



# Bound By His Fire (The Dragon Overlords #8)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Being sent to the dragons was the ultimate betrayal, and I have my father to thank for it. He wanted me out of the way, but I'm not about to roll over and obey. Especially not when it comes to Darian, the dragon enforcer who thinks he can control me.

He's everything I hate about power—distant, domineering, and infuriatingly unreadable. But when we accidentally stumble upon a secret plot that thrusts us into danger, I can't help but see the cracks in his armor.

Falling for him wasn't part of the plan, but neither was fighting for my life.

**Total Pages (Source):** 41

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

“That’s not him. It can’t be.”

Dark brown eyes steeled at my protest and stared across the heavy dark wood of my office desk, pinning me to my seat with unflinching logic.

“He’s not like that.” I shook my head fiercely, sending my hair flying. The extra emphasis didn’t change the images on my screen. They were still there in all their damning glory.

“You aren’t blind. I know you can see the truth of it, Miss Persephone.”

“I see what’s on my screen, yes. But I don’t see how that could possibly be him. He’s a good man.”

The woman across from me sighed, but her eyes bored into mine unrelentingly. Janet Stern, a former member of one of the FBI’s best investigative units, had come to me highly recommended. Now semi-retired, she was available to the highest bidder when it suited her.

What that all meant was that she had no desire to bullshit me. Nor would she show me evidence if she hadn’t vetted it herself. Twice.

The man on the screen was indeed guilty.

“I don’t believe it,” I said softly. But I did. I just didn’t want to because of the

implications.

“Then you’re lying to yourself because he’s your father. I’ve heard better things about you than that, Aurora. You can see the truth.”

“Thanks. I think.” My eyes flicked back to the video—one piece of evidence Janet had collected.

On it, Senator Marcus Whitefield—I’d taken my mother’s last name to make navigating my youth easier—could be seen and heard threatening a judge to ensure a current case had a particular desired outcome.

It was but one piece of the evidence Janet had collected. She’d spent the better part of a year very carefully digging into a mystery for me, and now, it was unraveling in the absolute worst way possible.

“How deep does it go?” I asked, looking at the number of documents on the thumb drive plugged into my computer.

Janet looked uncomfortable, something I’d not thought possible with the old battle-axe.

“How deep, Janet?”

“Very,” she said in a whisper, looking around the room. “You should get new security and have this room swept.”

“I have my own team sweep it,” I assured her.

It might not be normal for the children of senators to have their own security team, but then again, they weren’t the children of Marcus Whitfield. The outspoken senator

from New York was in his fifth term and had long crossed swords with many of the most powerful figures in Washington, D.C.

Now, as head of the Appropriations Committee, he'd risen to new heights, and with that came certain expectations. Including death threats and hate mail addressed not only to him but to his family.

I'd had a bodyguard since I was thirteen and a three-man team since I turned twenty-one and entered politics.

"I would get another team. One your father didn't vet," Janet replied. "When he learns he can't overhear this conversation, he'll be extra suspicious."

I frowned. "What do you mean he can't overhear it?"

The older woman gave me a withering glare. "You don't think, with what's contained on that disk, I would just waltz in here and start talking without taking a few precautions, did you?" She patted her purse. "My own team is waiting outside. I won't be going anywhere without them for the near future. This is nuclear, Aurora."

I sagged. She was right. By the sounds of it, my father's rot ran deep. Very deep. Judges, police, military, other senators, cabinet members, they were all on his payroll. I was terrified to even wonder what he was planning.

"The information is yours now," Janet said, standing. "Do what needs to be done."

"What are you going to do?" I asked, trying not to think what she meant by that. I wasn't sure I could face it.

"Me? I'm going to disappear down a deep, dark hole until I know it's safe to come out. Don't bother trying to find me. You won't." Her face softened for a moment.

“This can’t be easy, Rory. I’m sorry. When I come up for air, if you haven’t done anything, I will. And that will include sharing that I told you and you didn’t act. You know what must be done.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I do.”

I just didn’t know if I had the courage to do it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Damian

It was Tobias.

I sighed internally, careful not to let any sound escape or any hint of emotion reach my face.

Of course, it had to be Tobias. Why it couldn't be anyone else, any random dragon from across the Isles? No, it had to be my nephew.

Unfortunately, it didn't matter who it was.

"Tobias," I said coldly, my hand landing on the youth's shoulder and spinning him around.

"Uncle Damian!" he exclaimed, forcing excitement onto his face a split second after the initial fear gave him away.

I stared down at him, ignoring the familiar lines of his face. He was a carbon copy of Evander—from the thick mane of raven-black hair that fell in unruly waves right down to the little cleft in the chin. The only thing separating him from my brother was about thirty years of age.

There was not, however, a difference in their morals or worldly outlook. Like father, like son, in this case.

Which was why, when Tobias tried to play the family card, he got my hardest,

sternest look. This was no time to be familial, and he knew it.

“Um, I mean, greetings, Magistrate,” Tobias mumbled a few seconds later, brown eyes downcast as my look sank in.

For a split second, I hated him and, by extension, Evander for putting me in this situation. For making me choose between family and my job. But only for a second.

There was no choice. There could never be any choice. There was only the law and what it meant to our society.

If Tobias and Evander couldn't respect that, it wasn't my fault. We'd been raised better than that. He should've raised his son better. But he hadn't. Somewhere along the line, Evander had gone the opposite direction.

I'd become the magistrate, enforcer of the laws.

He'd become a common criminal.

“Let's go,” I said, my voice as cold as ice.

There was a brief hesitation in Tobias, but it faded immediately under the firmness of my grip. A wince twisted his handsome features for a mere moment, then he relented and started to proceed in the direction I dictated.

“Magistrate, I—”

I cut him off. “Don't.”

Ever the one to push the limits, Tobias didn't heed my warning. “I was going to—”

I'd had enough. My arm flexed, and I slammed Tobias against the outer wall of the shop next to which I'd spotted him. The wooden timbers shivered, and dust fell from the cracks, but they held together.

"I said don't ," I repeated. "We both know you weren't going to buy it. You have a history of not buying things. Because you're a common criminal, like your father. You think yourselves above the law. Or perhaps that the law is stupid. I honestly don't know, but I do know you stole those apples."

He squirmed under the attention as several passersby in the marketplace stopped to watch. Criminals were not well looked upon in the Dragon Isles.

"Dragons do not steal from dragons," I said, quoting the law. Not that it would matter. It wasn't the first time I'd done so to Tobias only for him to ignore me the moment I was gone.

Perhaps public judgment was what was called for.

The shopkeeper came out, eyeing the confrontation and likely wondering what was going on. The bins out front were filled with all manner of fruits, from several varieties of apples to oranges, pears, bananas, kiwis, and more. There was no security. There shouldn't need to be.

"Put them back," I ordered Tobias, releasing him from the wall. "And apologize."

"Some uncle you are," he muttered under his breath as he slunk over to the bin and deposited three apples back into it.

The shopkeeper's eyes went wide upon the realization he was the one who'd been taken from.



“You!” he barked at Tobias. “You steal from me? Why would you do that? Are you poor? Do you not have food? There are places to go for this. We look after our own. There should be no need for you to steal from me.”

Tobias was seething now. I could see it in the hunch of his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning back to me.

My glare stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Tell him what you’re sorry for,” I ordered. “And loud enough for everyone to hear.”

Anger blazed in Tobias’ eyes, and I knew there would be hell to pay at the next family gathering, but I couldn’t let that bother me. I couldn’t let it affect my ability to do my job.

“Now,” I said, lifting a finger in emphasis.

Tobias turned. “I’m sorry for stealing your apples,” he said.

The shopkeeper looked at me, then back at Tobias. “Stealing isn’t necessary in the isles,” he said. “There’s plenty to go around for all. If your family is too poor to afford it, come and tell me. I’ll look after you.”

“My family isn’t poor!” Tobias hissed, embarrassment getting the better of him.

The shopkeeper leaned back at the outburst. “So, you’re just a common criminal then, stealing from one of your own, is that it? Without a care in the world?”

A low growl circulated through the crowd, which had now grown to nearly twenty people. Tobias looked around uncertainly, unsure of what would happen next.

Thieves were not liked. If I weren't there, it was entirely possible the group would've taught him a lesson. One he would limp away from rather than walk.

As magistrate, however, it was my job to ensure crime didn't happen, which meant stopping vigilante justice as well.

I let Tobias stew in the tension for a bit longer, hoping it would drive the point home.

"Go," I said at last, pointing away from the crowd.

Tobias darted away, giving me one last spiteful stare as he went.

I sighed, walking up to the shopkeeper.

"Thank you," he said before I could get a word out.

"You're welcome. It's my job. Is anything else missing? I will fetch him if so, though I didn't see any evidence he'd taken more."

The shopkeeper glanced at the bins and shrugged. "It is impossible to tell, truthfully. I would never have noticed if you weren't there, Magistrate. Thank you for watching out for me."

I nodded, staring after Tobias.

I'd done my job, and the shopkeeper was grateful, but I doubted a lesson had been learned. Tobias would tell his father, and Evander would make things difficult.

What would he have me do differently? Pretend his son hadn't committed a crime?

I can't do that.

I'm the magistrate.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

My courage failed me at the door to his study. Lead filled my shoes, pinning them to the dark hardwood floor like concrete blocks. Try as I might, I couldn't work myself free. I was too weighed down with fear.

Fear and denial.

After Janet had left, I'd forced myself to read through every word in every file. I'd watched every video, heard every conversation, and looked at every snapshot. Together, they painted a damning picture of the man I'd held up as a shining beacon to the world around me.

God, what a fool I was!

Even as I acknowledged it, a part of me rebelled, wanting to shout it all down and say it wasn't so. That my father was still a good man. Someone must have put him up to it, made him do all those things. There was no way he would do it on his own.

This was the man who'd taught me everything I knew about politics. How to maneuver through conversations, to answer without making promises, to always keep the little people in mind, and so much more.

How could a man like that do all the things listed in that file?

"Daddy?" I knocked gently on the mostly closed door. "Are you in there?"

The light was on. There was nowhere else he would be, but I still didn't want to barge in.

"Rory? Come in."

I pushed open the heavy wooden door, the perfectly oiled hinges allowing it to slide inward without a noise and close behind me just as silently.

My father was seated behind his desk. At his back, a fire roared and crackled, warding off the cool evening chill and providing the only light. It was a sight I'd seen many times before, but now, it took on a darker, more sinister meaning in my mind. An omen of what he truly was.

"What can I do for my favorite daughter?" Senator Marcus Whitfield asked as he rose, coming around the desk to wrap me in a hug.

I let myself be enveloped in his arms. It felt so normal. He was my father.

And yet ...

"Rory?" Pushing back slightly, he stared down at me. "What's wrong?"

I looked down, then back up at him.

Eyes that I knew were dark blue looked near black in the darkness. Salt and pepper hair covered his face and head. He kept it trimmed short on his face but left it slightly longer on his head, the more to rub it into his peers that, at sixty-six, he still had a full head of hair, unlike many of them.

Always looking for an edge.

“Rory, you look pale. Are you feeling well?”

Grasping frantically at the fraying edges of my courage, I shook my head. “No, I’m not. Not at all.”

Concern creased his face, revealing the age lines his makeup usually softened. But he didn’t wear makeup at home. Not with family.

“Do I need to get a doctor? We can have one here immediately.”

I raised a hand. “No, Father. It’s not that. It’s that I heard something today. Something terrible, and I need to know it’s not true.”

Now, it was curiosity’s turn to weather his face. He knew me well. After the training he’d given me—and a lifetime of exposure to politics—there wasn’t much that could cause the sort of reaction I was having.

“What did you hear?”

“Someone sent me an anonymous email, Daddy. About Judge Porter. They said ...”

“What did they say?”

Nobody else would have heard it. The only reason I did was because he was my father and I was his daughter. We’d talked many times in situations where he didn’t have to be “in character” and could let his guard down. Which he did for the briefest of moments.

But it was enough.

“They said you threatened him over this Sutter case. The murder suspect. That you

told Porter to ensure the outcome was one you desired. You wouldn't do that, though, would you?"

I looked up, trying to project hopefulness onto my face. I was just a girl who needed to hear that her Daddy was caught up in some other scheme or another where a rival had tried to implicate him in something bad.

"Now, why would I tell Porter to do something like that?" he asked, shaking his head.

My heart sank as I recognized the deflection tactic even as he tried to probe me for more information.

It was true. I knew it right then.

"Rory?"

"I believed in you," I whispered hoarsely, taking a step back. "I believed you truly wanted to be the change you said. That you held yourself to higher levels than the rest."

Stiff-shouldered to the point his suit was pulled tight against his shoulders, he stood upright.

"Tell me who's forcing you to do this, Dad. Tell me who it is. I'll help you bring them in. We can do this together."

But the look on his face told me everything I already knew. The mask was gone, replaced with the hard immobility of stone as he stared at me.

"Who told you this?" he asked, his voice like steel.

I shook my head. “I still love you. We can fix this, Daddy. We can make it better. I’ll help you. I will. You can resign. Just leave politics behind. Just let it all go, and we’ll pretend like none of it ever happened.”

“Who. Told. You.” A hand landed on my shoulder, wrinkled with age but still full of power thanks to his daily workouts. It gripped tight enough I couldn’t easily shake free.

A warning.

“Aurora Whitefield. Who else has this information?” The coldness of his tone was unlike anything I’d ever heard from him before. Even when I was growing up and he’d had to discipline me, he’d never used such a voice.

“Nobody,” I replied. “I have the only copy.”

I was his daughter. Angry or not, he wasn’t going to do anything to hurt me.

“Good.” His head shifted slightly so he could look past me.

My head whirled around, and I gasped as I realized that Martin, the head of my father’s security detail, had slipped into the room at some point without me noticing.

“Daddy?” My voice was a squeak. “What’s going on?”

I’d thought he wouldn’t do anything to me. Not his only child. The child he’d raised on his own after my mother had died when I was twelve. I was his pride and joy. He’d told me on so many occasions.

“Rory,” he said, adopting the gentle tone of an adult doing some parenting that they were tired of. “You need to tell me who told you about Judge Porter. It’s very



important.”

Everything was coming crashing down around me. The man I thought I knew, the father, the dad who'd always been there with me in private, so different from the public face he put on ... that was the fraud I realized now as I stared into his face. His dark blue eyes were cold and devoid of any emotion, even for me.

I'd been lied to my entire life.

“I'm going to give you this one chance, Rory. You need to tell me what you know, then forget you ever heard it. Okay? If you do that, it'll be okay.”

The condescension was too much.

“Okay? Okay ?” I laughed bitterly. “By that, you mean you'll cover it up and continue to steal the money from the Appropriations Committee and use it to build up your influence? To buy your way to the top? Is that what this is all about?”

“Aurora ...”

He used my full name. Like a stranger. The ice that had congealed in my stomach melted swiftly, running in streams as my temper stoked the fires of anger. “This goes against everything you taught me!”

Sighing, my father relented ever so slightly. Or so it appeared at first. His expression calmed, and he stepped back, resting on the edge of the desk, his fingers curling under the lip. Behind me, in silence, Martin waited, summoned by the raised voices.

“Times change, Rory. And you have to be prepared to change with them if you ever want to get something done.”

I stared at him, horror slowly spreading across my face as what he was saying dawned on me.

“Yes,” he said. “If you want, I could bring you in. We do this together. Father and daughter.”

I wanted to spit in his face with disgust. “If you were truly my father,” I said, holding back from screaming, “you would know I could never do anything like that. I still have principles I believe in.”

Finished, I turned to go.

But Martin was there. Blocking my way. The ex-special forces soldier didn’t look at all surprised by what he’d heard.

“Get out of my way, Martin,” I said, moving to go around him.

Moving like a predator, he blocked my way. His every body movement was moderated, using the least energy necessary to achieve his aims.

I ducked under him, but his arm wrapped easily around my waist. Opening my mouth to scream, I was suddenly bent over as a blow to my stomach drove all the air from my lungs.

Terrified, I instinctively turned to find my father. A man I’d always run to in times of danger.

But instead of my father, there was someone else.

Senator Marcus Whitfield.

“I’m sorry to do this,” the senator said calmly. “But I can’t have you spoiling my plans.”

He was going to kill me.

The senator must have seen the horror in my eyes. “No. I couldn’t kill you. You’re still my daughter.” Something glinted in the depths of his eyes, signaling an idea. “But perhaps there’s a way to ensure you never interfere while also not killing you or leaving you in a cell for the rest of your life.”

I struggled, and when a rush of air came back, I tried to scream, but Martin’s hand clamped firmly over my mouth.

“Goodbye, Aurora,” he said as he gestured at the door with his chin.

Without any effort whatsoever, the bodyguard hauled me from the room. The last sight I had of my father was of him sliding into the chair at his desk.

Behind him, the flames roared higher.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Damian

“I ’m going to make your life miserable, I’m afraid.”

I stared across the desk at the Sovereign Ruler of All Dragonkind. The distance between us yawned like a chasm as her words sank home. She didn’t blink, impaling me on the spot with her jade green eyes, so vibrant as usual. There was no hint of remorse in her tone or on her face. It was all soft skin and sharp angles as usual.

It wasn’t so much an apology as it was a notice.

“How, my sovereign?” I asked, wondering just what she was getting up to.

“As part of the terms of ceasefire with the humans, I will be insisting on a tribute.”

“What does money have to do with me?” I asked, confused. That was the realm of the treasurer, not the magistrate.

“I’m not referring to monetary tribute,” she said. “Instead, they will be sending us eight women per year.”

“Sending us,” I repeated slowly, processing the bombshell that had just been dropped in my lap. “You mean humans, here, in the isles.”

“Yes. Eight of them. The first will be here in a few days. Callum and his team will be bringing them to the palace. There, they will be chosen by eight of us.”

I sighed and, despite it all, rubbed at my forehead. “You want to bring human women here and offer them as mates. And you’re giving me, what, a week’s notice?”

“Two days.”

I groaned. “My sovereign. You know I will do whatever it is you ask of me. I am your humble servant, but two days? Could you not delay?”

Platinum hair rustled softly as she shook her head. “No.”

“This is going to be a nightmare,” I whispered. “Integration of humans into our society ... Some people are going to lose their minds.”

“Probably. I’m counting on you to ensure our laws are followed with respect to the humans.”

“I will do my utmost,” I promised, though secretly I was less than certain that I stood a chance.

Nor was I entirely certain I wanted to. The sovereign could do as she wished. She was our leader. But humans in the Isles? The Dragon Isles? It bordered on the edge of madness.

“Of course you will, Damian. You are ever the perfect magistrate for our society. They trust you.”

“Only because I’m impartial and believe in justice for all who are wrong. Our people understand that.”

I neglected to mention the incident with Tobias.

“And?” she prompted.

“Humans don’t,” I growled. “They don’t have our values. Bringing them here and trying to integrate them won’t be easy.”

The sovereign flashed me a dazzling smile. “Think of it as job security.”

“With all due respect, Sovereign, but I’m glad you ended up where you are. You are ill-suited to life as a comedian.”

She laughed heartily, rising from her desk to come around and squeeze my shoulder.

“Your honesty is refreshing, Damian.” Her eyes tightened almost imperceptibly.

A slight crease formed between my brows as I noticed the action. “Is everything okay?” I asked, keeping my voice so low only she would hear it.

Somehow, with just a touch of my shoulder and a look in her eyes, she’d changed the subject entirely.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, looking past me to the door to her office. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

I cocked my head slightly, abruptly on high alert. This was very unlike her.

“It’s just a whisper, Damian, a hint of a whisper really. Bordering on paranoia, perhaps.”

“Never in my time as magistrate have I thought you prone to paranoia, my sovereign. What are you hearing?”

“A plot,” she said. “People moving against me in the shadows.”

“Are you talking about the protestors in the square? Malakai and Levi and their group? I’ve been keeping an eye on them, but so far, they have broken no laws.”

“Not them. And others are watching them, too. I fear nothing from them. No, this is from within the council. I’m certain of it. Something deeper and darker. Whatever it is, when it happens, they expect to be invited into power. Unlike Mr. Malakai, who plans to try to seize it by overthrowing me. This way, by appearing reluctant and gracious, the mysterious conspirators will have a better claim to it. They will pretend they don’t want it but are only taking control for the betterment of the people.”

“How would they even go about such a thing?” I asked, stunned at the depth of what the sovereign suspected. “They must know I would investigate anything.”

She nodded. “Which is why I’m warning you, Damian. There’s a chance they’ll come after you as well. Be careful.”

“I will,” I assured her, trying not to curse out loud at the double bombshell that had been thrown into my lap.

First, she wants to bring humans here. Now, I’m to be on the lookout for potential assassinations and coups?

I didn’t dare let myself think about what else might be awaiting me as the day progressed. After all, with the way it had started, it was bound to only get worse from there.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

Dreamlike. It was the only way to describe the way events were progressing around me. Everything was a blur as I retreated further and further into the depths of my own mind, leaving nothing but my body behind. A vapid shell of myself, I was sure.

How else was I supposed to react to my father's actions?

"You."

The word echoed in my ears, but I didn't process it or react to the man saying it.

A man who was a dragon.

That had been my father's—never again would I refer to him as "Daddy"—plan. He possessed just enough guilt to not kill me. So, instead, he'd shipped me off with a bunch of other women to become tributes for the dragon men.

People whom we'd been at war with until just days ago. Now, I was part of the peace treaty.

"I said, you."

The voice repeated itself. Trying to catch my attention. I heard someone else say something. A woman this time. Fingers dug into my back, propelling me forward. I stumbled, staring blankly as the man talked.



He was tall, broad-shouldered with long, wavy blond hair, and he had brown eyes and a wide chin. There was a brutish, almost wild air to him, from the untamed nature of his hair to the free-growing beard and beyond. I took that in, but I never truly saw him.

Fingers like thick sausages gripped my arm, easily carrying me along beside him. I was supposed to go with him.

Why? Why did it matter? What did any of it matter anymore?

My life was over. Gone.

My father had seen to that.

It bothered me to know he would never get what he was due. No justice would be served for the crimes he'd committed or those he would continue to do. Nothing would change for him.

For me, everything had changed.

“What’s wrong with you? Are you okay?” the man holding my arm asked.

Was there concern in his voice? I didn’t know.

“I’m fine,” I replied. I think . He grunted something and continued to pull me along with him when I didn’t immediately follow of my own accord.

My legs didn’t want to respond.

We went up an incline, where the rocky stone floor of the underground cavern eventually gave way to carved stone hallways. Torches glittered on the walls,

providing a modicum of light. I had to squint to see much of anything.

Which was why I cried out in surprise and pain when he pushed open a door to reveal the bright rays of sunlight shining through a window. Flinging my arm over my eyes, I blinked rapidly to make them adjust faster.

The surprise brought me back to myself, shocking my system into action, and I looked around with renewed focus.

“Sorry about that. Are you ready to continue?”

My eyes never made it to the speaker.

As I swung my gaze around, my attention was brutally and forcefully ensnared by the man resting stiffly against the wall next to the window.

Piercing gray eyes stared back at me, pinning me to the spot like daggers through my clothes, holding me still and seeing right through me.

He pulled himself upright as our eyes locked, strong, powerful shoulders stiffening and pulling his dark gray shirt tight across his chest. The movement only served to emphasize the power of his toned, fit body as it moved with effortless grace.

Hair blacker than the darkest night settled into place behind his neck, the long strands held there by a deep crimson band. The color contrasted sharply against the bronzed tone of his skin—what was visible of it on his face and hands.

Frost cracked and slid away as the stranger and I continued to lock gazes, melting swiftly from the intensity of those strange gray eyes. A ghost of a shiver ran down my spine.

His mouth opened, but his lips moved silently, any sound silenced beneath the ringing in my ears.

The man who'd brought me from the depths shook my arm slightly, pinching the skin of my triceps when I didn't immediately respond. The pain snapped the world back into clarity.

The men waited for me to respond.

"I'm sorry," I said, my eyes not budging. "What did you say?"

"Gray Eyes" stared back, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "I asked if you were well, and if you are being treated properly."

His voice was like the steel of a blade being unsheathed, ready to be used. This was not a man who spoke to hear himself talk. When he opened his mouth, there was a purpose.

I nodded, glancing up at my escort then back at Gray Eyes. The difference between the two could not be more profound. Muscular-oaf against tall, tanned, gorgeous and mysterious.

The tension was so thick it had to be cut with a knife. Even in my brain-addled bubble, I could feel it, like a physical, tangible thing stuffed in the space between us, pulling us closer and closer. Daring us to touch, to see what would happen.

But my escort looked on obliviously.

"It's been ten minutes," I said. "I've barely begun to register what happened to me. But in that short period of time, your, uh, countryman here has been fine. So, yes. I guess? I have no metric to measure it against."

“Has he hurt you?”

Was that a flare of jealousy I detected in his voice?

“What? No!”

“No, I have not , Magistrate,” my escort said, reacting for the first time. “Nor would I. I am not a criminal .”

The man, the magistrate, whatever that meant, stared hard at my escort, then flicked his stare back to me. His face softened for a split second before hardening back up.

“Very good.” He leaned back against the wall but didn’t relax. He was a viper, coiled and ready to strike. I could see it in his body language. He was on high alert.

Because of me.

Our eyes lingered on one another as I was shuffled forward by my escort once more. My head turned to stare, and as we passed him, his eyes darted down and then back up.

I jerked, though whether in surprise or because I was slow and my escort was impatient, I didn’t know.

He just checked me out! That dragon-man eyed me up and down.

A wonderful ripple of heat rolled down my spine and into the bottom of my stomach. Coiling around other parts of me.

Threatening to wake them.

Who are you, Mr. Gray Eyes? And why did you have such a reaction to me?

More importantly, after everything that's happened to me, why do I care?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

Laid back on the covers, staring up, I saw not the golden chandelier above the four-poster bed that was in my room at home, nor did I see the painted stone ceiling. Instead, I saw a pair of gray circles looking down on me.

Watching. Judging.

I pulled the ridiculously plush comforter a little higher as if the imaginary eyes could somehow see through the plain t-shirt I wore over my upper half to sleep in. Even as I did, warmth stiffened my cheeks at the thought of doing the opposite and pulling the covers down. Exposing myself to that otherworldly gaze. Letting him see what he could only imagine earlier.

Don't kid yourself. He was just being a normal man. There was nothing special about the way he gave you a quick elevator stare. That was just you making it up because he was so hot you haven't been able to stop thinking about him all day.

From the next room, the echo of loud snores droned out my inner monologue for a moment.

It had been hard not to daydream about Gray Eyes—or the magistrate, as my escort had called him. A man in a position of power, who commanded respect from others. That much I had put together.

Given the absolute bland, boring nature of my escort, Janus, my brain justified it as only natural to think about something, or some one, else.

Janus was polite and kind. He'd fed me. Given me a room to myself. Hadn't made a single sexual comment, let alone an advance. I didn't even think he'd checked me out fully. All day, he'd gone about his own business, leaving me to do the same. Then it was bedtime, and that was that.

More snores shattered the silence.

I bet Gray Eyes didn't snore. He didn't seem the like the snoring type. Every single thing about him screamed apex predator. A dragon at the top of the dragon food chain.

A dragon.

My mind wandered at that word. Just a little less than a year earlier, the creatures had been nothing but myth and legend, like King Arthur and Merlin. Tales to be told in books and around campfires. That was all.

Then the beasts had come pouring out from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and overrun most of the northern seaboard in less than eight months of absolutely one-sided warfare.

We hadn't stood a chance. Bullets bounced off them. The heaviest tank rounds caused bruises, as best as we could determine. The biggest of bombs outside of nuclear weapons merely drove them back and at a huge cost to our infrastructure.

Then, just when it looked like Washington and the White House were going to fall, the dragons had stopped and offered a ceasefire in exchange for eight human woman as tribute.

Everyone with half a brain cell understood why they wanted women. Including my father.

Which meant the bastard knew he'd sold me off to become some rich dragon's sex plaything.

More snores rattled the very bones in my body. If Janus viewed me as a concubine, he hadn't shown it at all. Part of me had already begun to think he'd been forced into it as much as I had.

I brushed aside a stray thought about not fighting it if Gray Eyes had been my escort instead. Because I would have. That was who I was. I didn't give up. I didn't back down. There had to be a way out, a way to escape this place and the dragons. I just had to find it.

You won't find it by lying in bed either.

My inner voice was right.

Sitting up, I slipped from the bed, grateful for the constant snoring. Not only did it mask the little noise I might make, but it would serve as the perfect warning if Janus stirred.

Out of bed, I dressed swiftly, putting on the same clothes I'd arrived in. Janus had been thoughtful enough to provide me with a few spare changes of the basics. Underwear, socks, some stretchy pants, and a mix of short- and long-sleeve shirts. I gathered them all up, stuffing them into the drawstring bag Janus had given me.

Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I tiptoed from the spare room, listening with every step I took to make sure the snoring didn't stop or change pace. One thing I'd learned was that dragons had extremely good hearing.

Which made my next task all the more heart-pounding.



Racking my brain, I tried to recall if it had made a lot of noise when Janus had shown me into his quarters. I couldn't remember. I'd still been in my addled phase after waking up in the cave with dragons.

If this thing squeaks loudly, this escape attempt won't get me very far.

But what choice did I have? I couldn't just stay put. I wasn't the type to accept that sort of limitation. No, I would make my own future.

Taking three long, slow breaths in and then slowly out again, I worked to lower my heartbeat as best as I could. The calmer I was, the more deliberate my movements would be, and the less sound I was liable to produce.

I listened to Janus' snoring pattern carefully, and as he started up another, I slowly eased the deadbolt across, timing it with the apex of his snore. It took three snores for me to fully slide it open, but I did. The click as it seated itself again was right next to my ear. The noise was deafening in the silence, although in reality, it was barely audible.

Then came the hard part. Opening the door.

Grasping the L-shaped knob, I slowly pushed the lever up . It was more effort, but by going upward, I also lifted the door ever so slightly on its hinges, reducing any squeakiness.

With the handle turned, I very, very gently pulled the door inward, lifting up the entire time. Inch by inch, in tune with Janus' snoring, I neared my escape. I paused several times, listening to the corridor as well to ensure nobody came by at the worst opportunity.

Then, at last, it was open enough for me to sneak through. I lowered the handle,

grabbed my shoes, and eased myself through the door.

But I'd forgotten one important thing. I had a bag over my shoulder. Which meant I needed more width.

The bag caught the corner of the door and pulled it after me.

I froze as the entire thing squeaked loudly.

Janus' snores stopped.

Barely daring to breathe, I prayed urgently.

Go back to sleep. Just go back to sleep. It was nothing. You imagined it.

There was no way he would sleep through it, though. Between that and the absolutely thunderous roar of blood as it rushed through my veins, something would wake the dragon up. Then he would find me trying to leave and probably fry me on the spot.

I was halfway through the imaginary recipe for Humans Sunny-Side Up in my head when the snores returned.

Sagging against the doorjamb in relief, I eased myself through, this time being careful to avoid catching the bag. Then I closed it just as cautiously, waiting well over a minute after the latch had caught to ensure Janus' snores were uninterrupted.

After that, I crept down the hall far enough where I could put my shoes on in peace. In all that time, nobody had come by, but I was pushing my luck, nighttime or not. A barefoot human in the middle of the night was bound to draw questions.

But now, I was out. I was dressed. And if politics had taught me one thing, it was

how to fake it. So, I stood up tall, shoulders back, and walked right down the carpeted hallway like I owned the place. I knew what I was doing and where I was going, and I didn't have time to be questioned about it.

That was the air I exuded. The attitude I let flow over me as I started my escape journey.

First step: Escape the room. Check.

Second step: Exit the building. In progress.

I recalled several things I'd seen during the day. First was that we were several floors up. The building, the palace as Janus had explained, was massive. Actual windows were few and far between, but we'd passed several. Judging from that, we were on the fourth, maybe the fifth, floor.

So, it was time to go down. I'd seen several sets of stairs, so I made a beeline for the ones closest to Janus' room. With any luck, they would lead me straight down and out.

The stairs did indeed go down. And down. I passed three different levels, and they kept going. There were no signs, no labels, nothing to tell me where I was.

How the hell do these people keep track of where they are in this maze?

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I glanced up behind me. It had been more than five flights worth of stairs, hadn't it?

I didn't know. But there had to be an exit somewhere. After all, people had to go in and out of the palace somehow. Didn't they?

My feet took me up one hallway and down another. The lights grew fewer and farther apart. There was no carpet underfoot either, only cold, hard stone.

A well-traveled path this was not. In fact, I hadn't seen or heard a sign of anyone in nearly half an hour.

I was lost.

My confidence was fading. I hurried down the hallways, trying to recall if I'd seen them before. Was this intersection familiar?

"Shit," I said to nobody in particular.

What the hell did I do now?

I needed to find a way to leave marks behind. To tell myself I'd already passed that way. But the question was how? What could I use?

Bending over, I rifled through the bag. Maybe there was a button or a zipper I could use to leave a trace on the walls.

My hand closed on the waist of one of the sets of pants, and with it, I felt the cold hardness of metal.

I had my way out!

The elation that rushed in like a freshly lit candle was just as quickly snuffed out when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder, spinning me around.

"What are you doing down here?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

The hand spun me like a top in a terrifying use of power. Rarely had I been so bodily controlled by another and never in such an aggressive manner. Panic spiked a rush of adrenaline through me while simultaneously blasting my heartrate to the moon.

All of which came to a sudden, screeching halt as I looked up into the sexiest pair of gray eyes I'd ever seen.

Eyes that were cold and hostile as they stared down at me.

I took in a breath, relief flowing through me as I realized who it was. My mouth opened to say hello, to tell him that "it was me" and remind him of the hallway encounter from earlier.

"You don't belong down here."

The words blasted all that free-flowing relief into orbit, the icy harsh delivery a reminder that I very much had no idea where I was, what I was doing, or what any of it meant.

"I-I-I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"This area is off limits. Being here is against the rules, especially for a human."

Great. Gray Eyes did recognize me since he knew I was one of the humans, but apparently, the shared look in the hallway earlier hadn't had the same effect on him

as it did me.

“I’m sorry. I promise—”

“Enough,” he said, again cutting me off. “Being down here is a reckless endangerment of your well-being, not to mention a flagrant breaking of the laws. Excuses don’t matter. What are you doing down here? Why this floor?”

Crap. What do I say?

Telling him I was trying to escape and get back to human civilization wasn’t an option. Although nobody had told me, I was fairly certain that was against the rules, too. What wasn’t in this crappy place?

“Well? Answer me!” he snapped.

At that moment, I decided anger didn’t suit his face. It twisted features that were so pleasant to look at into caricatures of themselves. Even the way his eyes blazed with a fury to match made them look less intriguing.

“I got lost,” I finally said, deciding to try to play the pity card.

“You got lost,” he repeated in a much calmer voice this time.

“Yes. There are no signs anywhere here. Do you have any idea how easy it is to get lost for someone new?”

Gray Eyes was having none of it. He snorted. “I’m well aware. I also know that you didn’t take a wrong turn.”

“I did, too!” I exclaimed. “Three or four of them at least. How else do you think I

ended up down here?”

Black hair fell over his shoulders as he shook his head in disdain. Now free from the red clasp he'd worn earlier, it framed his face perfectly. It was mostly straight yet wild and untamed.

“Do you actually think I'm going to believe that?” he growled, some of his earlier ire returning.

“Well, it's the truth, so—”

“Do not lie to me!”

I stepped backward at the sudden outburst, and a tiny cry of alarm slipped out.

In a surprise move, he took a half-step back while blinking rapidly as if he were confused. But why would he be shocked about anything?

The look faded almost as swiftly as it came, replaced once more with the cold, marble features of the magistrate.

“You are lying,” he said, once again calm and collected. “And it's blatant, so don't try to pretend otherwise.”

I stared at him but didn't repeat the claim.

“Better.” His eyes looked me over quickly and analytically, without any of the intrigue I'd seen the first time. Then he looked beyond me down the hallway. “What are you doing down here, human?”

“My name is Aurora,” I said, sticking my chin up at him.

“I don’t care. Tell me what you were doing down here. Lying won’t help you. You didn’t ‘take a wrong turn’ because you’re five levels below where you should be. That doesn’t happen by accident, so save the woe-is-me attitude I can see you trying to mimic.”

The callous dismissal was too much.

“There’s no need to be an asshole about it,” I said, done with being belittled. “I get you’re trying to control me, just like Janus, because apparently that’s what all you dragons are like. But I did not know I was in a restricted area. I wasn’t trying to be in one.”

I just wanted to get out of here and find a way home.

“This isn’t about control.”

I let my face do all the talking, showing him just how little I believed him.

“It’s about the law. Which you have broken by being down here. Why did you leave Janus anyway?”

“None of your business.”

He looked me up and down, then shrugged. “Very well. But you were entrusted into his care. So, you need to stay there. Come.”

I shook my head, taking a step back. “Where are you taking me?”

“Back to Janus,” he growled, fingers closing on my upper arm, propelling me alongside him. “Where you belong.”



“Wait!” I protested, trying to stop, to dig my heels in.

It was no use. He was too strong.

“Please don’t take me back there,” I said, trying to plead with him.

“You were entrusted to him,” he said, guiding me easily through the maze of hallways back to a set of stairs. “You are his responsibility. Those are the rules.”

“So much for looking out for my well-being,” I muttered under my breath. “I should have known you were just lording your power over anyone you could. It’s just like you. All of you.”

The magistrate was silent as we ascended, not replying to my comments or any further pleas. I eventually fell silent. What use was there in trying to convince him that Janus didn’t want me around either and I didn’t want to be there? That I’d been forced against my will.

Clearly, he didn’t care about me or about humans. Just a cold, hard face of authority. Nothing more. Typical cop wanting the power but not the responsibility.

What are you hiding behind that facade, I wonder? Those gray eyes mask much, but not all, Mr. Magistrate. Nobody is a fanatic for the rules like this. Not unless something happened to make them that way. So, what happened to you? How did you get hurt?

His fist rose and fell, banging on the door to Janus’ quarters.

“What the hell is going on?” a sleepy voice demanded as the door swung open, revealing my ... whatever he was. Escort? Guard? Handler?

“You lost something,” the magistrate said, pushing me forward. “I brought it back.”

Janus blinked, looking back and forth between us. Then his eyes widened as comprehension made its way through his drowsiness. “Oh. Okay. Uh. Thanks, Damian. I appreciate you looking out for me like that.”

Damian. So, that was his name. I looked at his face, nodding slowly. It suited him. Strong and powerful, just like him.

“Do a better job of keeping an eye on her,” Damian said, thrusting me toward Janus.

I turned to say something harsh, but by the time I did, Damian was already gone. Yelling at his back as he strode away seemed a bit too childish, even for me.

But I wanted to.

I slipped past Janus, ignoring the beefy dragon shifter as he tried to talk to me. My mind was focused elsewhere.

On Damian.

Earlier that day in the hallway, we’d exchanged a look . There was something there. I knew it. I’d daydreamed about it.

So, where the hell had it gone?

Frustrated, I went to “my” bed, closing the door behind me in Janus’ face and flopping down on my back to stare at the ceiling.

Had I been wrong? Who knew.

Sighing, I rolled onto my side.

Well, today really sucked. At least tomorrow can't get any worse.

How wrong I was.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Damian

The scale-edged blade slide easily from its scabbard, barely making a noise as I exited my bed with practiced ease.

Not that I needed to be silent. The insistent rapping of knuckles on my door would more than mask the tiny amount of noise I made.

It was dawn but not quite time for me to be awake. Which meant something was wrong.

Marching toward my door, blade at my side but ready in the blink of an eye if the person wasn't friendly, I began mentally cataloging the list of problems I was aware of and extrapolating what could have happened to cause them to erupt overnight this way.

Nothing I came up with was good.

Nor was any of it right.

Peering through the peephole, I recoiled in shock at the vision that greeted me. Swiftly, I laid the blade on a nearby table, then ran my hands over my hair, trying to smooth it back. There was no time to do anything about my lack of clothing, however, because any further delays were absolutely unallowable.

"My sovereign," I said as I opened the door in my boxers, starting to come to attention. "What can—"

“There’s no time for that,” she said, breezing past me into my quarters. “Shut the door. Lock it, then move to the back of your room. We need to talk.”

Swallowing the giant lump in my throat, I nodded, closing the door and dropping the bar across it to prevent easy entry by any unauthorized parties.

Alarm bells clanged wildly in my head. Something was very wrong. The sovereign had come to awaken me, and she didn’t have time for formalities?

“Are we at war again?” I asked as we retreated to my kitchen, putting another stone wall between us and the door.

“Not yet,” she said, “but we might be soon enough.”

I stared at her, fully awake now. “You have my undivided attention.”

Watching the way she braced herself before telling me the news was a very discomfiting feeling. The fear growing within me was further fed by these absolutely foreign actions. She was nervous. Perhaps scared, even. The Sovereign of All Dragonkind was scared .

“What the hell is going on?” I whispered.

“Something was stolen last night.”

I frowned. “A theft?”

Why would that be such a big issue. Theft wasn’t common, but neither was it unheard of. But how could that send us back to war?

Green flashed in her eyes. It was unsettling to see her so agitated.

“My sovereign. What was stolen? ”

She locked eyes with me, and I braced. But no matter how much I tried to be prepared for her answer, I wasn't.

“The Scepter of Mount Anaris,” she whispered.

My jaw dropped open.

The pause lingered for a second. Then two.

“ WHAT?”

Almost immediately, I shook myself, realizing what I'd done, who I'd shouted at.

“My sovereign, please, accept my apology for—”

“Yes, yes, accepted. Don't worry. I reacted much the same when Jair told me.”

The head of her personal guard, Jair, was a good, solid man. One I knew I could trust thoroughly.

“But how?” I asked, the question more rhetorical than anything. I was trying to handle my shock by speaking.

In the back of my head, an outlandish thought cropped up.

There's no way.

“We don't know yet. But one of Jair's men reported it missing this morning. He immediately came to me with the news. I, in turn, told him to keep it between us and tell no one. Then I came to you.”

“Why would anyone in their right mind steal the scepter?” I asked, shaking my head. “It benefits all dragons.”

The thought grew louder. I knew I should probably tell the sovereign, keep her informed, but ... there was no way. It was impossible. Wasn't it?

“My thoughts exactly,” she said, shaking her head hard enough to disturb several locks of hair. She casually tucked the platinum strands behind her ear.

Most would have missed the slight tremble in her fingers. But not me.

“It'll be okay,” I assured her. “This is my job. This is what I do. I will find who stole it. I will have it returned. Then I will ensure justice is served, my sovereign.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath, regaining some of her usual composure. “You should know that I fear this may be the first step, Damian.”

She had to be referring to the shadowy whispers she'd warned me about.

Which meant the voice in the back of my head, the one I was ignoring when I shouldn't be, would be irrelevant.

I opened my mouth to say something. To tell her, but the words didn't come out.

Misinterpreting my actions, she nodded. “I know. But if they get their hands on enough of the scepters ... they could in theory use them to bring the shield down instead of keeping it up. We all know what happens if it isn't there.”

I nodded. All dragons did. The shield protected us from the humans. It hid our isles from their eyes, and the magic subtly encouraged ships and even flights to skirt around us. To keep us safe.

If it came down, the humans would find us. And then they would probably nuke us.

“I won’t let that happen,” I promised. “I’ll find the culprit.”

“Quietly.” Her lips flattened into a line. “You must do it quietly, Damian. Nobody can know. Too many already know. If word of this gets out, it will only hasten the actions of those who want to use it against me. They will say I lack the power to be sovereign if I can’t protect what matters most to our people.”

“There are a million flaws in that logic,” I growled.

Placing a hand on my shoulder, she smiled. It was a sad thing. “I know. But it won’t matter. That’s politics for you.”

I looked skyward. My opinion on politics was well known. I didn’t need to voice it.

“Go find who was in the restricted area and who could have taken it.” She watched my face closely. “Find them for me, Damian. Please.”

“I will. I promise.”

My brain was shouting at me to tell her. To say everything. I knew I should.

So, why wasn’t I speaking? Why was I ... defending the human ...

Whether the sovereign could see the internal war going on or not, she eventually decided she’d seen enough and departed my quarters, leaving me in inner turmoil.

Furious at myself, I dressed quickly and headed down to the restricted areas.

Again.



“You fool,” I cursed at myself. “You know who was down here. Someone with a very good reason to steal the scepter.”

Except she hadn’t had it on her. I knew she hadn’t. I knew very well .

The growl that tore from my throat echoed up and down the hallways.

After all, the reason I was perfectly well aware that the human, that Aurora, hadn’t stolen the scepter was because my eyes had been all over her. I hadn’t been able to stop myself from staring at her body every single chance I’d gotten. When her eyes had looked away, my eyes had gone to her.

I practically had the lines of her body memorized.

It had all started in the hallway during that unexpected encounter. Those eyes, so bright and piercing with a green that was as soft and airy as the sovereign’s were hard and noble. Different yet eerily similar.

And the way her hips moved as she walked, highlighting her firm posterior. I’d stared long after her, watching it go.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Enough!

I smacked a fist into the palm of my other hand hard enough to hurt. It was not the time for such thoughts! The entire safety of the Dragon Isles was in danger, and there I was, daydreaming about bending a human over and taking her from behind. My hands grasping her waist, pulling her back into me as the impact ripples shot across her ass. Her cries filling the air deliciously as I pleased her unlike any human.

My dragon, the bestial, untamed side of me, loved the idea, lending its not inconsiderable mental power to the idea that I should go seek her out. Take her from Janus and make her mine. Ours. Whatever.

“Stop it. Stop it right now. You have a job to do!”

Leaning against a wall, grateful for the emptiness of the lower levels, I paused to take several deep breaths. My composure was integral to who I was—to what I did for my people. I could not afford to act like this. To lose control. Least of all over a human woman I didn’t even know!

Integral to who you are? You already didn’t tell the sovereign you caught Aurora down here last night.

Because she didn’t have the scepter on her.

I pushed off from the wall and stormed off to the room where the Scepter of Mount Anaris was kept. One of five matching scepters scattered across the Dragon Isles, it was nearly three feet long, made of pure platinum, and imbued with a power no living dragon understood.

It also glowed. Brightly . The brilliant white light it constantly emitted was not easily concealed. Not only did Aurora’s clothing not leave any room to store such an object, it also wouldn’t have hidden the light.

She hadn’t done it. So, it was okay I hadn’t told the sovereign.

Stop lying to yourself. Because if you’re wrong...

I wasn’t. But I couldn’t be entirely sure.

Either way, I had to find who had stolen it. And soon.

Before it was too late.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

The gurgle from my stomach was loud enough to echo in the room as it launched a renewed protest. Hunger strikes, it seemed to be saying, were not on the approved list of actions.

Well, too bad because I am NOT going outside.

Sitting on the bed, knees crossed, I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, working hard to let go the stress and tension slowly knotting its way up my spine. With each exhale, I focused on relaxing a new set of muscles and easing myself into a deeper state of tranquility.

“ You have to eat at some point, human. Stop being a stubborn bitch and have some food!”

My eyelids flicked open, and in my imagination, laser beams flashed from them to pierce the door and drill right through the annoying voice on the other side.

“ Just come out already.”

I stayed silent, my refusal to even acknowledge Janus doing more to piss him off than any words I could use.

The change in his personality after Damian had turned me in like a stuffed teddy bear at a lost and found was profound. Janus had gone from ignoring me to being a royal dick.

Exactly like I expected a dragon to be. It was reassuring to know I'd been right all along. The indifference from the day before was nothing but a facade, a mask he'd found an excuse to drop.

Dragons didn't like humans. We didn't like dragons. It was a thing.

So, why the hell was I still among them?

If only Janus was more like—

BANG!

I tensed, the noise catching me totally off-guard.

“What do you think you're doing?” Janus raged at whoever had just thrown open the main door to his quarters. “Even you can't just intrude on someone whenever you want.”

“I can if I have reasonable cause to suspect a crime has been committed.”

The words barely registered. All I heard was the voice. That steely, even-keeled voice of a man who didn't take any shit because he knew he'd get his way.

Someone who expected to be obeyed. It worked especially well if they paired the voice with a set of eyes that matched that steel in temper and, in this particular person's case, color.

“Damian, I have committed no crime. Now, get out of my quarters,” Janus demanded.

Shivers ran down my spine when the reply came.

“I was not referring to you ... Janus.” The obvious extra pause before uttering my escort’s name couldn’t have been more profound.

“ You aren’t?” Confusion reigned. “ Wait, you mean the human?”

“She has a name. Use it. Is Aurora here?”

There was a longer pause this time. Much longer. Then footsteps approached my door.

I broke out into a smile as the door opened, and Damian the Magistrate stood there, clad in pair of black pants with far too many pockets and a gunmetal-gray shirt that came down to his wrists. The arms and half the chest were dimpled in a replication of a dragon’s scales. It clung to his body at every junction, emphasizing his physique in ways my hunger-addled brain found absolutely delicious.

“This is entirely improper,” Janus protested from behind him. “You’ve offered nothing but words as you’ve stormed into my quarters and declared yourself—”

The smile on my face widened as Damian turned on Janus. “I am the magistrate. I need nothing but my word. Or do you wish to challenge my honor?”

Janus paled. I didn’t know what that phrase meant, but it seemed significant. A duel, perhaps? Did dragons engage in such things? I made a note to find out.

“Well?” Damian prompted when there was no response.

“No. Of course not,” Janus said, though there was no deference in his voice either. He was trapped, and he knew it.

“Then get out. When I’m done, I will leave. Until then, don’t bother me.”

After the way Janus had treated me all morning, I couldn't quite suppress a snicker at seeing him tossed from his own quarters.

It withered and died immediately under Damian's burning glare.

"There is nothing funny about this," he growled, turning his full attention on me once the door closed.

I almost told him he was wrong and that there was because Janus was turning out to be a mega-jerk.

"Better." Damian scanned my face.

"What do you want?" I asked.

The air in the room turned to ice as he stepped inside. There was no warmth on his face. No pity, no caring, no nothing. This was the face of the magistrate. A position, I was learning, that carried some weight to it.

"You will tell me exactly what you were doing in the restricted area last night."

I blinked. That was it? All the commotion to ask a question he already knew the answer to?

"I was lost," I said easily, relaxing.

"No more lies!"

I scooted back on the bed at his outburst, moving without thinking.

Even Damian seemed stunned by his outburst. Taking a moment, he ran a hand over

his hair, his fingers lingering at the red band he used to keep it tied in a low knot at the base of his neck.

“Don’t lie to me,” he said in a much calmer tone. “Tell me what were you doing down there?”

“I wasn’t lying to you,” I said, staring him down. “I was lost.”

It was the truth. I had been lost. There was no lie in that.

Damian didn’t care. He was at the side of the bed in a blink, snatching up my wrist.

“You’re coming with me,” he said before gently but firmly pulling me from the bed and maneuvering me out of Janus’ quarters.

I stumbled along next to him, staring at his hand where it gripped my wrist. The warmth of his grip was astounding. It radiated up my arm, sending little electric shockwaves through my system as nerve endings responded to the stimulation.

Was this normal? Did dragons always have this effect when they touched us? I tried frantically to recall if Janus had touched me at any point, but everything blurred together as Damian hurried me down one flight of stairs after another.

“Where are we going?” I managed to get out, tearing my eyes away for long enough to look around.

“You know exactly where you are,” he said, pausing outside of a set of doors.

I stared at the decidedly unfamiliar markings on the double doors. “I haven’t seen this before.”



Damian didn't say anything, but his body language made it quite clear he didn't believe a word I said.

"Maybe this will jog your memory." We went through the doors and then a second set before entering a low-ceilinged room carved entirely from stone. In the center sat a solid hunk of shiny black stone with a hole in the center of it.

I stared at it. Then slowly looked at Damian. "Is this supposed to mean anything?"

"Where is it?" he said in icy tones.

"Where is what?"

"What were you doing down here?"

"I was lost!"

"Tell me the truth. Now. No more lies or truth-shirking, Aurora."

The way he said my voice ...

"I was trying to escape," I said, caving easily for some reason unknown to me. "Okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? I was looking for a door to get out of here, and I got lost."

That was all I told him. The pain of betrayal was still far too fresh to want to talk about my father and how I'd come to be among the dragons in the first place. I didn't want to tell Damian, didn't want him to think—

To think what about you? What are you afraid of? He's just a dragon. Why do you care?

Damian spoke again before I could come up with an answer I liked.

“A door? Why would you be here looking for a door?” There was a giant crease in his forehead as he tried to puzzle it out.

“Because doors are on the ground floor?” I tried not to say it too rudely.

My efforts must not have been enough. Damian glared at me, but there was a mocking knowledge behind it. Like he knew something I didn’t. Whatever it was, I didn’t enjoy being looked at like I was an imbecile.

“There is no door. You’re underground,” he said with a hint of “gotcha.”

“How do you people leave then?”

His head cranked upward, eyes still narrowed in a mixture of confusion and disbelief as if he still couldn’t believe I was missing the point. “The roof.”

“How do you ...” And then the logic came crashing down. “You fly. Of course. Because you’re dragons. I assumed ... shit.”

Damian nodded. Then he looked at the empty holder.

“I don’t know what you’re asking me,” I repeated in a calmer voice. “Whatever you lost, I had nothing to do with it.”

“I did not lose the Scepter of Anaris.” He grimaced after he spoke, and I had to wonder if perhaps he hadn’t meant to put a name to what was missing.

“The Scepter of Anaris. That sounds important.”

“It is,” he said, clearly lost in thought once more. “Come with me.”

“As if I have any choice,” I muttered as we started walking again. “Where to this time?”

“Back to your quarters. Janus will be waiting.”

I cringed. My stomach growled loudly.

Damian cocked his head. “Have you not eaten?”

“I, uh... no,” I admitted. “I’m sort of on a hunger strike.”

“Why?”

“After you brought me back last night, he changed. Turned into a dick. Before he was ambivalent, didn’t really seem to care that I was there. Now, he’s acting all controlling and assholeish. Like all you dragons.”

“And you humans are just perfect on all levels,” he grunted, but his tone said he was less than impressed. “After I caught you snooping around in the restricted area, where something was stolen last night? Is that what you mean?”

I glared at him. “Yes, that is what I mean. After that, he turned into a giant asshole. I didn’t want to deal with him, so I shut myself in my room.”

Damian grunted but said nothing more. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

This time, he knocked instead of just flinging the door open and barging in. There was no response after a full minute. Damian’s jaw clenched, and I noted his hand had curled into a fist.

“Maybe he’s not back yet?” I suggested.

“No. He is. I heard him moving,” Damian growled. “And he’d better open the door soon.”

Another thirty seconds went by, then the door finally opened. Janus stood on the other side. Although he was just as tall as Damian, and perhaps even wider at the shoulder, he didn’t exude the same deadly aura as the magistrate shifter. From the beginning, I knew who would win the contest of wills.

“Thank you for returning her,” Janus said, caving at last. “Again.”

“Perhaps you should treat her better,” Damian said, acid dripping from each word.

“Don’t tell me how to treat my property.”

“Excuse me?” I stepped forward furiously only to find a thick arm blocking my path.

“She’s not your property,” Damian whispered. “Let me make that very, very clear in case the sovereign did not. Which I know she did. Tell me, Janus, are you able to continue with your duties to the sovereign as she gave them to you?”

Janus only hesitated for a second. Not even. But it was enough.

“Very well. You are relieved of your duties.” Angrily, Damian looked down at me. “Come with me. Now.”

Then he started off again.

Sort of shocked, I trailed after him, watching his fingers clench and unclench. I

couldn't see the knot in the middle of his back, but the change in his posture made it clear it was there.

"You didn't have to do that," I said. "But thank you."

"What are you thanking me for?" he said, not turning back.

"Didn't you just ... am I not going home now?" I asked, confused. "You pulled me away from Janus."

"Yes." Damian stopped in the hallway and slowly twisted until he was facing me. His gaze, which was looking at something above my head at first, dropped until they locked on mine. "But I didn't free you."

"So, I'm not free, but I'm not with Janus?" I asked, hoping the tremor in my voice wasn't as noticeable to him as it was to myself.

He nodded.

"Then, who am I with?"

I already knew the answer. It was written all over Damian's face.

"Me."

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Damian

Bad. That's what it was. Very, very bad.

"You can freshen up in there," I said, pointing to the little powder room off my sitting area at the front of my quarters.

"Thank you," Aurora said, picking her way through the seats and closing the door behind her.

The door to the bathroom. The bathroom in my quarters.

What have I done?

She closed the door, and the instant I heard the lock click, my shoulders sagged. This was not how it was supposed to go. Not what I was supposed to be doing or how I'd been told to do it.

The sovereign told you to ensure the laws were upheld with respect to the humans. What is your justification for removing Aurora from Janus' care?

I groaned through clenched teeth. That was the problem! I didn't have one. Not a good enough one. Admitting I'd caved to my dragon's insistence was not enough. Not when Janus wasn't committing a crime.

Was he being an ass? Yes.

Being a dick, however, violated no true law. Yes, I could probably argue that I'd acted preemptively because Janus broke the spirit of the agreement he'd committed to. But it was a weak link, and I knew it.

Nor was that the worst of my sins.

The countertop of my kitchen groaned as my fingers clamped down on it.

I, in one day, less than one day even, had gone against everything I stood for not once but twice. I still had yet to tell the sovereign about finding Aurora in the restricted area.

You have to get a hold of yourself. You can't let this woman control you. She's only human.

The response from my dragon staggered me. I wavered, nearly bending a knee before the unending wave of fury that poured out from the bestial half of my mind. A furious cascading range of emotions that could be boiled down to one inescapable thought.

Mine.

"But she's human!" I hissed to the empty room, reduced to talking to myself.

The beast took my protest and bathed it in fire, melting it away. It did not care. Human, dragon, there was no difference. It wanted what it wanted and screw anything that stood in its way.

Including me.

"Damian?"

I whirled at the tentative voice, forcing my features into a cool, neutral temperature. The last thing I could afford was to give away anything to Aurora.

She stepped closer but stopped short of entering my bubble. “I just wanted to say ... thank you.”

“For what?” I tried to be dismissive of her. To pretend I didn’t care.

“Caring enough to listen,” she said. When I didn’t respond, she half-shrugged and turned away. “Anyway, that’s all. I just wanted to thank you. Maybe not all dragons are total assholes.”

As she retreated back to the bathroom, I watched her go the entire way, memorizing the sway of her hips beneath her pants, much to the approval of my dragon.

“ Stop it ,” I said, scolding myself for getting caught up in watching her. I could ill afford the distraction of a woman right now, let alone a human. There wasn’t time. The Scepter of Anaris was still missing, and I was no closer to having any leads.

She didn’t do it .

Despite my inner turmoil over the sudden intrusion of the human into my life, I was fairly certain it was the impartial magistrate within me that was confident Aurora had nothing to do with the lost scepter. Her confusion was too genuine, her denial too heated.

Besides, she couldn’t have had it on her.

But the problem was I couldn’t prove it. If anyone else deduced she’d been down there, the immediate suspicion would fall directly upon her. Jair would toss her in a cell without a second thought.



Picturing Aurora in a cell, alone in the four stone walls, did not amuse my dragon one bit.

I took another deep breath, trying to calm it.

Aurora chose that moment to exit the bathroom. She looked at me, and I looked at her, once more admiring her.

Despite all the uncertainty and change, she managed to radiate an aura of strength and determination that anyone, dragon or not, would be hard pressed to match. Her hair shimmered auburn in my apartment's lights, falling freely past her shoulders and framing her face with a few loose strands.

Her skin was slightly tan, a product of sunlight, not genetics or a booth, if I guessed correctly. It served to emphasize the dusting of freckles across the middle of her face, bringing them out in a contrast that gave her a wild, fiery kind of gaze.

Then there were the eyes. So green and strong, they demanded attention, even when I was looking at the rest of her. Nobody could look into those eyes and not wonder what hid in their depths, what the sort of person who possessed them could be like.

"Can I help you?" I asked as I sensed myself getting pulled toward her orbit. I needed to stay in control.

"Who are you? Who have I become stuck with?"

It was not a question I'd anticipated.

"You know who I am," I said, again trying to be standoffish, to keep her further at arm's reach.

“Damian. Magistrate. That’s about all I know. What does that title mean? Are you a police officer?”

“No.” I shook my head. “To my knowledge, there is no equivalent to who, or what, I am.”

“Not a police officer?”

“More than that. There is a phrase, however, that is particularly apt, I have found.”

Her face invited me to explain.

“I am the judge. I am the jury. And if need be,” I said softly, “I am the executioner. I am the law, and it is my duty to enforce it equally and punish those who defy it. I am the right hand of the Sovereign of All Dragonkind.”

There was a long pause. I watched her eyes, seeing them shift through several shades of green as she parsed everything I’d said.

“So, if the law is the right hand of the sovereign ... what’s her left hand?”

“None of your business.”

Aurora had no need to be aware of the sovereign’s personal assassin, her Shadow, the dragon who carried out her will when the spirit of the law was broken and used against our people.

Nor did I like that such a person existed to operate outside the law. But that was politics.

“I understand,” Aurora said, looking down. “Sorry I asked.”

Without thinking, I crossed to her and broke every rule in my own book by taking her chin and tilting her head upward.

She inhaled sharply at my touch, and I nearly backed off, but it was too late now. I had done it. I'd given in to the intrusive thought.

"Don't apologize for asking questions, Aurora. That's how we learn. And learning is a crucial thing that far too many forget how to do."

"Okay," she said in a very tiny voice, all at once looking nothing like the confident, brave woman of a moment earlier.

You're scaring her. Good job.

I dropped my hand from her jaw, pushing aside the reluctance from my dragon. It was not the time for that. I was already screwing everything up royally. I couldn't afford to do more. I needed to be fixing things, not making them worse.

"Are you refreshed?" I asked, glancing at the bathroom to make sure she felt fine.

"Yes, thank you."

"Good."

"What now?" she asked, sensing I had a reason for asking.

"The scepter is missing," I said, still uneasy discussing it with a human. "I must go into town and visit the marketplace, make some inquiries, to see what is being said outside the ears of the palace."

Her face brightened considerably. "Great. I love markets."

I frowned. It hadn't been an invitation.

"You weren't planning on taking me," she said, again demonstrating her sharpness.

"No," I admitted. "I wasn't."

"Why not?"

"Because to get there, I have to fly."

"So? Big deal. You can carry me, can't you? Let's go."

I watched her go to the door, where she waited, looking back at me expectantly.

Frowning, wondering why I was even entertaining the idea, I went after her.

"I could've sworn I was the one in charge," I muttered as I followed her out the door.

"Men," she snorted. "They always think that."

Aurora

I was insane.

Trusting a dragon ? What was I thinking! It was crazy. Stupid. Moronic. The actions of an absolute idiot. How naïve did I have to be to think that being carried by a dragon was acceptable?

One little “oops.” That was all it would take. A slip of a claw, a dip of a wing, and then he would be telling everyone “Oh, dear, I have no idea how that could have happened,” all while my body was splattered across the ground.

So, maybe I was being a bit dramatic. But I had an excuse. The pulse-pounding adrenaline-infused state I was coasting in ever since Damian cupped my chin was unlike anything else. I was almost trancelike as I followed him to the roof, walking in a stupor of endorphins that I should not be enjoying.

But no matter how much I tried to tell myself that, no matter how much I tried to shut down the grin that continually tried to plaster itself on my face, I failed. I’d liked the press of his fingers, gentle and yet firm. No, not liked it—I’d loved it. The instant of control, the gentle touch, the way he simply made me do as he wanted was enough to make my legs wobbly even now.

You need to calm it. Put it back between your legs and stuff your insane ideas right back up where they came from because they are absolutely stupid, and oh, also, never-gonna-happen. He’s a dragon. He despises you. Which is why he’s going to drop you from thirty-thousand feet so you’re nothing but a red splotch.

Except I knew Damian would never do such a thing. He was the magistrate. He believed in the law. Murder was not his thing. That was the field of the left hand of the sovereign, whoever that was. He hadn't been willing to elaborate, but it was an obvious connection to make for anyone who understood politics.

"Tell me about yourself."

The command startled me out of my half-aroused daydreaming. "Pardon?"

"Who are you? Who is Aurora?"

"I ... ummm." I frowned, not sure what to say. "I don't know. Is there anything you want to know?"

Long pause. Someone hadn't thought things through very well.

"Humans have two names, do they not? What is your full name?"

"My full name is Aurora Persephonnie," I said, hoping I didn't sound too eager. "Well, technically it's Persephonnie-Whitefield, but I don't actually go by that. It's a mouthful."

"Whitefield," Damian mumbled. "That name feels familiar."

I sighed, wishing my own blithering hadn't forced me to correct myself. "My father is a senator. That's probably why, okay? Let's move on."

Although clearly caught off-guard by my outburst, Damian recovered quickly. His eyebrows lowered, and he nodded along. "Of course. Moving on." He paused "What would you prefer to talk about?" Damian deferred, quite clearly and understandably wanting to avoid another minefield of a topic.

“Um. How about how you’re going to go about carrying me?”

The dragon-man shrugged. “Most of the time, when we’re carrying younglings, they sit at the base of our neck. I don’t see why you couldn’t do the same.”

I stared at him owlishly. “Are you saying you want me to ride you?”

Damian’s face stiffened, and a hint of color tinted his cheeks. Was he embarrassed? Why would he—

“On your back, I mean. Ride on your back.” The words tumbled out so fast they ran together.

Oh, god. He was thinking about me on top. Or was he thinking that’s what I was thinking? So, did he like that idea, or did it bother him?

“Yes. That would be easiest,” he said. “Most simply climb up the wing and sit. It’s quite stable. You’ll see.”

“Okay,” I whispered, still beyond horrified at the sexual innuendo I’d inadvertently triggered.

Thankfully, I managed to go the next two minutes without saying anything stupid. But as we climbed the grand set of stairs to the roof, further doubts slowly coalesced.

I tried to brush them off, to reiterate the internal argument I’d already had, but the worries only grew more insistent. The instant we went through the large double doors and I saw my first dragon launch itself into the sky on the far side of the landing zone, I knew I couldn’t stay silent.

“I can trust you, right?”

“That depends on what you’re referring to?” he said cautiously.

“About this, I mean. Getting to the market. You aren’t going to accidentally make me fall, are you?”

Damian glared down his perfectly straight nose at me. “Why would I want to do something like that? Do you think I’m some casual murderer?”

“I think that humans aren’t dragons, and you don’t want me here, nor do the others. It’s an easy way to be rid of me.”

“Only someone who doesn’t know how much paperwork there would be could say such a thing,” he said dryly.

“Please tell me that was your attempt at a joke.”

Deliciously thick lips twisted up. “I am quite confident it was much more than an attempt at a joke.”

“Damian!”

“Yes,” he said, a hint of irritation returning. “You can trust me, Aurora. I’m not going to drop you or let anything happen to you. You’re in my care now. I will keep you safe. I will protect you.”

A shudder ran down my spine when he said that, his eyes locked onto mine, unwavering. Who was this man?

“Come on,” he said, leading me to one side of the roof. “Wait there, okay?”

I nodded, still not sure my voice could be trusted to speak evenly.



Damian stepped away from me, leaving a solid circle thirty feet on either side of him. He rolled his shoulders and—

“Shit!” I cried, stumbling backward as all at once a giant dragon with scales of ruby red fire occupied the space he’d been.

“The change is quite abrupt,” the dragon said, a voice eerily similar to Damian’s coming from its mouth. There was an added timbre to it, changing it to something non-human but still identifiable.

“You don’t say?” I stammered, staring up at the scaled beast.

The giant dragon head hovered in the air twenty feet above me, swinging easily from side to side on the long, sinuous neck. The sun was bright and the sky clear, and as such, all the scales on his snout, neck, and body glittered with an internal fire as they reflected the rays aimed at them.

Damian twisted slightly and then extended his right wing out and down until the tip brushed against the stone roof. The membrane, a duller red without the sparkle to it, was stretched taut, providing a nice walkway to his neck.

“Now, I just climb on board, I guess,” I said to nobody in particular, trying to hype myself up. “On the back of a dragon. No big deal. We just fought a war with you. Sworn enemies. Now, this. It’s all right. I can do this.”

“Everyone can hear you,” Damian reminded me.

“I don’t care. This is normal to all of you,” I said, waving a hand around a bit jerkily, unable to control my muscles completely thanks to my nerves. “To me, to us, it absolutely is nothing of the sort. I’ve never seen a dragon this close up. Only in videos. Let me tell you, it is not the same. Not at all.”

“If you are unable, you may head back inside,” Damian said stiffly. “I will not be offended.”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “I can do this.”

I wasn’t about to let my fears control me. That wasn’t who I was. Fear was normal. It was a part of being human. Knowing that meant I knew it could be controlled. Like everything else.

Drawing a lungful through my nose, I exhaled slowly, focusing on my shoulders and releasing the tension knotting them together.

Then, before I could let the niggling prick of terror take hold once more, I started climbing up his wing. The membrane gave way slightly under each step, almost like a trampoline. In seconds, I was stepping on the scales of his back.

“You’re so warm,” I said as my hand pressed against a scale for the first time, surprising me with the heat.

“What did you expect?”

“Cold, obviously,” I joked, settling in around his neck, one leg on either side. “You’re lizards, aren’t you?”

“Mammals, actually.” Damian’s snort reverberated down his neck and into his spine, sending tiny vibrations up my leg. “I assure you, our women do not give birth to eggs.”

“Honestly, I hadn’t thought of that,” I admitted. “So, then, how ...?”

“With puberty. Your dragon is born, you bond with it, and learn to control both it and

yourself.”

“And I thought puberty was hard enough getting a period and growing boobs,” I muttered.

“It can be ... difficult,” Damian the dragon added wryly with the tone of someone who knew exactly what they were talking about.

“I can imagine.”

“Are you ready?” He stretched both wings and then brought them down alongside his flanks while facing out over the edge of the roof.

“Not yet, give me— AHHHH! ”

Aurora

I screamed as Damian ignored me and launched himself into the air and over the side of the roof. We plunged down toward the sharply angled mountainside as his wings caught the air and shot us out even farther so that there was nothing but air beneath us until the forested slope far, far below.

“You were taking too long,” he called back, his wings beating rhythmically as we gained some stability, curling southward around the mountain.

“We’re not on the clock!” I shrieked back. “You could have warned me. Ten seconds doesn’t make or break anything.”

“It might,” he said, lacking humor.

I frowned, my mind momentarily drawn away from the jaw-dropping horror of the sudden departure. What had he meant by that ? Why would it matter.

“This scepter doodad must be pretty important,” I mused, purposefully speaking loud enough for him to hear.

“You could say that.” This time, it was clear he wasn’t going to elaborate.

Banking sharply, forcing me to throw myself flat to his neck and hold on for dear life, Damian took us soaring out across the landscape below, all too quickly reminding me of where I was.

“So far up,” I said dizzily, staring at the trees flashing past. “So far ...”

“Look up, Aurora. Focus on the horizon,” Damian ordered.

“Okay,” I said, the vertigo fading somewhat as I looked out instead of down. “Hey, that helps! Thank you.”

“Just making sure I don’t have to fill out the paperwork.” His sense of humor and delivery were so dry it was hard to know he was joking.

I smacked his neck with my fist in response since I did know and didn’t find it funny.

Either he didn’t feel it, or he ignored it.

“So, what’s the plan?” I called, forced to raise my voice so he would hear me over the rush of the air. “Once we get to where we’re going, I mean.”

“I’m going to ask my contacts some questions. You’re going to stay in the marketplace and out of my way.”

I frowned. “Why are you bringing me along then, if you’re just going to get rid of me?”

Damian twitched. It ran down his neck and across his spine. “I’m not bringing you,” he corrected. “You insisted you wanted to come to the market. That has no bearing on what I’m doing. I simply agreed to give you a ride.”

“Oh.” He was right. I had kind of barged my way into coming along. When that had morphed into me helping him, I wasn’t sure. But why would he want such a thing? I didn’t even know what the Scepter of An-whatever did. Nor did Damian seem likely to tell me.

“Don’t worry, you can spend some of my money,” he grunted, thinking my silence was one of disappointment at being unable to shop. “I’m sure you could use some more clothing.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, not thinking if he could hear me over the wind or not.

We flew for several minutes, during which I grew more accustomed to riding on the back of a dragon than I had any right to. From the vantage point of however-far-up we were, I could see everything, and it was beautiful.

“Coming up on our destination,” Damian announced as a cluster of things on the horizon quickly resolved into a large town made of stone and wood construction.

In the air, other dragons circled, some moving in to land casually on open areas that had to be designed for just such a purpose. Others flew in lazy circles, keeping a watch on everything from their lofty positions.

As I watched, a bright blue dragon appeared in an open square, spread its wings, and took off, heading to my left.

Watching it all was so different. I kept comparing it to the videos humanity possessed of dragons in combat. There, they wheeled and dove with terrifying speed and lethality, spewing fire and lightning across anything that moved.

The scene before me was more like watching people enter or leave a grocery store. Utterly and totally anathema to someone who’d only known dragons via the war.

It reminded me that they, too, were people. Living, breathing creatures. Perhaps if we could see more of each other like this, there could be a chance for lasting peace.

Damian angled toward one of the open squares near the middle of the town, flaring

his wings at the last second before touching down. There was a slight bump as we came to a full stop, but otherwise, it was perfectly smooth.

“My compliments to the pilot,” I teased as I climbed down the extended wing.

“Careful when you stand up, you might find—”

I stumbled as my feet hit the land, and it swayed beneath me, forcing me to crouch with a hand on the ground.

“—it takes a moment to get your land-legs back the first time.”

“Uh-huh,” I moaned, my stomach suddenly indicating it wasn’t okay. “What the hell is this?”

“Not everyone is a smooth flyer,” he advised. “Hopefully, it was just the first time, but it could be a regular thing for you. We’ll just have to wait and find out.”

“Lovely.” It was already fading.

Forcing it aside, I got to my feet. At some point, Damian had shifted back, and now he stood at my side, ready to catch me if I was forcing it too soon.

“I’m fine,” I promised, shaking him off. “I’m not going back down.”

But Damian didn’t budge. He stayed right at my side, waiting without saying a word until I felt ready to move. Even then, he walked next to me. He didn’t hover, didn’t invade my space. Instead, he simply let it be known to me that if I needed him, he was there.

It was appreciated.

Once I was fully recovered, Damian led me into the center of the town, toward the market. I could smell it far before we reached it. Fresh fish was a ubiquitous scent. There was nothing quite like it.

“We’re not near the coast. Why does it smell so fishy?”

“Dragons love fish. It makes them happy. Besides, it’s easy enough to carry a net from the coast.”

“Oh. So, fish is your dessert, is that it?”

He laughed. “Something like that.”

Other spices and the acidity of fresh burning wood fires helped to tone it down, and by the time we’d reached the market itself, the cacophony of sounds and minor scents forced the fishy aroma to the background.

Colors abounded, from gaily colored pennants flapping in the breeze to the clothing worn or sold by many of the merchants. Everything was designed with an eye to catching the gaze and holding it long enough to generate interest.

After I was caught up by the third booth in a row, listening intently to the sales pitch about some trinket or shirt, Damian put an arm around my shoulder and guided me past them, ensuring we continued to walk at a decent pace.

Buckets of food just sat out front of stalls, from fruits and vegetables to breads, cheeses, and more. I watched people move between the rows of food, picking and choosing what they wanted, before they headed into a tent or up to the proprietor to arrange payment.

Well, almost all.



My eyes caught a youth moving between two stalls, looking left and right, before his hand darted out, snatching a pair of apples and making them disappear into the giant pockets of his baggy pants. Then he glanced around to see if he'd been spotted.

I looked away, unwilling to make a fuss about a hungry child, even while realizing it felt just like some of the big open-air markets back home. Complete with the pickpockets. Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about anything of mine being stolen. No phone, money, or even passport. Just the clothing on my back.

Glancing up at Damian, intending to mention to him how perhaps our people were more alike than any of us realized, I caught him staring down at me with disappointment.

Before I could ask him why, he strode forward and intercepted the young dragon before he could take off with his prize. Rushing after the speedy dragon, intending to interfere, I skidded to a halt as Damian caught the child's arm before crouching down in front of him so he could look the child in the eyes.

My initial fears about what sort of "justice" Damian the Magistrate might mete out were put on hold as he spoke calmly.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked the youth, keeping his voice low so as not to cause a scene.

The child nodded.

"Who am I?" Damian pressed.

"The magistrate," the child said glumly, knowing he was in trouble.

"What's your name?"

“My friends call me Ernie.”

“Okay, Ernie. Do you know why you’re in trouble with me?”

I watched curiously, wondering what Damian’s intention with the child were. So far, his attitude wasn’t at all what I’d expected.

“Because I took something.”

Damian didn’t look pleased with the answer, and the youth picked up on it.

“Because I took something that didn’t belong to me,” he repeated, adding on the full extent of his crime.

“Exactly.” Damian motioned with his other hand for the apples and waited while the young child coughed them up from the depths of his pants. Putting them back in the bin without looking away from the boy, he glanced at the child’s unclad feet. “Are you going to do this again?”

“No, Magistrate.”

“Good. Now, tell me, why did you do that, Ernie? You’re obviously a smart kid. You know it’s wrong. Is everything okay at home? Are you not eating? There are places you can get food from. Do you know that?”

“Yeah, I know.” Ernie kicked at the ground.

“So, why don’t you use them?”

“The other kids make fun of me if I do,” he said. “Call me names and stuff.”

“Kids can be mean,” Damian said knowingly. “Have you ever called someone names before?”

“Well, yeah, but ...” Ernie fell silent as he got Damian’s meaning. “Oh.”

“Exactly. So, maybe stop calling them names, and they’ll stop doing the same to you.”

“Maybe.” Ernie didn’t sound like he believed it.

I didn’t either. Kids were absolutely vicious that way.

“Now, you know what you have to do, don’t you, Ernie?”

The child cringed. “Do I have to, Magistrate?”

“Yes,” Damian said gently. “Justice must be seen to. You broke the rules. Now, you must pay the price. It’s really not that bad.”

“I guess.” Ernie hung his head low and trudged up to the stall’s entrance where a shopkeeper sat out of sight of where the incident had occurred.

I watched Damian, who had his eyes on Ernie as he apologized to the owner for what he’d done. At first, the owner shot up from his chair, but upon catching sight of Damian, he understood what was going on and dialed his temper back down.

I heard him say something about honesty, and then he shooed Ernie from his shop. Damian did the same, watching until the child was gone from sight.

It was all so unlike the chewing out he’d given me down in the restricted area. Calm and polite, explaining things clearly and then doling out a punishment.

I started to smile at him as he came back, prepared to ask why the difference, but Damian spoke first, cutting me off. “You saw it happen. You knew what it signified, and yet you were going to ignore it.”

He shook his head while I stood there, flabbergast by the outburst. But then he hit me with an even worse line.

“I’m disappointed in you for not saying anything,” he said before walking again.

I stared at his back, trying to ignore the giant knot of organs where my stomach had been. I was flabbergasted. There was absolutely no need for the wave of guilt that slammed into me.

Why ? I asked myself repeatedly as my legs started working again, carrying me after Damian. Why do I care so much about disappointing this man?

Damian

I paused in the middle of the walkway, forcing others to go around us to reach the intersection just ahead.

“Why are we stopping?” Aurora looked around, her hair dancing in the warm afternoon sunlight.

For just an instant, I allowed myself to follow the flowing locks as they cascaded down around her shoulders, the rays causing her natural waves to glimmer. She caught me looking and smiled.

Then I was back in control, shoving my dragon to the side and ignoring the things it was telling me to do.

“Because,” I explained, “I have someone I need to talk to, and I can’t bring you with me.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me?” She pouted.

“Don’t.” I waved a finger. “You knew this was why I came out here.”

“I know, but—”

“No buts.” Now, I smiled, showing her I had a secret. “Trust me, you have no reason to be upset.”

“I can think of a lot of reasons to be upset,” she countered.

“My comment was referring to our current situation,” I grumbled. “Now, let me explain because I’m trying to be nice to you. I found the best way to keep you busy while I go do what I need to do.”

“And that would be?” Aurora asked, playing her part properly when I didn’t immediately expand.

Turning at the waist, I waved a hand at the storefront. “Shopping. Clothes shopping, in fact.”

Dropping my hand, I waited for her reaction.

The expected outburst of excitement didn’t materialize. Instead of smiling broadly and proclaiming happiness, her face closed off entirely. Eyebrows knitting together, Aurora looked at the storefront. Then she slowly swung her head back my direction.

“What?”

“You thought you’d get rid of me by sending me to look at clothes?”

“I like to think of it more as temporarily detaining you to keep you out of my way while presenting you with a selection of the finest garments on the island.”

Her facade cracking, she smiled. “I didn’t bring my wallet, Damian. This is a big tease.”

“I’m going to tell them to charge me,” I said. “I’m not an idiot. I know you don’t have anything to use. Give me some credit for thinking the idea through.”

“Blame Janus. He hasn’t exactly given me a glowing impression when it comes to dragons giving a crap about others.”

“You’ll find that most of us are nothing like that fool.”

Aurora gave me a little curious look, but that was all.

After getting her set up on an account with me in both the clothing store and the “lifestyle” boutique across the street, I headed to the intersection and ducked down an alleyway. Just before the crossing, I paused at a nondescript wooden door and banged on it three times in quick succession, then waited.

“We’re not open,” a voice said as the door eased open a hair. “Come back later.”

“Not here to drink your beer,” I said, my fingers already wrapping around the door and pulling it open. “I need to talk to Peter.”

“Hey!” The owner of the voice cried out in surprise as I yanked the door open and stepped in. “Who do you think you are, barging in here like that?”

“I’m the magistrate,” I said, hitting the young man with the hardest glare I could summon. “That’s who.”

There was an audible gulp , and the young dragon backed off, wiping his hands on his apron. “Sorry, sir. I, uh, I didn’t know.”

Feeling like a jerk for lording my position over someone just trying to do their job, I took pity on him. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I just don’t have time to waste with Peter’s usual antics. He’s in his office, I presume?”

I was already walking before the man started talking. The layout of Peter’s Pub was

more than familiar to me. The large establishment was on the corner of two of the busiest crossways in the entire market district and was the favorite watering hole for many a dragon.

Including those who often didn't agree with the sovereign. Peter was a known opponent of the position of the sovereign as monarchal ruler of the Dragon Isles. As such, many of those who felt the same could often be found drinking his ales.

Which was why I made it a frequent habit of mine to raid the pub, looking for any signs of outright sedition or treason. Of course, I never did because Peter was one of my best informants and had been since before he took it over from his father, who was long an informant for my predecessor. That continued all the way up the line, where several generations in the murky past, Peter the original was brother to the sovereign.

It was a convenient cover, and one I hoped would again pay dividends. The Scepter of Anaris had to be recovered, no matter the cost, and soon. If whoever had stolen it figured out its magic and brought down the shield ...

I shuddered to think about it.

"Open up, Peter, I know you're in there! Don't think you can hide from me!" I hollered, fist thundering against the door. "I've got you this time!"

"Go away!" Peter called back.

"I'll be back in two hours," I growled and then opened the door anyway.

"Don't you ever get tired of that?" Peter asked from where he sat behind his desk, running a hand over his graying hair.



He wore a poorly knitted red sweater and comfortable, well-worn black slacks with a similarly colored pair of bar shoes. With one ankle crossed over the knee, he leaned back in his chair, tilting the front two legs off the ground while waiting for a response.

“Never,” I assured him, leaning in to shake his beefy hairless hand. Too many hours over the stove had long since singed away the dark black hair that covered much of the rest of his body.

“A shame. It bores me.”

I shrugged. “Next time, I could bring a couple of guards with me, lock the place down on a Saturday night, and make you sit there while we ‘officially’ go through all your records. Would you prefer that?”

All I got in return was an upraised middle finger. Peter chuckled at the thought, knowing I would never do that. Neither of us wanted to be there for that long.

“What do you need?” the bar owner asked, levering himself to his feet.

While not fat, which was extremely hard to be with the metabolism our other form demanded, Peter was one of the thickest dragons I knew.

“I need to know if you’ve heard anything new. More than idle chatter.”

Peter’s brown eyes flashed with a hint of copper-gold. “Must be pretty serious to have you barge in without fucking with my doorman.”

“Have you heard anything or not?” I growled, not appreciating his attempt at deflecting while digging for more information.

Scratching his stubbly face, he pretended to think. I clenched my jaw. Peter saw.

“Very serious indeed,” he mused, shaking his head. “Unfortunately, I have nothing for you. Nothing new you don’t already know. If you give me more, maybe I could help you ...”

Peter might be my informant, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t also selling gossip to the highest bidder either. Many a member of the ruling council frequented his bar. They would pay very well for news of something that had me rattled.

I needed to keep it together. Keep people from prying too deeply and figuring out something was wrong.

“You would know if you’d heard,” I said, turning to go. “Let me know if that changes.”

I stomped out of his office with just the right amount of frustration for another failed raid. The young man working behind the bar was studiously polishing the top until it practically glowed.

Ducking outside, I paused to take a breath and decide where I wanted to go next or if it even mattered. If Peter hadn’t heard a thing, it was unlikely anyone else had. Not of something of this magnitude.

However, trying to silence my mind only brought to fore the shouting coming from the street.

Confused and curious about what could cause such a vehement confrontation, I wandered close enough I could make out the words.

“ We don’t want your kind here!”

“Get out! Go away! You don’t belong!”

“Filthy humans, diluting our greatness!”

The last was spewed by an older dragon, his face red with the effort of screaming his hate.

On the other side, Aurora stood stock still, surrounded by faces, many of whom who were shrieking yet more vitriol at her.

I cursed at myself for leaving her alone, thinking my people could be trusted not to behave this way.

Then the gray-haired dragon stepped closer to her and raised a hand.

Aurora flinched back in fear, and a haze of red dropped over my world as I started forward, shouldering aside anyone in my way.

“ We don’t want your kind here!” the older dragon screamed again.

I was going to kill him. My knuckles cracked and popped as I made a path toward him.

But before I could, Aurora stepped forward. I moved faster, fearing she was going to hit the dragon, but instead, she raised her own finger and began screaming back, standing her ground.

Aurora

“Y ou don’t want ‘my kind’ here?” I pitched my voice loud enough that all could hear me. “Am I understanding your screams correctly?”

I hadn’t gone looking for a fight. It had found me, courtesy of the crotchety old-timer standing in front of me with his face all twisted up amid a tantrum of toddler-esque proportions.

“That’s exactly right!” he hollered. “You don’t belong. We don’t want you!”

“Why not?” I asked, crossing my arms, the bag holding my clothing bouncing off my hip.

Things had been going great. I’d gone shopping, as directed by Damian, and bought myself some nice shirts and a couple pairs of pants, among other things. As I was finishing up, I’d become aware of the man and a woman who I assumed was his wife. He was watching me, muttering angrily under his breath.

My hope had been that by leaving the store, it would be the end of it. He would stay with his wife, do more shopping, and I could go on about my life peacefully. Instead, he’d followed me out, and the confrontation had begun.

Unfortunately for him, in a war of words, he was hopelessly outmatched.

“Because this is our place. Not yours!” he shrieked.

“Does talking louder make it more true?” I asked, inviting him to demonstrate how he truly felt even more.

“Humans don’t belong here!” he retorted. “You aren’t wanted.”

That was the one part of it that confused me. Without me saying anything, the man had just instinctively known I was human. I would have to ask Damian about that because I certainly didn’t feel too out-of-place just walking the street. It wasn’t as if they meandered around in their dragon forms while I was the only one on two feet. So, what was the tell?

“What makes you think I want to be here?” I asked. “Do you think I just hopped on a plane and came to visit because of the hospitality shown by the locals?”

“Then go back where you came from!”

I bared my teeth in challenge. “Get me the permission to, and I’ll gladly go.”

Although I tried to put as much desire into my statement as I could, a part of me held back. After all, leaving would mean having to confront my father and what he was doing, which wouldn’t be pretty. But more immediately, it would mean never seeing Damian and those mysterious gray eyes of his ever again.

“The sovereign should never have brought you here,” the old man countered.

“Moving the goalposts because your argument is suddenly null and void. How classic,” I said tiredly, shaking my head. “Your point has nothing to do with me. Unless, of course, you think I somehow control your sovereign.”

“You should leave.”

“How? Seriously, is there a way for me to go back home? I would gladly take it if you could show me.”

“You could swim.”

Swim? Interesting. So, I’m on an island. That would help explain how we’ve never come across the dragons before.

“Too impolite to help me find a boat?”

“For a human like you? Yes!”

“You’re getting really worked up about this,” I observed, keeping an outward air of calm.

“I’m not afraid to show my feelings,” he snapped.

I grinned. I had him now. A war of words was exactly what I was good at.

“No, no, I can see that,” I said. “You haven’t been afraid to show your fear at all.”

“What?” The older man blinked, his forehead acquiring a few extra wrinkles as he tried to understand what I meant.

“Humans. You’re afraid of humans. Isn’t that what this whole outburst has been about? You’re afraid of me, of us. Thinking we’re going to come to your precious island and do something. I don’t know. All eight of us, we sure are terrifying. Going to make life very difficult for you.”

I looked around the crowd for support but couldn’t find it. Nobody was on my side. Did they all hate humans that much?

All of a sudden, I realized I had erred and erred badly. They all looked human, but they weren't. They were dragons, and many of them didn't like being told that their internalized hatred was because they were scared.

A low growl circled us. The noise empowered the older man, who'd just been challenged and found wanting in a battle of verbal wits.

Which left him only one way out.

"Are you calling me a coward?" the old dragon hissed. "Saying I'm afraid of you, is that it?"

Uh-oh.

I stepped back, trying to keep my distance, but he was too fast. His fingers reached for my neck, his right hand cocked back.

You're an idiot. You should've known better.

Leaning back, I braced for the blow, wondering if I'd survive it. Probably not.

I closed my eyes, knowing there was nothing else I could do.

There was a gasp and then silence from the crowd, followed by the meaty impact of flesh on flesh echoing sharply in the suddenly silent street. Someone grunted loudly in pain.

But I remained untouched.

Tentatively, I opened my eyes. My gaze took in the scene before me as I desperately tried to understand what had happened.

“Damian?”

“Are you okay?” He looked up at me from his position on the back of the elder dragon-man, who he was keeping down with a knee in his back.

“What? Yes, I’m fine.”

He looked me up and down as if to confirm that nothing had happened and then turned back to the other dragon. When he spoke, it was loud enough for the entire crowd to hear.

“The Sovereign of All Dragonkind has invited these women to come live among us,” he said in strong, clear tones. “That means they are her personal guests. Any insult or injury that comes to them is considered done to the sovereign herself. Any dragon who commits such a crime will be seen fit to be dealt with by the law. Do I make myself clear?”

There was muttered assent from the crowd, which quickly dispersed. None, it seemed, were willing to take up the argument with Damian the Magistrate.

“Thank you,” I said as Damian got to his feet.

“Stay down,” Damian ordered, putting a foot on the elder dragon’s back as he tried to rise. “You can get up when we’re good and gone. Until then, you can lie on your face and save us the embarrassment of seeing it. You’re a disgrace to our people. If you think you’re so much better than a human, act like it, and don’t whine like an infant.”

Before I could say anything or get a last word in, Damian took me by the arm and steered me away.

“You already embarrassed him,” he said quietly. “Leave it be. He doesn’t need to be



carved up any further by you. It's not fair."

"Not fair?" I asked, surprised by the choice of words. "He started it."

"Yes, he did," Damian agreed. "And like me, he misjudged you. A lot. Thankfully, only he volunteered to do so in public."

I wasn't sure what to say. It sounded like a compliment, but it was hard to be certain.

"You're stronger than I thought," Damian said once we had moved away from the scene to calmer streets.

"Thanks? I try to work out, but—"

"Not physically," he said. "But here. And here."

He touched my head and then again over my heart, looking intently at me as he did. "Your spirit."

"Oh. That."

We stopped walking, one of us looking up. The other looking down. Around us, the crowds parted and joined, flowing like water around two rocks, caught in a moment, unwilling to be the first to move and give way.

In that circle of tranquility, something changed. A tiny shift, with seismic repercussions, that neither of us truly understood.

Not yet, at least.

Damian

For the second time in a short span, I was woken in the middle of the night by someone at my door.

The outburst of anger was swiftly pushed aside by skyrocketing suspicion. Whoever was knocking this time wasn't the sovereign. The visitor wore metal, which couldn't be covered by the heavy-handed hammering.

Whoever was at my door wore armored gauntlets. The only people in the palace who dressed that way were the guards.

On high alert with every sense opened up to its fullest, I stepped into the main gathering room, eyeing the door as it jumped in its frame under another furious barrage.

"Do people normally wake you up in the middle of the night like this?" a voice asked from near my elbow.

"No," I told Aurora, who stayed back by her room's entryway as I stepped forward.

"Who is it?" she wanted to know.

"It had better be the guards," I growled over yet another door-shaking pounding. "And they better have a damn good reason, whatever it is."

I slid fully between Aurora and the door.

“Stay here,” I added.

The need to protect her burned my insides. Each step away only added to the sense that I was doing wrong. That I should be with her.

I tried to calm my dragon. But it refused. Instead, it demanded further concessions, further protection. Scales appeared around my head and down my body like a wave, covering every inch of skin. Flame wrapped around my arms, curling into a bright ball in my open fist.

Reaching the door in full battle mode, I went to open it when the voice on the other side finally spoke, identifying themselves.

“Open up!” Jair announced. “By order of the sovereign.”

I flung the door open and stared at the head of the sovereign’s personal guard.

The guards, arrayed in a loose horseshoe around my doorway, immediately tightened up formation at the sight of me ready for a fight. Even Jair recoiled slightly, surprised by the apparition greeting him.

“Easy,” he said, holding up a hand, calming me and his guards. “Damian, it’s me. Jair.”

“I know that,” I growled, my voice taking on a deeper basso tone as more of my dragon was channeled through me upon seeing the entire guard team awaiting me and their reaction. “What I am not aware of is why you’re here at my door in the middle of the night. With an entire squad behind you ...”

I let the sentence trail off, making very clear my distaste for his actions.

“We’re not here for you. So, knock it off,” Jair said, several flames dancing across his own eyes.

Not here for me?

That could only mean one thing. I didn’t say anything, but Jair must’ve noticed my slight shifting of weight to block the door and what was behind it from his view. My dragon was coiled in my head, ready to be unleashed and do whatever it took to protect Aurora.

Forcing myself to relax slightly, I took some control back from the beast. She wasn’t my mate. There was no need for it to be acting this way about her. Regardless of my newfound respect for her, I had to recall that Jair was there on the orders of the sovereign herself.

“Why does the sovereign require her presence in the middle of the night?” I growled suspiciously, unable to fully put aside the need to protect her. My dragon was too intense.

Jair rolled his eyes. “Damian, don’t stand there and pretend like either of us knows her mind. We are her servants and do as ordered. You’re just like me in that. Her business is her business.”

“If she is being accused of breaking the law, Jair, that is my purview, as per the sovereign. I am the magistrate. The law is my duty to enforce.”

“Drop the whole battle-mode, will you?” Jair asked.

I looked at his squad of palace guards.

Recognizing my point, Jair dismissed his men, ordering them to take up posts farther

down the hallway.

Once they were gone, I put the scales and fire away, though I didn't allow myself to fully relax.

"I'm not authorized to tell you this myself," Jair said quietly, looking past me to make sure Aurora wasn't close enough to hear. "But another scepter has gone missing."

"And you think to come here and insult me over it?" I said, even while my mind exploded with the news.

"Insult you? About the human?" Jair's eyes widened.

"Aurora is under my watch now. I am responsible for her actions. Accusing her of theft implies that I've not been faithful in discharging those duties."

Jair thought quickly. "Have you kept eyes on her?"

"Yes. Did I not just say as much?"

"Every second, of every minute, of every hour?" he pushed.

I had to admire his dedication, even as I questioned my own decision. By defying him, I was, in effect, defying my sovereign. The head of state, ruler of the Dragon Isles.

Was Aurora really worth such actions? More to the point, why ?

"Yes," I answered at last.

“Even,” Jair said, leaning in now, “during the time you’ve slept this night?”

I stared at him. The commander of the sovereign’s personal guard stared right back. She hadn’t picked a pushover for this command.

Slowly, I turned, finding Aurora where I’d left her, across the open area near the hallway to her room. “Did you sneak out tonight while I was asleep and steal something?”

“No,” Aurora said firmly and confidently. “I was sound asleep. That is, until I was woken up by someone pounding rudely at the door a few minutes ago.”

I turned back to Jair and smiled. “It was not her.”

Jair shrugged. “You act like I care whether she did it or not, Damian. Seriously, I was told to come fetch her. So, I came to fetch her. What difference does it make?”

I looked him up and down, including the full suit of armor he wore, along with the six men he had in the hallway. “It makes all the difference,” I growled, my implication clear. “And you know it.”

“And if I’d shown up alone and asked you to bring her with us to see the sovereign, you would have agreed?”

“Not in chains,” I said. “But yes, we would have come with you.”

Jair nodded. “Very well. You have my apologies, Magistrate. Now that you know the situation, would you please escort the human to see the sovereign?”

“I will bring Aurora, yes.” I closed the door and looked at her. “Better get dressed. We’ve got a meeting to attend.”

She didn't return to her room. Instead, she stayed there, looking at me with those damnable green eyes, the ones that were making me do things I'd never done before.

"What?" I grumbled, not ready to deal with another problem. If she resisted at this point, I would just throw her over my shoulder and take her.

"Thank you." She tugged on a tiny lock of hair, then let it go abruptly as she clued in to what she was doing.

"For what?"

"Believing me like that. Automatically and without question. I ... didn't expect that from you," she admitted softly. "And I was wrong. So, thank you."

She glanced up at me one more time, hints of green glimmering through her eyelashes, then she went to change.

I wanted to roar in frustration. What the hell was going on? How did this woman have such a hold over me?

And more importantly ... what was I going to do about it?

Aurora

“This is all just a formality. I promise,” Damian said through clenched teeth as we walked the hallway toward the sovereign’s office. Jair walked ahead, while his men trailed behind in pairs. “Nothing is going to happen.”

“Relax,” I said, putting a hand on his forearm as I tried to exude far more confidence than I felt. “It’s going to be okay.”

“That’s what I just said.”

“So, why does it feel like I’m the only one who believes it?” I teased.

Damian’s face grew even more closed off.

“I’m serious. If, as you say, this is all just formality, then that means it’s theatrics. A show.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” he confirmed.

“I know all about that,” I told him. “It’s politics. I can handle politics. Given I’m innocent, it’s going to be even easier.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” he grated. “That’s the problem. The sovereign doesn’t do things ‘for show.’ She’s a better leader than that.”

“Then why is she doing it?” The answer came to me before Damian replied. “She



isn't, is she? This reeks of something else.”

“There are several members of the ruling council with her,” Jair mumbled under his breath. “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

I looked at the back of his head. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He still didn’t look back.

I let it drop, understanding full well what he was doing and the tightrope he was walking because of his respect for Damian.

When we reached the office of the sovereign, Jair rapped his knuckles respectfully on her door and announced us.

Damian smiled at the commotion on the other side. Clearly, whoever was in there with the sovereign did not like hearing that Damian had come along as well.

“Enter,” a cool female voice called a second later.

Jair let us through the door but remained outside, closing it behind us.

“My sovereign,” Damian greeted the woman sitting behind the big desk with extreme honor, saluting with his arm across his chest, fist to chest, elbow out, and then bowed deeply.

Taking a cue from him, I curtsied politely, deciding it best to treat the sovereign as a foreign monarch until told otherwise.

“How may we be of service?” he asked, standing stiffly at attention.

He didn't, I noticed, address the trio of individuals standing off to the side of the sovereign. In fact, he didn't even glance at them.

It was an interesting array of characters. The locus of power in the room was very clearly the woman behind the large desk. From the way she sat to the perfection of her platinum hair and the sharp glitter of eyes a similar shade of green as my own, it all ensured she was the center of attention.

I had to admire it because she did it all without moving, without needing any gimmicks or trickery. She simply was the seat of power. And nobody could change that.

The three people standing to her right, however, were so coated in slime it was easy to tell they were career politicians. They liked the game and the power that came with it. They didn't, however, have any of their own. Two of them stood out, the man on the left with the perfectly groomed hair and impeccable suit, and the woman in the center with the permanent sneer twisting her nearly gaunt facial features.

Immediately, I knew they were the loudmouths. The outspoken ones with far too high a sense of self. I ignored them and instead focused on the man to the right, standing closest to the sovereign.

"Councilor Kerstun," Damian said very quietly, noting my shift of attention. "In the middle is Councilor Laurana and then Councilor Parun."

I filed those names away. Kerstun. Laurana. Parun. Whoever they were, despite their shortcomings, they'd amassed enough power to arrange this meeting in the middle of the night. That meant they were not just hot air bags who liked to hear themselves talk. Others listened to them as well.

"You stand close to a thief, Magistrate," Councilor Laurana said, voice full of acid.

Was that directed at me, or did she and Damian have history? I wasn't sure.

"I stand where I belong, Councilor Laurana. And I would remind the councilor that I, not her, am the judge of who is or isn't a criminal."

The council woman's amber eyes turned orange as flames danced through them, reflecting her anger at the rebuke.

"So, you willfully associate with a thief?" That time, Kerstun spoke up.

"As willfully as you throw around unproven accusations ... Councilor."

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling. It was an excellent retort. Even the sovereign's cheek twitched slightly. She didn't intervene, however, and I didn't have any knowledge of her to understand why. It could be because she agreed with the councilors and just found Damian funny. Or it could be that she disagreed and was staying silent to let him tear them apart. I just didn't know yet.

"In the three days since the human arrived here, two important items have 'gone missing,'" Council Laurana explained.

"My name is Aurora," I said. "You can say it. I promise it won't bite you."

The female councilor's eyes blazed with fresh fury at being spoken down to. "She was reported to have been seen wandering around on her very first night here. Several palace guards recalled seeing her outside of her quarters and not on the dormitory floor either. She seemed to be making her way lower."

Beside me, Damian stiffened just a tad. I noted it and wondered at that. The councilor made no mention of me being on the restricted levels. He was only inferring I went there. Had Damian not told them where he'd found me? And if so, why keep that to

himself?

“She was lost,” Damian said, speaking up.

“No, let’s be honest,” I said, putting a hand on his arm. The sovereign’s eyes saw that and narrowed slightly, but she made no comment. “I wasn’t lost. Well, I was , but it wasn’t on accident. I’d been trying to escape. To get out of the palace so I could go home.”

“Long swim,” Kerstun said with a snort.

I gave him an icy smile. “I was unaware at the time that we were on an island. After all, I’d only been here for a few hours at that point.”

“So, you admit to leaving the quarters and going elsewhere?”

“I do, Council Laurana.”

“You see? She was there. She was a human. She did it. She stole the scepter!” The sneer that seemed laser-etched onto Laurana’s face only deepened, further twisting her porcelain features into hatred.

“That’s your evidence?” I said, yawning deliberately. “That’s why you woke us all up at this hour?”

“It is enough,” Kerstun said confidently.

“Sure, for a prejudiced group like yourselves, I bet it is. You could convince yourselves of anything. Even if it’s far more likely that one of your own is behind this string of thefts. Especially given that they know what the hell has been stolen! As I said, I was here less than twenty-four hours. How could I have found out about this

fancy scepter and stolen it and then somehow hidden it where you couldn't find, all in that time?"

"That part is easy," Council Parun said, finally speaking up. His voice was calm, matching the calculating look on his face. "You already knew about it. The knowledge was with your people ahead of time, and they sent you to get it."

I laughed in his face, which the tall, somewhat slender, Parun clearly did not appreciate. "You're joking, right? You have to be. There's no way that argument stands up. If we'd known that much about you and your people, about dragons, then we could've done something to make sure we didn't get our asses kicked so thoroughly by you."

Parun glared, and I gave it right back.

"No humans have been to the island before now," the sovereign said, interjecting. "They could not have known."

"Unless someone told them," Parun suggested.

"So, it was one of your own," I pointed out. "Besides, if someone was sent to steal them, don't you think they would send someone who could, I don't know, not get caught? Come on. I'm many things, but a competent thief is not one of them. Trying to put the blame on me reeks of desperation. I can smell it from here. So will the rest of your council, and you know it."

"You might be surprised by what the council thinks," Kerstun interjected, not happy with all the attention Parun was getting.

"Oh, so, they're just as prejudiced as you three? That's unfortunate. I'd hoped someone could get off their high horse and think critically instead of just yell loudly

and maneuver for more power. Isn't that what your people expect of you? Or are you more like humans than you care to admit, and are just doing this to look good for political gain?"

Damian didn't bother to stifle his snort. That, combined with the three sets of daggers staring my way, told me everything I needed to know about the accuracy of my statement.

He did decide to speak up again at that point. "I will remind the council members that Aurora is under my protection. I have given my word to watch her. Any accusation against her is one against me. You may have your opinions on humans, but do you have any reason to doubt my word?"

I stayed quiet now, recognizing he was trying to end the sham of a meeting and send the council members packing. If I said much more, it would only rile them up more.

"Well?" the sovereign prompted her council members in the silence that followed. "Can any of you find fault in the magistrate?"

It was Parun who spoke for them all. "No, Sovereign, of course not."

"Good." Her voice was hard, emphasizing her feelings toward it all. "If there's nothing else, then I thank you for your time, councilors."

Everyone knew a dismissal when they heard one. For a moment, I thought Laurana was going to continue protesting, but a hard look from Parun sent her heading to the door.

I made eye contact with him as he passed. He looked at me and didn't flinch.

That one is dangerous .

“I’m sorry for that,” the sovereign said once the door was closed and silence reigned again. “But they aren’t wrong. It is suspicious.”

“Of course,” Damian replied graciously. “But she was with me for the other time, and I have been given no reason to doubt her word. As you have seen, Aurora is not afraid to be honest.”

“Indeed,” the sovereign said, glancing between us. “I noticed that.”

“By your leave, then?” Damian asked, gesturing to the door.

“Unfortunately, there’s more bad news,” she said.

“More?”

The sovereign nodded. “One of our border guards is overdue to report in. I want you to see what you can find. Take her with you. That way, if anything else happens, you have an ironclad excuse, and we can begin to find out who is actually doing this.”

“Take her with me?” Damian glanced at me, then at his sovereign.

“She’s got a good spirit,” the sovereign replied lightly. “Yes, take her. Go find our missing guard. See what happened to him.”

“Of course,” Damian said.

We paid our respects and left.

Aurora

I yawned suddenly as Damian pushed open the door to the roof, holding it open for me to pass through.

He smiled at me. “Tired?”

“You know I am. Aren’t you? It’s hard to pack a whole night’s sleep into the, what, three hours you gave me?”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“These tell me a different story,” I said playfully, tapping the bags under his cheeks without thinking. “Are we safe to fly? I need to know if my pilot and aircraft are in good condition.”

Damian grunted and, with one hand, lifted his shirt and flexed at the same time. “I think the condition is acceptable. What about you?”

I swallowed, trying not to drool over the rock-hard figure he revealed. “Yeah ... yeah, I think it’s safe to say proper maintenance has been conducted.”

Letting the door close, he brushed past me and led the way up the steps. Thankfully, he didn’t look back, lest he see the confused anguish on my face. What the hell had just happened? When did we break the flirtation barrier? Why was my body and face burning so fiercely?



Damian, I noticed, was all business as he shifted into his dragon form and waited for me to climb aboard. There was little to say, but he only spoke the minimum to ensure I was seated and ready. When I confirmed I was, he spread his wings and took off without a word.

Was he also having second thoughts, wondering what had just happened back there? It wasn't like the strict, rule-following dragon to be so openly playful. Was it my fault, or was I just seeing a side of him he'd kept hidden until now? It was tough to say.

I decided I would respect his decision to refocus on strict formality and let it drop. I just wish I could get that image out of my head. It would be so much easier to act normal if I wasn't constantly picturing his abs being shoved in my face ...

"What did she mean by the border?" I asked, leaning forward against his neck. "The sovereign, I mean!"

There was little in the way of ambient wind, so I only had to speak loud enough to be heard over the air from our passage.

Damian's head— his snout, he calls it his snout in dragon form— twisted slightly, indicating he heard me. There wasn't an immediate answer. Instead, I felt him adjust and stretch slightly under me.

"Don't lie!" I called, wondering if I was interpreting the body language correctly.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm debating how much I can or should tell you. What I do say will be truthful, however."

"As if it matters what you do or don't tell me."

This time, his snout actively curled around so he could fix both his golden slit-eyed pupils on me. “What is that supposed to mean? Did I offend you somehow?”

“What? No,” I said, waving it off. “I just meant ... I’m not going home. Ever. I’m trapped here. Telling anyone what I learn won’t happen.”

Damian the dragon made a noise. A grunt, perhaps? I was still learning dragon language. “If the peace is maintained, I’m certain visits to see friends and family will be arranged.”

To see family. I nearly laughed. Friends, perhaps. But family? No. I wasn’t going back to see him. Though it would be very interesting to see what story my father had concocted to explain my disappearance. Perhaps I could ... expose him that way, make him—

No. You don’t want to meddle in that. Best to just leave it as it is. Do what you’ve been doing and work hard to accept that this is your new life. This is where you live and who you’re going to be around.

At least Damian wasn’t working to try to undermine everything, including the sovereign. So, that was a nice change.

“In the Dragon Isles, there’s the main island, which we’re on, and four smaller ones, all of which are surrounded by a shield. It’s made of an energy, a magic if you will, that not only visually obscures our home from prying human eyes but also exerts an influence, one that makes ships and planes innately avoid the area.”

“Interesting. How does it work?”

“I have no idea. Only the sovereign does, supposedly. However, the edges are always patrolled. Storms frequent the area, likely because of our shield, and sometimes, it

blows humans off course. We must ensure that none of those who come near actually penetrate the shield before returning to their path.”

I didn’t ask about what happened to those that did discover the shield. Some things were better left unasked.

“So, one of those guards is missing? What does that have to do with your magic rods?”

“The scepters ,” Damian said firmly, “are what power the shield, the barrier. So, yes, it could be connected. Hopefully, it’s not. But best to be safe. So, we’ll go see what we can and report back. Settle in. It’s a long flight.”

I took his advice, curling up as best I could while lying flat along his neck, my arms and legs draped on either side of his scaled body.

His dragon body.

Running my hand along the scales, I abruptly realized we were flying. I was on Damian’s back, and we were flying. Without hesitation or thinking, I’d blindly climbed onto his back and let him carry me off toward the middle of nowhere.

I traced the outline of a scale with one finger as I processed the source of the trust that had enabled such a thing.

He’s always shown you could trust him to keep you safe. He gave you his word, and he’s kept it. Like at the market or with the councilors this morning. Jair and his squad. He insisted he join me.

What sort of mistake was I making? Why would I trust my own judgment? That was insanity. I used to trust my father, only to find out he was trying to set up a shadow-

cabal to take over running the entire government! In what way was I set to decide if I could trust a dragon or not, a species we'd been at war with until a week ago!

There was more to Damian than he was showing, though, that much I was confident in. The “rules must be followed, and everyone must be punished equally” mentality was so strict and onerous. There was no way he was perfect.

After all, he hadn't told anyone about finding me in the restricted area. Why not? Why keep that to himself? That should classify as a breaking of his rules. Yet he'd done it for me and didn't seem bothered by it at all.

He wants something from me.

That was the only logical explanation. But what? Sex? That didn't seem his style.

Confused, I closed my eyes.

Instead of thinking, I fell asleep to daydreams of Damian showing me much, much more than just his six-pack ...

A violent jolt ran down his spine, nearly dislodging me, just as he was about to lose his underwear.

“Aurora.”

My eyes popped fully open at the concern in his tone. “Yeah? What's—What the hell is that?”

“I don't know,” he said stiffly, setting us down a few dozen feet from the roiling circle of golden energy hovering just above the ground. “But it looks to me like there's a hole in the shield.”

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Damian

My claws dug deep into the soft earth of the plateau as I set us down.

“A hole?” Aurora asked, sounding as surprised as I felt. “Is that a normal thing to happen?”

“No,” I said, waiting while she quickly clambered down my wing to plant her feet on the ground.

There was no need for me to help her this time. She steadied herself for a brief moment and then walked through the knee-high grasses toward the tear in the air.

Shifting back, I followed. “Don’t get too close,” I warned, but she was already stopping.

The hole, if that was what it really was, had to be fifty feet across and the same high. A giant oblong circle hovering just off the end of the plateau. The edges were frayed in a golden energy that wove its own tapestry in never-ending motion.

“It doesn’t seem to be getting any bigger,” I said after watching the edges for several minutes.

“No, it’s just sort of hanging there. Doing nothing but looking ominous. It doesn’t even look like a hole. Like, I can see the ocean on the other side. It’s like a circle of energy. If I didn’t know there was a shield, I’d think that’s what it was.”

“Good point.” I paced out the length of it, noting that the circle dropped slightly below the base of the plateau. Was that important? I had no idea. This was all brand new to me.

“Do you think this has anything to do with the missing guard?”

I looked over my shoulder at Aurora’s musing, noting the skeptical frown on her face and letting my own match her expression. “I don’t believe in coincidences like that.”

“Then where did he go? Out there?” she asked, pointing. “Why?”

“Maybe a storm blew a ship close by,” I suggested. “It’s not that big or high up in terms of the size of the ocean, but the color is certainly very noticeable from a distance. Could be it attracted someone.”

“Maybe.” Aurora didn’t sound like she agreed.

Stepping closer, I tried to peer down in case the guard was somehow pinned to the base of the plateau by the endless waves that crashed against it, creating a never-ending roar of background noise.

“Anything?”

I shook my head, looking up into the sky through the hole just to see if our missing guard had taken to the air. I brought my hand up to shield my eyes from the sunlight. “No, I don’t—”

At that moment, light flared from the edges of the hole. Tendrils of golden energy reached out to flay against me like the ends of a whip. They touched my skin, and I exploded with pain while being tossed backward like a ball of paper in a gust of wind.

My feet caught on something, and I spun wildly, feet over head.

Then everything went black.

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It was the tapping of fingers against my cheek that dragged me out of the darkness.

“Damian? Damian! Wake up! Wake. Up! Please!”

I blinked, slowly bringing Aurora’s panicked face into focus.

“Shhh,” I said, her voice too loud. “I’m right here. Calm down. There’s no need to get all worked up.”

My voice sounded like I’d run it across a sanding belt a few thousand times. Dry and croaky, it hurt to talk.

“Worked up? Worked up? You’ve been unconscious for five minutes!” She sat down hard next to my head.

It was only then my befuddled brain noticed the tear tracks down her face. Had she been crying over me? No, that was preposterous. More likely she’d believed she was stranded on the edges of the isles with no way back. Yes, that made much more sense.

“I’m awake now,” I rasped, trying to turn over.

Moving felt inalienably wrong . Nausea swept over me, threatening to disgorge the contents of my stomach all over the ground.

Maybe I'm not ready to move just yet. Yeah, let's just rest for a little bit.

"Hey," I whispered, seeing Aurora's shoulders shake. "It'll be okay. You won't be stranded."

Her head came up, a muddy confusion discoloring her eyes. "Stranded? What are you talking about?"

"I don't know." The sky was still spinning. "I don't know."

She edged closer, once more leaning over me. Her hair fell on either side of her face, blocking much of the spinning, twirling clouds in the sky from my view. Leaving nothing but Aurora and her beautiful eyes and pretty little face.

I reached up and touched her chin just below the little cleft at its base. "You really are beautiful, you know."

A stillness crept over her, like a barrier between what I could see and the real her. "Um, thanks ... Are you sure you're okay?"

Despite the pullback, her eyes never left mine. I stared into the green abyss within, getting lost in it as I fought my dragon back, forcing it to stay down, to ...

No, that was wrong. I should've been fighting my dragon, but it was strangely quiet, unwilling to speak up. Did it know that now was the wrong time? Was that why? There was a hole in the shield. Now wasn't the time to be lying on my back, daydreaming about a human woman.

I needed to figure out what it meant and find the stolen scepters so I could stop it before the entire shield fell.



“I’ll be okay,” I said, grunting and groaning as I got first to my knees.

The ground heaved and trembled, throwing me off balance. When Aurora got to her feet and stood as if nothing were wrong, I knew it wasn’t actually moving. It was just my mind. The blast from the energy surrounding the hole had really messed with my internal circuits.

“Whoa, easy!” she cried as I stood up, only to stumble drunkenly.

Getting under one shoulder, Aurora held me tight, letting me use her for balance. I stiffened, abruptly aware of the feminine form practically molded to my side. Her entire body pressed into me. It was impossible not to feel her breasts against my ribs and chest as I hung off her like a sailor stumbling on his sea legs.

I braced myself for an onslaught from my dragon, but again, it never came, never presented itself, though I knew it should be going insane. We’d never been this close before, this ... touching.

“Damian? Are you okay? You’re breathing a little deep.”

“I am?” I blinked, focusing on the here and the now and not Aurora’s body and what I wanted to do to it. “I’m sorry. I ... just need a minute. That was a solid blow. I’m not sure I’ve ever been hit that hard before.”

It took another minute and a lot of deep, slow breathing, but eventually, I steadied myself. With everything properly rebooted and functioning once more, I stood on my own, rolling my shoulders to relax and loosen tense muscles.

Aurora studied my face. “You look better now. Not nearly as pale.”

Then she smacked my arm.

I recoiled in surprise more than pain. “Why did you do that?”

“Don’t scare me like that again,” she said, crossing her arms and looking anywhere but my direction. “That was not fun. I don’t want to do that again.”

“I’ll do my best not to. Trust me. I didn’t enjoy it either.”

“You’ll enjoy it less if you die and I have to come give you a proper piece of my mind for it.”

I frowned, trying to figure out just how she would do that.

“Yes, I know it’s not possible,” she said, sighing. “So, now that you seem back to normal, what do we do from here?”

We both glanced at the hole in the shield and the threatening golden energy swirling around its edges.

“First,” I said, glaring at it, “we stay away from that thing. Secondly, I take another moment to catch my breath, then we’ll go looking for our missing border guard.”

Aurora nodded. “That sounds good to me. I’d be happy to stay far, far away from that thing.”

“Me, too,” I said, walking on my own to put some space between us so I could shift back. “My muscles are all achy from it. Tomorrow will probably be tender.”

“Are you okay to fly?” There was a hint of unease.

“Yes. I wouldn’t put you in danger. It’ll be sore, but nothing that will actively impede us from looking. Besides, we’ll have a better idea of spotting anything from in the

air.”

Aurora shrugged, acknowledging the truth of that. “Okay.”

I smiled at her, then closed my eyes and shifted, waiting for the surge of power that would flow over me as my dragon was set loose, freeing the beast from within.

But nothing happened.

My dragon wasn’t there.

Aurora

Settling himself a second time, Damian let his arms fall and his head rise ever so slightly, just as he always did before shifting.

Except he just continued to stand in front of me.

“Are performance issues a normal thing with dragons?” I teased after he tried a third time. “Do you need me to go hide behind a boulder or something?”

Damian’s face was tight. He didn’t find it funny. After trying a fourth time, his eyes opened to stare at me.

“Are you okay?” I asked, stepping forward. “You look pale.”

He shook his head, alarm growing. “No. I don’t think I am.”

“What do you mean? You said you were feeling good.”

“I am,” he said softly, rubbing his chest with one hand. “But my dragon isn’t responding.”

“It’s being stubborn? I don’t understand.”

“No,” he said, a wild unease creasing the corners of his eyes. “I don’t think it’s there. It’s not there. It’s missing !”

“Calm down,” I said, grabbing his shoulders, hoping he would listen to me. If he didn’t, I had no hope of physically restraining him. “Talk to me, Damian. How can it be missing? Where could it possibly go?”

“Nowhere!” he shouted, pulling away from me. “It’s a part of me. It and I are one. Don’t you get it? It can’t go anywhere. But it’s not there!”

“So, you feel, what, empty? I don’t know what it’s like to have a dragon in my head. Help me out here.”

“It’s like having another part of you. A living part, with its own basic thoughts and ideas, emotions, desires. It’s all there , and it lives in a corner of your mind. It speaks in basic emotions and images, senses, things like that. We don’t actually talk , but we interact, for lack of a better word. When I go to shift, I let it out. I free the beast to exert control over our body. I stay in command of the brain, in charge of us, but it tries to take control sometimes, too. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain because it’s just who we are.”

“I think you did a pretty good job, actually.” I stepped closer again, reaching out. “Give me your hand.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you need to stop and breathe and think about this. Freaking out won’t help. I’m sure once we get back to people, someone can tell you what’s going on.”

“I doubt it.” He frowned. “This isn’t supposed to be possible. I’ve never heard of it happening to anyone before. It’s not normal. ”

“That’s not good,” I said as he gave me his hand, letting me take it in both of mine. I held it firmly so he couldn’t pull away easily.

“No,” he agreed. “It’s not.”

“Okay. But we don’t need to flip out over it. Not here. Do we? We need to work together and get home.”

Damian smiled. “I’m sorry. This is probably terrifying for you, too, isn’t it? Don’t worry. I am ... very confused and alarmed. But you’re going to be fine. We’re going to be fine.”

“You’re sure? We’re a long way from anywhere.”

“Not that far,” he said. “It was only a four-hour flight to get out here. If we don’t report in tonight, the sovereign will send someone to follow up. And even if she doesn’t, the nearest town is a half-day’s walk, maybe a bit more.”

I glanced at the sun setting slowly over the island to our west. “Not tonight.”

“No,” he admitted. “We’re stuck out here for the night. But there’s plenty of fresh water further inland. We’ll wander and look for our missing guard. I think I know what happened to him now.”

The shiver that ran down his arm was extremely powerful. “What was that all about?”

“I was just thinking. I got close to the breach and stray energy smacked me down. Hard. What if our guard saw it and tried to go through to make sure nothing was out there? The energy that would’ve hit his dragon as he tried to pass through might’ve killed him.”

I couldn’t fault the logic. “Let’s hope not.”

“Agreed.”

Putting the breach at our backs, we headed off the plateau into the maze of rocky landscape that came right up to the ocean as far we could see. Our options on where to go narrowed quickly, presenting us with two paths, one through a narrow gorge and another seemed to meander around the edge of a high bluff. Stone and grass scree covered the slope on the other side, dropping away steeply at some point into the canyon below.

Neither option was maintained. It was either that or try to scale the bluffs even higher. With Damian unable to shift, that option was out. I was not a climber by any means.

“I’ll go first,” Damian announced in a tone that told me not to bother arguing, as if I’d been so inclined.

I wasn’t. I knew how tough dragons were. A fall from here wouldn’t hurt him badly. It could, however, kill me.

“Go right ahead,” I said. “Thank you for being so brave. I don’t like the looks of either of these.”

“Me neither,” he agreed, heading for the cliff-side path instead of the gorge. “We’ll go this way and try to get higher to see what we can see.”

I followed along, three steps behind, just in case. The pathway was narrow yet wider than it had seemed at a distance. Two feet wasn’t much, but it was easy enough to follow.

We were just about to go around a corner and out of sight of the plateau when disaster struck.

“It evens up out here,” Damian called. “Nice and solid ground.”

“Got it!” I called, happy to hear that as I took another step. “Does it head uphill at—”

I never completed my sentence because the ground beneath my foot gave way, leaving nothing but open air.



Aurora

Screaming, I reached out to try to grab onto something, anything, that would stop my slide into the darkened canyon below.

Stone cracked deafeningly as a huge swath of the ledge simply came apart on either side of me. My fingers snagged on an outcropping. The rock dug deep, but it held.

For a moment.

There was another horrifying crack as a line appeared in the rock, and it gave way, flying off from the edge as I slid down the nearly vertical wall that was all that was left of the path I'd been standing on an instant ago.

My feet hit first, sliding as I tried desperately to slow the descent. Then my body hit, and I bounced off the rocky incline, more scree coming loose and clattering down around me as I half-slid, half-fell.

Eventually, I hit the bottom, catching my knee and spinning around. I screamed once more, but the effect served to turn my fall into more of a barrel roll, which lessened the blow as I hit the bottom and rolled away onto a blessedly horizontal surface once more.

My body was screaming at me from the fall, and I groaned in pain from the multitude of bumps and bruises I'd surely accumulated.

But I was alive.

“ Aurora! ”

Damian appeared far above me, still in the daylight, looking like an angel sent from the heavens, his face aglow.

Before I could respond, the ledge under him gave way as well, forcing him to scramble farther back.

“Shit!” I screamed, hauling my battered and sore body out of the way as fresh rocks came crashing down, some big enough to do serious damage if they hit me.

“ What is it? Are you okay? ” Damian’s voice called from somewhere out of sight.

“I’m fine!” I shouted back, the fresh spike of adrenaline from avoiding the mini-avalanche having cut through the brain fog post-fall. “Sore. Some cuts. Probably a lot of bruises. But nothing broken, no serious damage. But you have to stay back. If you get too close, more will fall, and that could be bad.”

“ I’m coming down to you! ” he hollered back.

“No! Not yet. It’s not safe. You’re going to put me in danger. Just hold on,” I said, dusting myself off. “Ow, fuck, that hurt.”

“ Aurora? What was that about? What hurt? ”

“Nothing, I was just dusting myself off and forgot my body is going to be one giant bruise. I’m fine!”

His concern was warming, and I tried to make sure I didn’t bite his head off, despite the full-body ache currently slamming into me as my nervous system properly catalogued everything that had been hurt.

“ You’re sure ?”

“Yes, I’m fucking sure!” I called back, turning sharply to direct my voice right at him. The abrupt movement triggered new waves of pain. “Fucking ow . Dammit. Sonofa bitch! ”

There was a long silence, followed by what sounded like someone covering up ...

“Are you laughing at me?” I shouted at him. “This isn’t funny!”

“ Of course not!” came the disembodied reply. “ I would never do something like that!”

I paused midway through my scan of the canyon, its base littered with rockfall debris, both fresh, and older that had become covered in a layer of dirt and moss. Had I imagined the hitch in his voice?

“Was that a joke , Damian? Are you making a joke now, of all the times to demonstrate a sense of humor?”

“ I have a sense of humor ,” he protested.

“Oh, sorry! I just wasn’t aware you packed it today. Usually, you leave it locked in the safe.”

“ That’s so not true.” Long pause. “ I don’t lock the safe.”

Despite everything, I sputtered with laughter until a few tears trickled down my face.

“ Feeling better? ”

“Yes, yes, I am.” I took a deep breath. “Thank you, Damian. I’m okay now.”

Whether his little back and forth was preplanned or not, my breathing was slowed. The pain, while prominent, was no longer in the driver’s seat, leaving me free to assess my situation.

I didn’t like what I saw.

“ I don’t know how I’m going to get down to you from here. Not without risking another rockslide.”

My mouth opened to tell him to just fly down here and get me.

Shit. He can’t.

“I agree,” I said instead, grateful I hadn’t spoken. Damian didn’t need that extra pressure right now. I couldn’t begin to imagine what it must be like to be in his place, missing a core part of himself. “Let me look around a bit down here. Maybe you can follow the ledge and see if it presents itself a way down. Then we can meet up somewhere over there?”

I moved to the middle of the canyon, noting it was the area clearest of rocks and thus probably the safest for me to be while I explored.

“ Shout loudly if something happens. I’ll hear you ,” he said before heading off.

Looking both directions, I weighed my options on which way to proceed. Going back didn’t seem to make sense. Damian couldn’t go that way, not safely, and the canyon ended just before the plateau where the ground leveled out. But it was forty feet above me, and I didn’t recall any ramp down to where I was at.

Which meant going forward. Picking my way, I kept an eye out for anything that might help get me back up and for any potential danger. The last thing I wanted was to get caught in an even bigger landslide.

No more than fifty feet and a corner later, I came to a stop. The grayish ground ahead was marked by a giant dark spot. In a circular pattern around it, smaller dots were visible.

It looked like than an impact sight.

Was it blood?

I looked around, suddenly aware I had no idea what sorts of predators might exist on the island. Birds and other wildlife had become far more prevalent during our flight out, and it only stood to reason that with prey would come hunters.

Had I just wandered into the territory of one?

Nervous but knowing that going back was even less of an option now since it would only trap me in a dead end, I crept forward. My head swung back and forth nonstop, scanning the walls and the ledge high above. Mountain lions wouldn't hesitate to drop down on me.

My foot scraped on the stone, and I froze, the noise wildly loud in my ears as it reverberated off the walls.

If whatever creature was down here didn't know it wasn't alone before, it certainly was aware now.

Somewhere ahead of me there was a noise.

Blood pressure spiking, I crouched down, taking a rock in both hands. It wouldn't be of much help in a fight with a wild beast, but it would be better than my bare hands.

Could it be a bear?

Frozen in place, my feet unwilling to move forward to investigate, I tried to stay settle into place without making a sound.

In the deafening silence that followed, I strained to listen for even the slightest sound. I was in hostile territory and thus at a disadvantage. Whatever was out there likely had far better hearing than I did. My breathing was probably loud enough to draw its focus. I just had to hope Damian could get there in time and—

My ears perked up as the sound came once more. It sounded vaguely familiar. Almost like a low moaning.

Tiptoeing forward, I spied the source of the noise.

“Damian!” I shouted up and out of the canyon. “If you can hear this, hurry up! I found him! I found the guard!”

At least, that was who I assumed the prone figure lying on the canyon floor was as I rushed to his side.

He did not look good. One leg was twisted at an unnatural angle, and his entire body and face was one massive wound. I looked back at the blood spatter behind us, trying to figure out what had happened to him but drew a blank.

“Hey, it's okay, we found you,” I said, crouching down next to him.

The guard didn't stir. Just another low moaning, almost keening sound. He was

unconscious.

A cold chill stirred in my chest. Dragons healed fast. Yet the guard hadn't.

Was he missing his dragon, too? It had been over a day, reportedly, and it still wasn't back?

What does that mean for Damian? Will his dragon ever return?

Damian

Not for the first time, I paused to look down into the canyon, trying to judge the depth to the bottom. I took a squat, testing the muscles in my legs. There was no change. They still didn't have the same snap to them, the same carefully restrained power, that had been ever-present before my dragon up and disappeared.

Come on, you stupid thing. Where are you, wake up, we have shit to do!

Try as I might, there was no response. A hole in my head where its presence had lived with me for nearly twenty years. We'd gone through so much since it had awoken. Now, it was gone.

I reached out to steady myself on the cliff wall.

Now wasn't the time for this. I needed to find a way down to Aurora. She was scared, alone, and hurt. She said it wasn't bad, but I didn't care. That was where I needed to be. I would not have a breakdown over my missing other half while she remained in peril.

Snarling angrily, I set off once more, taking deep breaths to calm myself while looking for anything that might serve as a way to get me down to her—but also allow us back up.

The sound of a female voice shouting reached me. I couldn't make out the words, but it sounded alarmed.



Something had happened with Aurora.

I was at the edge of the cliff in an instant, heading legs-first over the edge as I slid down the almost completely vertical incline without a care for my own well-being.

A second later, my right foot hit an outcropping, and I bounced into the air. Away from the wall.

“Oh, shit,” I said when there was suddenly nothing below me. I fell twenty feet to the bottom, bracing to absorb as much of the drop as I could with my legs.

The impact came, and I bent into a deep squat, ready to roll backwards to fully bleed off the speed, but surprisingly, my legs held up. The jolt that ran up my skeleton would leave an ache, but I was alive, on my feet, and mostly unharmed.

Not pausing to do more than be thankful, I took off, heading back in the direction I’d left Aurora. I just hoped I wasn’t too late.

Rounding a corner, I vaulted a large boulder blocking most of the path, going over instead of around, not wanting to slow down.

“I’m coming!” I hollered, hoping she would hear me. “Just hold on.”

My boots slapped against the stone, the impacts echoing raucously off the stone walls. If something was down there with Aurora, they would know something was about to arrive.

I came hurtling around another sharp turn and nearly ran her over. I quickly saw she wasn’t alone.

“How did he get down here?” she asked, looking up at me with troubled eyes. I

dropped to a knee next to the unconscious guard, noting his broken leg and facial trauma. “He’s not doing well, Damian. I don’t know what to do. Dragons are supposed to heal, but he’s not. He just keeps moaning.”

Hearing her concern was unexpected. Between that and the way she kept stroking the guard’s shoulder and talking to him in a soft sing-song voice, I would’ve expected to find her tending to a human. Not a dragon.

She’s treating him like he’s one of her own.

Or perhaps for Aurora, there was no distinction. All she saw was someone hurt and in need.

Again, I needed to readjust my thoughts about her. My preconceived notions of humans were being thrown out the window at every opportunity by the auburn-haired beauty with eyes of jade.

Another moan, this one louder, grounded me back in reality.

“I don’t know how he got here,” I said, addressing Aurora’s first question. “Not yet, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? He’s here now, and we found him. You found him.”

“Don’t give me any credit. All I did was take a wrong turn off a cliff,” she said. “What do we do with him?”

“First,” I said, looking at his leg unhappily, “I’m going to have to set his leg.”

She looked at me, eyes wide. “You know how to do that?”

I nodded. “Most dragons do. Our bodies heal, but broken bones have to be set to heal;

otherwise, they heal badly. It's a good thing he hasn't healed; otherwise, this would be a nasty situation to fix."

"Okay." She swallowed. It was the only clue to the nerves she had. Her voice was as steady as a rock. "What do I do?"

I directed her through what I wanted to do. "This won't be pretty or permanent, but it'll get it straight so we can at least move him."

"Move him?" She bit her lip. "Is that a good idea?"

"We can't stay down here. Nobody will find us. There's no water here, nothing to eat. We have to get to a better location farther inland where we can find all those things."

"Okay."

I grabbed the guard's leg, and then, with a nod at Aurora, I reset it to the best of my abilities, trying to ignore the horrible noises coming from near the break.

The guard's muscles seized abruptly, and sweat poured from his face, but still, he didn't wake up.

Aurora dabbed at the rivulets, keeping them out of the guard's eyes. "Is there nothing more to do?"

"No," I said. "He's either going to pull through, or he won't. At this point, it's up to him, not us."

Carefully, with Aurora's help, I lifted the guard onto my back, letting his legs hang freely. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best I had to work with until we could get out of the canyon and find something to splint his injury with.

It took nearly an hour of walking the winding canyon to find a reasonable path back to the surface. Then it took us another hour to actually get up it. I went first to ensure it was doable, then I returned to help Aurora to the top. After that, I spent some time gathering wood and enough of the natural growing long grass to fashion a very basic splint to steady the guard's leg.

Then, with one hand holding the guard, the other clutching desperately to the incline in front of me, I ascended to the top.

"Here, let me help you." Aurora grabbed under my arm and added a little boost to get me over the top. I gently set the guard down without causing too much discomfort.

The unconscious dragon shifter moaned softly, then subsided back into silent unconsciousness, only the slow rise and fall of his chest giving away that life remained within him.

"Thank you," I said, meeting her eyes and smiling slightly.

She smiled back, a hint of red flowing into her cheeks. Why was she blushing?

"Where do we go now?" she asked, quickly distracting me.

"Somewhere we can camp for the night. Make a fire." I gestured toward the plains in the distance. "That way."

"Do you want some help carrying him?" she looked skeptically at the much larger border guard.

"I appreciate your willingness, but no, I've got this," I replied, already bending to lift him into a modified fireman's carry. "You can lead though."

Aurora's eyebrows rose slightly, but then narrowed in fierce determination. "Okay."

She set off, and I followed along. We walked for hours, mostly in silence. I watched the sun set behind the horizon in front of us, the sky slowly darkening.

"We should set up camp soon," I told her, gesturing to a nearby stand of trees. "There will do."

Aurora came to a stop, scanning left and right.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"No," she said confidently, shaking her head. "But it's getting late. We should find somewhere to sleep for the night. I'm thinking those trees will do."

She pointed in the same direction I had just moments before. I looked at the trees. Then at her.

"Do you disagree?" she asked.

"Nooo, but ..."

"You told me to lead. So, I'm leading." She stuck out her tongue.

Despite everything, despite the emptiness where my dragon should be, I laughed. As I did, a fresh tingle swept over me, brightening my spirits considerably.

"Very well, Commander. Lead the way," I said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Much better," she said under her breath, though loud enough she knew I would hear.

We got the guard settled in, and then I cleared an area in the dirt and began to build up tiny twigs and dried grasses into a little tent.

“ Come on, please work,” I whispered to myself while Aurora was out of hearing range collecting larger pieces of wood. “Please.”

I called forth fire and ordered it to flick from my finger to the little pile of kindling. Nothing happened. I tried again. And again.

We needed the fire. The temperature was dropping. It wouldn't drop to the point of freezing, but it would cool off significantly, and I wanted to make sure Aurora would stay warm. I knew humans were more susceptible to that sort of thing, but I didn't truly know much.

Focusing harder, I demanded fire respond to me as I flicked a finger toward the kindling. I didn't see anything, but I felt ... something .

Again. Nothing. Again. Nothing. Again!

A tiny hint of a flame sparked on the tip of my index finger and disappeared.

AGAIN!

I poured all my energy and anger into the command.

A couple of sparks scattered across the kindling, and my head erupted in agony, doubling me over. But one of the sparks caught a piece of dried grass just right, and it began to smolder.

I had to keep it going. This was the only chance I was going to get. Ignoring the fierce pain hammering at the insides of my skull, I blew softly on the grass, feeding it

with oxygen. The headache wasn't getting better. Instead, it was worsening, tightening into my temples like vise clamps.

But the grass caught. True flames ran up its length, jumping to other grass.

Fire.

On my side from the pain, I grabbed for some smaller twigs to keep feeding it, but I couldn't find them. The moan I heard this time wasn't from the guard. It came from me.

"Easy," a feminine voice said, hand resting on my shoulder. "I've got this."

I lay there in blinding pain as Aurora slowly and expertly fed the fire until it was a nice, respectable size, with several large pieces of fallen branches crackling away merrily.

"You've done that before," I said, having waved off her concern. I could handle a headache for the time being. After all, it actually helped calm me because it proved that my other half was still a part of me. If I could still control fire, then my dragon was in there, too. Somewhere.

Aurora nodded, watching the fire with her eyes but her mind somewhere else.

"Tell me about her."

She looked up. "About who?"

"The woman you were before you came here. Who is she? I want to know her."

I want to know you, Aurora.

Aurora

“Who I was?” I whispered, returning my stare to the wild frenzy of flames as they danced and reached for the sky high above them, uncaring of anything else.

“Yes. Tell me about yourself. Where did you learn to build a fire?”

I smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. “When I was young, my family would go camping several times a year. That’s where I learned. Since then, I’ve gone camping and hiking often enough to not forget.”

The weight of Damian’s stare was palpable. Out of the very corner of my eyes, I could see him looking at me as I stared into the depths of the fire. I stayed that way, not wanting him to detect any pain in my voice.

“Why do you sound sad about that?” he asked softly.

Apparently, it didn’t matter what I wanted. He noticed anyway.

I closed my eyes. “It’s a long story.”

“As it happens, I have all night to listen to you. Unless you’ve got other plans,” he added wryly.

My lips quivered, but the smile died before it could bloom. Too much hurt could do that.



“If it’s too much,” Damian added hurriedly, “then don’t.”

“I know.” I took a deep breath. Perhaps it was time I told someone, talked to them about the pain that had never left. That would probably never leave. If it were my fate to be exiled among dragons for the rest of my life, what did it matter?

“Someone hurt you, didn’t they?” Damian’s hand found my leg, giving it a squeeze.

“Yes,” I said, the crackle of flames nearly drowning out my half-whispered reply.

“I’m sorry that happened to you. You didn’t deserve it.”

“How can you be so sure?” There it was. The question I’d been wrestling with, trying to understand. I’d been doing the right thing, looking into what my father was up to, hadn’t I? So, why was I the one getting punished and not him?

It wasn’t fair!

“Because I’ve seen who you are,” he said quietly.

Only when he gave another squeeze did I become aware that his hand had never left my leg. It sat there, halfway up my thigh, just resting. And I hadn’t even noticed.

Or did I, and I didn’t care? Perhaps I need the reassurance right now. I don’t like this topic.

“Will you tell me what happened?” he urged gently.

I took a deep breath, held it for a pair of beats, then let it out slowly through my lips, all the while lost in the dance of the red-orange flames.

“I told you my father is a senator.”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s a powerful one. When I was young, he was always talking about helping people out, making the country a better place. I grew up essentially idolizing the ground he walked on. I wanted to be him, to do the same thing. So, I entered politics.”

Damian grunted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that I have some experience with the realm of politics,” he said knowingly. “I would expect it was jarring.”

“That’s putting it politely.” I nodded slowly. “But with my father there, someone who had done it, gone through it, and was still unscathed, why couldn’t I be?”

Damian’s eyes darkened, but he said nothing. Did he sense where I was going? Was it that predictable?

“The more I became exposed to the world of politics, the more I wondered. Questions arose. Things I couldn’t explain. The image the public saw compared to what I heard when I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It didn’t add up. So, I hired a private investigator to see if they could find anything.”

“How bad?” he asked, pulling himself into a sitting position at last, the muscles of his forehead relaxing. Whatever had been bothering him seemed to have passed.

“Worse than you can imagine,” I said through gritted teeth. “Bribery, embezzlement,

fraud, the works. He's trying to set himself up as the puppeteer from the shadows. Everything I thought I knew about him was wrong. It was all lies!"

I subsided abruptly, breathing heavily. Damian nodded but said nothing. We sat in silence next to one another, staring at the fire. Seconds became minutes. I fed it more wood to keep the flames going, basking in the warmth pouring off it.

"I'm sorry," Damian said sometime later, "that you had to go through that betrayal. Nobody should have to put up with that."

There was a genuine sorrow in his words, a sadness and empathy I appreciated. More than that, though, there was a lack of finality when he went silent again. As if there was more.

"Say it," I told him, waving a hand in the air between us. "Whatever it is, just get it out. Don't bother holding back with me. I can take it."

The left side of his face curved up in a smile. "Actually, I wasn't going to say anything rude. All I was going to say is that if it hadn't happened to you, I would never have met you. Never would have realized that there are humans out there who are worth it."

Worth it?

"Worth what?"

Damian glanced at me, locking eyes briefly, letting me see into them for a split second before he focused back on the fire. "My respect."

The heaviness with which he replied bespoke a lot of retrospection. How much time had he spent thinking about humans? More importantly, why?

“That can’t be easy to say. Someone like you is probably quite set in their ways.”

“Someone like me?”

“You know. A stickler for the rules. Someone who can’t follow the spirit of the law but instead must obey it by the letter.”

He leaned away while giving me a long side stare. “Is that how you think of me? A stickler for the rules?”

“Well,” I shrugged, “you are, Damian.”

“I’m the magistrate,” he said defensively. “Making sure the law is followed is my job. It’s who I am.”

“That’s the point,” I said quickly. “It doesn’t have to be both of those. Just one. It’s your job. It doesn’t have to be who you are.”

“Easy to say. Not so easy in reality.”

“Why not? You seem smart. You should be able to differentiate the two.”

He barked a laugh. “Thank you. I think. But it’s not me I was referring to. I suspect I could do as you say and keep the two separate. Most couldn’t. They would see me on duty, and then if I were to act differently while off duty, they would use that as an excuse. A reason that they should also be able to do same.”

“But—”

“Where does it end?” He shook his head sadly. “How much happens when I’m not the perfect image of a magistrate day in and day out? The line has to be drawn

somewhere, Aurora, and that means it must start with me . I cannot afford to be seen as anything but a ‘stickler for the rules,’ as you put it. Because others look to me for guidance.”

“Surely, there must be others,” I protested. “Why does it all have to be on your shoulders?”

“The sovereign has appointed me magistrate. That comes with the territory.” He shrugged, looking into the fire once more, the flames dancing in the endless depths of those magnetic gray eyes of his.

Something tightened the edges of his eyes.

“That’s not all, though, is it?” I asked, taking a guess.

“We all have family,” he said, suddenly meeting my gaze with renewed intensity. “Family that perhaps does not reflect well on us. Makes it difficult.”

“Your family doesn’t like what you do?” I tried to look away, to find something else to focus on, but I couldn’t. My eyes were locked on Damian. Every nerve ending in my body was coming alive, sending a cascade of reports to my brain, overwhelming it with information.

“My family is more the type that I see in my job than a guiding light to aid me along.”

“I’m sorry.” The warmth from the fire was spreading across my arm and face. At least, I thought it was from the fire.

I hadn’t realized how heavily the responsibilities of his position weighed on Damian. The need to never waver, never show any cracks, lest his people fall astray. I couldn’t

imagine the strength it took to stand up under that, day after day.

The scene with the young dragon shifter in the market the other day came to my mind. How gentle and firm, but also unyielding he'd been with seeing that justice was done. Not in a manner designed for public humiliation. Rather with learning and encouragement of growth.

Damian would be a great father one day.

"You're doing a good job," I told him, breaking the silence. My hand found his leg, giving it a squeeze of reassurance.

Our eyes locked once more. The fire crackled and popped beside us. Everything else stood still.

Holy shit. We're going to kiss, aren't we?

He swayed a little closer, looking deep into my soul while giving me a brief, unguarded glimpse into the part of him he kept shut off from everyone else. Everyone but me.

My heart pounded in my chest. It was going to happen. He was going to kiss me.

Damian came closer. My head tilted back, giving him unspoken permission.

From the other side of the fire, a deep, threatening growl announced we were no longer alone.

Damian

The spell was broken instantly as both our heads whipped around fast enough for things to pop and crack.

“What the hell was that?” Aurora hissed, pressing her firm, feminine body up against my side.

I shoved my hormones down and her behind me, my eyes already searching across the fire for the source of the noise. Not that I didn’t already know what it was.

A shadow moved, a shape just ever so darker than the space around it. When it moved, two tiny golden circles moved with it, reflecting the firelight.

It was as I’d feared.

“How bad is it?” Aurora whispered, fingers digging into my sides as she kept behind me.

“When I tell you,” I said, shifting to keep my body between her and the shadow, “run for your life.”

“My life?” she squeaked. “Where?”

I didn’t like the answer I had to give her. “The ocean.”

She choked. “The ocean?! But that’s, like, two miles away.”

“It’s a good thing you’re a hiker then, isn’t it?” I said, reaching out and piling all the remaining logs onto the fire. “It won’t follow you into the water. Wyverns hate it.”

“Why-what’s?” she squeaked, terror taking over as she tried to repeat the word.

“Wyverns,” I repeated harshly, noting the slow side-stepping of the creature on the other side of the fire. It was nearly ready. “Get a hold of yourself, Aurora. Right now. I can’t baby you. I don’t have time for that.”

“O-okay. Run for the water.”

“When I tell you,” I added, flames jumping higher, revealing the tip of the snout of the hunter stalking us before it eased back into darkness.

“What are you going to do?”

“Buy you some time,” I said. “Look around. Do you see any rocks? Anything I could use as a weapon?”

“Are you going to be okay?” Her voice was muffled as she dug around as I asked.

“If I could shift, it wouldn’t even be near us,” I said. “Wyverns are rare creatures, and they know better than to hunt true dragons. But you aren’t one ... and right now, I can’t shift to show it who’s boss.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” she said, shoving a rock into my left hand. “Will this do?”

“Perfect,” I said, hefting the chunk of stone twice the size of my fist. “Look for more.”



Then I cocked my arm back, noting the center point between the two golden orbs that were the wyvern's eyes and, with a roar, let it fly.

The beast honked loudly as my throw clipped its snout. Recoiling, it disappeared into the darkness.

"Did you kill it?"

"No, not at all," I said. "It's still out there. Watching."

"Do I run now?"

I shook my head. "I just made it mad. Now, it'll focus on me. Giving you time to get out of here."

Aurora clutched at my arm. "I can't leave you here. And what about the guard?"

"I can't protect everyone," I said calmly. "Maybe I can get a lucky blow in, drive it off. Who knows."

Another murderous growl echoed in the dark. The wyvern approached once more, shadows shifting, announcing its arrival. I watched, staring it down as the beast entered the light this time.

"It looks like a dragon!" Aurora cried from behind me.

Which was true. Aside from its lack of wings and smaller stature, a wyvern did resemble a dragon. It stood on four legs, a long tail and matching neck extending away from its body in opposite directions. Scales covered the beast's body in a mottled green and black combination.

“Close. A wild cousin, I suppose.”

“Can it breathe fire, too?” she asked suddenly.

“No, thank goodness.”

Any further questions were abandoned as the wyvern stalked firmly into the circle of light around the fire, bellowing challenges at us.

“Get ready,” I told Aurora, reaching desperately inside me.

Come on. Where are you! I need you right now. We have to fight this thing! I know you don’t want to miss out!

Any dragon loved an excuse for a good fight. Dealing with a wyvern who didn’t know its place was near the top of that list, too. Something about the feral nature of the flightless cousin just infuriated the dragon-mind.

But not this time.

The wyvern charged.

“Now!” I yelled, sending another chunk of stone hurtling at its face. Behind me, Aurora screamed and ran headlong for the water two miles away.

The wyvern accepted the blow this time, taking the pain to continue its charge. I spread my arms wide, trying to focus its attention on me so Aurora could run.

Obliging, the wyvern slammed straight into me. I flew backward, slamming hard into a thick tree trunk and spinning off to one side, where I ended up face down in the long grasses.

I lay there for a second, trying to convince my lungs to work, knowing I had to move. The wyvern wouldn't stop there. It would finish its kill. I had but seconds to gather myself.

Except the wyvern wasn't coming after me. Its heavy footsteps grew fainter as it headed in another direction.

Toward the coast.

Fresh adrenaline spiked, inflating my lungs and bringing everything around me into hyper-awareness. It was going after Aurora.

Pounding a fist into the dirt, I pushed myself to one knee and then to my feet.

"Hey!" I shouted, starting forward one unsteady step at a time, gathering speed slowly. "Hey, you! Ugly! Over here!"

The wyvern looked over its shoulder and slowed, clearly trying to decide what it wanted to do. I used that time to run toward it at an angle, putting myself between it and the direction Aurora had taken off in.

"You aren't getting her," I snarled, planting my feet and staring down the wild beast. "So, don't even try."

The wyvern reared back on its hind legs and roared. It knew a challenge when it saw one. Beating my chest, I stuck my face forward and bellowed back, an inarticulate sound of pure fury.

"She's not yours! She's mine!" Something took control of me, the words boiling up and out before I could think.

Front legs slamming into the ground, the wyvern charged, and I went to meet it. The longer I distracted it, the more focus I could put on myself and the longer Aurora would have to get to the coast.

To be safe.

That was all that mattered to me. Making sure she lived.

Protecting her.

A lightning bolt shot down my spine as I ran. I wanted her safe. I would defend her with my very life if that's what it took. Not just because she deserved it, but because I wanted to.

Something broke in my mind, a dam shattering, releasing power that had been contained.

Fury pounded my feet into the ground. I leapt into the air as the wyvern's snout snapped down, trying to bite me in half.

As I soared through the air, I called to that power and welcomed it into my veins, into my body, letting it surge through me.

I hit the ground on the far side of the wyvern on all four paws, with wings wide and flames spewing from my snout in a torrid stream that incinerated everything it touched. Grass, shrubs, and wyvern.

The fire-breath attack ran up the beast's flank, curling and melting scales until they popped free, scattering on the ground. The wyvern bleated in sudden terror as I stalked forward. Limping badly, it tried to run off, but it didn't matter. There was no escaping now.

My jaws clamped shut, and with a sharp twist, it was over.

Turning my head, I looked into the darkness to the east. There was only one last thing to do now. Spreading my wings wide, I took off, determined to catch her before she got too far.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

Aurora

I dove for cover as something swooped through the air overhead.

There's no way I'm making it to the coast.

Crawling as silently as possible behind a rock, I drew my knees to my chest, not wanting any part of me to be visible to whatever had made the noise.

It was the wyvern. You know it was. There's nothing else around.

I shook my head. It couldn't be the wyvern. It couldn't. Because if it were already coming after me, then that meant Damian was—

A tremor in the ground announced the beast was near. I could sense the vibrations of every step. I had to grab at my left hand to stop it from shaking, only to notice my right was also trembling.

Staying still was madness. The wyvern would find me and kill me. If I kept running, however, I could perhaps dodge it and stay out of its way long enough to reach the coast. More than likely, it would catch me and eat me, but there was a chance .

Get up. Get up. You can't sit still. Get up and run!

Before I could think about it further, I lit out of my hiding spot behind the rock and raced for the coast, not waiting the wyvern to find me. I didn't see it in the darkness, but I wasn't about to slow down and play Marco Polo either. If it wanted me, it had to

come and get me!

Something moved in the darkness.

I screamed and tried to duck as it came closer.

Strong hands wrapped themselves around me, lifting me from the ground. Shrieking at the top of my lungs, I struggled like a hooked fish, kicking as hard as I could.

There was a grunt, and then I was being lowered.

“Aurora!” a hearty bass voice shouted. “Aurora, snap out of it. It’s me! It’s Damian. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m here to protect you.”

I pushed away from him as my feet hit the ground, keeping some distance between us as my brain sought to reestablish control of my nervous center.

“Damian?” I yelped, unable to stop my voice from rising in pitch.

“Yes. It’s me.” He snapped his fingers and flames danced across his hand, providing some light. Cupping his other hand around the flames, he squeezed and then softly tossed a ball of flames into the air between us to hover over our heads.

I stared numbly for what had to be a full minute before it clicked.

“You’re back!” I shouted, looking around. “That was you? Your dragon? Is the wyvern ...?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” he said, smiling. “My dragon is back. That was me. The wyvern is dealt with. Our guard friend is alive.”

“That’s amazing!” I shouted. “How did you do that? How did you bring it back?”

His face grew still once more. Not upset, but solemn in its focus. On me.

“The wyvern tried to go after you.” He growled. “I couldn’t allow that to happen and live with myself.”

“Why not? I’m just a human,” I said, watching his face in the firelight, trying to discern what was going on in him.

“Just a human?” he whispered, shaking his head. “No, Aurora. You are far more than that.”

“I am?” the tightness in my throat made my voice hoarse.

“Yes.” That same growl.

I almost didn’t ask the question. Almost. But I had to know. Thirty years from now, I would have hated myself if I didn’t ask. “What am I?”

Damian was there. One moment, we were a dozen feet apart. The next, he was there . His lips crushed into mine, hungry and demanding as he entered my personal space and put his hands on my body.

He was alive.

I was alive.

We were kissing.

He was alive. I was alive. We were kissing!



My body was responding on its own, acting without the approval of my addled brain. Wrapping my hands around Damian's neck, I let him kiss me deeper and harder. Blood pounded in my ears as it flooded my head. Much of it, however, went elsewhere.

Where had this come from? Had it been there all along, buried beneath it all? I didn't know. The adrenaline high from near-death experience was blasting aside all my reservations, leaving me open to whatever I desired.

What did I desire?

At that moment, the answer was right in front of me. It was a tall dragon-man who'd shown me nothing but respect and trust from the very get-go. A gray-eyed man with a good heart and soul.

And a blisteringly hot body that was now pressing its rock-hard muscles against me, begging me to touch them, to run my fingers across every inch. Heat like a metal furnace blasted out from my crotch, broadcasting my desires freely.

"You're not hurt at all?" I whispered, head arched back to expose my throat as Damian kissed down my jaw, his lips finding that sensitive spot halfway to my collarbone and gently latching on.

"No," he said, speaking above the hiss of delight that his actions produced from me. "What about you?"

"I'm fine," I promised, tugging his shirt up and over his head. "It didn't touch me."

"No, it didn't," Damian agreed. "But I'm going to."

Oh. Fuck.

I flung myself back into his arms, propelled by the utter confidence of his statement. The intensity of his desire was a powerful attractant. Again, we kissed, fast and fierce, each seeking out the reassurance of the other. Hands began to move lower. Exploring. Touching, caressing. There was no denying there would be nothing but each other and our bodies under the dark sky and the light of his fire.

Until, somewhere in the distance, someone began calling for help. The sound interrupted our passionate embrace as both Damian and I looked for the source.

“Our border guard is awake,” he said without a hint of frustration. “Come, we must get to him.”

He took my hand and set off toward the fire and stand of trees. Just like that, Damian was gone, and the magistrate was back in the same old way. I looked down at our intertwined hands.

Well, maybe not the same old way.

Damian

“Send for a healer right away!” I ordered as I swooped low over the palace roof, angling my wings to slow me down as fast as possible before dropping onto my hind legs.

The two guards nearest me glanced at one another.

“Now!” I roared when neither moved.

Spurred into motion, one of them took off at a run, while the other jogged over to me.

“What’s going on?” he demanded to know as I continued to rest on my hind legs. My front claws were wrapped cautiously around the unmoving form of the guard.

Despite momentarily rousing himself, after several minutes of alertness, the guard had slipped back into unconsciousness. During his time awake, he’d never become lucid enough to give us any information. After some discussion, both Aurora and I had agreed that he needed to be brought back to the palace sooner rather than later.

“I can’t discuss it,” I told him, relaxing my tone. “But I need you to take him from my paws.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. Badly hurt. Careful of his leg, I put a splint on it, but it’ll need further attention.”

Between the two of us, we got the guard eased down onto the ground without too much jostling. It was critical that we prevent further injuries because getting him well so we could hear his full story was crucial to understanding what had happened with the hole in the shield.

Aurora slid down my wing, moving with practiced ease. I noted the confidence of her movement, a far cry from the fear she'd once shown.

How much of that was simple repetition and how much of it was due to the abrupt change between us, I couldn't be certain. Nor would I ask. It was not the time to be delving into personal ... situations. Not after what we'd learned on our trip.

I refrained from calling it a relationship, mostly because it wasn't. However, there could be no denying that things between her and me were different now. I'd never shared a kiss like that with anyone before. The fires her lips had lit in my mind and across my body were innumerable. Even now, as concerned as I was for the well-being of my people, I couldn't push the image from my mind, the memory of her mouth and mine and the underlying hunger for more.

When did I start to think such a thing would be okay with a human? She was always attractive, easy on the eyes, but taking it to this level?

The truth was it had surprised me completely. Why I had said the things I said, did the thing I did by kissing her? It all happened so fast, and I was still trying to process it, even as we gathered up the guard and headed toward the healers' wing.

Could I handle this and the situation developing with respect to the safety of my entire nation? Or would I become too distracted and do them a disservice? There were just too many questions. I needed to focus.

The healer on duty met us halfway there and took the guard from me, his dragon

strength easily allowing him to heft the limp form.

“Severe break in his leg. Likely other internal damage,” I said, listing off all we knew. “Likely impact from high altitude. Healing does not seem to be engaging as per normal. He regained conscious for a few minutes but was not aware of himself or his surroundings during that time.”

“Understood. You did well. I’ll take it from here.”

The healer bustled off to do his job, leaving me alone in the hallway.

Aurora appeared at my side, a reminder that perhaps I wasn’t entirely alone.

Her presence was expected, but I was caught fully by surprise when her fingers slipped through mine. So stunned was I by her display of affection in public, I froze, unable to grip her hand back.

She gave me a quick squeeze and then her hand withdrew. Hopefully, she would understand that it was only surprise and not a flat-out rejection that had kept me still.

As if reading my mind, Aurora lowered her head to rest it on my shoulder. It was only for a second, and she quickly stood straight as if nothing had happened.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“In time, yes.”

“What do we do now?”

Was I imagining the subtle undertone of that question? A hint about the unacknowledged change between us, perhaps, or was it a genuine curiosity? I wasn’t

sure, and unfortunately, I couldn't take the time find out either. Duty was a heavy burden, and its weight settled around my neck like a noose.

"The sovereign must be informed," I said, wishing I could take the time to—

To what? What would you do if you had no duty at the moment? Would you take her to your room and seduce her, giving in to the urges you can't control? Where would that get you? What would that do but further complicate your life?

Further complicate it? With the way things were going, could it get any worse?

In hindsight, I should never have asked myself that question.

Because it can. And it did.

Aurora

I slammed the door behind me, causing Damian to spin in surprise.

“How does she put up with those cretins?” I hissed, shaking my hands free of imaginary debris. “I feel dirty just having been in the same room as them.”

Damian blinked owlishly, his eyes flicking to the door. “I take it you’re unhappy with Councilors Kerstun, Laurana, and Parun?”

We had just returned from debriefing the Sovereign about the breach in the shield, where the three slimy councilors had also been present.

“You think?” I snapped.

“Yes, I do.” He didn’t back down. “Are you done? Or is there more you’d like to say before we get to the councilors?”

I didn’t enjoy being called out, especially when he was so calm about it, like he had all the answers locked and loaded. It just made me angrier.

“No, I’m not done,” I said, forging ahead anyway, my temper getting the better of me.

“Didn’t think so.”

If looks could kill, he’d be melting into the floor. Instead, he just stood there, arms

crossed, looking so impossibly sexy with his confidence that it was growing hard to stay angry at him.

Which meant I had to dig deeper.

“Don’t act so smug,” I said, stabbing a finger in his direction. “I just spent the past thirty minutes being accused of all the worst things again from your councilors, and I stood there and took it. Do you know why I did that, Damian? Do you?”

“Enlighten me.” He wasn’t fazed.

“Because after listening to their tirades, when all we were supposed to do was inform the sovereign of what we found regarding the guard and the shield, after all that bullshit, you stood there, and you agreed with them! ”

Damian nodded. Not that there was any point denying it. The meeting had just concluded, and I wasn’t twisting any facts.

“Do you have any idea how humiliating that was? All you had to say was ‘No, she wasn’t involved with stealing any of the scepters. I know her and trust her.’ That was it, Damian, but you didn’t say that. Instead, when they used their bullshit logic about ‘There were no attempts on another scepter while she was gone means we have no proof it wasn’t her either because it could be coincidence,’ you agreed. You didn’t call them out. You just said ‘Yes, it could still be her.’ That’s what you said. Do you remember?”

“I said it,” he rumbled. “Of course I remember.”

“So, why don’t you feel like a jerk about it?” I snapped. “You seem happy.”

He rolled his eyes. “Now, who’s the one spouting bullshit, Aurora?”



I was so utterly unprepared for his choice of language that my thoughts came apart like a crumbling house of cards, crashing into a million pieces as I tried to sort them out.

“There’s something you need to remember,” he said, taking a step closer. “When I am in that room, when the sovereign is present, when a councilor, or multiple councilors, is present, I am acting as the magistrate. I am the law. The law considers all sides without prejudice. That is what I must do. It is who I must be. Not because I want to, but because I am .”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “There’s always choice. Don’t act like a politician, please. I am so done with them.”

“That’s part of why you’re so upset,” he said, nodding. “I know. You don’t like the strictness with which I follow the rules. You wish I would bend them. But tell me, what sounds more like a politician to you? Someone who follows the rules, or someone who bends them for a person close to them?”

He paused while I tried to come up with a good response.

“But there’s more, I think. More to why you’re angry. More to why I had to say what I did.”

“Like what?”

Damian came close until he was inside my bubble, my personal space, and didn’t stop. I backpedaled slightly, feeling my shoulders press against the wall as he loomed above me.

“Even if I wanted to defend you, which I did, I had to take their side, despite knowing better. If the councilors got a hint that there was something going on between us,

anything , then they will use that information. They will use it to accuse me of being compromised and unable to do my job. They might even use it to take you away from me.”

His voice wavered for the first time with the last sentence.

“They know you were spotted outside your room on another floor. I have already bent the rules by not telling anyone where I initially found you, so close to the chamber where the scepter was held. I have put my trust in you, and I ask that you please return the favor.”

It was my turn to feel guilty. After all the words I’d hurled at him, he was right. That was a big breach, and I knew it was bothering him to keep it secret, but he was doing it for me.

“Okay,” I said, nodding slowly. “That’s a fair argument. I’ll try to remember it.”

“Thank you.” He was still right in front of me, forcing my head back to be able to look into his face. “That leaves one more issue about why you got so mad.”

“Another reason?” I sighed. “I’m getting tired of you being in the right here.”

“Then you aren’t going to like this,” he said.

“Hit me,” I drawled. “Let’s just get it out there.”

“The final reason you’re angry I didn’t defend you isn’t because I know you’re innocent. It’s because you like me, and you didn’t enjoy hearing me not act the same.”

I stared into his eyes, unwilling, or perhaps unable, to come up with a good reply.

He thinks I like him. Do I?

The answer wasn't the immediate negative I assumed it would be. Instead, my brain paused, like a computer taking time to, well, compute.

"I like you?" I said, grabbing onto the only lifeline I had, which was to deflect. "What about you? You're the one who was just getting worked up about the councilors taking me away from you. I think maybe you like me!"

"Maybe I do," he concurred. "But I'm not ready to let them know that. Because I'm not sure what I know."

"You know you didn't want me taken away."

"True," he said, nodding. "I don't want them to take you away. But I also don't want you to keep yourself away. I did not enjoy having to say what I did back there, Aurora. I need you to believe that."

"I believe it," I said, watching his face as he spoke and seeing no sign of duplicity or deviousness. He was telling the truth.

"Then why are you still keeping the wall here?" he said, gesturing to the few inches of space between us.

"I don't know," I admitted, well aware of that last barrier. "It's just ... you were so cold about it. I thought you did believe that I could still be guilty."

"I do," he said, then held up a hand to stop my outburst. "Using logic, and logic alone, they are correct. Which is what I must use when I am the magistrate."

"But—"

He pressed a finger to my lips. “Don’t confuse what I think up here with what I feel in here,” he said, touching his head and then his heart. “It is my job to be impartial, to not use emotion, so justice can be applied equally and fairly to all. Without bias.”

“I guess.”

“I believe you had nothing to do with it. That you are innocent, and I am working to prove that innocence. But I won’t do anything that will see you put into their custody until the issue is resolved.”

“Because you believe me?”

“Because I want you here. With me,” he said firmly. “While we figure out just what ‘this’ is.”

He gestured back and forth between us.

“Oh.”

I didn’t have any better way to define what was going on between us either. We’d shared a kiss, yes, but that had been it. Nothing more. That could mean nothing more than I thought he was extremely attractive and, in a moment of vulnerability, had given in.

Or it could mean—

I shut the thought down before I gave it words, even if they were only in my head. That was insane. Falling for a dragon? Liking him? Damian had called me out on it, said I did, but was he right?

“Can you be okay with that, Aurora? The two sides of me, the magistrate and

Damian? I have to be both until the ones behind this are discovered. That means treating you as if you could potentially be that person. At least in public. Can you handle that?"

I chewed on my lip. There was so much extra weight to that question. Answering yes implied I could not only handle his dual personalities, but it also was tantamount to admitting that yes, I did like him, and I wanted to continue finding out more. To see what was there. What it meant to me, to him.

A dragon and a human? It could never work.

"I don't know," I said at last, the words heavy in the air between us.

Damian's shoulder's dipped slightly. Only for an instant, then he was back in control, but I saw it, nonetheless.

"Very well," he said stiffly, backing away. "I understand. We should get some sleep. This mystery won't solve itself. Goodnight, Aurora."

Then he was gone. Closing the door behind him, he left me alone in the common area to wonder if I'd chosen the right option. The one that I truly felt and believed in my heart.

In the silence that followed, doubt began to set in.

Damian

Licking my lips, I forced myself to stop the constant shift of weight from leg to leg as I waited.

The gala will be fine. Things have gotten better, you know that. You can both be mature enough to handle a night of dining and dancing politely.

Better was not the same as fixed. Sure, the giant glacier between us had begun to thaw, but it was still there, still an ever-present part of our every interaction. The kiss on the plains near the border had taken us both by surprise. The ensuing confusion in my mind seemed to be echoed in Aurora, but I didn't know because she wouldn't talk to me about it!

Over a week had gone by. In that time, nothing had happened. It was infuriating.

No new leads about the missing scepters. No threats, no more holes in the border—even the one Aurora and I had discovered had begun to close on its own—and no more attempts to steal others. It was as if the culprits had gone entirely to ground, content to wait things out.

My frustration was boiling over into the tension between Aurora and me. She was having a hard time reconciling the two sides of me, not believing I could be both people without bias. In her world, that leaked over, and she was hurt by that, all the while forgetting she wasn't in her world anymore.

I'd tried bringing it up several times, but eventually, anyone would get tired of the

cold shoulder.

“We’re going to be late,” I called loudly enough so I would be heard through the closed door. “Are you ready?”

“No,” came the distant reply. She was distracted, likely fiddling with something. “But I’m probably not going to be any more ready, either. I just hope I look okay.”

I knew she would look better than “okay,” but I tempered my response so as not to come on too strong. The last thing I wanted to do was ruin the evening before it had started.

“You will look fabulous, I’m sure,” I said, attempting to sound uncaring.

“You’re just saying that so we can get going.” She sounded closer to the door.

I laughed. “Absolutely not .”

“What? Do you not like these things?” she asked, the handle turning.

“I may have to occasionally act as a politician, Aurora, but I detest everything that goes along with it. I do what I do to ensure justice is applied fairly to all. Not to be seen or heard, which is exactly what an event like the Peace Gala is all about. For those with power to preen and be admired by those whom they have power over. No, it disgusts me.”

The door opened.

“But I think I’ll survive tonight,” I said as my jaw fell open at the visage that greeted me.

Aurora had opted for a stunning midnight blue dress. A stiff, structured upper half that fell off the shoulders in pleated waves gave way to a form-fitting lower body, with a leg slit that instantly started the drool flowing. She looked like a classical beauty. I admired what she'd done to her hair, somehow making it shorter by pulling it back, giving it a little bob-like effect.

Her pouty lips were now bright red, acting like the cape of a matador, and I was the bull.

"Well?" she asked, somewhat subdued as she twisted left and right, the motion only emphasizing the high slit in her skirt, showing off a delicious amount of leg.

"You look spectacular," I said bluntly, unable to come up with any better descriptor for her. "Just ... wow."

"Just wow, eh?" she teased, a hint of fresh redness coloring her cheeks under the makeup.

I nodded slowly, giving her another head-to-toe once-over. Apparently, letting her loose in the store with no limits on what she should buy had been the right choice. Every dragon at the gala would admire her once they saw her.

My dragon snarled possessively. It didn't want to share. For once, we were on the same page about that. Tonight, Aurora was ours.

"You look pretty wow yourself," she said with a giggle, pulling on the jacket of my uniform. "The purple stripes on your pants are a nice addition."

The dual stripes ran down the sides, the color marking me as magistrate. The formal uniform jacket had matching stripes on the shoulder under the green and orange emblem, making up grinning dragon head of the office of the sovereign.



“Thank you, but it’s nothing compared to you.”

Aurora blushed deeply this time, unable to hide her embarrassment. “Please stop. I never liked getting all dressed up for events. I feel like a doll on display.”

“I thought you were a politician,” I said, taking her arm and heading for the door, noting that she’d opted for a pair of black strappy sandals to go with the outfit. A wise choice.

“That doesn’t mean I liked everything about it,” she countered.

Her mood darkened so suddenly I nearly broke my neck looking around, trying to see what it was. There was nobody in the hallway. We were alone.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly. “Do we need to go back?”

“No,” she said, reaching over with her right hand to squeeze my forearm. “I was just thinking. My father loved these events. He was like a peacock showing off. I should’ve known then. That should’ve been my first warning sign that he was full of lies.”

I thought frantically, trying to think of something to distract her. This wasn’t the tone I wanted set for the evening. We both could benefit from a good time, even if it was a lame political grandstand for the power-makers to attend and pretend like they were better than everyone else.

“Horus is feeling better, did I tell you that? He’s awake now and seems to be on his way to recovering.”

She glanced at me, hope banishing the doom and gloom. “Really?”

“Yes.” I smiled to myself, happy the mention of the border guard had worked. “We also found out what happened to him.”

“You mean why he was so much worse off than you?”

“Exactly. Apparently, he saw the hole in the barrier and tried to fly through it.”

Aurora looked up at me. “Why would he do that?”

I fought down the flickers of excitement as we locked eyes, trying to keep myself controlled. It was hard enough with her hand resting on my forearm while we walked. If I spent too long looking at her, it would only grow more difficult.

“When you know the barrier is usually invisible, but not tangible, it makes a lot more sense. Normally, we fly across it without issue. It’s a visual mirage, essentially. Not a physical wall.”

“Oh. You’re right. That does make more sense. He would have no reason to think flying through the hole would pose an issue.”

“Until it was too late,” I added, nodding along. “So, he got hammered by the energy, whereas I only got a tiny dose. It flung him backward and has left his dragon still stunned even now.”

I didn’t tell her that the only reason my dragon had come back to me, had been able to shake off the energy snare that had split us, was because of the wyvern. The near feral need to do anything and everything to protect her had reached deep inside me to wherever the dragon had been and roused it enough to come surging back.

Though I hadn’t told her, my dragon had crashed after we’d returned to the palace, requiring days of rest. Only yesterday had it begun to stir normally, and today was the

first renewed insistence that I take her to bed.

It was making things difficult, to say the least, especially because as far as I could tell, that was the last thing Aurora wanted to do with me.

But we did share that kiss. I didn't imagine that. It was real.

The confusing deluge of emotions was more than I needed. With the scepters still missing, and the senior councilors clearly out to make my life problematic until it was resolved, falling for a human was an added confusion I could do without.

My dragon didn't seem to agree or care about all my carefully constructed logical arguments. It wanted her, and it wanted her now, and until I claimed her as my own, it wasn't going to be satisfied.

"Quite the lineup," she said as we turned the corner and approached the main doors to the ballroom.

At least two dozen couples were in line ahead of us, all being ushered inside at a slow but constant rate. Behind us, more dragons were approaching. We wouldn't wait long.

"This is the event to be at, or so I've been told," I said as we took our place in line, advancing several steps as each pair in front of us was taken inside and announced to the party by the doorman.

"Gosh, if I only felt the same way," she said, laughing.

I smiled, ushering her forward once more to keep things moving. "The other human women will be here. You could talk to them."

She shrugged the suggestion off. “I don’t know them from anyone else.”

“Maybe not,” I insisted. “But at least they’ll be able to relate to things better than a dragon. You might find you appreciate just talking to someone who gets it.”

“We’ll see.”

The line moved forward, and we advanced. The front of the line was growing close, and we were only a few couples away now from the entrance.

“Are you ready to dance ... with me?” I added the last two words almost as an afterthought, but from the way Aurora sharply looked at me, eyebrows lowering, I knew she understood the implication.

“Why?” she asked. “Do you want to dance with me? A human?”

A deep growl tore from my throat, echoing off the stone walls and filling the hallway, drawing stares from every side.

“You are not just a human,” I rumbled darkly, leaning forward over her to better make my point. “You are a wonderful woman. You are strong, intelligent, caring, and downright stunning tonight. Any man here should be proud to have you on his arm, dragon or not. Do not think I need pity, Aurora. I am lucky . Is that clear?”

She nodded jerkily, eyes wide at my outburst.

“Good. Now,” I said in a far softer tone, extending my arm toward her at the same time. “Would you do me the honor of entering at my side?”

Blushing furiously at the attention she was receiving, Aurora nodded, taking my arm once more.

Spine straight, I escorted her to the door and inside, glaring around the room. Anyone who dared say a thing about who I was with would be getting an earful.

At the minimum.

Aurora

I laughed as Damian spun me around with his hand, my dress coming up with the speed of the twirl before settling back against my legs as he brought me in tight to his chest. We slid to the side, hips twisting and legs moving in time with the music.

“You’re getting better at it,” he remarked, casually lifting me off my feet while he pivoted on his left foot before setting me down and extending me on his arm.

“I’m trying,” I said, the formal steps to the ballroom dance unlike anything I’d ever learned.

We glided across the floor, hand in hand, moving in lockstep with other pairs, all in time to the music until the last note faded away, and we faced one another. I curtsayed low, as did the other women. The men, in perfect unison, snapped their heels together and bowed deep at the waist before straightening.

“You’re a natural,” Damian rumbled with a delighted air, snagging my arm casually to escort me off the dance floor.

“I did dance for some years as a child, as much as I would love to let you believe I’m some sort of prodigy.”

“You aren’t that good.”

I whirled on him, only to see the mirth spreading across his face until it became a big grin of the sort I rarely saw on him.

“Wise-ass.”

“I prefer to think I store my wisdom in my head,” he said, tapping his temple.

“Probably ‘cause the rest of you is full of bullshit,” I joked, leaning my head on his shoulder, momentarily forgetting that we were in public.

“Leave it,” he said as I started to pull away.

“But if they know you and I ...”

“They won’t unless you tell them.”

“Won’t they make your life hard?”

Damian turned a feral grin on me. “I’d like to see them try,” he stated very carefully.

“They won’t enjoy it.”

“Okay ...”

“Now, stop worrying and enjoy the night, please.” He gave my arm a squeeze.

Despite my worries, I managed to do as I was told.

The night passed in a blur. We danced. We ate. We had drinks. We danced some more. I was in his arms, and out of them, moving like a spinning top across the floor. Every move, he knew what I was going to do, where I would be, and what to do next. It was incredible.

I laughed and smiled until my cheeks hurt. There was nothing but the music, and Damian. Strong, confident Damian. He never faltered, never slowed, his stamina

impeccable. The lights dimmed, but I could still see his face and his silvery eyes unaided.

At some point, the ballroom disappeared, and we were back in his room. Alone. Music played from somewhere as we danced slowly in one another's arms. His body against mine. Hard muscle against the soft blue fabric of my dress.

In the background, a fire roared merrily, wood crackling and burning. When had he lit that? I didn't recall. I didn't care.

Fingers caressed my shoulders, hooking around the hem of my dress as it slid from my body.

Damian growled at the sight, the noise coming from somewhere deep within him—that seat of basic primal urges. The beast of man. Skin puckering from excitement and nerves, I beckoned him down on top of me, his legs pushing mine to the side.

“I’ve wanted this,” he whispered into my ear before nibbling on it, his mouth tasting my neck, my collarbone, and across my chest.

“You have?”

“Mmm-hmm,” he said, mouth full of my nipple, making me gasp, my spine arching toward the ceiling high above. “Since the day I saw you in the hallway.”

I grabbed his chin, forcing him to look up, even as he slid farther down. “The first day I arrived?”

He nodded. “I knew I shouldn’t have. I wasn’t supposed to. You were a human, and I am the magistrate.”



“I’m still a human,” I teased.

His eyes burned with platinum intensity. “No, you aren’t. Not anymore, Aurora. You have shown that you are so, so much more than that. You have shown you belong here.”

“With you,” I murmured.

Damian tensed, then nodded. “Yes. With me.”

Any reply I might have had was stolen when he brushed his lips against the tender sensitive skin above my mound and dragged his mouth down between my thighs. Little kisses and whispers of air only teased me further until I was soaking, every part of me eager for more.

“Touch me,” I moaned when I could take it no longer. “ Please .”

Damian growled happily and touched his mouth against me, fully parting my lips with his tongue, running it up and down, pausing to trace delicate circles across my little nub.

One hand on the back of his head, pulling him in tighter, I twisted the thick carpet into tight circles with the other hand. The fire crackled, the sharp noises mixing with the rising crescendo of my moans as Damian demonstrated he was quite skilled in the art of satisfaction.

Quite fucking skilled indeed.

I sprinted toward the edge at an insane speed, stunned by how well he could read my body and every little sigh and movement. It was coming, and he was driving me right off the cliff without slowing down. My eyes rolled back into my skull, muscles going

limp as everything reached the tipping point.

And then I tensed, every muscle going taut at the same wondrous moment. Beautiful agony shot through my body, my orgasm exploding out from between my legs, consuming me and everything I was. The intensity shocked me, even if it shouldn't have. Apparently, I'd needed that more than I thought.

Damian wasn't done either. He hauled me back up the long cliff I'd gone over and settled me down with little kisses and touches, letting the sensitivity between my legs drop to something more reasonable.

Then he did it all over again. Only this time, he slid first one, then two fingers inside me. I was thoroughly drenched by that point, my wetness easily coating him as he added another layer of pleasure to the perfect torture.

Twice more he did this to me until I was soaking in a bath of beautiful golden endorphins, the thick soporific air settling over us with nervous anticipation.

We both knew what was coming next.

"Damian," I whispered, my throat dry from moaning and crying out.

"Yes?"

"It's time," I said, caressing his shoulder as he looked up at me over the swell of my mound and the tiny humps of my breasts, his eyes wide and dancing delightedly.

"Time?"

I nodded.

“Time for what?”

Grabbing his jaw with both hands, I hauled him away from my pussy. “Time for you to fuck me. Right now. I want this inside me.”

It gave me great satisfaction to watch his eyes wrench shut as I ran my fingers down the length of his hard shaft and across his sac, feeling it tighten under my caress.

“If you think that’s something you’re up for,” I said, grinning wide, knowing exactly how he would react.

Silvery-gray eyes snapped back into focus, pinning me to the plush carpet as strongly as his body did.

“You don’t have to challenge my ego to get me to fuck you,” he said, pushing my legs out of the way and positioning himself with one hand, the tip of his cock rubbing against my entrance. “I’d do that for free. Anytime, anyplace. I would make you mine.”

And then he did. I cried out as he entered me, a wordless thing that conveyed far more than any sentence could. In two strokes, he filled me until I took all of him.

“It’s just as good as I imagined it would be, all those times I stroked myself until I came, all while thinking of you,” he growled into my ear, pinning me down under his bodyweight, hips sliding back and forth. “And your moans are the sounds of the gods. You are the hottest, sexiest little thing I’ve ever seen.”

Fuck. It wasn’t so much what he was saying but how he was saying it that triggered a fresh wave of wetness between my legs. The truth and ferocity of his claims was a heady aphrodisiac that, when combined with his cock pumping in and out of me, drove me over the edge yet again.

I cried out. Or screamed. I didn't remember. My fingers dug deep enough into his back to make him grunt as he rode me into submission, quite literally fucking the orgasm out of me. At some point, I slumped back into the carpet, gasping for air.

Damian lay on top of me, casually kissing my breasts and shoulders and neck. Every little touch sent a matching bolt of electricity through my body, lighting on fire whatever functioning nerve endings I had left.

"Aurora," he groaned into my ear with a tone I'd never heard from him before. It was tight and ultra-focused. "I can't hold on for much longer."

"Then don't," I told him. "I want you to let go. I want you to finish. Please."

He grunted, thrusting deeper and faster into me. I watched his face, enjoying the way it wrenched itself into a guttural display of utter ecstasy.

Because of me. I was the cause of his enjoyment, and I basked in that like a sunbather at the pool, soaking it all in.

His eyes flew open as he gasped. They were fully soaked in silvery fire now, no pupil visible at all. That was how I knew he was close, that he was letting himself go.

A moment later, he groaned loudly, pulling me tightly to him as he filled me deep.

We lay there for a bit, gasping and sweating from the intensity of our coupling, neither wanting to move until absolutely necessary.

"I'll get a towel," Damian said, getting up and heading to the bathroom.

He had to walk past my head as he did, and I cranked it backward, watching his ass from upside down as he strode naked through the door. It was an enjoyable sight,

there could be no doubt.

Without his weight on top of me, a cold chill settled into my skin that even the fire couldn't dissipate. Would I ever see this view again? This was very unlike Damian the Magistrate. This was Damian the dragon, and I had yet to know if I would ever see him again.

I hoped he would, but I feared that, deep inside, he'd been the magistrate for too long and that he didn't remember who Damian was anymore.

And that made me sad.

Damian

The urge to whistle contentedly was nearly overwhelming until I walked into the working wing of the palace.

That was where all the various offices that helped run the kingdom were housed, including my own. It was a hubbub of activity and voices, good-natured bandying about mixed with more proper business discussions. There was a lot that went on behind the scenes to ensure things ran smoothly, and it all happened there.

It was due to this that I suppressed the urge to whistle a tune while also schooling my face into its usual neutral expression.

The fewer questions people asked about my good mood, the less misdirection I would have to employ to ensure that more rumors about Aurora and me did not get out. In hindsight, I should've been more cautious at the Peace Gala, but I wouldn't let that get to me.

As it turned out, it wouldn't matter. I noticed the lack of energy the instant I walked through the double doors.

What the hell?

I looked around, seeing the stiff expressions and wooden movements as people went about their business. Nobody was joking around, and those who were talking were doing so in hushed tones, keeping their conversations quite.

Snagging the first dragon to come within arm's reach of me as I stood there, I inquired about the goings-on.

“You haven’t heard, Magistrate?”

I grimaced. “I’m running a little late today. Fill me in?”

The last thing I would do was admit to having spent extra time in bed with Aurora before leaving. Something I’d told myself would be fine, that I didn’t work regular hours, so there was no time I “had” to be there by.

Apparently, I was wrong. Guilt gnawed at my insides. Could I have averted whatever was going on if I’d come to the office at my usual time? Perhaps I could’ve dealt with it before it became a crisis.

“There’s a problem with the shield,” the nervous dragon said, his eyes big and black, looking everywhere as he spoke.

“A problem?” I tried to portray ignorance. Was there another problem with it, one I hadn’t been informed of yet? Had it come down entirely?

Again, I cursed myself for slacking off to enjoy Aurora’s company. As enjoyable as it was to explore the soft contours of her body, duty came first. I was letting them down.

“It’s failing , Magistrate. There’s a breach.”

I stiffened. “Who told you this?”

“It’s all over,” the dragon said, shaking his head. “Everyone knows. I’m not sure where it started.”

“Very well. Thank you.” I patted the junior dragon on the shoulder and then strode deeper into the labyrinth of hallways and passages that made up the administrative heart of the Isles.

He may not know where the rumor started, but I do.

There were seven people who knew about the breach in the shield at the border. Neither I nor Aurora had told anyone, and Horus knew better than to bring it up. While the sovereign might have reason for letting it get out to the masses, I trusted her to inform me of that plan before she did. Which left three people, all of whom would benefit from the word getting out.

“I fucking hate politicians,” I growled to nobody in particular, earning me more than one questioning glance from passing staff.

By the time I reached the ornately carved brass door out front of the sovereign’s office, I’d reached a boiling point. Hearing the whiny voices of the occupants inside simply tipped me over the edge.

Without knocking or waiting to be admitted, I entered, brushing right past the trio of politicians to stand in front of the heavy wooden desk.

“Magistrate,” the Sovereign of All Dragonkind said gravely as I saluted, fist to chest, elbow out straight.

“My sovereign. I regret to inform you that there is a security leak in your administration,” I said, ignoring the muttering of Councilors Kerstun and Laurana. As usual, Councilor Parun remained quiet, staying in the background even in the relative private setting of the office.

“A security leak?”



I nodded. “Someone, somehow, has—”

“This is a private meeting you are interrupting,” Councilor Kerstun snapped abruptly, having had enough of being ignored that he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

I snorted in response but didn’t turn around to acknowledge him. “As my sovereign is aware, the news about the breach of our protective shield was also private until someone unscrupulously leaked it. Likely for their own benefit.”

The sovereign managed to look aghast. “Surely, nobody in my administration would do such a thing?”

“They would, and they have,” I said sadly, not having to turn around to know that the politicians would all have their best “I don’t understand, I’m innocent” faces on.

It was just another reason I detested their kind. They bent—and even outright broke—the rules, convincing themselves that if they were doing it, it was for a good and just reason. In their eyes, they’d done nothing wrong because it “had” to be done.

“You need to leave, Magistrate.” That was Council Parun. “You’re not a part of this meeting, nor are you privy to our discussions with the sovereign.”

Now, I did turn, doing so slowly, letting my gaze settle on the small smarmy councilor who, despite his oily looks, actually wielded the greatest amount of power of the trio.

“As a senior member of the sovereign’s government who has actually seen the breach in person, not to mention experienced its effects, I’m here to answer any questions the good councilors of our nation might have.”

“We do not—”

“And as the magistrate of that nation,” I went on, steamrolling the incoming protest. “I am here to ensure that the law is being followed. Including ensuring all information deemed sensitive in nature to the security of our nation is not revealed without proper authorization. The breaking of said law being a serious issue, as I am sure you are aware. After all, any law that is punishable up to and including death if the breach is serious enough is one that everyone should be aware of. Am I correct, Councilor Parun, that you and your fellows are aware of the seriousness of this law?”

Councilor Parun glared hotly, but I had him, and we both knew it. I hated politics, but if he wanted to play games, I could play games.

“The councilors were just informing me about an incoming formal protest set to be lodged against me in regards to this data breach,” the sovereign said, breaking the silence.

“Interesting,” I said, moving my glare across all of them. “I wasn’t aware the council had met today.”

“They haven’t,” the sovereign said.

“Then how is it they’ve already passed a formal protest against you?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“The council is unhappy with the lack of resolution on this issue,” Council Kerstun said. “They will vote for a protest of no confidence in her rule, citing the danger this breach in our shield represents.”

“You seem awfully convinced of what the council will do,” I said. “Given the rumor has only circulated this morning, you are remarkably well prepared.”

“It’s the council’s job to act quickly when called for,” Councilor Laurana snapped.

“Of course,” I said, smiling toothily, letting there be no doubt that I was well aware of their bullshit, and as the magistrate, I would be looking for any slip-up on their part that revealed their connection to the breach reveal.

Both Luran and Kerstun refused to totally meet my gaze, but Councilor Parun had no issues looking me dead in the eye. Either he was entirely confident in his actions going undiscovered ...

Or maybe he’s not involved? He’s the most powerful of the three and stands the most to gain if the sovereign is removed from power by the council. That would take an eighty-percent majority vote, which is unlikely but possible if things get worse. But he has absolutely no sign of guilt.

“If there is nothing else, councilors, then I assume you have important business to attend to.”

“Of course, Sovereign,” Councilor Parun said before Kerstun or Laurana could launch into a new tirade.

The trio filed out, and I shoved the door closed after them before sitting in one of the chairs opposite the sovereign and sighing dramatically. The sovereign stared back at me. I couldn’t help but notice the tiredness in corners of her eyes as she looked across the desk at me. The jade fires were just a bit duller than usual, and it bothered me to see her like that.

“Ignore them,” I grumbled. “As annoying as they are, we need to ignore them for now.”

“I can’t.”

I lifted my eyebrows.

“This is the move I warned you about,” she said. “The opening stages of their play for power. This is it.”

“One of them is behind it, you’re sure?”

“You aren’t?” she fired back.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it? Everything is perfect to indicate one of them.” I worked my jaw in disgust. “Almost too perfect. It’s too obvious one of them is behind it.”

“Not to them,” the sovereign said with a most un-monarch-like snort of disdain. “They think I’m an idiot and that they can pull a fast one over me like this. That I’ll just roll over and go with it.”

“All three of them?” I shook my head. “Parun isn’t that dumb.”

“No, but he’s that ambitious.”

“Yes. Which is why I think he sees this as a gift horse.” I scratched my jaw. “But I don’t think he’s behind it.”

“Regardless of who it is, they must be stopped,” she said, pounding her desk with a closed fist. “This cannot be allowed to get any worse.”

“I agree.” I hesitated. “Do you have a plan on how to make sure it doesn’t?”

“I’m working on it.” She didn’t sound hopeful. “In the meantime, however, I intend to ensure that whoever is behind this gets no more scepters. That is why I’m sending you and several others I trust to guard the remaining ones.”

“They’ll be ready for beefed-up guard detachments,” I warned.

“I know. Which is why you and the others aren’t going as part of that group. You will be extra. My ace in the hole. Because they will come for them, Damian.” She leaned forward, flames of fury dancing in her eyes now. “And when they do, you must be ready. You must stop them.”

“I will,” I said, rising and saluting. “I won’t fail you.”

Aurora

“P ack your bags.”

I sat up in alarm as Damian barged through the door unexpectedly. He’d told me not to expect him until later in the evening, so I’d settled down on the couch with a book from his personal library. I wanted to learn more about the culture on the island and—

His words finally registered in my brain, scattering all my thoughts.

“My bags?” I said, echoing as shock spread across my body. “You’re kicking me out? Why? What did I do wrong?”

Damian came to a skidding halt in his passage across the common room.

“I thought things between us were ...” I trailed off, unable to complete my sentence.

Was that it, then? I’d served my purpose to Damian. He’d taken me to bed, and now I was no longer of any use to him. Were the hours we’d lain in bed all night nothing now that the hunt was over?

The alarm on Damian’s face was followed quickly by both his hands coming up, motioning for me to stop.

“No, no, no,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s not what I meant at all!”

I got to my feet, arms crossed, hands tucked into my sides. I was sure I was broadcasting my insecurity, but it couldn't be helped. I was insecure.

Damian crossed the distance between us in two long strides. His hands wrapped around my shoulders, his fingers pressing into my shoulder blades, a vivid reminder of just how much smaller I was.

"Listen to me," he growled, ducking his head so he could stare into my eyes. "And listen well. You're staying with me. I don't want you to be anywhere else. Where I go, you go."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure," he said firmly, his eyes never wavering, those misty gray circles utterly focused on me.

I shivered at his intensity. He'd never acted this way before, never been quite so possessive. Except perhaps during our passion the night before, but that could be explained away as part of the act. This was different. This was real.

And it was unexpected. I fought down the goosebumps threatening to pimple my skin as I replayed the memory in my mind.

"What did you mean? Why do I have to leave?" I asked, desperate for any excuse to change the subject.

Suddenly, I wasn't sure I was ready to talk about it with him. I needed more time. Time to figure out what it all meant.

"You don't have to leave. Not alone. We're going somewhere." He stood up straight, squeezing my shoulders. "On a trip."

“A vacation?”

“No, I wish.” He looked unhappy. “A work trip. To one of the outer isles.”

The outer isles. I didn’t know much about them, but in the few weeks I’d lived among dragons, I’d picked up that the dragon nation was composed of several different islands. The palace and most of the population was on the biggest of these, but there were several smaller outlying ones as well.

“Why to those?” I asked. From what I could tell, they were quite rural, pastoral in nature, though some towns did exist. “Are we in trouble? Did you get in trouble because of the gala and me?”

“No,” he said, smiling so hard his eyes crinkled at the corners. “Not at all. Oddly enough, nobody’s mentioned that. Which I should be more concerned about, but at the moment, there are more pressing things to consider. Such as the missing scepters. Which is why we’re being sent there. To guard one of them.”

My eyebrows rose. “We’re being sent as guards?”

He chuckled. “As feisty as you are, Rory, only I’m being sent as a guard. In fact, the sovereign is sending teams to guard the remaining scepters. She’s also sending some of her own people, including myself, to act as backup.”

“And you’re taking me with you?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t leave you here on your own.”

“Right.” I licked my lips. “And leaving me here, in the palace, surrounded by guards, is something you consider more dangerous than this mission? To guard something, several of which have already been stolen using violence?”



“First, I won’t let anything happen to you,” he rumbled, flames briefly dancing in the depths of his eyes. “Ever. You have my word. You also won’t be on guard duty. You’ll be nearby but out of harm’s way if an attack does come.”

“I guess ...”

“You’ll be safe. The sovereign is sending enough guards to ensure any attack is thwarted. The scepters will be kept safe. They must be,” he said. “The shield must stay up.”

“Could they bring it down if they get another one?”

Damian shrugged, discomfort bunching up his brow. “I don’t know,” he admitted softly. “Maybe? All I know is they must not be allowed to succeed. If the shield comes down ...”

“My people will use nuclear weapons,” I said, fully aware of this point by now. “Are you certain those will even work? You dragons seem pretty impervious to everything that’s thrown at you.”

Damian grunted. “The explosion would be bad enough. But some would survive, I have no doubt, at the edges, or underground. It’s the radiation that—”

He broke off suddenly, the uncomfortable frown intensifying dramatically as he looked away. I stared at him, understanding dawning on me. Damian had inadvertently told me a major weakness of dragons. Radiation was something they actively feared.

My father would kill for that information.

“Are you okay?” Damian asked. “You look ill. Though I mean no offense.”

I waved off his concern. “Just disgusted with myself,” I said. “My first thought was how badly my father would want that information.”

Shame burned at my cheeks.

“Aurora.”

“You don’t have to worry about it,” I said, stepping forward so I could rest my head on his chest, listening to his heart beat steadily. “Your secret is safe with me, Damian. I’m not going to reveal it. I couldn’t. Not now.”

All at once, it was too much.

“Learning of my father’s true nature. His betrayal. Being exiled from my own people to become a dragon concubine. Meeting Damian.”

My shoulders shook, and a choked sob was the only sound in the room. It was followed quickly by a second.

“Rory?” Damien said uncertainly. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Hold me,” I managed to get out as the dam broke, an onslaught of tears following the emotions overwhelming me.

Then he was there. Thick, powerful arms wrapping around me, pulling me in tighter.

“Always,” he growled in my ear. “I am here for you.”

Hearing the depths to which he meant that statement just made me cry harder. I quickly soaked his shirt, apologizing for it through muffled sobs. Damian simply stroked my hair and told me it was only a shirt, that all was going to be okay. That he

had me.

“Whatever it is,” he whispered as I clung to him tightly, “it’s going to be okay.”

“I-I know,” I stammered through the haze of tears.

“Then why are you crying?” he asked, kissing the top of my head gently.

I took a deep breath, a wave of exhaustion following the pummeling of a good cry. “Because it’s been a lot, Damian. I might not understand it. I might not get it, but when you say it’s going to be okay, it feels like the truth. But my life has changed dramatically in less than a month. Lots of emotions, and I haven’t really had time to process it all.”

“You seem to be doing so now,” he observed, giving me a squeeze with both arms.

“A bit at a time,” I admitted, swiping at my eyes. “But it’s scary.”

“What’s scary?”

“Lots of things. But mainly the sense of belonging that grows stronger in me every day I’m here. With you and your people. As if this is where I was meant to be. I never knew I was missing something, but now? Now, I can see all along that I was. I’m beginning to like it here.”

“Good,” he said, gathering me into his arms to give a big bear hug.

I barely felt it, though. It wasn’t just here that I liked. It was him. That didn’t scare me, though. The fear coalesced into one single thought.

The word like wasn’t the first one to enter my head when I thought of Damian ...

Aurora

The crimson-scaled dragon spread its wings and leaped into the sky, gaining altitude and speed as it swiftly left us behind, heading back in the direction from which we'd arrived.

"Are you okay?"

Damian had that look in his face, the one where his features didn't move as he fought to keep everything stiff and nonreactionary. It usually meant he was experiencing a very strong emotion. He didn't seem to be aware that he gave himself away like that, but I didn't have the heart to tell him either.

"Fine. Why?" he grumped, heading for the recessed doorway that led inside.

"No reason. I just thought maybe I could help take that off."

He frowned. "Take what off?"

"The giant sign on your forehead that says 'Fuck You' to whoever that was who just left. Did you not realize you left it on?"

Damian's neck muscles flexed, swiveling his head in my direction, his silvery-gray eyes finding me and pinning me in place with their weight.

My breath caught in my chest.

“No,” he said slowly, much of the tension in his shoulders dissipating. “I must’ve forgotten it was there. How clumsy of me. Do you think he was offended?”

“Probably,” I said, hating how squeaky my voice sounded.

“Gee. What a shame.” Humor tickled the corners of his mouth.

“Do I need to worry about him coming back?”

“Who, Damon?” he snorted. “No. Much as I dislike the sovereign’s Shadow, it is the position, not the person, I disapprove of.”

I looked up into the night sky where the dragon had long since disappeared, blending in as nothing more than a shadow to the glittering skyscape beyond. “That was her shadow?”

The Shadow was the yin to the magistrate’s yang. Equal but opposite. I found it oddly appropriate that their names were so similar. I doubted it was a coincidence, knowing what little I did about the sovereign.

“Yes.” There was no elaboration.

I followed Damian inside. “She sent him here to guard this scepter?”

“Yes.” He grabbed the handle and pulled the heavy brass door open, holding it wide for me.

“Thank you,” I said, adding a hint of extra sway to my hips as I passed.

A gravelly rumble echoed in the night, a surefire sign of Damian’s approval.

“What is this place? It looks kind of like a temple from the outside.”

“In a way, I suppose it could be. It was built specifically for the scepter that resides here. Although we don’t worship them, they’re incredibly important to all dragons.”

“How many scepters are there? Or is that classified?”

Damian thought about it. “I suppose not. There are five in total.”

My eyebrows shot up. That was way fewer than I’d thought. “And two have already been stolen? Shit.”

The curse word seemed to work for Damian because he only nodded in agreement.

“But I don’t get it. You got sent here to relieve the Shadow. Well, we got sent here. But didn’t the sovereign put you in charge of finding out who stole the others?”

“Yes, she did,” Damian said as we paused under a ten-foot-tall archway leading into the center circular chamber where the scepter sat, a golden rod with a multi-hued gemstone at its end, held in place by five dragon claws. Other than that, the rest of the scepter was devoid of anything but markings and inscriptions. I’d expected them to be covered in precious gems, but besides being made from solid gold and topped with the one gem, it was quite unremarkable in appearance.

However, there was no mistaking the power it held, despite its lack of adornment. Even from thirty feet away, the scepter radiated a subtle energy. It was unlike anything I’d experienced, the pressure of its power pulsating against my chest. There was nothing ominous or intimidating about it. In fact, it was more akin to a warm welcome, a reassurance without words.

“How are you supposed to find the others if you’re not able to leave here?” I asked,

staring mesmerized into the oscillating colors at the heart of the gem, watching them turn from blue to red to green to purple and gold and then orange and silver and back again.

“I asked myself the same question.”

“Is she mad at you?”

Another guard came walking by on patrol, nodding respectfully to Damian as he passed. His eyes didn't even flicker to me, and I suppressed a sigh. They weren't happy about my presence. I hoped it was because I wasn't a guard and that they didn't think there should be any distractions, rather than a sign of anti-human hatred among the guards sent with us.

“I don't believe so,” Damian said once we were alone again. “She's always been upfront about those things. No, I think she simply needed to relieve Damon, and I was the only choice. She needed to send those she trusts, and with the need to guard all three scepters equally, those resources are stretched thin.”

It made sense. Someone was making a huge play against their own kind. Until more was known, it was impossible to know who to trust. The sovereign was working with what she had.

That was why we and a dozen palace guards had flown out to act as guards, relieving those already in place. So many, and all of them on high alert.

“She thinks an attack is coming, doesn't she?”

He grunted agreement. “It's been over a week, and nothing has happened. No more attacks, no further threats to the barrier. As it stands right now, our mysterious enemies have no leverage. They need another scepter. At some point, they must

attack again. It's inevitable."

The logic was sound. I couldn't fault it.

"You don't need to worry about that," Damian said, draping an arm over my shoulder. "Let me take you to your room. I'm sure you could use some sleep. Besides, I should check the perimeter one more time."

I wasn't tired, but I let him take me up to the fourth level anyway, where he and I shared a room. There were rooms to house many more than just the fourteen of us, so each guard also got their own room. The circular building was set atop a hill, affording each room a stunning view of the rest of the isle.

Even now, with only the light of the moon and the stars to see, it was beautifully lit in a silvery glow.

"Sleep well. Shift change is at six. I'll join you then." There was a promise in his voice that twisted my stomach into knots.

"Okay," I whispered, tilting my head back to accept his kiss, forcing my wobbly knees to stay straight until he was gone and I could slump back against the windowsill, breathing heavily.

He was good. Really, really good. Each time he kissed me, it stole my breath. I touched my lips, remembering the warm firmness of his mouth. There was something dominant about the way he kissed me. Like each time he did, it was his way of reminding me I was his.

Warmth curled deeper between my legs. Chewing on my lower lip, I leaned against the wall next to the window, staring unseeing into the skies. My left hand slid across my stomach and between my legs as I thought about his hard body against mine. Tiny



tingles skittered across my crotch, pleasant shivers as my pinky tried to scratch that itch.

A little gasp fled out the window as my mind's eye pictured Damian coming back through the door in the morning, purposeful strides carrying him to the edge of the bed. With one huge sweep of his arm, the covers would be torn from my sleeping body. I'd wake to the crush of his lips against mine. The weight of his body over me, holding me down, the promise of what was to come a hard bulge between his legs. Outside the window, figures would dance and sing— wait .

Figures outside the window?

Jerking out of my aroused dream, I stared down the hillside as shadows moved toward the perimeter of the temple.

Fear gripped my lungs, squeezing hard. I gasped for air. I tried to run for the door, but I slipped and fell, slamming a knee on the floor. I had to go, had to get out and warn Damian, warn the guards.

The attack isn't coming.

It was already here.

As I scrambled to my feet, there was a brief flicker of light from the window that caught my eye. I paused, seeing a figure in the distance. Waiting idly, their body language tense, screaming impatience.

They were doing something most peculiar while they waited...

Damian

There was no shout, no cry to warn of what was coming.

One moment, everything was still and calm as I completed my walk around the perimeter. The night was silent and still. In the distance, a bird cawed. Insects buzzed. A warm wind swept up the hill through the grasses, causing them to rustle with sweet lullaby softness.

The next, a blackened claw was slashing for my throat, having erupted out of the darkness. There was no time to think, no time to plan. I let go and instinct took over. My arm came up, scales already bursting through the skin to cover it in a defensive layer.

I bellowed in anger and pain as the clawed hand dug deep anyway, tearing away scales and spraying blood. My throat was intact, though, and that was what mattered.

Now, I could go on the offensive.

Grabbing the wrist of my attacker with my other hand, I yanked him forward out of the dark, intercepting his nose with my head. Cartilage snapped, and the nameless shifter stumbled backward into the shadows as blood poured down his face.

Shouts of alarm were echoing from everywhere now, and I knew the other half of the guards would be roused and joining the fight.

“To the scepter room!” I bellowed, backing toward the temple door as I scanned the

darkness for another attacker. “Protect the scepter!”

The cry was taken up by others.

Balls of fire shot high into the sky as we banished the darkness, robbing our attackers of any cover. Instead of retreating, they attacked harder. One came at me, bursting from a bush, going for my legs. I obliged him, introducing my knee to his temple. His entire body went limp, taking him face-first into the stone walkway that ran around the outer edge of the temple.

I landed on him, making sure he didn’t get back up to cause trouble later. Prisoners were wanted, but not until the fight was won.

Momentarily free from attack, I rolled the attacker over. An unfamiliar face stared up at me. It was unlikely that I would have recognized them, but knowing who was behind this all would have been nice.

The only warning I had was a giant whoosh of air. Flinging myself forward, tucking into a roll, I narrowly avoided the giant dragon claws that flashed through the spot I’d just occupied.

Coming around again, the beast tried to incinerate me, unleashing a giant stream of flame that turned stone to liquid and grass into blackened flecks that scattered on the wind. Red welts covered my exposed skin from the intense heat, but I otherwise avoided injury. Turning in the direction the winged monster had taken off in, I sent a white-hot ball of flame after it, chucking it like a ball.

I smiled humorlessly as it exploded on my attacker’s snout, melting scales and blinding it in one eye. It wasn’t nearly enough payback for the losses I was certain my guards were taking.

Eager to go to their aid, I rushed inside, where I immediately peeled a black-clothed attacker away from a struggling guard, leaving him to defend against only one enemy. My fingers lengthened into claws, and I did what my first attacker couldn't and ripped the throat from my foe.

Turning to aid the guard, I saw him fall back, eyes open and sightless as the attacker pulled a dragon-scale dagger from his chest.

"You're going to die for that," I promised, watching closely for any signs of weakness.

Boots on stone came hurtling down the hallway behind me. There were no shouts to identify friend or foe, and I couldn't risk turning away, else the dagger-wielder would make his move.

Knowing my initial foe would expect me to react anyway, I feinted turning but kept my attention on his hips and shoulder. The blade came forward, but I was already reversing. I slammed my shoulders into the stone wall and used the impact to fling myself forward, chopping violently at the outstretched knife arm. My aim was true, and the blade fell from suddenly numbed fingers.

I snatched it out of mid-air, reversed my grip, and drove backward and up, impaling the second attacker on the eight-inch blade as he couldn't stop in time. He gasped as all the air was driven from his lungs from the impact. Then I twisted the blade and drove him sideways to the other wall.

Agonizing screams echoed off the walls as the man's insides became outsides. I hit the far wall, yanking the dagger free just as a body hit me from behind.

My skull rang from the impact as it smashed off the wall. The dying attacker fell forward, collapsing onto my new attacker, buying me a moment to recover.

Somehow, I kept a grip on the dagger through it all. Slashing out wildly before anyone had a chance to recover, I felt the tip hit bone as I dragged it along the forearm of the blade's original wielder.

Blood-slickened stone betrayed him as he tried to back away, and I pounced as he flailed, driving the blade up through his jaw and into his brain.

"Told you," I snarled, stumbling away from the dead body, weaving in a zig-zag path back and forth as I tried to get to the scepter chamber, where the sounds of more fighting could still be heard.

The shouts and cries grew more intense the nearer I got to the chamber. I tried to ignore them just as I was furiously ignoring the fact that Aurora was upstairs, completely unprotected. I couldn't go to her, despite what my dragon bellowed in my mind. The sovereign had sent me there to protect the scepter. I was going to do my job.

I stepped into the main chamber just in time to see the last two of my guards go down under a wave of attackers. Where had they all come from? How could so many have turned on their sovereign? I didn't understand it.

"Stop!" I bellowed, stepping forward. "In the name of the sovereign, I command you to cease your actions, under punishment of—"

Something slammed into the back of my head, pitching me forward, toward the floor and a blackness far darker than the shadows outside had ever been.

"Death to the sovereign," was the last thing I heard.

Aurora

I huddled deeper into the hidden alcove, trying to stifle the shaking of my hands, as the sounds of hunting parties came closer. They were so close now. Any moment and one of them would bend down and see me hidden at the back. I didn't want to think about what they would do before they killed me.

Drawing another shuddering breath, I clamped down on a terrified squeak as the door to the room opened. Oh, god, they were in there with me. They were going to find me. I tried to pull my legs in tighter to make it harder for them to grab my ankle and haul me out of there.

Two pairs of booted feet entered the room, striding across it. A table crashed to the floor, breaking a vase into a million pieces. Wood splintered as a storage hutch was flung across the room.

"Nothing good in here," one of the intruders complained. "Just junk."

"This whole place is junk."

"Besides the scepter," the first added.

There were matching chuckles that sent ugly shivers down my spine.

"Besides that," the second concurred. "Check the door over there. Then we'll move on."

I froze, staring at the door in question, which was visible from my vantage point. They wouldn't see me on the way to check the room, but on the way out, it would be hard for them not to see me curled up at the back of the ground-level alcove. There was nothing I could do either. Only one of them was going, leaving the other in the middle of the room.

I was screwed.

But they didn't get across the room because a loud whistle from somewhere outside stopped them.

"Time to go," the first said. "We got what we came for after all."

"Yeah. Maybe the next one will have something for us."

They left the room, muttering to each other about the gold and valuables they would ransack when they hit their next target, which I could only assume was another scepter.

Once they left and the sounds of their feet fell into silence, I stayed curled up in my hiding spot, waiting. Just in case they were still out there, hiding just out of sight for me to emerge, at which point they would grab me and haul me away.

As I remained there in a tiny ball, my thoughts turned from myself to Damian and the guards. If the intruders had been confident enough to stroll around and loot the place, then they must've felt secure about not being attacked.

No. No, it couldn't be. Damian couldn't be gone. I shook my head against the tears that came with the dark acceptance. Whoever the intruders were, they would have dealt with any last resistance. There was no way Damian would have surrendered to them. That wasn't who he was. He took his duty to the sovereign seriously, and I

knew he would've fought to the last alongside the rest of the guard duty.

"They're dead," I whispered to no one, my voice cracking. "All of them. They're dead."

Saying it out loud didn't help make it feel any more real. I kept expecting Damian to come rushing into the room at any moment, calling out my name and making sure I was okay.

I will protect you. I will keep you safe.

Those were the things he'd said to me. The promises he'd made. Nowhere in them had he promised to always be there. Only that he would do whatever it took to make sure I was okay.

Trying to curl into myself even tighter, this time around the ball of pain lodged in my stomach, my shoulders shook violently. More time passed. Eventually, I had no more tears to cry. Cold numbness settled over me, filling my fingers, my arms. They were so heavy, moving like I was swimming through molasses.

Agonizingly slowly, I extricated myself at last, joints and tendons protesting as I stood up after hours tucked into a tiny ball. I didn't ignore the pain. I embraced it. This was something I could handle, something that would go away soon. Unlike everything else.

Listening carefully for the sounds of life, I crept my way to the stairs and headed down, circling around and around as I passed the other floors.

"Oh my god," I gasped, steadying myself against the stone wall as I reached the ground level.



There was blood. So much blood. And it was everywhere. It ran along the walls in thick red streaks. It pooled on the floor. Droplets were splattered everywhere, even the ceiling. I looked around, jaw hanging open at the gruesome scene before me.

I'd expected death. But not like this.

Thick gouges were torn from the walls, usually in three or four lines at a time. As if someone had reached in with their fingers and dug it out. Only the walls were solid stone.

At the entrance to the main chamber, I came across the first body. It was one of Damian's men, clad in the sharp-cut black and red livery of the palace guards. He was slumped against the wall, his sightless eyes staring at the wall across from him.

I whimpered, backing away until he was out of sight.

Politics had exposed me to a lot of things that most would never see. Death was one of them. I'd seen plenty of dead bodies before. Many with horrible things done to them.

But every one of them had been on a screen. A picture. Nothing like this. Never in person.

My stomach started to churn, roiling like the open ocean in the middle of a hurricane. I wanted to run back to my spot, hide away and cry until someone came to save me. To tell me it was over.

"Nobody is coming for you." I forced the words out over the objections of the half of my brain that was wholly in flight mode. That wouldn't help me. Not now.

Clenching my teeth until my jaw ached, I made myself walk forward. Pausing to

close the guard's eyes was too much, but I got past him and into the main chamber.

Immediately, I wished I hadn't.

The bloodbath only got worse. Blood and body parts were strewn everywhere. The dead lay where they'd fallen. Many of the faces were visible—those that were whole—and I scanned them, dreading coming across a pair of eyes that were silver and sightless just like the guard in the hallway.

But Damian wasn't one of them. Which meant I had to turn over the others. To view their faces.

I found him on the third try. He was face down, his body covered in blood.

“Oh, Damian,” I whimpered, fresh tears gathering in the corners of my eyes, blurring my vision until I blinked them clear. “I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have—I should—oh, no!”

I rocked back and forth, his head in my lap, my tears splattering across his face.

Until he drew a ragged breath.

Screaming, I scooted away so fast his head slammed off the concrete floor.

“Ow,” he moaned.

“Zombie!” I shrieked, looking around wildly for a weapon.

There wasn't one in sight.

Damian groaned again, lifting a hand to press to his forehead. “Why did you hit me?”

I stared at him. Zombies couldn't talk. Everyone knew that. Which meant—

“You're alive!” I screamed once more, shooting back to his side. “Damian? Are you alive?”

His eyelids flickered open, revealing those silvery-gray eyes I would recognize anywhere. He needed a moment to focus them on me. Then he smiled. “No, I think I've died and gone to heaven because all I can see is an angel.”

My heart skipped a handful of beats. It didn't matter that it was one of the oldest, cheesiest lines in the book. He'd said it with a warm, happy smile on his bloodstained face, and at the moment, it was the best sound my ears had ever heard.

“I thought you were dead,” I whispered, stroking his face, ignoring the way touching him stained my fingers red.

“Why?” he asked, starting to look around, eyes wide.

“No, no. Look at me.” I grabbed his chin, holding it still, locking eyes with him.

His eyes met mine, searching them for reason. I knew he'd found it when his shoulders slumped.

“How bad?” he whispered.

“Damian ...”

“How. Bad.”

I sighed, eyes half closed. “Everyone but you.”

He shuddered. I pretended not to notice.

“And you,” he said after a moment, grabbing my hand, engulfing it in his own much larger grip. “You made it out.”

I started to cry again. “I’m sorry. Damian, I’m so, so sorry,” I blubbered. “I wanted to, I did, I swear, but I just couldn’t, and then the attack and—”

“Shhh.” He squeezed my hand tight. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not!” I said, trying not to look around at all the dead. All the guards who’d given their lives for nothing in the end. “It’s not okay. It’s not okay, it’s not, it’s not ...”

“Why not? It’s not like you could’ve stopped this,” he said, clasping my hand between both of his now.

My eyes opened, searching his face, and I moaned unhappily. “But I could have. I could have warned you. You could have known, then—”

His hands fell away, his face growing still and hard. “What are you saying, Aurora? What are you trying to tell me?”

I pointed at the wall in a random direction. “In my room. I saw them. The window. I saw them coming, but there was no time! I couldn’t get there. I was too slow. They came anyway. I was too slow...”

The tension left his face, and he took my hand once more. “I thought you meant something else. I thought you knew in advance.”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “No. I just saw them coming. Then they were here, and I had

to hide. I couldn't stop them."

"No, it's okay." He shook my hand slightly. "Rory, I promise you. You did the right thing. I don't hold you accountable. Nobody will. You can't be expected to fight off a dragon. Certainly not as many as it took to overwhelm us and steal the scepter."

His face closed up as he uttered those words, acknowledging the loss of yet another of the protective scepters.

"What do we do now?" I whispered as he levered himself into a sitting position.

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know. They have three scepters. Is that enough to bring down the shield? If so, will they do it?"

The question hung ominously in the air around us.

Aurora

“Looks like the sovereign got your message,” I said as the palace came into view.

Ranks of armored soldiers were visible on the roof, the palace guards out in full force as we approached. The sun glinted off polished scaled-plate armor, emphasizing the perfect lines of wary, watchful guards. Heads were on swivels as we neared, multiple sets of eyes stayed laser focused on us.

It made sense that they would be on high alert. Not long after Damian had regained consciousness, a local from the nearby town had arrived, having seen the fight from a distance. It hadn't taken much to convince the man to fly to the palace as fast as possible to inform the sovereign. With that taken care of, I'd forced Damian to rest overnight before we followed in the morning.

“Maybe.”

I jerked my attention away from the welcoming party. “What do you mean ‘maybe’? Look at this. She's got everyone turned out.”

“Then why aren't they at the walls? Why aren't they out protecting the other scepters?” he said as we continued to descend. “We aren't that important. It's not like we're bringing the last scepter back to be guarded by them.”

“Hmmm.” I looked back at the guards on the roof again with a fresh eye.

There did seem to be an inordinately large number clustered close to the center of the

roof, near where Damian was likely to land.

“Do you think something happened while we were gone? Is the sovereign okay? If they could get to the scepters, maybe they could get to her?”

He flared his wings, slowing us dramatically. “That’s possible. Or maybe she found the bastards behind all this and everyone is just still on guard? I don’t know.”

Damian set down smoothly onto the roof. I waited until he’d settled and then got up from where I sat at the base of his neck and started to climb down the length of his wing. As I did, he swung his snout around, bringing it near my face.

“Stay close.”

I nodded, dropping from his wing earlier than usual so I could press in tight to him while he changed.

“Something’s definitely off,” I mumbled under my breath, watching the faces of the soldiers waiting for us.

“Agreed.”

None of them showed any overt emotion, but that in itself was a giveaway, especially when paired with their eyes and the set of their feet. They almost looked ready for a fight.

“Hey,” I said, coming to a decision as Damian reassumed his human form. “Listen, there’s something I should tell you. About last night and the attack. I was going to wait and tell only you and the sovereign together. I didn’t want it to get leaked. But—”

If the sudden narrowing of Damian's eyes hadn't told me something was happening, the clanking of scale-plate armor behind me would've been a dead giveaway. I turned slowly to see what the commotion was about while Damian stepped in front of me.

"What is the meaning of this?" he growled, the gravelly bass a warning that brought the advancing lines of soldiers to an uneasy halt.

One guard stepped forward. "Magistrate."

Though there was nothing about his armor to differentiate him from the others, it was obvious from his bearing, the spine-straight posture and sharpness of movement—not to mention the respect in his voice—that this was the leader. A man used to commanding others, to being followed. Not out of fear but out of respect.

Damian didn't care. He didn't relax, didn't move a muscle. "Explain yourself, Captain."

"As a man of the law, I'm sure you understand the necessity of following orders, Magistrate. That's what I'm doing here." As the guard captain spoke, his men fanned out, surrounding us in a square of metal and dragon scale.

"Explain. Yourself. What orders? Under whose authority? I have done nothing to warrant this treatment," he snarled.

The captain frowned. "You misunderstand, Magistrate. My orders do not pertain to you."

My eyebrows shot up. "Me? What the hell did I do? Am I in trouble for not fighting a dragon? You do know I'm human, right? Not a whole lot I could do."

Damian waved me silent. "Captain. She is with me."



“No, Magistrate. She is under arrest.”

“Councilor Kerstun does not have the authority to do that,” Damian snarled, rolling his shoulders.

The soldiers stiffened, preparing themselves for a fight.

“My orders,” the captain said, keeping his cool, “come from the sovereign herself, Magistrate. Would you defy your ruler?”

Damian stiffened, glancing at me.

“She has not done anything wrong.”

“I’ve done everything asked of me,” I added. “What is the reason for this arrest? I demand to know.”

“Silence, human,” the captain said, the first hint of his prejudice showing. “In the land of dragons, we don’t have to tell you anything.”

Damian rumbled warningly, stepping forward.

A dozen soldiers lifted their swords and took a matching step forward at the same time. The threat was clear: Come along peacefully, or come in pieces.

“Damian,” I said nervously as two guards stepped up to me holding manacles. “What do I do?”

He grimaced.

“Damian?” I repeated as my hands were forced behind my back and trapped in

stainless steel restraints. “What do I do?”

“I ...” His nostrils flared, eyes filled with a deep simmering anger.

“Take her away,” the captain said.

“Damian?”

Soldiers grabbed me by the arms, hustling me off the room.

“I will free you!” he called over the sound of their armor.

I tried to respond as we went down the stairs, but one of the guards drove his elbow into my stomach. “Be silent, human.”

Gasping for air, I wrenched my arm away, trying to get free, to run back to Damian. The guards grip was like a vise on my biceps, barely yielding at all to my struggle.

“I didn’t do anything,” I spat, struggling impotently as we descended to the lower levels of the palace. “I’m not the bad guy here.”

The guards didn’t respond. They simply took me to a cell and tossed me inside, slamming the heavy bars shut. I didn’t bother trying to see if I could do anything to them. They were made for a dragon, not me. There was no way I was escaping.

“Enjoy your stay,” one of them smirked before leaving me alone in the dark, damp palace dungeon.

The cold crept in as I leaned against the metal barriers, sinking in past my clothing and through my skin until it settled deep into my bones, numbing me to the core.

He'd left me. Damian had just let me be taken, thrown in jail, when he knew I hadn't done anything.

"I'm never going to fit in here," I whispered, resting my head on the bars, feeling the futility of it all. "They're never going to accept me."

Not even him.

Damian

The guard captain stood in front of me, watching my face as his men took her away. I listened to her cry my name and protest her innocence. I heard it all. Every word laced with fear and confusion. I took it all in, feeding it to the fires in my very core. The air around me shimmered with the building heat.

“Don’t do it,” the captain whispered under his breath. “That’s what they want.”

I tore my eyes away from Aurora’s manacled wrists, fixated instead on the man who’d ordered her arrest. “What do you want?”

“The councilors,” he hissed. “I’m the sovereign’s man, as are you. But Kerstun and the others were there when I was given these orders. You know she’s being forced to do this by them. Otherwise, they’ll give her further difficulties.”

I looked him up and down. “You hate humans,” I said. His attitude toward Aurora had not been faked. I’d seen the real thing often enough to know that. “Why are you telling me this?”

The captain’s face never changed. “I hate politicians even more. I’m urging you, Magistrate. Damian. Don’t give them what they want. I have orders to arrest you if you resist, and that will tie the sovereign’s hands even further.”

I inhaled sharply, the fury in my chest redoubling in intensity. Fire would be dancing in my eyes at this point, while my dragon was on its edge, ready to come the instant I summoned it.

“Don’t.” The captain pleaded with me now.

Exhaling the breath, I let my rage go with it. In its place came a cold determination, a vow to myself, to Aurora, and to anyone who got in my way.

“Mark my words, Captain,” I said, hearing the ice in my words as it reached out to encompass him and those nearest. “Everything that just happened here, everything that is going on, it had better be completely and totally by the book. I mean utterly perfect. If I find out that anyone has been doing something that doesn’t follow procedure, twists the law from its spirit, or blatantly breaks it, there will be ... punishment.”

I said the last word with calm promise, but I knew from the paling of nearby faces that they all understood exactly what I meant by it. The magistrate was speaking now, not Damian. When he spoke, people listened.

“Am I clear, Captain?”

The guard captain bobbed his head. “Completely.”

“I thought so.” I shouldered past him and headed for a separate set of stairs down into the palace, making it clear I was not pursuing Aurora.

My dragon fought me every step of the way, demanding I go after her and free her. With it went my heart, longing to go show her just what I was willing to do for her.

But over it all, I flung my iron willpower, locking down those emotions and taking control of every step I took. It was not the time for rash emotional action. I needed to use cold hard logic and the law. I was a master of the law. I was the law.

And those who were trying to play games with it were about to regret it.

Down the stairs I went, making a beeline for the administrative wing and the sovereign's office. She would be there, waiting, well aware that I would be unhappy. I figured the councilors would be with her.

It wasn't until the third checkpoint that I realized something else must be going on. The level of security wasn't unusual. In fact, it was as I expected. The guards verified my identity and let me proceed, which was also as normal.

But each of those security stations had been manned by guards I suspected were more loyal to the councilors than the sovereign. Every guard. That was unusual. Where were her loyalists?

I bared my teeth. Someone was playing funny with the schedule, and I doubted it was an accident either. There was nothing I could do about it now. I could only hope someone else had noticed what was going on and was taking action.

The fact that doing so would mean the rule of law was on the verge of breaking down didn't sit well with me. However, it was not the law-followers who were causing issues. I crossed my fingers that I was overreacting, but I doubted it.

Upon reaching the inner area of the administrative wing, I breathed a sigh of relief. All the guards there were of the sovereign's own bodyguard. Staunch loyalists. They were surrounded and outnumbered, but at least there were no traitors among them.

That you know of. Someone is stealing the scepters, and we still don't know who's behind it.

Word must have preceded me into the inner areas because I was intercepted by a furious-looking Jair not long after I arrived.

"What the hell is going on around here?" I hissed.

“Lots,” the commander of the sovereign’s bodyguard replied, his anger barely held in check. “Where do you want to start?”

“The beginning.”

He nodded. “In brief, your messenger set off a firestorm. Word got out quickly. We couldn’t keep a lid on it. The councilors called an emergency session, and now they’re making a play for power.”

“What do you mean?” I curled one hand into a fist, knuckles cracking loudly.

“They’ve turned the entire council against her. A vote of no confidence is on the table, and they claim to have the support to pass it, removing her entirely. Her hands are tied, Damian. That’s why the stupid arrest order for your human went out. She can’t go against them. Not right now.”

I growled in frustration, clenching and unclenching both hands.

“And given how things are going, she’s not going to be able to, is she?” I said. “Three missing scepters. Not a single lead, besides the idiocy with Aurora. It doesn’t look good.”

“I know.” Jair just glowered at nothing, probably feeling just as impotent as I did.

“Are they in there with her?”

“No, thankfully.”

“Good.”

Entering the sovereign’s office, I exchanged a brisk nod with the Ruler of All

Dragonkind. For now .

“Damian,” she greeted, her voice tight, strained. I couldn’t imagine the pressure she was under.

“My sovereign,” I said, saluting formally.

“Tell me you know who did this?”

I stayed silent.

“Shit.” The sovereign rarely cursed.

“But I may have a lead,” I said into the silence that followed.

She waited expectantly.

“Technically, it’s Aurora who may have it.”

“Either she does or she doesn’t,” the sovereign said. “And I am sorry for the arrest ridiculousness. I could not stop it.”

I waved it away. “She didn’t get a chance to finish telling me when we landed. It sounded like she didn’t want to let anyone else know about it. But I didn’t have time before she was hauled off.”

My dragon roared furiously.

The sovereign nodded. “Damn. We need to know what she knows.”

I grimaced. “I was thinking the same. I noted the guard situation out there, however,



and if it's similar in the dungeons—”

Jair grunted. “It is.”

“Then they won't let me anywhere near her to find out,” I snarled, slamming a fist into my palm.

“To them, she's their only lead, their only suspect.”

I snorted. “More like she's the only one who might have a clue which one of them is behind it. But if I can't ask her, what the hell do we do?”

The sovereign laid her hands out her desk, her lips compressed into a firm line.

“What is it?” I asked, sensing the tension within her.

“There is a way,” she said. “If you're prepared to do what must be done, Damian.”

The fact she called me Damian, not magistrate, rang all sorts of alarm bells. I silenced them.

“I am,” I said without hesitation. “What must I do?”

There was a great sadness in the sovereign's eyes when she looked up at me. She didn't flinch, didn't hesitate, but she was filled with regret.

“You must do what you have sworn not to do,” she said. “You must go against the law. Go get her, Damian, help her escape, and find out what she knows. It's our only lead, our only hope at this point.”

I stared at her, stunned.

Break the law? Me?

But it was all I had. All I was. No, it used to be all I had, all I was. Now, there was something more. Some one more.

Aurora.

Damian

The confidence in my stride wavered as I neared the entrance to the dungeon, the doorway itself acting as a metaphorical line in the sand. One that had been drawn not by me, or by those who I supported, but drawn nonetheless. The councilors were making their move, and to do so, they needed Aurora. She was the villain in their plans, and without her, things would slow to a crawl, if not fall apart. After all, without someone external to blame, the masses would have more questions.

None of which changed what would happen if I went in there—if I crossed that line. It wasn't a matter if I was able to do it. If I chose to step forward, there was nothing that would stop me. Anyone who got in my way, who blocked my path to Aurora, would be cut down. That was if I chose to cross over. To go to the other side.

I hesitated, coming to a stop. This was not the way I did things. It was not who I was, who I'd been since the sovereign had given me the honor of being her magistrate. This was the land of shadows, of darkness and backdoors. It was a job for the Shadow, not the Magistrate. But he wasn't here, I was.

And if I went forward, there would be no going back. Ever. Things would change. I would change, and so much of what I had worked for would be undone. After all, if I chose to disregard the law, to break it, then why would any other shadowy members of our society stop to think twice about doing the same?

I can't do this. I can't just storm in there and start wrecking things. There has to be more.

Justification. That was what I needed. A reasonable explanation for what I was doing in the name of the law.

“Well, damn,” I muttered, rocking back on my heels as things coalesced in my mind.

In the name of the law. Legality, in other words.

Something that just so happened to be in the wheelhouse of the magistrate of the Dragon Isles.

AKA, me .

Could there be a way, then, for me to somehow justify what I was about to do? That I had given the guards a chance to do the right thing and put them in violation of that same law I was trying to uphold?

Feeling suddenly empowered, I went down the stairs to the dungeon. There was an excuse I could use. It was flimsy and technical, but I loved technical, I lived for it. Everyone knew that.

Would it matter if I couldn't find a way to prove who truly was stealing the scepters and trying to threaten our society? No. They would just overrule my justification and likely throw me in jail for being a traitor if caught.

So, I would just have to believe I was right that Aurora knew something vital. She hadn't let me down so far ...

“Can I help you?”

Not a good start if the sneer on the guard's face was anything to go by as I entered the dungeon. Nor was the way both guards came to attention, blocking the hallway in

front of me. A clear sign that they had no intentions of letting me proceed.

“Yes, I am—”

“This area is currently off-limits,” said a third guard who appeared in a doorway. He spoke calmly but firmly, expecting to be obeyed.

“Off-limits,” I mused. “Interesting. Off-limits to whom? ”

“Anyone,” the head guard said in that same tone. “Including you, Magistrate.”

I arched an eyebrow in his direction. Him knowing who I was didn’t surprise me. There were well over a thousand guards who worked in the palace, though not at one time, but there was only one magistrate. My face was known far and wide. I wouldn’t be sneaking in here unnoticed.

But that wasn’t my plan.

“You don’t have the authority to give me orders,” I said, sizing the captain up and making sure he saw me doing so.

“I have my own orders, and they say no one is to have access to the dungeons. Including you.” The captain shrugged, but his eyes danced with humor at being able to deny me what I wanted.

“Who issued these orders? I come on command of the sovereign herself.” I added that last line to force the captain to reveal who was behind it.

“Councilors Kerstun, Parun and Laurana.” The captain said the names with a pause after each, as if laying a better hand in a game of cards one by one. He obviously expected me to be impressed and to do as I was told.

Too bad for him, I had a bit of a stubborn streak when it came to little things like following the law of our nation.

“I don’t recall the dungeons being under control of a councilor—or councilors—no matter how august the personage they may be,” I said, drawing out the word, making it clear I held them all in great disdain.

Fires flashed in the eyes of the guard who’d initially stopped me, and all three became just a little more alert. They knew I wasn’t going to be easily deterred, nor was I interested in play the games with their patrons.

“Extenuating circumstances,” the guard captain insisted, doing his best to keep the peace.

“There’s no such thing when it comes to the rule of law in the dragon kingdom,” I spat. “There is only the magistrate. Me . I am judge, jury, and if need be, executioner.”

I let that last hang in the air for a moment.

“I’m sorry, Magistrate, but orders are orders.”

Nodding slowly, I kept my eyes fixated on the captain. “Just to be clear, you are willfully following orders that are given in error, and you are refusing correction from the senior judicial member of the kingdom? In addition, you are interfering with an active investigation of the magistrate that pertains to the security of our home?”

The guard’s jaw stiffened as he realized I’d backed him into a corner. I’d given him an out with the first sentence while letting him know the seriousness of any consequences if he didn’t take the lifeline.

If I, as magistrate, judged the security of the Dragon Isles to be in jeopardy, I was authorized to do just about anything and everything to prevent anything from happening.

Including killing anyone who got in my way. It was flimsy logic, and the council would likely fight to have me removed if things went sideways, but it was true to the law.

And that was what I cared about.

Scale rasped against leather as the guards went for their swords without warning.

I was ready, having anticipated this move. My forehead smashed into the captain's mouth, reeling him back so he collided with the first guard I'd come across. Stumbling back from the headbutt, I acted woozy and unsteady, shifting my weight just in time as the third guard came at me, only to collapse in a heap as my foot connected with his jaw.

Dragons didn't go down that easy. Cursing and trying to stop the flow of blood at the same time, the captain disentangled himself from the guard he'd hit, freeing them both to come at me.

I ducked a wickedly slicing sword, delivering a flat strike of the edge of my hand to his wrist. The scaled blade dropped, numbed fingers unable to maintain their grip. This opened me up to a knee from the captain. Rolling with it, I tried to diminish the impact, but the blow still tossed me back against the wall. Pain lanced up my spine, and I momentarily saw stars.

"You are under arr— Oof. "

The captain doubled over as I kicked him straight in the dick. Two heavy fists to his

back dropped him to the floor. I watched idly as a tooth bounced across the floor.

“Stay down,” I grunted, climbing to my feet, squaring off against both remaining guards. In the background, shouts of alarm signaled the coming arrival of more guards who would likely oppose me.

“You’re one of her favorites, and I’m going to enjoy watching you die for this,” the sneering guard spat hotly, still shaking his sword hand, trying to regain feeling.

“The orders you are following are in violation of the law of the Dragon Isles,” I grunted. “If you persist in threatening our national security, it is my duty as magistrate to do all in my power to keep our people safe. That means I will kill you.”

Both guards glanced at one another. It was in that hesitation that I struck. Moving fast enough to be a blur, I dropped first one, then the other guard. Their bodies hit the floor with a heavy clatter of armor and limpness.

“Sometimes I hate this job,” I said to the empty hallway. Then I took up the sword and made good on my promise.

Dragon blood dripping from the tip of the scale blade, I strode deeper into the dungeons, ready to confront the guards racing to see what the commotion was. My jaw was set, every feature carved from granite. I couldn’t afford to slow, to show mercy to anyone who got in my way.

The tip of the sword came up as guards came around the corner. The air screamed as the blade swept through it, striking down those who would side with a traitor. I did not hesitate. I did not offer quarter.

Judge. Jury.



Executioner.

It was the side of the job I disliked the most.

Leaving the trail of bodies in my wake, I pilfered a set of keys from the wall of the office and moved on, picking up speed. Aurora's scent was in the air. She was close.

Find. Claim. Find. Claim.

The drumbeat of basic thoughts from my dragon pounded in time with my boots on the stone floor, increasing in speed until I came to a halt in front of the cell that contained her.

Aurora.

"Damian?" she yelped from deep in a far corner. "What are you doing here?"

"Getting you out," I growled, opening the door, removing the metal barrier from between us. "Did you think I would not come for you?"

"I ..." she faltered.

The world blurred, and she was in my arms. I sought and found her mouth, soaking in the soft warmth of her lips, the curves of her body against mine. I wanted to stay there forever, spend eternity exploring her.

But there wasn't time for such enjoyments. Not until the scepters were returned and the traitor exposed.

"What do we do now?" Aurora asked when we broke apart, her eyes dropping to the sword in my hand, the scaled blade stained with drying blood. "I take it I wasn't

released willingly.”

“The law was not being followed,” I ground out. “I rectified the issue.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, licking her lips, scanning me over, looking for injuries.

“I’m fine,” I said, brushing off her concerns.

She nodded. I doubted she fully believed me. I wasn’t sure I believed me.

“Shall we leave?” She gestured toward the exit.

“Not before you tell me what you started to say on the roof,” I said, meeting her eyes.

“Aurora, what did you see last night?”

Aurora

There was an urgency about his question, a desperate plea from Damian to me. It turned my stomach into a ball of knots. Why did the answer to this question matter so much to him? Something had happened, something bad. I only hoped I wouldn't disappoint him.

I tried to ignore the steady drip-drip-drip of blood falling from the blade of the sword. It wasn't easy. Knowing Damian had shed blood to get to me, that he'd killed his own kind, just to reach me, a human, did not sit well.

"Damian," I whispered, suddenly unsure. "What are you expecting from me?"

"Last night. You said there was something you noticed about the attack? You tried to tell me about it on the roof," he said. "Remember? What was it, Aurora? What did you see?"

That wasn't an answer to the question I'd asked. Not directly, but I could hear the anxious need in his words. He thought I was going to solve it all. That I had the answers to the problem of the missing scepters.

A sharp burst of pain served as notice I was chewing on my upper lip.

"Damian ..." It was almost a moan of pain. "It's not like that."

"What do you mean? You saw who did it, didn't you? The person behind all of this, the one stealing the scepters. You know who it is. I know you do."

I shook my head. “No, that’s not it at all.”

The left side of his face twitched, tightening into a grimace, then slackened once more into something harder than marble. “Just tell me everything.”

I nodded. “I was looking out the window, and I saw them coming. The attackers. The shadows moved, and I knew it, I just knew. Then I could see them creeping up. I wanted to shout an alarm, to come find you, but they attacked before I could. They were so fast! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I wanted to ...”

“It’s okay.”

He didn’t react or show much emotion. We’d already been over this part. Damian didn’t blame me for not sounding an alarm. According to him, he was happier I stayed silent so the attackers stayed unaware of my presence.

“Just before I left the window, I noticed there was one more out there, one more attacker, I mean.” I shrugged. “He was watching the attack. Pacing back and forth.”

“That’s it? You saw someone pacing? Why didn’t you tell me that before?” he roared, throwing the sword away in frustration. “Do you have any idea what I’ve done?”

I cringed away, hating that I couldn’t provide what he wanted.

“He was also slapping his legs?” I added. “Really hard, which I thought unusual.”

Damian spun. His eyes were gone, consumed by silver fire. “Slapping his legs?”

“Yes.” I mimicked it, bringing my hand up and whacking my thigh. “It was the strangest thing, he did it so hard. How could it not hurt?”

There was a blur, and then Damian had me by the shoulders, gripping almost tightly enough to hurt. “Listen to me, Aurora, listen very carefully. I need you to close your eyes, and replay this memory. Replay it exactly .”

“O-okay,” I stuttered, still recovering from the speed of his movement. “I can try.”

“Don’t try. I need you to do it perfectly. Everything hinges on this. Everything, Aurora.”

Great. Nothing like a little pressure.

With my stomach churning, I did as he requested, closing my eyes, calling up the memory of the man in the dark, pacing back and forth, slapping his legs while he waited.

“What do you see?” Damian asked, his voice intruding my thoughts like a narrator.

“A man, big and muscular, likely a dragon. He’s in the dark. Too far away for me to notice his features. He has long hair, probably a dark color, but I don’t know. He’s walking back and forth, watching the temple we’re in. He’s sent his men to attack. They’re coming for you. I want to come and warn you. But I don’t.”

“Forget that. Talk to me about his legs, about the slapping.”

“He’s hitting himself. Constantly. Over and over,” I said. “Just smacking the side of his thigh.”

“Is it both legs, or just one?”

“Bo—” I paused the memory, rewinding it, letting it go again. “It’s just his left leg.”

Damian growled loud enough that it echoed down the stone hallways. My eyes popped open at the noise. His hands fell away from my shoulders, knuckles cracking and popping as he clenched his fingers into tight balls. Muscles swelled and stretched his shirt, and his face was a mask of pure fury, unlike anything I'd seen before.

"Who was it?" I asked. "Who is this person?"

He rolled his neck, more cracks and pops filling the air. Mighty lungs rose and fell with a long, controlled breath.

"My brother."

My jaw fell open hard enough to be painful. "Your brother? "

"Yes." There was no emotion in his voice as he talked. "A career criminal. Just like his son, Tobias. They both have that nervous tick where they tap the left side of their leg. It can only be him."

He took my hand, and we started walking fast through the palace hallways. His blood-spattered outfit drew more than its fair share of looks. Guards slowed, many eyeing us suspiciously, and more than one went for their sword but stopped at a look from Damian.

When we reached a set of large double doors with ornate carvings etched into their surface and magnificent friezes set into the walls around them, I knew we were somewhere important.

The pair of heavily armed and armored guards standing watch helped to emphasize this point. Only certain people were allowed inside.

"The council hall," Damian muttered. "Wait here for a moment."

I came to a stop in the middle of a four-way intersection. Dragons passed behind and in front of me, moving out of the way. Damian didn't slow as he approached the doors.

"Magistrate, the council is in a closed session," one of the guards said, raising a hand to stop Damian. "You cannot go in at this time. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Damian echoed.

"For what?"

"This."

I gasped as he grabbed the outstretched hand and wrenched it around. The guard shrieked, but Damian wasn't done. He hauled on the mangled hand, pulling the guard closer, where an elbow was introduced to an unarmored chin. The guard collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

Damian was moving before the man had even hit the floor, leaping over him and slamming into the second guard, wrapping both hands and legs around him. The added weight sent them both crashing to the floor. The sound of the guard's dragon-scale helmet slamming into the stone instantly induced a wave of nausea. Nothing should sound that bad.

The attack had caused a commotion, half a dozen or more dragons pausing to watch the goings-on, but none interfered.

"Come," Damian said, beckoning me forward. "I have secured us an invite to this 'closed' session. Let's not waste it."

I struggled to find words. Was he making a joke about what had just happened?

Taking my hand, he kicked open the double doors and strode between a set of bleachers into the center of the room. Seats rose up around him like a bowl, holding several dozens of dragons. Every single one of them looked down on him, most in disdain.

“Magistrate!” an unfamiliar voice called. “You are not part of this body. You are not welcome. Please remove yourself while we—”

“Councilor Jinson.” Damian’s voice was pure ice as he spoke, instantly silencing the pompous-looking councilor. “I am the magistrate, as you said. When my duty requires me to seek justice against those who would threaten our entire nation, there is nowhere I am not welcome.”

The councilor looked around for support, but with none forthcoming, he was forced to sit down, bowing to Damian’s superior will. I bit my lip. It was hot watching him put that fool into his place.

“Now, where is Councilor Laurana?” he said, sweeping the assembled dragons, searching for someone in particular while I waited off to one side, in case I was needed.

Thankfully, my time in human politics had prepared me for such a stage. I was not afraid to speak to these dragons. I’d addressed the entitled dicks of the Senate on more than one occasion. The Dragon Council were rank amateurs in comparison. I felt no fear being under their scrutiny.

“She is not here.” That was Councilor Parun.

“Where is she?” Damian demanded. “Why is she not a part of this closed council session.”



“I don’t know,” Parun admitted.

To my surprise, he sounded genuine.

“Something is wrong,” I said to Damian, but the way he looked at me told me he felt it, too.

“I agree.”

“What is going on?” Parun demanded to know. “You have interrupted a very important council meeting.”

Damian threw his head back and laughed. “Important? Hardly. You’re trying to convince these idiots to support you in your attempt to usurp the throne from the sovereign. You want to rule yourself. You’re using the missing scepters as your threat, the ‘proof’ that the sovereign is no longer capable.”

Parun’s jaw tightened.

“I don’t have proof of your guilt,” Damian snarled. “I will, but not yet. For now, I only have enough to interrogate Councilor Laurana. I’m sure she’ll be forthcoming ... eventually.”

“Well, she isn’t here,” Parun snapped. “So, if you would please leave us alone?”

“He doesn’t know where she is either,” I said to Damian. “And it’s bothering him. Something’s going on here.”

Damian looked at me, searched my face, then nodded. “We have to find her, then. If she’s broken away from them, it means she’s not going to use the scepters as a threat.”

I gasped, it all settling into place. “She’s going to bring the shield down no matter what. The crazy bitch! We have to stop her.”

Damian took me by both shoulders once more. “No, Aurora. I’m sorry. We don’t have to. You stay here. I must deal with this.”

“But—”

Any further protests I had were cut off as he covered my mouth with his, kissing me firm and deep. In front of the entire council.

“Go the sovereign,” he said, escorting me from the council chamber. Behind us, it erupted with shouted accusations. “Find her. Tell her what’s going on. Have her send help. But I have to get there before she can do any more damage.”

Damian stepped away, heading down one hallway, while I went down the other.

The sudden distance between us snapped something I hadn’t even realized was there.

“Damian!” I cried, running to him. “Wait!”

He spun. His eyes searched mine. I licked my lips. Why had I called him back? What was I hoping would come of this moment?

“I ...”

My voice failed me.

Damian’s hand brushed my chin, and he smiled tightly. “We’ll talk when I’m back.”

Then he was gone, rushing off down the hallway, his skin turning to scales as he

leaped up the stairs in a single bound.

“I think I’m falling for you.”

The words fell on an empty hallway.

Damian

The color of the sky above brought me to a standstill as I raced onto the roof. I could hear the guards muttering nervously about the unnatural golden-bronze hue where there should have been blue. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Wings sprouted from my shoulders as I called for my dragon, willing its energy into my body, transforming me from human to lizard in the blink of an eye. Crouching low on all four legs, I leaped across the roof, picking up speed before launching myself into the air. I didn't care that the little maneuver left giant marks on the stone. All that mattered now was speed.

Speed and stopping my brother and his employer before they brought ruin upon us all.

Anger banished the dull ache in my heart, but I knew it wouldn't hold. It couldn't. Right now, I was caught up in the mad race across the sky. When it was over, after it was all done, I would have to face the consequences of what was to come. Of what I would do when confronted by Evander. My brother was a criminal, but he was still blood.

Right now, you are the magistrate. You have no blood. Only the law and the requirement to do your duty.

Slipping into that persona allowed me to distance myself somewhat from the reality of what I would have to do. At least, it usually did. But the magistrate was no longer that cold, hard figure it had been. I'd thawed.

The air rushed over my snout as the muscles along my back flexed hard, pushing my wings down, propelling me forward at an ever-increasing speed. The land below hurtled past, the palace rapidly fading in the distance.

It and Aurora.

She was the one who'd thawed me out. Broken through the mask I'd allowed to drop over my entire personality even when I was off duty. I smiled a toothy dragon smile despite everything as I thought of her and the joy she brought to me.

We'll talk when I'm back.

The grin faded. That was the last line I'd spoken to her. She'd wanted to say something, but I'd stopped her. Now, with time to let my mind wander as I arrowed in on Councilor Laurana's estate, I recalled the look in Aurora's eyes, the way they'd danced with fear, uncertainty, and the need to tell me something.

So much had been left unsaid. Too much, perhaps. I was taking a chance, striking out on my own to stop Laurana before it was too late. But there had been no time. Even now, I might be too late. The sky was turning from gold to full burnished brass. A surefire sign something was affecting the shield.

Fueled by fresh adrenaline and a need to stop the apocalypse, I found more speed somehow. Thoughts of Aurora faded though they never went away. They never would again, I suspected. She was a part of me, an integral part in a way that defied reason. Especially considering she was human. Every fiber of me wanted her around, from my human to my dragon. We longed for her presence.

We cared for her. We adored her. We lo—

I nearly plummeted from the sky as the shocking realization struck me, momentarily

resetting the neurons in my brain. Regaining control after plunging over a thousand feet, I pushed myself harder to make up for the precious lost seconds. Time was running out.

I'm in love with Aurora.

The words filled my head at the same moment the councilor's estate appeared over a rise in the distance. The air around it shimmered with heat.

Lunging forward, I strained against the laws of aerodynamics, trying to break them to increase speed even more. Time was nearly run out on my home, all because of one crazy dragon who thought it would somehow benefit us. She had to be stopped. Her and those who worked for her had to be nullified. Regardless of personal cost.

Diving from the sky, I hit the front door of the palatial estate house mid-change, using my wings to shield my body as the massive wooden barriers exploded under my impact. Wooden splinters flew everywhere, impaling an unarmored woman who'd been rushing to the door. Two men farther back took other, less lethal wounds from the storm of projectiles.

They must have seen me coming and been heading out to stop me.

I bounced off the floor, snapping my now-shrunken wings out wide and catching both of the wounded dragon-men by surprise. The whiplash impact smashed them into stone walls. One of them rebounded and flopped down still while the other slid slowly to the floor, leaving a thick red streak behind.

Stalking angrily through the foyer, I thrust both hands out wide. Flames burst from my palms, coating the walls and ceiling. Wooden interior timbers burst into flame, as did tapestries, furniture, and carpeting. I walked down a wide, twisting wooden staircase, flames engulfing each step as I went, my boots leaving behind brands as I

incinerated everything in my path.

Another dragon hurtled up the stairs, only to be met by twin streams of flames to his unprotected face. He tried to scream, which resulted in him inhaling the fire. As he flung himself against the wall, scraping at his melting face to try to stop it, I plunged a clawed hand into his chest, killing him instantly.

Judge.

Jury.

Executioner.

The estate burned around me as I descended into its bowels, knowing full well that would be where the councilor and the scepters would be. The fire slowed because there were few wooden frames there. Everything was mostly carved directly from the bedrock.

“Evander!” I bellowed, the sound backed by the roar of flames from above and unbelievably loud as the rest of the house went up. “I know you’re here, brother . Show yourself!”

It had been years since I’d last spoken to my brother. Being associated with that type of person was not a good look for the magistrate. Although I held out hope for my nephew, Tobias, I knew Evander was long since lost.

Two figures, guarding a door, waited for me as I turned down another hallway. Baring my teeth, I started toward them.

“Stand down,” I said, casting the order. “Now. It’s over. You are under arrest. Your punishment will be suitable to the crimes you have committed. If you resis—”

“Oh, shut up already,” the figure on the left spat, hurling a fireball in my direction.

I recognized the voice easily, knowing who it was without needing the light of the spherical ball of flames rocketing toward my head to show me.

“Brother.” I paused to duck the attack but continued my advance. “Cease this insanity now. Bringing down the shield is suicide. You know this!”

“Don’t tell me what I know! You don’t speak to me. Not now, not after pretending for years I didn’t exist. You don’t get to do that!”

Evander launched himself at me. The other figure held back. Waiting.

I embraced the attack, jumping at Evander. The move caught him by surprise, bringing me into range before he was ready. The impact knocked the wind from us both, but I’d led with a shoulder that caught him in the jaw, snapping his head back. Teeth smashed together.

We hit the ground and rolled, throwing punches, elbows, knees, and anything we could. It was two kids fighting. Only this time, the loser faced death.

“Stand. Down,” I grunted, slamming my head back into him. The impact left me woozy for a moment, seeing stars.

That was when the other figure hit me in the midsection, taking me down again. I snarled, angry at the interruption, and clapped both palms over his ears. The figure screamed and rolled away, revealing himself.

It was Farhan, the only son of Councilor Laurana, and Evander’s only “friend,” though the term was used loosely. It was Farhan who’d brought Evander into Laurana’s circle.



“I don’t have time for this,” I snarled. “Your mother is trying to destroy our entire culture.”

“Your sovereign already did that!” Farhan shouted back. “We must purify our lands if we hope to ever regain our true selves. She’s poisoned us by bringing humans here, by sending us to them. Their taint spreads across the Isles already. But my mother has seen this, and she will save us!”

“By bathing us in nuclear fire courtesy of the humans?” I snorted.

“Those of us who’ve stayed true will survive,” Evander growled, the corridor filling with light as the fires above slowly but surely made their way down to us. “The rest will perish. Then we will rebuild.”

I rolled my eyes. There was no saving these idiots. Talking to them would be a waste of precious remaining oxygen. I’d tried. They’d pled guilty.

Now, they must face their punishment.

I called my dragon and its power once more, and flames filled my body. They surged from every pore, covering me in crimson scales that coiled the fire within each individual center. Wings sprouted from my back, and horns jutted from my head while my face elongated, though I didn’t fully shift.

Evander and Farhan backed away, trying to buy themselves time to reciprocate, but they were too slow.

I lunged at them. Fingers became claws that raked open Farhan from stomach to waist as he got too close. Stumbling away, he screamed in pain. The sound was barely audible over the flames.

“I’m sorry, brother,” I intoned, my voice deep and powerful as I hit Farhan with a kick, sending him down the hallway and through the door, bouncing across the stone floor into the middle of a large chamber.

I heard Laurana’s shriek. She must’ve seen her son’s body as it bled out on the floor.

Evander came at me, Farhan’s death having bought him time to half-shift as well. I blocked his attack, grabbing him and spinning before slamming him into the wall. Once. Twice. Three times. His eyes lost focus. Blood trickled down his temples.

But he wasn’t done. His fists shot out, both catching me square in the chest. Stone shattered as I hit the far wall hard. Evander came at me, following up with a punch to the gut before trying to rake his claws across my face. I yanked my head up and away at the last second. What would have been a blinding attack only ripped flesh and bounced off my jawbone. Painful but not debilitating.

Grabbing him in a bear hug, I jumped, crunching his head against the ceiling. He kicked out, blasting me away and through the shredded remains of the door.

Almost immediately, a tingle ran down my spine. There was an energy in this room, one I didn’t like.

My eyes caught sight of Laurana weaving flames around the three scepters, pouring more energy into the effort each second. The snakelike energy projection threaded back and forth, intersecting itself, looping up and down. At its heart, the scepters were in the shape of a triangle, their bases sunk into the stone, preventing them from moving.

“You can’t stop us,” Evander snarled as he burst through the door.

I rolled, his foot stomping down through the space I’d occupied only a second before.

Stone shattered under the impact. I swept out with a wing, catching him off balance. He hit the ground, and we pushed away from one another before getting to our feet.

“Don’t make me do this,” I pleaded. “Please. You are still family. Surrender now. I will make sure you’re spared death. Brother, I beg—”

“You stopped being my brother years ago!” Evander shouted, attacking again.

We battled across the room, scales and blood torn from our bodies. He sought to kill me. I tried to stop him.

But it was a losing effort. I could only avoid hurting him for so long. Eventually, I’d make a mistake, and he would break through. Killing me. Dying wasn’t an option. I couldn’t. Not here. Not now.

Aurora is counting on me. I owe her a conversation.

Her likeness filled my mind, glowing golden against the darkness that had occupied the space previously. She banished the darkness, my darkness, providing me with a beacon to see, to stay strong.

“I am not going to enjoy this!” Evander snarled, beating down on my upraised arm with both hands, his fists giant hammers slamming into me.

The tiniest of sighs escaped me. “Me neither, brother. Forgive me.”

Then I exploded upward, surprising him. My claws tore scales from his chest, leaving massive furrows in their wake. Blood poured fresh. I breathed fire at him before he could fully recover, forcing him to duck away and bringing him in range of my knee, which connected solidly with his jaw.

He stumbled backward. His wings wrapped around him, forming a barrier that prevented me from getting in the finishing blow. Instead, I grabbed those wings and hauled back, pivoting as I did.

Evander was yanked up and over my shoulder as I whipped him around and down into the ground. His skull rebounded, and his wings went limp. I leaped on him, and in a second, it was over.

Pulling my claws from his throat, I stood, trying to fight off the waves of guilt and revulsion that instantly filled me. Evander was dead, but the councilor still lived. She was still trying to bring it all down.

I couldn't let that happen. I eyed the size of the chamber and came to a decision in a quarter-second.

"You're too late!" she cackled, the last of the energy leaving her hands. The scepters trembled. "I have succeeded. We will be free once more. Free and pure to—"

A giant dragon paw crushed her flat as I finished shifting.

Almost immediately, the firesnake engulfing the scepters dimmed. Reaching out with my claws, I dug lines in the stone floor, reaching down until the scepters fell over one by one, without me actually touching them. I wasn't sure just what the councilor had done to them, and I didn't want to find out.

As I finished, the unpleasant energy in the underground chamber disappeared.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was over. I was safe. My people were safe.

Aurora was safe.

Damian

The sovereign, a full contingent of her guards, and one other person waited for me as I dropped down to the roof of the palace.

Much as I served the Ruler of All Dragonkind, I could not keep my eyes away from the other green-eyed woman at the middle of the heavily armed ball of dragons.

For her part, Aurora didn't look away either, her gaze firmly locked on me as she smiled from the corner of her mouth.

Shifting into human form, I gathered up the cargo I'd brought with me and strode into the center of that knot of guardians.

"My sovereign," I said, noting Councilors Parun and Kerstun approaching from off to the side. They were not welcomed in the bubble but were close enough to hear. I spared them a glare. "I have retrieved the scepters. The shield is intact. The known perpetrators have been dealt with."

I didn't bother to stop my eyes from sliding over the two councilors as I made my pronouncement. More than one guard did the same, several even turning heads. The councilors, however, just stared back blankly, pretending they had no idea to whom I referred.

"Thank you, Magistrate." The sovereign gestured to Jair, who collected the scepters from my arms. "You have done your people a great service. Truly, you are to be thanked for your efforts at resolving this crisis."

I nodded. “It should be noted, Sovereign, that those behind this, including Councilor Laurana, made it expressly clear that they blamed all the problems on you and your guidance. Their reasoning behind this was to bring the shield down so our kingdom could be purified from the taint of humans that you have ‘allowed to infest us’.”

“Purified?” Aurora gasped. “They thought that having nukes rain down on this place would make it better? Are they insane?”

“No,” I said stiffly. “They were insane. Their punishment has been given.”

The sovereign was a keen reader of people. She came forward now, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Magistrate, I would have the names of those who defied me.”

I licked my lips. “There were three that I do not know. They died in my initial assault. I did not recognize their faces in the brief moments I saw them, but I assume they and others were part of Councilor Laurana’s household. In addition to them, I served punishment to her son, Farhan, his acquaintance, Evander, and the councilor herself.”

The sovereign’s hand tightened on my shoulder. “You have a brother by the name of Evander, do you not, Magistrate?” Everything was formal but her touch.

Beside her, Aurora inhaled sharply, eyes widening.

“I had a brother, Sovereign. But he lost that title many years ago.” I somehow got the words out, though my voice was like two stones grinding together.

There was a long pause. “I understand. You have served well, Magistrate. Your wounds will need time to heal. Please take as much time as necessary.”

“Not until your name is cleared,” I said, anger rising once more. “Only once this issue is settled will I rest. If there are others out there who still insist on your inadequacy, I

will ensure I find whatever proof I must.”

Councilor Parun took a small step closer. The guards shifted, forming a solid line and barring him from coming much nearer. “I do not foresee that being an issue, Magistrate. The scepters are returned. The sovereign has demonstrated her ability to keep our people safe. She has the support of the council.” He paused. “The entire council.”

I snorted. Parun’s words meant nothing, given the unspoken but very loud “for now” at the end of his statement. There would be more plans, more attempts. But until he could be fingered in it, he would stay free. That was the life of a politician.

“Thank you, Councilor Parun,” the sovereign said, somehow managing to sound grateful and not irate as she dismissed the slimy bastard and his accomplice Kerstun. “That will be all.”

The councilors retreated, leaving the three of us surrounded only by the spiky ball of dragon guards. Aurora and I stared at one another.

“Well?” the sovereign teased. “Are you going to kiss the girl or not?”

“Gladly,” I purred, closing the gap to Aurora in a blink, lifting her up and spinning her around as I kissed her. Guards had to shift and move so I didn’t collide with them, but none of them complained.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, holding tight like she never wanted to let go. I never wanted to let her go. She was mine now. All mine.

The trumpeting roar of my dragon only sealed her fate, linking her to me for the rest of time.



There was no other way I would want it.

“Apparently, palace decorum goes right out the window after a major crisis is averted,” the sovereign teased.

I ignored my ruler for several seconds longer, basking in the warmth of Aurora’s tongue against mine as they danced the intricate dance of two lovers while we turned slowly in place, oblivious to the world around us.

Eventually, however, it was time.

“My apologies,” Aurora said, taking a deep breath. “I’m not sure what came over me.”

“That would be Damian,” the sovereign mumbled softly under her breath yet loud enough for all to hear.

Aurora blushed bright red, but she didn’t pull away from me.

I glanced between the two women. “Everything is resolved now, correct? Justice has been handed out. The scepters are returned. The council has been put in their place. Am I missing anything?”

The sovereign shook her head, her platinum hair glimmering in the sunlight as it bounced delicately. “No. You have done well, Damian, my magistrate. I am in your debt. If there is anything I can do for you.”

I glanced at Aurora, fighting the grin threatening to conquer my face. “Perhaps you could see to it that I’m able to find and appoint a deputy, Sovereign? I believe the time has come for me to spend more time as Damian and less as magistrate. If I am to keep my mate happy and be a proper family dragon, I must learn balance.”

The sovereign arched an eyebrow at me, then slowly turned her gaze on Aurora, who was now smiling broadly, having lost the battle to remain stoic.

“That seems like a most reasonable request, Damian. Go get your house in order. The Dragon Isles will be here for you when you return. I have full confidence you will be able to do your job just as well, perhaps better, with this newfound perspective.”

I glanced at Aurora, the giddiness in my stomach threatening to boil over. “Yes, my sovereign,” I said, trying to remain solemn. My efforts were a complete and utter failure.

“Go then,” the sovereign said with a laugh, breaking the tension between us.

“As you command,” I said, snatching Aurora up in my arms and running for the edge of the roof.

Wings sprouted from my back, carrying us high into the air, arm in arm as we left the palace behind.

“Where are we going?” Aurora asked, snuggling in tight against me, her head nestled perfectly under my chin.

“You’ll see,” I said cryptically. “But I know you’re going to like it.”

Aurora

We landed high on the mountain at the center of the main island. A vast panoramic view spread out before us, from down into the grasslands to the coast, miles and miles away. To the right, the sun was trending low toward the horizon, casting a golden shadow over the ocean waters.

And behind me was Damian, his arms around my waist, holding me tight against the hardness of his body. The pressure of his chest to my back, his hips to my waist, was all I wanted, all I craved. He was what I craved. Every part of him. My body cried out for it. My mind demanded it.

And my soul needed it. Needed him.

“This view is beautiful,” I whispered, trying not to melt into a puddle when his chin came to rest on the very top of my head.

“If you ask me, it’s the second most beautiful thing I can see,” he murmured, the vibrations of his deep voice filtering down over my skull, quickening my heart.

“Flatterer,” I teased.

“I only speak the truth. You’re the most wonderful vision my eyes have ever feasted upon,” he said. “Your voice is the most harmonious sound my ears have ever drunk deep of. Your touch is the most heat-inciting experience I have ever felt. Your soul is the most wonderful thing to ever fill my heart.”

My knees were wobbly, but a thick arm snaked around my waist, keeping me up and pressed to his body. To his chest, his flat stomach, and the stirring hardness between his legs. It was all there.

And it's all mine.

"Damian ..."

"Aurora," he echoed just as firmly.

"Are you sure this is okay?"

It wasn't what I had meant to say, but the question had been nagging at the back of my mind ever since a part of me had clued in on the developing connection between us. I'd held back, kept parts of myself away, until I knew the answer. I had to hear him say it from his heart to know he wasn't just trying to bed me or make me feel better.

I had to know he believed it.

"It is with me." There was a pause, and his chest and arm rose then fell as he shrugged. "Others may not like it, but you're not the only human on the island. Others have taken humans as mates. We would not be the first. I suspect we would not be the last either. I cannot pretend that none will bother us for our union, if such a thing is indeed what you desire as much as I do. But I can promise you two things."

"What are they?" I turned in his arms to look at him as he spoke.

"First, I promise you that no matter what happens, that no matter what is said about you, or me, or us, that regardless of the prevailing feeling of the rest of my people, it will change absolutely nothing about the way I feel about you. I swear this to you.

They will not persuade me to ever believe that caring for you is a mistake.”

My throat closed up, so I could only nod that I understood.

“The second thing I promise you, Aurora, is that I will always be there for you. If anyone tries to hurt you or take you away from me, I will ensure it never happens again. Whether it is as the magistrate who sees justice done or Damian protecting his mate, they will pay for it. Nobody will harm you. Ever.”

I bit my lip. He meant it, I could tell. There was an intensity to his promises, a certain gravity that told me he didn’t make them lightly, nor did he fear what it would cost him to follow through.

Because, to him, any cost was worth it if he kept me.

“You certainly know how to make a woman feel valued,” I whispered, resting my head on his chest, feeling the pounding rhythm of his heart. It was oddly fast, especially for him.

“Good.” His voice was deeper than usual. More grave. “I hope that will translate over to making a woman feel loved. A certain woman in particular.”

I jerked back so abruptly it broke his grip on me. I stared into his face, searching it for any sign of lies or trickery, while my brain worked to process what he’d just said. “W-what did you just say?”

Thick fingers came up, cupping my jaw, tilting it up and keeping it there while he gazed down upon me. The silvery glow in his eyes danced like flames on an open fire with a mixture of amusement, and behind it ... uncertainty?

Of course. He wasn’t sure how I would respond to his statement. To his choice of

words. Damian had gone out on a limb, throwing that word around, without knowing if I would reciprocate or if I even felt the same way.

“I said I want to make you feel loved,” he growled. “Because that’s just it, Rory. I love you.”

My lungs constricted, driving the air from them, making it impossible to breathe. I could only stare up into his face, his long dark hair falling on either side as he looked down on me, a restless worry gathering in the corners of those mysterious silver eyes of his. The more seconds passed, the worse it got.

“Oh, Damian.” I stroked his cheek. “My big, powerful dragon protector with a heart of gold. I love you, too.”

The sun was suddenly the second brightest thing as his face lit up with mixed glee and relief. “You do?”

I nodded, throwing myself at him. “I do. I am so incredibly in love with you.”

“I’m wildly in love with you,” he repeated, laughing lightly. “I thought I was insane, but my dragon has been telling me all along. It wasn’t until I was fighting my brother in the basement of Councilor Laurana’s estate that I realized it. That I became aware of how you had helped me become a different, better dragon.”

He leaned in and kissed me. I rose up on my tiptoes to meet him, flinging my arms around his neck and squeezing tight. The moment lingered, and for a second, I thought he would take me to the ground and proclaim his love right there on the mountaintop. But he held back, something stopping him.

“We can talk about that,” I said, stroking his face.

“About what?”

“Your brother.” I brushed his cheek with my thumb. “You need to get it out. If what happened is what I’m assuming, then that can’t have been easy. You’re not just hurting on the outside.”

“Those wounds have mostly healed,” he said, brushing my concern aside.

“If you love me, then you know me well enough to know I’m not going to let you bullshit your way out of that,” I said, poking his chest with an index finger. “Now, come sit over here and tell me about him. About the two of you and of what happened. Tell me everything.”

Reluctantly, Damian let me drag him over to where we could sit with our backs to a rocky outcropping while staring out over the ledge into the vast distance beyond. Slowly at first, he spoke to me about Evander. The more he talked, the more he had to say. The words poured out about their childhood and their eventual split. To Evander’s son, Tobias, who was out there somewhere and still had to be told about his father’s death.

We talked until the sun was low over the horizon. Damian’s head rested on my shoulder until he finally took a deep, shuddering breath and then let it all go. It was a cathartic, healing sigh that came from a place so deep within I swore I could see it exiting him.

“Thank you,” he whispered in my ear before kissing it softly. “For listening.”

“Thank you for talking,” I replied. “I know it couldn’t have been easy. But you did it. I’m proud of you.”

He kissed my cheek in response. I nuzzled against him, but he cupped my jaw and

pulled me in to him for a kiss far fuller of warmth than expected.

After that, he took me to the ground and expressed his love, right there on the mountainside.

Twice.



*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am*

“Lillian, get me that report on the new contracts for our steel agreement now!”

Senator Marcus Whitefield slammed the phone down and leaned over his desk, staring at the television on the other wall. News of a workers’ strike at a major steel plant was playing on it.

“Fucking unions,” he spat to the empty room.

The first thing he planned to do, once he was in control, was abolish unions and the ability for workers to collectively bargain. It absolutely ruined productivity and profit. So much money was being left on the table, given to the whining masses, who always complained and wanted more. More, more, more.

Soon, however, that would be a complaint he would have to listen to no more. The upcoming election would seal the deal. He owned the leading candidate, and they would do whatever he said. When they did, Whitefield’s media empire would loudly proclaim the wonderful news and how it would benefit everyone.

Indeed, things truly were about to change for the better.

He glanced at the door. Where was his damn secretary and those agreements? He needed to get ahead of things—fast. The situation could still be saved, if only Lillian would do her damn job!

Finally, he got so angry he stood up from the desk and stormed toward the door, shouting his secretary’s name.

The heavy oak door was flung open before he could get halfway to it, and a horde of men in dark blue jackets emblazoned with the letters “FBI” came charging through, guns drawn. They shouted at him to stay still and to put his hands up.

Behind them, in the outer office, Whitefield could see Lillian at her desk, eyes wide with fright, another pair of agents with her. One of them had his hand on the intercom, preventing her from using it. With them was an older woman, her face hidden behind a pair of dark oversized sunglasses. But her lips were visible, and Whitefield saw red when she smiled at him.

“Senator Marcus Whitefield. You are under arrest for more charges than I can name, including treason.”

Whitefield tuned out the rest of it as the senior agent droned on. He would be out of jail before any of them knew it. There were enough senior judges he owned, or who owed him favors, that one of them would release him on bail in hours. At which point, he would begin to contact others, who would ensure the FBI never bothered him again. The agents in charge would be dismissed and the evidence burned.

“You can wipe that smug grin off your face,” the agent in charge said calmly. “I know you’re probably thinking this is nothing. That you’ll be out in no time. Probably one of your bought and paid for judges.”

There was no response from Whitefield.

“I thought so.” The agent snorted. “Which is why you’ll be glad to know you and all your traitorous buddies are all going to the same cozy place. There will be no one to free you. No one you’ve bribed to let you out. We have your entire organization. Right now, teams are rounding them all up. In short, it’s over, Whitefield. You’re done.”

Stunned, Whitefield swayed uneasily on his feet, all the color draining from his face.

How? How could they have everyone? It was impossible. He'd been so careful. Covered all his steps. There was no way to trace him to it all. Was there?

He was still in shock as the agents hustled him from the room, yet more of them searching his files, his desk, and even his computer.

As he passed through the outer office, the older woman standing next to Lillian's desk leaned in.

"This is for Aurora, you bastard. I don't know what you did to her, but I hope you die before you make it to prison."

Whitefield stared at her, positive he'd never come across the woman before. "Who are you?"

Private Investigator Janet Stern never replied, staying silent behind her sunglasses.

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Thank you for reading Bound by His Fire .