

She's outside the barracks, surrounded by the rest of the team, who stand back with cautious awe, their faces lit with firelight and wariness. No one moves, like they're afraid a single breath might ignite her. The air is thick with heat, charged and pulsing like the second before lightning hits—raw and electric, a promise of power barely restrained.

I feel it pressing in on me, too—raw, volatile power radiating off her in waves that sing to the dragon inside me. Her eyes are wide, her pulse visible in her throat, and

she's glowing. Literally. Flame crackles around her skin, dancing along her arms, spiraling from the mark at her shoulder like a brand lit from within. She looks terrified—caught between instinct and disbelief—but she doesn't run. And despite the fear, she radiates something else, too: raw, unfiltered power. She's radiant. Untamed. And she's standing in the fire like she was born for it.

"Ember," I call, stepping forward slowly, "You need to breathe. Don't fight it. Just feel."

"I don't... Dax; it's burning me..."

"No," I say, voice low and steady, "It's becoming you."

The flames swallow her whole, a rush of heat and light so bright the others have to look away, shielding their eyes as if the sun had descended to earth. But I don't. I can't. It's not just fire—it's her, taking shape, stepping into the truth that was always waiting. And I watch, transfixed, as the impossible becomes real right in front of me.

She disappears in fire—and then emerges, rising from the inferno like a phoenix reborn. For a heartbeat, all I can do is stare, stunned silent by the sheer majesty of her transformation. My chest tightens, not from fear, but from awe and something deeper—reverence.

This is my mate, claiming her power in full, blazing with purpose, unflinching in the face of the unknown. She's not breaking. She's becoming. And gods help me, I've never wanted anything more than I want to protect this fire-borne fury, to stand beside her in every battle, every storm, every flame she commands.

The blaze rolls off her new form in shimmering waves, each one pulsing with heat and power that steals the breath from my lungs. The air thrums with magic, seared ozone, and the sharp tang of elemental fire, pressing against my scales like a physical

force.

Her wings stretch wide, copper kissed by flame, catching the light with every slight movement as though the sky itself is bending to her. Her eyes glow with molten gold as if lit from the inside out. The ground shivers beneath her as if the earth recognizes what she is. It's the most beautiful and terrifying thing I've ever seen—and it's her.

A dragon.

Her scales shimmer like sunrise and copper, a cascade of fire-forged beauty that stuns me silent. Something ancient and possessive coils inside me, fierce and unrelenting. She is radiant, untouchable—and mine. Her form is smaller than mine but fierce, every movement purposeful, every line of her body speaking in the language of dragons. Elegant. Lethal. Divine. Every inch of her speaks of fire and purpose, as if the world had waited just for her to wear this shape.

She trembles, unused to the weight and power of this new body, legs moving awkwardly as her talons dig into the earth for balance. Her wings twitch with uncertain tension, and her tail sweeps low, stirring the ash at her feet. Every movement is hesitant but instinctive, like a song she's heard before but never sung aloud.

"I don't know how," she says—her voice raw in my head, the bond already forming.

"Then let me show you."

I shift in a blaze of fire; the world falling away as my form changes—skin giving way to scales, limbs stretching into talons, heat roaring in my chest like a second heart.

When I open my wings, I feel her pulse in mine—like warm electricity crackling through a shared current, an echo of her breath against mine in perfect rhythm. It's

more than heat. It's ancient, instinctual, a tether of flame and soul that tightens with every wingbeat, every inhale we share through the bond.

I move beside her, wings brushing hers gently.

"Follow me. Bend your knees. Push with your hind legs and beat your wings once, hard."

She copies me, clumsy at first, wings flailing in uneven bursts and her hind legs scrabbling against the earth. She wobbles, falters—but refuses to stop. Her determination burns through the uncertainty.

And then... with a sharp beat of her wings and a final push, she lifts. The ground slips away beneath her, and for the first time, she's weightless. Free. Her form steadies midair, a shiver of triumph crackling down our bond.

Wind tears through the canyon as she rises, and something primal stirs in my chest. Pride, fierce and full, swells in my heart. She's clumsy but determined and watching her take the sky for the first time nearly drops me to my knees.

My fated, fireborn mate. My equal. Her wings catch the thermals, her body sways until she finds her rhythm. A shriek leaves her throat, surprised and exultant, echoing through the sky like joy wrapped in wildfire.

I take to the sky beside her, wings catching the updraft just as hers do, our movements syncing like muscle memory passed through the bond. I fly slightly ahead, angling my body to shield her from a sharp gust, guiding her through the thermals and unpredictable winds. Every wingbeat from her sends a surge of pride through me—she's learning, adapting, rising.

My place is beside her now. Leading. Commanding. Not just as her alpha, but as her

mate. Just flying with her, flame to flame.

We rise together above the clouds. The world is nothing but firelight and sky, painted in streaks of orange and molten gold. The air is crisp and thin, carrying the scent of ozone and ash, stinging our nostrils with the memory of fire. Wind ripples along my wings, cool at the edges, sharp with altitude, and I glance sideways to watch her—Ember—soaring beside me.

Her movements are uncertain but graceful, like instinct dancing with discovery. This high, everything below disappears —there's just her, me, and the endless stretch of sky burning with dawn. Her eyes are wide, her thoughts blazing through the bond. Wonder. Awe. Power. And something else—acceptance. The kind that doesn't need words, just wings.

She is not afraid. Not anymore. Her fire isn't just power—it's freedom. I feel it in the beat of her wings, the way her roar echoes with purpose. The girl who stood trembling in the flame is gone. What rises now is something forged, not broken. Something fierce. Something unstoppable.

And the world just became a lot more dangerous because of it. I feel it in my bones—pride like molten steel, a fierce joy that makes my chest ache, and a low thrum of fear humming beneath it like embers that won't die. She's not just fireborn. She's the prophecy made flesh. The one the world will either worship—or try to destroy. And that makes her powerful... and a target. My target to guard. My fire to shield. My mate to defend with flame and fang until my last breath.

CHAPTER 17

EMBER

Power hums beneath my skin like a living current. And yeah, it's kind of badass, but it also scares the crap out of me. What if I lose control? What if I can't go back? Confidence and panic chase each other around in circles, neither quite winning—but for now, I ride the high. Which, frankly, is both awe-inspiring and a little annoying—like my body installed an invisible espresso machine without asking. I feel like a walking caffeine overdose with wings and attitude.

I swear I could vibrate my way through granite. It hasn't stopped since the shift. Since I became... more. Not just Ember Vale, Fire Investigator. Now I'm Ember Vale, newly made dragon-shifter. I haven't found the words yet, but my body knows. The fire knows. It moves with me, inside me, through every breath and heartbeat. It's terrifying. And exhilarating. And okay, more than just a little badass.

I stretch my wings testing the feel of air, weight, and balance. The ghost of flight still lingers in my bones, a memory my muscles haven't fully shaken—an ache and a thrill that lingers like an aftershock. Just thinking about being airborne again sends a flutter of anticipation through me. There's freedom in the sky—limitless and wild—that I've never felt anywhere else.

No expectations. No ground to tie me down. Just wind, fire, and the sheer wonder of what I've become. It clings to me like wind in my lungs, a silent rhythm beneath my skin that whispers of sky and freedom. I remember the weightless rush, the raw joy of breaking gravity's hold. Nothing else compares.

I'm back in human form now, wrapped in one of Dax's oversized thermal shirts, perched on a rocky outcrop near the canyon's edge. The sunrise paints the sky in shades of molten copper, setting the cliffs ablaze in light that mirrors the fire still simmering under my skin. And for the first time in days, I feel... alive. Not just breathing. Not just surviving. Burning.

Behind me, Dax clears his throat. "How's the afterburn?"

"Like tequila and bad decisions," I say, rubbing my shoulder where the dragon mark still glows faintly under my skin. "Only hotter."

He chuckles, but there's a reverent edge to his gaze. "You handled it better than anyone I've seen." He rubs the back of his neck, like he's not sure if he's impressed or a little unnerved. "Most would've melted down. Literally."

"You mean I didn't incinerate myself?"

Aside from singeing the edge of Dax's favorite field pack, setting a patch of moss into a spontaneous barbecue, and accidentally torching a perfectly innocent log—which, in my defense, looked suspiciously smug—I came out more or less flame-retardant.

"Exactly." He steps closer. His heat always precedes him. It's comforting now. Familiar. "Come on. You've got training."

Training, it turns out, means learning how not to crash into pine trees. Dax, of course, glides like a damn predator on thermals, all effortless grace and precision, while I'm over here flapping like a dragon-shaped lawn ornament in a windstorm. I, naturally, make it halfway through my first turn before smacking a branch with my tail, doing a midair corkscrew that ends in a not-so-graceful bush dive. I pop out covered in twigs and dignity loss. Dax doesn't laugh—because he values his life—but I see the twitch

at the corner of his mouth. Jerk.

We spend the next hour in the air. Dax teaches me how to bank, how to breathe fire better, how to sense wind currents. I flail, I overcorrect, I spiral once into what can only be described as a midair interpretive dance of disaster—but I'm learning.

Every time I falter, he's there—calm, steady, quietly dominant in a way that pushes all my buttons and makes me want to punch him and pounce on him at the same time. Every time I do something right, he rewards me with a quiet, "Good girl," and damn if it doesn't make my toes curl and my inner feminist throws up her hands in confused surrender.

Later, after we land, I pull out my laptop and connect to the encrypted files I took from Price's drive. My dragon brain is still getting used to human thoughts again—like trying to reboot Windows on a lava flow with a cinnamon latte and a migraine—but something clicks.

The symbols, the spiral, the burn patterns—they're following ley lines. At first glance, they'd looked like chaos. But now I see the pattern—the design hiding in the destruction. The rogue fires weren't random. They were ritual. A fire map written in code and ash.

I swipe through seismic overlays, fault lines, geothermal activity charts—every tool in my analytical arsenal. And slowly, the picture sharpens. Every ignition point aligns with a volatile place—volcanic calderas, geothermal pockets, old lava tubes. Places where fire already sleeps under the surface, just waiting for a push.

Malek isn't just burning things. He's feeding something ancient, deliberate. Building a fuse line across the spine of the west like a dragon carving its path with flame.

"Holy shit," I whisper. "He's going to trigger a mass ignition. Something on a scale

no one's ready for."

"What kind of scale?" Dax asks, crouched beside me.

"Dragon fire," I say. "He's using fault zones and ley energy to amplify ignition. If he uploads these last sequences, it'll detonate half the western fire zones like dominos."

Dax's jaw tightens. "Then we stop it."

We plan fast, adrenaline already coiling in my gut like a live wire.

"This is going to be insane," I mutter, scrolling through the relay schematics.

"You've seen me fly through a firestorm," Dax replies, already pulling on his gear. "I specialize in insane."

"Yeah, well, if we die doing this, I'm haunting you first.". The ignition codes are set to upload from a secure federal relay station buried deep in the national fire grid. No one outside Blackstrike—or Oren—knows how deep this goes. No clearance. No allies. No second chances. Which means no backup. No time. Just us, a single helicopter, and the last line of defense between annihilation and ignition.

Oh, and a bunch of firefighting, smokejumping, fire-breathing dragons.

We take the chopper. It's a fast, tense flight—wind slicing past us, tension strung between our bodies like a live wire. The silence says everything we aren't ready to. At one point, Dax's hand brushes mine on the seat between us, and my breath catches. He glances over, eyes burning with something that could scorch me from the inside out. For a heartbeat, I swear he's going to kiss me. I lean in a fraction—just enough not to fall if he doesn't catch me. My chest tightens, breath held like a secret I'm afraid to speak aloud. The need to close the distance is maddening, like gravity

pulling at my ribs. But he doesn't. Not yet.

Not until we're on the ground. Even then, we hesitate—standing there for a breath too long, the helicopter's rotors still whirling behind us like a ticking clock. Heat ripples off the engines, the scent of scorched metal and pine thick in the air. We land in a remote clearing near the relay site; the trees closing in around us like sentinels. The ground is damp with ash and old fire. It feels like we're stepping into the mouth of something that's been waiting to bite.

My boots hit the dirt first, but it's Dax's presence that anchors me. One glance, one silent agreement, and then we move. Fast. Determined. But not before the space between us ignites in a way that feels like a promise—one we both know we're about to break open.

Before we make our move, I reach for him—because I need to. Because if this ends tonight, I want to have touched something real. Because this thing between us has been burning since the second we met, and I'm tired of pretending it's just heat and not gravity.

His mouth claims mine like fire meeting gasoline—hungry and shocking in its intensity. It's so full of need it rattles something deep in my chest, cracking open a part of me I didn't know was locked tight. I feel like I'm finally exhaling after holding my breath for weeks. It's heat, yes—but it's also relief. Belonging. unyielding, full of heat and promise. His hands grip my hips, pulling me close. My fingers slide into his hair, tugging, needing. It's not just lust. It's survival. It's home.

"I will let nothing happen to you," he growls against my lips.

"Then stop wasting time and kiss me again."

We would've gone further. Right there. And honestly, I was more than ready to let

the world burn for another ten minutes. My hands are already tangled in his shirt, my mouth halfway to saying something I'd either regret or double down on. But Kade, the absolute king of timing—and apparently the official ruiner of epic make-out sessions—bursts through the tree line like a wet blanket with boots and zero shame.

"We've got a problem," he says. "Malek has abandoned his lair."

Dax lifts his head, the kiss still lingering between us like an unfinished sentence. His expression darkens, the heat in his eyes replaced by something colder—calculating, furious. His jaw tightens as if bracing against the weight of what's coming. The soldier in him resurfaces, shoulders squared, fire banked behind steel.

"Which means he's ready," I whisper.

And I know the real firestorm is just beginning.

CHAPTER 18

DAX

The clearing is thick with heat, tension, and the lingering scent of her lips on mine. My body is still keyed to her, blood pumping in rhythm with hers, like we haven't quite detached. For a second, I'm suspended—half in the moment we just shared, half already reaching for the threat I know is coming. But my instincts change fast—desire smothered by dread.

I drag in a breath, clench my fists, and roll my shoulders, forcing focus over the rising tide of emotion like steel locking into place. The last of Ember's heat still lingers on my skin, but I shove it back, burying instinct beneath discipline. There's no room for softness now—not when the sky is darkening with war. The second Kade delivers his warning, it slices through my control like a blade.

"Malek has abandoned his lair," he says, his jaw clenched.

I don't flinch. But inside, fire coils low in my gut, tightening like a noose, burning with a fury that's too still, too precise. He's not hiding—he's staging. Every move has been methodical, meant to mislead, to bait. This isn't improvisation. This is a script. And we've followed it straight to the final act. The pattern's too familiar, too rehearsed, the echoes of past battles humming beneath the surface. We've run out of time—and the bastard knows it. He's orchestrating the endgame. And we've just walked onto the stage.

"Take to the air. Sweep the ridge and flanks. Rafe knows the signal patterns. You see

anything—send a flare into the sky. Don't engage alone."

Kade nods once, eyes flicking skyward, then turns and sprints into the tree line. I catch a flash of movement—his body bursting into flame, disappearing in a pulse of light. A second later, his dragon form erupts from the canopy, wings slicing the air, scales gleaming like obsidian, kissed by lightning. He banks once, catching an updraft, and vanishes into the clouds, a sentinel already on the hunt.

I turn to Ember. Her eyes meet mine—still fierce, still lit with the same fire that nearly undid me just minutes ago. But there's steel beneath the heat now, something sharpened by instinct and purpose. She gives a curt nod, jaw set. Whatever comes next, she's not just ready—she's with me.

"Let's go."

The federal relay station juts from the rock wall above the basin, hunched and silent like it's holding its breath. A fortress disguised as infrastructure—low profile, high security. This is where secrets come to hide. Breaking in should be impossible, the kind of impossible that gets people disappeared if they try.

Ember kneels at the external panel, fingers flying. Her brow furrows, lips pressed in a tight line—a mix of focus and the kind of nerves she won't admit to. She mutters under her breath, "Give me sixty seconds," with a grit-edged calm that sounds more like a battlefield promise than a tech estimate. Sweat beads at her temple, but her hands don't shake—if anything, they move faster.

I crouch beside her, scanning the perimeter. A breeze tugs at my skin—subtle, but wrong—and my breath catches. There's something sharp beneath the smoke, acrid and wrong. Sulfur. And something older, more primal, like scorched earth soaked in blood. My gut twists. It hits me a second too late.

"We don't have sixty," I growl.

Malek appears at the far end of the ridge, draped in shadows like smoke given form, malevolence radiating from every line of his body. His eyes gleam with cruel amusement, glowing faintly red as if lit from within. Power coils around him, oily and thick, the kind that stains the air and makes your instincts scream. He doesn't need to roar. His silence is worse—watchful, waiting, confident. He's not here to fight. He's here to dominate. And gods help us, he might enjoy it.

"Well," he drawls, "aren't you two just adorable? The pet project and the fledgling."

Ember rises slowly, the wind lifting her hair. "Move aside, Malek. We're not here for you."

"Oh, but I'm very much here for you."

He lunges, a blur of smoke and muscle, closing the distance with impossible speed. One second he's a shadow at the edge of the ridge, the next he's a force of fury, teeth bared, fire burning at his back. The ground cracks beneath his first step, heat rolling off him in waves that warp the air. There's no warning—just pure violence unleashed.

Combat is chaos and heat. I shift mid-sprint, flames erupting around me in a sudden, blinding burst that scorches the ground beneath my feet. One breath I'm human, the next I'm airborne—wings unfurled, claws primed, vision sharpened through a dragon's eyes. There's no pain, no sense of bones or flesh moving—just the wash of fire and a pulse of ancient power reclaiming its form. The ground buckles beneath my launch, trees ripple from the shockwave, and ash spins in my wake. This is fury unleashed. This is war in its truest form. My roar splits the sky.

Malek answers with fire of his own, his dragon form lean and venomous, more smoke

than scale—an unnatural blur of shadow and heat. We collide mid-air in a brutal dance of talons and fury, our roars tearing through the sky.

Below, Ember streaks across the ground like a comet, flame licking at her fingertips, her body alive with fire she hasn't yet learned to master. The glow around her pulses and flickers—raw power, beautiful and terrifying all at once.

Ember breathes fire. It's raw, uncontrolled—but hers. And it stops me cold. Pride and awe surge through me so fast it knocks my rhythm off. She's untrained, untested—and already wielding more fire than some born dragons ever will. My heart stutters, not from fear, but from the sheer force of what she is becoming.

I tear into Malek's defenses, unleashing a barrage of flame and claw, but it's not enough. Not for what I feel. The rage climbs, molten and merciless, twisting through me like a storm unbound. My dragon roars inside, not just with battle fury—but with centuries of vengeance, betrayal, and loss. The fire in me isn't just power—it's hunger. It wants to end him. Wants to reduce him to ash, to leave no trace. Wants to end everything, just to silence the scream burning in my bones.

Until I hear her. Ember's voice cuts through the haze, steady and grounding. "Dax. Look at me."

The sound of her voice—familiar, fierce, unmistakably hers—hits me like a cold plunge straight into fire. The chaos in my chest jolts, hiccups, then falters. My claws freeze mid-strike, breath catching in my throat. I turn toward her, and in that instant, the maelstrom inside me slows, quiets, steadies. Not because the threat is gone. But because she's real. Present. Grounding. And she didn't flinch—she reached for me. Called me back from the brink not with force, but with faith. And gods help me, I came.

The madness recoils, pulled back like a tide, I draw in a breath—not fire, not fury, but

her. Her presence crashes through the fog of rage like cold wind through wildfire, cutting sharp and clean. The storm inside me calms, tethered by the single constant that cuts through the chaos. Her voice is the anchor I didn't know I needed, and the bond between us thrums like a lifeline. I find the center in her voice, in her strength, in the blazing clarity of what she means to me. I find her—and I don't let go. Not this time. Not ever.

We land in tandem, our bodies moving like they've always fought side by side. The ease startles me—how naturally she matches my rhythm, as if her instincts mirror mine. Her landing is fluid, seamless, as if she'd been doing this with me for years instead of days.

For a blink of time, it's not just partnership—it's fusion. My mind registers the shock of it even as my heart latches on. The part of me that's never stopped bracing for loss dares to hope—really hope—that maybe I won't have to fight alone anymore. Maybe she's not just my match in fire—but in purpose. In soul.

Malek steps back, scorched and grinning. "Such promise," he purrs. "You could be so much more than his weakness, Ember. Isn't that what he fears? That you'll see what he hides? That you'll leave, like the other one?" You could be my queen. Rule beside me. Or refuse—and condemn every last one of his pathetic little unit to ash."

She doesn't hesitate. "Go to hell."

Malek vanishes in a plume of smoke and flame, his laughter curling through the scorched air like a poison. It's not just amusement—it's a promise. A warning. His voice lingers even after he's gone, echoing in the heat like a threat carved in fire.

We turn to run, urgency snapping back into our limbs like a jolt of electricity. The air is thick with scorched ozone, but there's no time to breathe, no time to assess. The codes must still be active—somewhere behind those walls, the ignition command

ticking toward detonation. We need to reach the server core, purge the upload, and do it before Malek circles back. Before he turns the sky to fire again.

Ember stumbles. Her knees buckle as if gravity has doubled its grip on her, her breath hitching in her throat. Then she drops, collapsing in a boneless heap that sends panic ripping through me.

I catch her before she hits the ground. Her skin is too hot, glowing at the edges. Her pulse is erratic. And then she whispers my name—not loud, not even clear—but just enough to hit like a strike to the chest. It's the same way she said it the night we almost kissed, with that stubborn mix of heat and hesitation. That sound... it's her. Still fighting. Still holding on. And it shreds me. I remember the first time I saw her with fire in her eyes and defiance on her lips—so damn alive. Now, that fire is consuming her from the inside out. And it's my fault. I started something I couldn't finish.

She's burning. The partial bond—unsealed, unstable—has turned volatile, its power unraveling inside her like a live flame with no tether. It should've been completed, sealed, protected. Instead, it lashes at her from within, her body caught in the crossfire of something ancient and unrelenting. If I don't claim her soon, if I don't anchor that flame to mine, I'll lose her. Not just her body. Her soul. Her fire. Everything.

Forever.

CHAPTER 19

EMBER

The dream starts like all the others: smoke thick in the air, flames licking at the edges of my vision. The heat is familiar—almost comforting in its intensity—but something's wrong. It coils tighter, presses harder. This time, it doesn't feel like a dream. This time, it feels like dying. Like something inside me is unraveling, a thread pulled too far, too fast. And I'm helpless to stop it.

Fire wraps around my body like a lover and a noose—intimate and terrifying, as if it knows every secret I've tried to bury. It coils into the cracks I pretend don't exist, finding the weak spots I show no one. It pulses in time with my heartbeat, every beat slower, heavier. My skin blisters and peels—but there's no pain, just pressure, building and building until my lungs seize and the world narrows to a single scream I can't release. I'm burning from the inside out. The fire is alive. And it wants more.

A voice cuts through it—low, rough, furious. It cleaves through the firestorm raging inside me like a lifeline tossed into chaos. Dax. His voice, tethered to memory and need, drags me toward the surface—toward reality. It's not just sound. It's an anchor.

My eyes fly open. I'm not in the dream anymore—I'm convulsing on the bed, heat rippling off me in waves. The dream lingers in my chest like smoke, curling through my ribs. For a second, I don't know where I am or what's real—only that I'm burning from the inside out, and terror claws at the edges of my mind. I try to speak, to scream, but my body is no longer mine. I'm trapped in fire and silence. My back arches. My skin glows. I can't speak. Can't breathe. I'm cracking apart.

He's there. Dax. Shirtless, wild-eyed, crouched at my side like a warrior in a storm, his bare chest rising and falling with frantic breaths. Sweat gleams on his skin, his eyes glowing faintly—panic and fury swirling behind the gold. His hands hover inches above me, like he's afraid touching me might make it worse... or not touching me will let me slip away.

"I've got you," he growls, voice broken with urgency. "You're not dying. Not on me."

I want to laugh, to cry, to scream—but all I can do is writhe. The fire inside me surges, furious now. Uncontrolled. Unclaimed.

"Burning," he whispers—maybe to himself, maybe to someone else.

I know what he means. I know he's the only one who can save me.

Dax leans close. I smell smoke, salt, skin. Heat licks along my spine.

"You're mine, Ember. I should've done this sooner."

His mouth crashes to mine—hot, possessive, a kiss that isn't asking. A jolt of relief floods through me, tangled with fear and something deeper—surrender. It's like the storm inside me finally has somewhere to go, someone strong enough to catch it. It's taking. And I let him. Because this fire doesn't scare me. He doesn't scare me.

His hands brand a path down my body. Every touch sears. Clothes vanish—I don't know how, don't care. I'm nothing but flame and nerve endings.

He whispers something in Draconic—an oath, a plea, a promise.

His skin burns golden, his eyes glowing as if his fire pulses just beneath the surface.

His breath grows hotter, charged with the magic that fuels their kind. He leans in and exhales a stream of flame—not enough to scorch, but just enough to brand. The heat sears into my skin at the curve of my shoulder, where neck meets collarbone—just above my heart. It's not a bite. It's a mark. A dragon's claim, rendered in sacred fire.

It's not gentle. It's not tame. It's a brand. A claim. Fire surges from the mark into every vein. My scream finally breaks free as my back bows and light explodes behind my eyes.

I see stars. Galaxies. I see him—his power, his vulnerability, the raw truth of who he is beneath all the heat and fury. All of him laid bare to me in this blaze of light and soul. And somehow, I know he sees all of me, too.

Then I burn... not with pain, but with power.

My body arches like a bowstring beneath him, every muscle taut and trembling as his weight pins me down. His cock—thick, veiny, and hard—slams into me with a force that makes my vision blur. My hands claw at his back, leaving angry red welts as I try to anchor myself against the tidal wave of pleasure threatening to drown me. The bond between us isn't just some poetic legend—it's a fucking live wire, crackling with electricity as our bodies collide again and again.

His mouth is everywhere—biting, sucking, claiming. His teeth sink into the tender flesh of my neck, and I scream, my nails digging deeper into his skin as he growls against me. His tongue flicks over the mark, soothing and stinging all at once, before he moves lower, his lips closing around my nipple. He sucks hard, his teeth grazing the sensitive bud, and I writhe beneath him, my hips bucking uncontrollably as he fucks me with a rhythm that's both brutal and perfect.

“Fuck, Dax,” I moan, my voice ragged and broken. His name is a prayer, a curse, a fucking plea. He doesn't answer—just grunts, his hips slamming into mine with a

force that makes the bed creak in protest. His cock stretches me wide, filling me so completely that I can feel every ridge, every pulse of his arousal as he drives deeper, harder, faster.

My legs lock around his waist, pulling him closer, deeper, as if I can't get enough of him. And I can't. Every thrust sends shockwaves of pleasure through me, my pussy clenching around him like a vise. His hands grip my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as he fucks me with a ferocity that borders on violence. It's raw, it's primal, it's fucking perfect.

The air is heavy with the scent of sweat and sex, saturated and heady, like incense offered to the gods of fire and desire. Every slap of skin against skin reverberates through the room like thunder—raw, rhythmic, desperate. The heat is stifling, not just from our bodies but from the bond blazing between us, searing away anything that isn't this moment, this connection, this claiming.

His breath is hot against my ear as he growls, "You're mine." It's not a question, not a request—it's a declaration.

He's right; I am. Every inch of me aches for him, for this. I've never belonged to anyone—never wanted to. But this bond isn't about ownership. It's about surrender. And for the first time in my life, surrender feels like strength. Like choosing to burn, because the fire makes me more than I was before. It's not just passion—it's transformation.

His pace quickens, his cock pistoning in and out of me with a speed that has me gasping for air. My orgasm builds, a tight coil of pleasure in my belly that's ready to snap. I can feel it coming, feel the way my body tightens around him, the way my breath hitches in my throat. And then it hits me like a fiery inferno, my pussy clenching around his cock as I scream his name.

He doesn't stop. He fucks me through it, his thrusts becoming erratic as he chases his own release. And when he comes, it's with a roar that shakes the fucking walls. His cock pulses inside me, filling me with his cum as he collapses on top of me, his breath hot and ragged against my skin.

We stay like that for what feels like forever, our bodies still trembling with the aftershocks of pleasure. The world outside doesn't exist—just this heat, this breath, this us. And as I lie there, his cock still buried deep inside me, I know one thing for sure: this isn't just sex. It's fucking fire. And I never want it to end.

When it's over, I'm draped over his chest, still glowing faintly. My breath comes in soft, shallow pulls as I press my ear to the steady beat of his heart. For a moment, there's only silence, broken by the whisper of skin against skin. I don't speak. I don't move. I just feel.

The bond is complete. Final. Irrevocable.

And it feels... terrifying. Beautiful. Like I've stepped off the edge of everything I thought I knew and landed in something deeper, stronger. I'm not just Ember anymore. I'm fire. His fire. And even though that truth settles into my bones like it's always belonged there, a part of me trembles with the weight of it.

What now? What if this changes everything?

But then his arms wrap tighter around me, and the tremble eases. Not gone. Just... anchored. For now. His hands stroke my back in slow, reverent circles.

I lift my face, and he looks at me like I'm the only thing left in his world.

"You're mine now," he says. Not a question. A truth.

I nod. Because I feel it, too. The bond pulses between us, alive and thrumming.

Outside, the emergency signal blares—long and sharp.

"The Ignition protocol has been triggered," Kade's voice calls out. "Malek's moving. We still have time to purge the upload."

I meet Dax's eyes. Fire still hums beneath my skin.

"Then let's go."

CHAPTER 20

DAX

The sheets are still warm when Ember rolls over and groans. “Tell me we have time for coffee.”

I grin. “You want caffeine or the satisfaction of torching Malek’s smug face off?”

She squints up at me from the nest of blankets. “Both. In that order.”

“No time for the first. But the second?”

Her eyes light up, wild and wicked. “That’ll work.”

Outside, the air crackles with heat and tension, thick with the scent of smoke and scorched pine. Distant flames snap and roar, a living wall of fire that eats its way through the far canyons. The sky above is a muted red, sun choked out by ash. The wildfire Malek summoned isn’t just burning—it’s hunting.

Ember and I step out of the cabin, skin still tingling, breath still uneven from what just passed between us. The heat outside is brutal, but it’s nothing compared to the hum still coursing through my veins—her touch, her fire, still branded on me. We don’t speak. We don’t have to.

Rafe waits near the perimeter, back straight, eyes locked on the canyon rim like he’s daring it to blink. His jaw is set tight, the kind of tension that comes from watching

too many people you care about walk into hell with nothing but grit and firepower.

He sees us coming and gives a sharp nod—no words wasted. We're out of time.

"We'll handle the line," he says. "Get moving. He was spotted near the obsidian ridge."

I nod once and reach for Ember's hand. "Stay close. This ends today."

She squeezes back. "Wasn't planning on letting you have all the fun."

We shift mid-run, our bodies stretching and reshaping, bones cracking, skin hardening, wings tearing free as fire pours through us. The ground falls away as I surge upward, the wind roaring past my ears, and my wings unfurl with the familiar rush of power that never stops being intoxicating. The beast in me howls with purpose.

Beside me, Ember explodes into the sky, her dragon form radiant—a blaze of molten gold and wildfire fury. Her eyes catch the light like sun on blade-edge, her scales flickering between heat shimmer and raw flame. She doesn't fly—she commands the air around her.

We launch into the smoke-streaked wind, slicing through ash and updraft like twin missiles. The air is thick with soot and heat, updrafts buffeting us from below, making every wingbeat a battle and a dance. My muscles burn with the effort, but it feels good—right.

Below us, the Blackstrike Unit fans out in tight formation, a coordinated arc of movement as they brace to confront the encroaching blaze. They look tiny from up here, but they move like giants—like the last line holding back the end of the world.

Ember banks left, brushing her wingtip against mine. “You smell like sex and war.”

A low growl rumbles in my chest. “You’re the one who blew fire into my skin.”

“I regret nothing.”

The canyon splits wide beneath us, jagged and blackened like a scar torn through the world. Rivers of ash wind through its depths, glowing faintly with ember veins that pulse like dying hearts. The heat rising from below is brutal—oppressive even at this height—warped air distorting the edges of stone and sky alike.

Then I see him.

A shape, at first—wrong, heavy, dragging shadow where there should be light. Then wings. Then the rest. Malek rises from the smoke like a nightmare born from fire—massive, twisted, haloed in flame and malice. His eyes gleam with that same unbearable hunger, and that grin—too wide, too sharp—cuts across his face like a fresh wound that never healed. He looks worse than before, darker somehow, like every second in the shadows twisted him deeper into something unnatural.

I don’t wait. I dive, fire spilling from my jaws in a blistering arc. Ember follows, our flames dancing together in perfect rhythm. Malek meets us midair, his fury rolling off him like stormfronts. The stench hits me first—acrid, rotted, thick with the reek of corrupted magic.

Claws clash. Wings thunder. Fire tears across the sky.

“He’s drawing it!” Ember’s voice shouts in my head. “Feeding the fire with his rage.”

“Then we starve him.”

We strike in tandem, relentless and synchronized—two storms crashing into one. Our claws rake across his hide in coordinated sweeps. Our fire blends midair, forging a wall of heat and light that presses Malek back again and again. He's brutal, unpredictable, his movements wild and jagged, like he's barely containing something inside him that wants out.

He spins midair and lashes out, catching Ember's flank with a blast of corrupted flame. I roar and dive, biting into his exposed wing. He howls and twists, trying to wrench free, but we don't give him room. Ember recovers in a heartbeat and flanks him, her body a streak of gold fury, her flame answering mine with a roar of vengeance.

Then, without warning, he folds his wings and drops. Not retreating—luring. He slams into the canyon floor hard enough to send a shockwave rolling up through the stone. Flame explodes outward from the impact point, not natural, but summoned—twisting, dark, fed by something foul. It punches into the air, sparking a new firestorm that surges up and tries to swallow us whole. The blaze roars with Malek's rage, and the canyon becomes a furnace of chaos.

For a heartbeat, I think Ember might falter. The fire lashes around her, wild and furious, the wind trying to rip her from the sky. Her wings shudder under the pressure, and the heat is so intense it warps even her golden glow.

But then I see it—the difference in her stance, the way her wings flare wider, defiant. Her jaw locks. Her eyes burn—not with fear, but with focus, with fury, with absolute control. Power ripples outward from her in a golden shockwave, parting the inferno like it answers to her alone.

She doesn't just withstand the fire.

She bends it.

Commands it.

Becomes one with it.

She is the fire now?—

—and it knows who it belongs to.

“I’ve got the fire,” she says through the bond, her form flaring gold. “Take him.”

I hesitate only a second, just long enough to feel the bond between us pulse steady—solid—in the chaos. Her wings beat with iron determination, cutting clean arcs through smoke and ash. Her flames don’t just redirect the inferno—they sculpt it, curve it back on itself, a burning serpent snapping at its own tail. The fire obeys her. She’s got it. She owns it. And I know—deep in my bones—I can trust her with this storm.

With a final glance, I turn toward Malek and let everything else fall away—Ember, the firestorm, the noise of the world. All of it drops into silence. My focus narrows until it’s just him and me, two forces spiraling toward collision. My wings snap tighter, my heartbeat syncing with the beat of flame in my chest.

Rage surges forward, sharp and hungry, but it’s clean now—refined. No hesitation. No fear. Just the righteous fury of knowing exactly who I am, exactly what I fight for. I lock onto him like a falling star with a single purpose: destroy the dark and end this.

I circle high, wings aching from the climb, the wind shrieking past my scales like a warning. I hold it for one perfect moment—the stillness before the storm—and then I dive.

The roar that tears from my chest isn’t just fury. It’s history. It’s vengeance. It’s every

scar, every betrayal, every memory of what Malek destroyed. My descent is a missile of flame and fury.

I slam into him with bone-breaking force, my talons driving into his throat, tearing through scale and sinew. His blood is dark, wrong, reeking of ruin. He shrieks, not just in pain, but in panic. For the first time, I hear it—fear in his voice.

And I'm not done.

My fire pours into him, not just heat but judgment, ripping into the twisted void that pretends to be his heart. It fights back—shadows curling against the blaze—but I don't let up. I give it everything. Every drop of power, every shred of will. I burn through him, burn into him, until the shadows scream and rupture, until the darkness finally breaks.

And still, I don't stop. Not until he's nothing but ash scattered on the wind.

Below, Ember redirects the blaze, her wings cutting deliberate paths through the choking heat. The fire doesn't just move—it alters its course, answering her will like a living thing. She pushes it away from the green valleys with precise, brutal authority, forcing it into dead rock where it can burn itself out harmlessly. Every gust of wind she rides, every pulse of flame she bends—it's all instinct and mastery.

Her wings tremble, but not from weakness. From the sheer magnitude of what she's channeling—wild, molten power drawn from the heart of the blaze itself. The strain is written in every line of her body, in the pulsing glow that bleeds from the tips of her wings, in the way the very air distorts around her from the heat.

Flame coils beneath her like a throne rising from ruin. She hovers there, sovereign and relentless, and every fiber of her being says: this fire is mine. She doesn't just resist the storm—she owns it. Commands it like it's an extension of her breath, her

will, her rage wrapped in beauty.

I hover for a beat, stunned—not by the fire, but by her. By the way she floats there in the blaze like it's her birthright, every wingbeat a statement, every flick of flame a vow. She isn't just surviving. She's owning this moment like it was carved into fate for her alone. Holding back disaster with nothing but will, instinct, and power that pulses from her like a second heartbeat.

There's grace in her control, yes, but there's also ferocity—regal and raw and utterly hers. She's not just radiant. She's sovereign. And the fire knows it.

When she lands, I follow, pressing my snout to hers.

“You good?” I ask.

“Ask me after I can feel my legs again.”

We shift back to human form, sweat slick and breath heavy. Ember groans as she tugs on her pants.

“Next time, can we fight evil someplace that has air conditioning?”

Rafe's voice crackles over the comm. “We turned the front. Firefighters are moving in. We've got it.”

Relief hits me like a wave, sudden and staggering, crashing through the high of adrenaline and the ache of battle. My limbs feel heavier, my breath finally reaching the bottom of my lungs. I look at Ember—smudged with soot, eyes still blazing—and something deeper roots itself in my chest. Gratitude, sharp and clear. Pride, fierce and blinding. And beneath it, a quiet, undeniable awe. Not just for what we survived. For what we became in the fire.

“Copy. We’re heading back.”

Together, we climb to the canyon’s rim, our bodies aching, clothes torn, skin singed, but every step forward feels earned. Below, the fire still smolders, licking at scorched earth, trying to pretend it still has power—but the worst of it is broken, its fury drained. I wrap my arm around Ember’s waist as we reach the top, drawing her close not just because I need to, but because I can. Because we’re still standing.

Just ahead, a spiral symbol is burned into the obsidian, etched deep into the volcanic glass like it’s always been there, just waiting for this moment to reveal itself. Not jagged, not chaotic, not corrupted like Malek’s scorched runes. This mark is clean. Intentional. Balanced. It radiates calm in the middle of ruin, like the canyon itself witnessed what happened and chose to remember it this way—not with fear, but with meaning.

The canyon itself has marked the moment—not with violence, but with memory. It doesn’t scream or burn. It simply remembers, carving the spiral into black glass like a signature on the end of war. Not an ending. Not even a victory. A declaration. A vow. A beginning. The kind that’s written in fire and sealed in ash, where nothing stays the same and everything worth keeping has been forged anew.

I turn her toward me. Her face is streaked with soot, her hair wild and wind-whipped, tangled with ash and battle. Her eyes—those fierce, firelit eyes—lock onto mine, and everything else falls away. The wreckage, the smoke, the blood on our hands—it all fades beneath the weight of what she is to me. She’s chaos and calm, destruction and salvation. And still, she’s everything. Not despite the fire. Because of it.

“You’re everything, Ember,” I say, cupping her face.

Then I kiss her. Hard. Desperate. Claiming. It’s not gentle—it’s everything I’ve held back, everything I almost lost. My hands are in her hair, pulling her closer like I

could fuse us back into the fire we came from. And in that heat, I feel it—the pulse of our bond thrumming between us, ancient and electric. Magic hums at the base of my spine, that tether we forged in blood and fire sparking alive again with every breath we share. This isn't just a kiss. It's a promise. A reclamation. A memory and a future crashing together in a single heartbeat. I taste soot, salt, the echo of fear and the fire still fading around us—but beneath it all, her.

When we pull apart, her eyes search mine, something fierce and steady burning there. Then she smiles—not wide, not giddy, but full. A slow, unshakable thing that settles deep. It isn't just happiness—it's peace. The kind you only find on the other side of chaos. The kind we bled to earn.

“Guess I'm firebound now.”

I pull her in tighter. “Damn right you are.”

And behind us, the fire finally begins to die, curling into lazy smoke trails as it surrenders to the blackened earth. But I don't just see the end—I feel what still burns beneath it. Not the wildfire, but something deeper. Something eternal.

The fire in us—what we've forged together in heat and danger and trust—won't fade. It simmers under our skin, steady and relentless, not consuming, but anchoring. A bond no wind can scatter, no ash can bury.

The wildfire might be contained.

But our fire?

That's forever.

KADE

The wind turns sharp with ozone, curling with smoke and tension. I stand at the edge of a makeshift fire base carved into the side of a high mountain pass, surrounded by a ragged half-moon of engines, brush rigs, and portable water tanks.

The ground beneath my boots is dry and cracked, blackened with ash from a backburn set just hours ago. A wall of pine looms to the north, charred and still crackling. The sky above it is streaked with orange and gray. Every breath tastes like smoke and warning.

Lightning crackles overhead. I don't flinch. The static sings across my skin, echoing the low hum building in my chest. Storms don't rattle me—they reflect me. Controlled chaos. Quiet fury. And right now, all that intensity is focused on the woman twenty feet in front of me.

Liv Monroe.

She's all sharp angles and defiance, arms crossed tight over her chest, soot streaked down one cheek like war paint. She looks like she hasn't slept, like she hasn't stopped since the world fell apart.

"You're wasting your time," she says, voice clipped. "I don't need a babysitter."

"No," I say, calm and quiet. "You need backup."

"I've worked this base three seasons longer than you've been interested in using your

voice,” she snaps.

My lip twitches. It lands—she knows it—but I don’t give her the satisfaction of more. I let the silence stretch, heavy and measured, the same way I handle everything that might blow up in my face.

I let a near-smile curve my mouth. “I don’t need to talk to protect you.”

Her eyes flare. “I don’t need protection.”

I step in closer, slow and steady, like she’s all coiled tension and I’m the lightning waiting to ground through her. “Someone sabotaged the fuel stores last night. Radios were jammed this morning. You’re not just a target, Monroe. You’re the spark.”

She doesn’t answer right away. Her shoulders flinch—barely—but I see it. Like a blade of memory just slipped beneath her ribs. I know that look. I know what it costs to lose a crew. To walk away when others couldn’t.

She’s thinking about them. About the ones she couldn’t save.

I stay where I am. Silent. Steady. Letting her decide if she still wants to stand in the fire.

And I see it—that flicker of doubt in her eyes, the ache just behind her bravado. She’s questioning whether she belongs here. Whether the line will ever forgive her for what she lost. For what she still carries.

But I know the answer.

She does belong here. She was forged in this heat. Strong enough to carry the scars. And if she forgets that, I’ll remind her every step of the way.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?” she asks.

“No.”

“You breathe like you were born in a storm.”

“I was.”

Her breath catches. She hates that I notice. But I do. I always will. I file it away like I do every critical detail before a breach. Because with Liv Monroe, every flicker counts.

“Fine,” she mutters. “You want to watch my back? Try to keep up.”

Then she turns and walks toward the fire trucks, hips moving with that same fire—purpose, power, fury.

I watch her go, pulse a slow, steady drumbeat of restraint.

She doesn’t trust me.

Doesn’t want me.

But she will.

Because I already feel it building—something hot and reckless sparking under my skin. It’s not just attraction. It’s instinct. Bone-deep. Combustible. Like standing too close to a storm you know could crack the sky wide open... and wanting it anyway.

A flashover.

And this time, I won’t let her burn alone.

Kade, Liv and the rest of the Blackstrike Unit will arrive later this summer.