



Carnelian Dragons: Sard (7 Virgin Brides for 7 Weredragon Billionaires)

Author: *Starla Night*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Enjoy this HOT dragon shifter second chance romance by the bestselling paranormal romance author Starla Night!

Snowed In With Her Hot Dragon Shifter Ex...

Julie gave herself to a gorgeous dragon shifter she trusted completely. Only his powerful hands ever touched her innocent body. Only his red gemstone eyes ever saw beneath her clothes. Their one night together fulfilled her wildest dreams and made her believe true love lasts forever.

The next morning, he broke up with her to marry someone else.

Now, almost two years later, he's turned up again on her doorstep.

She tried to slam the door in his face, but he pushed his way in and pressed her against the wall.

"I accept your declaration of love," he told her arrogantly. "I've come to claim you for my own."

Never! she replied.

Right then, from her upstairs nursery, came her secret baby's cry...

...And His Secret Baby!

This delightful, highly dramatic, spicy novella finishes the 7 Virgin Brides for 7 Weredragon Billionaires series with a bang. Set a short time after the end of the Onyx Dragons series, this story features fan-favorite "bad guy" dragon shifter Sard Carnelian, the heavily pierced aristocrat and rival CEO. Originally released as Snowed in on Valentine's Day, it's a complete standalone romance with second chances, secret babies, single beds and swoon-worthy happily-ever-afters. You will love this book!

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Chapter One

Sard gritted his teeth against the searing pain in his chest as he soared over northeast Portland.

Liquid dripped down his wrist, and he balled his fist, then forced the zipper of the leather jacket up to his neck. The jacket was too small for his great chest, powerful even in human form, and the constricting fabric helped bind his wounds.

Shifting into dragon form would be even better, but he couldn't do it. As a human, he was a little speck soaring over the city. As a dragon, he was large enough to show up on scanners.

A male dragon wasn't as large as a female, of course, but he would still easily be noticed. For the same reason, he didn't dare go to any dragon medical facilities. His appearance would be reported, and then there'd be no escape.

This attack had surprised him, but he'd already handled it pretty well, he thought. He'd had to deviate from his goal and had led his pursuers back toward his old office building outside Longview, Washington.

"Boss?" his previous employee, Syenite, had crackled softly in his earbud communicator when he'd gotten within range of the building.

"I'm not your boss anymore," he'd growled, the communicator picking up his voice easily over the icy wind.

“Yes, sir,” Syenite had said, ignoring that. “We didn’t know you were coming back to Earth, or we’d have prepared?—”

“I’m not flying to you,” he’d said truthfully, although he had intended to make his pursuers think so.

“We see you’re in distress. Please endure a little longer while we mount a counterattack.”

“Nonsense. Don’t get yourself involved in my affairs.”

“But, Boss?—”

He’d pulled the communicator out of his ear and thrown it into the Columbia River. This was close enough to fool his pursuers. He’d dived and hidden in a human park until everyone—his old employees and his new pursuers—had lost track of him.

No one would imagine that he, a former heavyweight CEO and beloved aristocrat of the dragon empire, would lower himself to hunching inside a yellow, plastic twisty slide!

Although some of the bulky, wrapped-up children who wanted to go down the slide had run away and cried to their confused parents, no one ever came to check on him.

Truly, he was masterful in his deception.

After his pursuers had become fully engaged with his old office, he’d doubled back, and now he was almost at the original goal of his journey. Over the rushing, chilly February wind, he listened for any ships creeping up behind him, but there was nothing.

He, Sard Carnelian, had thrown them off! Of course, without a single instant of doubt, he'd known that he would succeed!

He landed on the front step of the town house. It was an unfamiliar location, but the red heart decoration with sparkly letters hanging from the door confirmed to him that this home was hers.

Julie's radiant face glimmered in his mind.

Her thick brown hair with dark purple streaks spread over the pillow as she gazed at his nude body admiringly...

her adorable, freckled cheeks flushed as she yielded to his thick cock...

her velvet-brown eyes filling with tears as she suddenly hid her face in his shoulder and murmured that she loved him and only him...

He swelled with purpose as he walked forward and raised his fist to smash through the door.

Then he checked his movement.

What is wrong with you? the ghostly memory of his Julie demanded, her eyes flashing as she crossed her arms. Every day, she had sparred with him, stood up to him, enticed him with her inner fire until he couldn't go a single hour without thinking about her.

Come in like a normal person. Or isn't a great big dragon CEO capable of doing that?

Of course he was capable of following human norms. He searched for a door knocker and instead found a small button—a doorbell—and pressed it.

Hmm. Did it work?

He pressed it several more times. A faint, muffled noise came from inside.

He straightened, his heart soaring as he held his jacket sleeve closed so he didn't bleed out on her doorstep.

Look at him, following human norms unprompted!

He imagined her soft, shy smile, the one that he'd seen only once, while they were tangled up in the bedsheets together on the best morning of his life, as she now gazed on him again.

He grinned. He'd dreamed of this moment for two full years. And now, here he was!

She was going to be so surprised.

Julie backed cautiously out of the nursery, holding her breath so she could monitor the faint wheezing in the crib. Her one-year-old was too young to fight naps, but he was determined like his father, and she'd already put him down for this particular nap twice. The third time had to be the charm!

Her bath was probably cold by now, but even if it was, she was going to sit in the lukewarm water and eat the Valentine's bonbons she'd bought for herself from the local store, drink the wine she'd picked out from the bottom shelf, and read at least two chapters in her new book, *Single Mothers Are Doing Fine* .

She'd been stuck on the intro chapter for a week.

She needed this break so badly that if she didn't get it, she was going to stab something.

Julie eased her weight onto her heel. Her son snored. Almost to the doorway...almost to the door...

Ding-dong.

She froze.

The breathing sound changed. Her baby made a small noise, then returned to sleeping.

Oh, thank goodness?—

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

Her baby made a whimper.

Rage crackled in her. She breathed steadily through her nose and silently prayed. Go away.

Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-

Her baby son, Copper, wailed.

Argh!

She thundered down the stairs, grabbed the pen from the neatly organized entryway table next to the front door, and threw it open with the pen raised like a weapon. “What? What do you want?”

The bald, hulking gangster covered in piercings and wearing a leather jacket on her doorstep should’ve frightened her, but she was too used to dragons to react.

True, they never came to her house, but the normal fear was gone.

There was only a brief moment of confusion in her brain as the man, whose smile was accented by silver caps, blinked and answered in that familiar gruff voice that made her insides quiver.

“What do I want? You.”

Shock, then blazing heat flushed through her as her body recognized him before her brain did.

Sard Carnelian, the powerful CEO dragon shifter who had shattered her heart with a sledgehammer two years ago, stood before her in all his imposing glory.

Late afternoon sunlight caught the silver piercings on his eyebrows, ears, and chin, making them glint like distant stars.

His head was bald and smooth just like she remembered, and his red eyes, the same gemstone color as his scales, glowed with inner fire.

“What are you...” Pen still raised, she gripped the door for support as the strength left her legs. Her voice was so soft in her dry throat that it cracked. “What are you doing here?”

“I have returned...” He grinned, and his silver caps glimmered, making her frozen heart jump with electrical shocks as it came back to life. “...to accept your declaration of love. Become mine.”

Her heart thumped. “I decline.”

His grin dropped. “What?”

“My declaration of love expired.”

“It can’t have expired.”

“Two years ago,” she said numbly.

His brows darkened as he became the stormy, dominant male she remembered.

Her heart squeezed. She pressed her lips together. They were numb. All of her was numb. She could barely feel her fingertips. “You missed it. Sorry.”

His nostrils flared. “Fine. I’ll convince you to declare your love again.”

That was just like him. She put up the slightest obstacle, and he didn’t even try to argue with her about it; he simply vaulted over it and smashed right back into her life just exactly how he broke out of it.

No.

The aching pain of the last two years crystallized in her chest. He would do it too. If she gave a single inch, he’d stroll back in, and she absolutely could not get sucked into his dragon world of epic drama and heartbreak again. She had more than herself to worry about now.

She found her voice, tried to make it sound detached and carefree. “I said, no, thanks.”

He stepped forward and grabbed the door. “Let me in, Julie.”

She held it fast with her free hand. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“One hour. Give me one hour to convince you.”

“Now’s a really bad time...” She tried to close the door.

“Why?” He tried to peer past her. “Is someone else here?”

“No,” she said, too defensively. “Of course not.”

“I’ll chase them out.”

“You absolutely will not.”

“I’m highly capable of chasing away anyone.”

“I know,” she said, her temperature rising as she pulled on the door that was immovable in his grip. She used both hands, the pen held fast against the wooden edge. “And that’s not why you can’t come in. Go away.”

“Julie—”

“Let go of the door.”

“I must come in and convince you.”

“No!”

“Let me in, Julie.”

“Sard, you can’t!” She fought to hold the door while still gripping the pen. Her grip slipped, and she accidentally buried the pen in the back of his hand.

They both stared at the pen.

“Oh my god.” Julie’s chest heaved, as she tried to catch her breath. She stepped back from the surprise of her own actions, her empty hands flexing, and laughed shakily as it felt like everything was sliding out of her grip. “Why do you make me so crazy?”

“I asked myself this same question a hundred times.” Sard stepped in after her, the door closing behind him. He removed the pen archly—it wasn’t very deep—and tapped it against the injured back of his hand. “And you said humans had no defenses against dragons.”

“Well, it wasn’t a good defense, seeing as you’re inside.” She moved her messy hair out of her face and crossed her arms. “What are you really doing here?”

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“I told you.” His form loomed over her, his male scent filling her with that old mix of excitement and longing.

Luxurious and captivating, like the allure of wealth and power, yet tempered with a grounding note of cool, stone caverns deep within the earth.

As always, he made her lips part and her core throb. “I’ve come for you.”

No, no, no.

He stalked to her and hemmed her in, one hand on the wall over her head, the other caging her. But there were some differences. He used to only wear suits that barely contained his human form, and now he wore a leather jacket, making him look even more like a disreputable gangster.

All the feelings flushed through her. “You can’t be here.”

“Why?” he asked softly, and the roughness in his question made her pulse.

Upstairs, her son made a muffled noise.

Sard hesitated, then looked over his shoulder.

Her veins turned to ice. Oh, no. She pushed him back.

In surprise, he moved a step.

She escaped him, got between him and the stairway, and shoved his now-immovable bulk toward the closed door. “You’ve got to go.”

“You do have someone else here.”

“It’s just a cat.”

“You’re allergic to cats.”

“On TV.”

He frowned at her.

“Out you go.”

Upstairs, her son distinctly cried. “Maaa!” Sard’s expression blanked.

“Uh...” She pushed helplessly on him. “That was also the TV...”

“You lie.” He vaulted over her and flew up the stairs.

She swore and raced after him, her slippers thumping on the carpet. “Wait! Don’t you dare...” She reached the top of the stairs, gasping from panic and the ascent, to catch Sard frozen just inside the nursery.

He and her son stared at each other. Her son had coppery red eyes and hair. He held the bars of his crib and bounced on his two human-looking feet. He wore a fuzzy, green, hooded dinosaur onesie with darker green triangles down the back and dark footies.

Maybe she could get away with this.

“You had a child?” Sard asked, his voice even gruffer than before.

“No.”

His brows lifted, a mix of relief and confusion, and he staggered back as he took a deep breath.

Her son held out his arms to her. “Maaa. Maaa!”

“Mama?” Sard repeated, confused.

“I mean, yes.” She walked past Sard, unclipped the leash fixed to Copper’s anchor inside the crib, and picked up her son, her cheeks burning. “But it’s not what you think. He’s a human.”

“Oh. He’s a human.” Sard’s brows drew together, thunderous. “You had a baby with a human male...”

“Right. So he’s got nothing to do with you.”

Her son wiggled, straining for the ceiling. He was trying to reach the poster she’d put up to teach him about his ancestry. It was an artistic rendering of the planet Draconis, and he was always trying to fly up and touch one of the pretty cartoon dragons.

The onesie fabric slipped through her fingers, and Copper floated out of her arms, escaping before she could catch him.

She grabbed the dangling leash affixed to his ankle and dragged him back down.

But it was much too late.

Sard shouted, “He’s a dragonlet!”

“But he’s not yours,” she insisted, the words metallic in her mouth, beyond panicking.

“Who’s his father?”

“Uh, it’s...uh...you don’t know him.”

“Who?”

She hugged Copper. “Forget it! You left without any explanation. We don’t owe you anything!”

Sard’s nostrils flared and his eyes widened. Orange-red gemstone scales danced across his cheeks and across his head.

Her son stopped struggling and watched, captivated.

If male dragons could produce fire like females, no doubt Sard would let out a furious stream of fire. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, and his gemstone scales sank into his human skin once more. He opened his eyes, and they were still filled with inner fire.

“There is no dragon technology here! No security cameras, no perimeter alarms. Whoever the dragon father is, he must not have cared about you very much to leave you here in this human place instead of carrying you away to his well-guarded and well-provisioned lair!”

The accusation stung, but she shrugged one shoulder, shifting her son to be more comfortable against her hip. “You’re right. He definitely didn’t care.”

“Therefore, I...” Sard suddenly frowned and went to the window.

He examined the skies, let the curtain drop again, and zoomed back down the stairs, muttering to himself.

“This place is too close. I need somewhere far away from human settlements...” He stopped at her entryway and thumbed through her hanging keys, the red dot of the accidental pen strike already healing on his hand. He lifted an old wrought iron key.

Julie had followed him down the stairs, her nervousness making her flop sweat, and pushed her damp magenta-streaked brown hair out of her face. Copper bounced on her hip. “What are you doing with the key to my grandparents’ cabin?”

“We are taking a human road trip,” Sard announced.

“In February? The roads will be snowed under, impassable, and besides.” She shifted Copper to her other hip. “I already made plans for Valentine’s Day. Really great ones. Ones that don’t involve you.”

He opened the front door and advanced on her. “Cancel them.”

“I can’t— Hey. What are you doing?”

He scooped her up in his arms, lofting Copper as well.

She smacked his broad, implacable chest and thought he winced, but it must have been her imagination because he didn’t let her down. “Don’t ignore me. I’ll stab you with a whole box of pens!”

He strode out the door, leaving her front door wide open to the frigid February air—”My heating bill,” she moaned—and launched into the sky.

Her son shrieked with excitement to finally be flying fast and high.

Even though his and Sard's skins were warm where they hugged her, the icy weather cut through her completely inadequate black yoga leggings and off-the-shoulder teal shirt. She wriggled her feet in her puffy slippers. "Put me down!"

"Your dragon husband doesn't value you as he should," Sard growled, his red eyes sparkling with determination. "I will value you a hundred times more. You'll feel my love spilling out of your pores. I'll prove to you that I am the better husband!"

He flew them into the icy sky as Copper giggled and Julie screamed.

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Chapter Two

The ground flew past, and Julie's face went numb from cold. She shivered against Sard.

The trip to her grandparents' dilapidated old cabin took hours by car and a little under an hour by dragon.

Dragon shifters like Sard could soar around in human form like a superhero in addition to flying more normally with their scaly wings.

Until seven years ago, the residents of Earth didn't have any idea that literally everyone in the entire universe could shapeshift—except them.

Recessive genes and lack of useful space minerals kept Earth an isolated backwater that everyone ignored.

Then, seven years ago, dragon spaceships landed in cow fields outside Vancouver, Washington.

Apparently, the Dragon Empire's scouts had come in the Middle Ages and left again, considering Earth useless, so their sudden return was massively surprising.

Sard and the other dragon shifters had caused remarkably little upheaval, though.

They'd only wanted to export human art, music, and clothes—the more colorful, the better.

Earth's isolation and lack of shifting abilities meant all humans had natural artistic talent and creativity.

Sard, already a rich aristocrat's son on Draconis, had made even more money by exporting Earth commodities like thong bikinis and button-down shirts to the alien dragons.

Even though many dragons had settled near Portland and Julie had occasionally seen them—or their big alien ships—flying overhead, she'd never interacted with them.

But then, one day about four years into their extended visit, Sard had burst into the hair salon where Julie was a receptionist, and everything had changed.

They'd spent a year getting to know each other, then he'd disappeared. Two more eventful years had passed, and now he was back.

And within five minutes of his return, he'd already smashed all her plans and made her barely recognize herself. She had to escape, but she was clinging too hard to his warmth.

Sard hovered over the town nearest to her grandparents' cabin. "Your ancestral lair was north of here."

"F-follow the road," she managed, her teeth chattering. "It's u-up th-the m-mountain."

"Why are you speaking in that funny way?" He zoomed up the road, following her directions as she pointed him the last twenty miles deep into the solitary wilderness where her maternal grandparents had once lived.

"B-because I'm fr-freezing."

“You’re cold?” He veered down. The road was plowed until the four-mile turnoff because no one lived in this area during the winter. “Why?”

“S-seriously?”

“We’re not cold. Are we?” Sard asked Copper, who wiggled and pulled his hot hand free of hers to reach for Sard’s silver eyebrow piercing. Sard regarded him with amusement. She had never seen him around children and was surprised by how gentle he was, like he had a lot of experience.

Of course, who knows how many kids Sard had with his wife...

She hunched in. “W-watch out. H-he pulls h-hard.”

That was why Julie had given up on her clip-on earrings until Copper grew out of his grab-anything-shiny-and-yank phase. She still wore necklaces, even though the baby could choke her out.

Sard hovered over the snowy, evergreen-filled property on the steep-side hill searching for a place to land.

Her grandparents’ cabin, deep in the North Cascades, was a small A-frame with faded red paint.

The porch roof sagged under the weight of winter snow.

Sard landed and put her down on the cleared part of the porch.

Icy cold seeped up through her thin slippers.

She hugged Copper, who was burning hot, and the only thing keeping her aching

fingers from succumbing to frostbite.

Sard used the old key in the lock. It was frozen. He rattled the door hard. With a terrible cracking noise, the door gave way.

“Enter,” he ordered. “You will be comfortable in your ancestral lair.”

Julie stumbled inside, not looking at the suspicious splintering around the latch.

Inside, the cabin was small, dim, and cold.

Copper wiggled desperately to be free, and she released him as she flipped on the light switch.

Of course, the room remained dark. She wrapped a cold afghan around herself like a cocoon and hobbled to the breaker box on the wall behind the open front door.

She’d last visited in early October. Copper had enjoyed experiencing his mountain-person roots.

When they’d left, Julie had turned off the power and opened the pipes to drain the well pump, which meant all the water was now frozen and inaccessible.

She flipped breaker switches using the side of her thumb. Her fingers were so cold, she couldn’t properly pinch the hard plastic.

Luckily, no trees had come down on the lines since October, and the lights clicked on, casting a cozy glow on the interior.

The main room was dominated by a modern wood-burning stove and boxes of kindling.

A few split logs were stacked for crisp mornings and evenings.

In winter weather like this, it would barely last the night.

Mismatched furniture—a sagging floral couch, a rickety wooden table, and kitchen chairs with chipped paint—was arranged haphazardly around the stove.

“A colorful hovel, just as I remember.” Sard looked around with satisfaction.

“C-close the d-door,” she ordered, kneeling on the brick fireplace guard in front of the stove and opening the clear glass doors. She stacked firewood into the teepee she’d learned in Girl Scouts, clamping the cold hardwood in a frostbite-friendly pincer grip. “G-get me a m-match.”

“No need.” Sard patted his pockets, then pulled out a small candy, unwrapped, and crunched it.

Brimstone?

He leaned down next to her, over her shoulder.

Beautiful orange-red scales emerged across his face, and his mouth elongated into a dragon’s majestic snout, filling up the whole opening to the stove.

His throat glowed orange, and a targeted stream of fire blew onto the wood, charring and then igniting it.

He leaned back, proud, his mouth full of dragon fangs. “We can stay here indefinitely.”

“W-we’ll need a lot more wood,” she said, rising creakily and hovering as close as

possible to the stove.

“You have plenty stacked outside.”

“Under f-five feet of snow.”

“I remember.” He pivoted to stride past her. “I will melt the snow.”

She stopped him with a hand on his chest, and again, he almost seemed to wince, but the expression was harder to see on his ridged, scaly dragon face.

“You’ll m-melt the tarps, and I will not burn plastic fumes inside this cabin with the sensitive lungs of my one-year-old child.

B-besides, we’re not going to stay here long enough to need more wood.

You’re going to take us back home right this instant. Or, um, as soon as I warm up.”

He clasped her hand. His head stretched into dragon as if he was having trouble shifting back, but his fierce scaly expression lightened with surprise. “You actually are cold.”

“Of course I’m cold! It’s ten degrees below freezing and you kidnapped me in a T-shirt!”

“So, humans become cold in ten-degrees-below-freezing weather,” he mused as if it were a totally new concept. “Your bodies are strangely fragile.”

“You’re the one wearing a coat.”

“It’s not for warmth.” He turned away and unzipped the jacket. “I’ll give it to you.

You should've asked earlier. It means nothing to me."

Rage crackled inside her chest louder than the fire she shivered over. "Oh. I should've just asked. How silly of me to think a coat was for the cold."

"Yes, very silly." He grunted as he pulled his arms out of the jacket. "With my infinitely clear thinking, I will decide our next course of action."

"I know what my next action will be," she said conversationally. "I'm going to thaw out, regain the use of my hands, and murder you."

"Depending on the amount of stores you've got stockpiled in this hovel, we can stay here through the whole winter."

"Copper and I will survive on your carcass until the snow melts and we can hitch a ride into town. I'll sell my horrifying ordeal to Hollywood for millions. They'll cast a real beautiful actress to portray me, and I'll retire into luxury until Copper has to go to college."

Sard's undershirt had a strange red-on-red splatter pattern, with black charcoal strips. A new design, probably from his old business that was still named after him, Carnelian Clothiers. He always had dressed well.

He handed her the heavy leather jacket. "You still say funny things."

"Funny like what? Like I'm a dragon-cidal maniac who accidentally stabs men with pens and, after being kidnapped against my will and tortured with near frostbite, fantasizes about eating them?"

"You're being funny again."

“I’m a very normal person usually.” She shook the heavy jacket at his pale face. “When I’m with you, something in my brain snaps and even I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Ah.” He lurched, then rested his hand against the kitchen counter. His fingers elongated into claws, his bulging forearms straining the fancy shirt cuffs. “You, perhaps, do not need to pretend I am dead...”

The jacket had a strange dampness inside, and it was dark red on her hand. It was soaked.

What in the world?

“Is this blood?” she demanded.

“...my lawyer...will be...in touch...” He swayed and collapsed, losing control of his human form as he fell.

Iridescent orange-red scales erupted all over his body, bursting through his trousers and shredding his blood-soaked button-down as his limbs extended and his wings thrust out.

He landed on the uneven, peeling linoleum as a massive sard-red dragon, clothes scraps fluttering around him, filling the room and getting blood all over the old furniture.

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Chapter Three

Julie stared down at the male dragon who'd kidnapped her and once again turned her life completely upside down.

No way.

"Do not tell me that you're in trouble again," Julie muttered as she tried to drag him a safe distance away from the stove.

Even though dragons were pretty hardy and immune to most environmental effects, she'd feel bad if she got it wrong and he started cooking in his sleep.

"You've once more not told me anything about your problems. Who's chasing you?"

Why drag me out to the middle of nowhere with no purse, no car, no cell phone?

I had a bubble bath and a whole box of chocolates, Sard.

It's every flavor I like, including marzipan and caramel.

You said you'd make me fall for you again, and I have to say, you're not convincing me. "

He stretched, dropping his head onto the sagging couch. Dragons healed faster in their natural form, so she had to believe he'd be okay. She literally had no other choice.

Julie straightened and stretched out her back. Her voice shook. “You seriously came here to ‘win me back’ while you were in the middle of another catastrophe. And now you expect me to pick up your mess all alone. Again.”

Copper flew over Sard’s form, excited, having shifted as well so now he was an orange-red dragon baby inside a green dinosaur onesie. Because he was still a baby and the fabric had a lot of stretch, it still contained him, which was good because she had no spare clothes, diaper bag, nothing.

“Gah, Sard!” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Do not think you can avoid difficult conversations by passing out from blood loss.”

The dragon inhaled in a loud snore.

She shook her head. “Typical.”

“Julie...” he moaned, gruff and sweet. “Give Julie to me...Only want...Julie...”

Her heart squeezed.

Even unconscious, he said exactly what she most wanted to hear.

The old feelings surged through her. Her system felt shock, panic, and also vividly alive.

It was happening again, now, as if the last two years were a dream and she was striding into the waking world.

Her skin tingled, the warmth returning to her body with the sunlight, the old dreams, and fierce, fiery desire.

But mixed in, like dark clouds, was the memory of confusion, anxiety, and the agony of not understanding anything.

Julie set the blood-soaked jacket on the couch.

The middle cushions sagged under the weight of Sard's dragon head.

She plopped beside him with a huge sigh.

His head rolled onto her lap, heavy but reassuringly strong.

She stroked his ridged scales. The silver piercings, which looked so large on his human frame, were small and delicate on his gemstone hide.

He was beautiful in any form. Awake, sleeping, or passed out from blood loss after kidnapping her to a snowed-in cabin in the middle of the North Cascades.

He rolled off her lap, groaned, and snored louder.

Okay. Well, it was time to save herself, again.

Julie rose and grabbed a pot, scooped snow off the porch—freezing even for the brief few seconds this took outside—then set it on the woodstove to melt.

Luckily, she'd cleaned up the dented, misshapen cans that had been around since her grandparents' generation and replaced them with a few that expired next spring.

In a closet, she found a partial box of forgotten diapers.

Yes! One size too small for Copper, they were better than nothing.

Under the single bed around the corner in the walled-off bedroom, she found a package of baby wipes.

What she didn't find was a phone, boots, spare clothes, or even a hat. So, there was no way of contacting the outside world, and unlike a dragon, she couldn't brave the elements in her slippers. On the five-mile trek to the nearest neighbors for help, she'd probably fall into a drift and die.

Back in the main room, she kicked a small piece of wrapped candy.

Ah, this must have been in Sard's pocket when he'd shifted.

She'd eaten dragon brimstone candy before.

It smelled like minerals. Females could make fire naturally, but males had to eat brimstone to make fire.

Even humans pregnant with a dragon shifter's baby could eat a candy and make fire.

Her charred toilet had been a big surprise after that round of morning sickness...

She collected a big handful of the candies and put them in a dusty Mason jar. Sard had always kept a bowl on his singed desk, or so she'd been told. It was another incongruent thing with him. He looked like such a harsh, violent man and yet he had a sweet tooth.

In his leather jacket pockets, she found more candies plus a tube of dragon healing gel helpfully labeled with pictograms. He must've known he'd need it. She squeezed the gel on his chest and spread it with her fingers, which soon went numb again until she washed them off.

In response, Sard let out a deep sigh and shrank back down to human form.

Nude, he was a massive work of art, all muscle from his impossibly broad shoulders down to his multipack abdomen.

His thighs were like mountains. He did not skip leg day.

In the center of his body lay his thick, lax cock.

The hidden items that had surprised her so much the first time were still there, winking in the cozy firelight.

She'd never forgotten the way he'd used those inside her, the absolute bliss and utter love he'd once made her feel...

Her heart lurched.

His injury was already better, but still angry and red on the edges. It was some sort of laser wound.

She prodded his shoulder. "Float."

He moaned, half asleep, and rolled upright.

She bound his wound with first-aid gauze from an ancient kit she found in the cabin closet. Then she convinced him to float into the one bed, pulling the blankets up to his waist.

He'd live. Probably.

The familiar sight made a small lump form in her throat.

She forced herself to leave him and hurried to the doorway.

“Julie...” he whispered.

It took everything in her not to U-turn and wrap him in her arms. Cover his cheeks with kisses and cry that she’d missed him so much. She’d been so scared, and she’d always loved him, always.

But she gripped the doorframe in her white fingers and stayed strong.

She’d left his drama behind! And despite all her plans and promises, here she was, getting sucked right back in.

No. She refused. She had to look after Copper.

Sard would not take her baby away from her.

She’d lie through her teeth if she had to, but at the end of this, Sard would be the one to go away, once more, and leave them both behind.

He absolutely would not trick her again. She swore it.

It was inevitable, like these injuries she knew nothing about, that Sard was keeping more secrets. She wouldn’t even be sad when he inevitably went away. She wouldn’t care about it at all.

She definitely would not be broken and devastated by him.

Not this time...

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Chapter Four

Three years ago...

Julie was lounging in the Rebel Roots Salon's overstuffed, tangerine-colored armchair, a mug of herbal tea on the lime-green coffee table, thumbing through a worn celebrity magazine when a stunningly attractive bald man in a suit burst through the salon's glass doors, sending the little bell crashing chaotically.

He oriented his fiery red eyes on her and panted, "I need a hair stylist."

She gaped at him.

"Now!" he snarled.

"Ah, of course." She blinked at the mesmerizing man, who seemed familiar like a movie star, and closed her magazine, slipping her feet back into her sandals.

She went around the desk and opened the scheduling book.

Paper, because they only had a few stylists working part-time now, so it was easy to pencil things in. "What services do you need?"

"Hair colors." He gestured at his bald head. "Lots of them. Red, green, purple. Every color you have."

"Every color..." She pressed the intercom button that would summon the owner, her

not-mom, from the break room in the back. “Um, is this service for you? Or...?”

“I’m the one ordering it.”

“You’re in luck because we have an opening...” An all-day opening, really. Julie pivoted as her not-mom came out, brushing crumbs off her punk rock shirt with one hand as she tied on her apron with the other. Her short pixie hair was dyed jet-black this week. “This man wants a color?—”

“And make it fast!”

The tiny salon owner sized up the man shrewdly.

She’d had plenty of experience with odd people as a former singer in a local punk band long before Julie had been born, and their old posters were still pasted on the salon’s brick walls.

Julie’s not-mom had started this salon specializing in wild colors, and Julie’s real mom had been a receptionist until Julie’s freshman year of college, when her real mom had died from uterine cancer.

Julie had spent so much time in the salon anyway that she’d just continued coming by and then taken over the role of receptionist.

Anyway, from that time in the music business, Julie’s not-mom had definitely learned that people who looked like movie stars, even rich-looking, handsome ones with silver piercings, weren’t what they seemed. “How do you intend to pay?”

He curled his lip, twitchy with panic, and glanced behind him as he patted the pockets of his formfitting suit. “Gah, I didn’t bring human currency. Here.” He dumped a fistful of heavy gold coins on Julie’s desk. They clattered and thumped onto the rug.

Julie quickly gathered them up, rising as a commotion started out on the street. The man hurried back to the glass door.

The coin in her hand was stamped with a dragon head.

Ah! Julie suddenly knew why she recognized the bald man. He'd been in the celebrity magazine. She looked at her not-mom in a panic. "Um, I think?—"

"Oh, no," her not-mom said.

Outside, a huge red dragon landed in the center of the street.

Huge meant she was female. Cars screeched to a stop.

Men in suits landed all around her, holding up their hands, and it was not to protect her, but to protect everyone else from her.

As the red dragon turned toward the salon, she shrank down, her wings sucking in and disappearing and all her scales and claws magically sinking into her skin until she was a gorgeous, normal-size fertility goddess with deep auburn hair and not a stitch of clothing on.

Two of her suited men, who now stood much taller than her, caught up to her and draped her with a diaphanous rainbow fabric, fastening it into a kaftan and trotting to keep up with her because she didn't break stride.

"I've never touched dragon hair," Julie's not-mom murmured with dread. "I don't know the texture, the timing for treatments, nothing."

"They're just like us," Julie murmured back to her. "I read about it in the magazine. If they didn't shift, they'd be exactly the same."

The bald dragon-man—who was named Sard Carnelian, she remembered—held open the salon door. He was sweating. “Ruby, you grace us with your luminous presence?—”

“Stand back, male.” Ruby stopped in front of the salon owner. “You’re the one who gave all the colors and sparkles to Evalina?”

Her not-mom blinked rapidly. “Evalina?”

“The human with rainbow hair and glitter on her fingernails, eyelids, and body. I must have these colors for my own.”

Julie quickly flipped through the appointment book and found their last entry for Eva, a fashionable art teacher with a zest for using her own body as a canvas. She showed the booking to her not-mom.

Her not-mom shook herself. “Oh, yes, of course. Eva. Yes, ah, let’s see. Have a seat this way.”

Ruby was seated in a chair and turned to face the mirror, then Julie’s not-mom made small talk as she fell into the familiar task of brushing out the dragon’s beautiful red locks.

She rubbed it between her fingers, testing the texture with her expertise, then she checked the dragon’s fingernails.

“It will take a little bit for one of my girls to come in for your nails, but we’ll have the time because I’m not sure how long it will take the dyes to set. Did you want your toes done as well?”

“Yes.” The dragon preened, her red scales shimmering across her pale skin and then

disappearing again. “I don’t care how long it takes. I will have the colors.”

Her not-mom looked significantly at Julie. They were doing this!

Julie made the calls. The other part-timers wove through the crowds, camera crews, and suited dragon men outside. Ruby, despite her initial grandeur, was an ideal client, and soon, Julie’s not-mom and the others were chatting with her easily, even laughing.

Sard Carnelian paced nervously in the waiting area. He pulled something out of his pocket and crunched it, rubbed his belly, then crunched another.

Julie built up her courage and approached him. “Can I offer you some peppermint tea? It’s soothing on the stomach.”

“I have no problem with my stomach.” Sard unwrapped a piece of candy in front of her. “This is brimstone.”

“Well, if you think it would go well with peppermint tea, you’re welcome to have some.”

He looked down on her. “Don’t you know the only liquid worth drinking on your planet is coffee?”

Her mouth dropped open. Heat flared up her arms and across her cheeks. Her awestruck image of him cracked, and in its place, she felt an unfamiliar tingle against her skin. But she still managed to summon her best impassive customer service voice. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Now, you do.”

She returned to her desk, stacked the gold dragon coins into a mini fortress, and brewed a fresh pot of herbal tea for the others. Ruby said it was delicious. Julie poured the last cup for herself.

Sard approached the desk with a huff. “How long is this full-body coloring going to take?”

“Four hours,” Julie said blithely.

“Four hours!”

“At least.”

“Can’t you go faster?”

“I can’t order the chemicals to dye hair faster, Mr. Carnelian.”

He blinked. “Sard.”

“Mr. Sard.”

“What? No. Just Sard.” He jerked his chin at the cup of tea. “Fine. I’ll take some of that inferior plant water.”

“Sorry, that was the last cup.”

He stared at her.

She held his gaze as she took a long, slow sip.

His nostrils flared.

She set down her mug and then licked her lips. “Mmm.”

He stepped back, his gaze still locked on hers, a strange new fire in his red-orange gemstone eyes. He breathed through gritted teeth.

One of the suited dragons leaned in the door and called softly to him, and he walked away. But even from outside the glass, she felt his gaze on her, hot and electrifying.

She finished the rest of the tea without even tasting it. All she felt was dark waves of heat every time he glanced her way...

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Chapter Five

And Julie had a lot more chances to feel the dragon CEO's hot gaze.

After Ruby tossed her rainbow hair and giggled over her multicolor, glittery nails on camera in front of their salon, human bookings poured in.

Everyone was curious to try out the salon that had once catered to a dragon.

Julie had ample opportunity to do her job, which was not only refreshing but mentally invigorating.

Her not-mom hired a part-time receptionist to give her breaks and invested in a computer system.

And every few weeks, like a comet on an unpredictable orbit, Sard crashed through the doors with another color-obsessed female dragon.

Julie put down the phone from calling in yet another stylist to deal with the emergency. "Mr. Carnelian, we greatly appreciate your business?"

"It's Sard," he growled.

"—but if you booked in advance then we could have everything ready to begin when your client arrived."

"Females don't book services."

“Ruby does,” Julie replied coolly while the part-time receptionist watched their interaction with terror. “She has a regular booking.”

“Ruby has a booking?” The young female Sard had brought today perked up. “I want a booking.”

“I’ll be happy to put you on the schedule just like Ruby,” Julie said archly.

The stylists collected Sard’s client, momentarily breaking the tension. Her part-timer carried supplies for the stylists, leaving Julie and Sard alone at the front of the busy salon.

Sard’s eyes narrowed. “You’re too...too...”

“Helpful?” Julie asked, jamming a fist on her hip. “Considerate? Efficient?”

“Colorful!”

Julie touched her hair. She’d gotten new magenta lowlights, hidden beneath her dark hair, and was surprised he could even see them.

Now that the salon was raking in money, she could afford to treat herself.

She was even thinking about moving out of her shared house, the one she’d lived in since college, and into her first solo apartment.

She’d started buying her slips and shirts at name-brand clothing boutiques instead of making do.

Sard was the first person to notice, even if he was weirdly angry about it.

“What’s wrong with my color?” she asked him, her heart thumping.

“It’s irresistible.”

“Irresistible?”

“To dragons. And your type is the worst.” He gestured at her hair. “You keep it hidden like you’ve accidentally revealed a secret. It makes a dragon male wonder what other colors are hidden beneath.”

She heated. “Well, everything else about me is on full display so nobody will get the wrong idea.”

“Exactly.”

She blinked. “That’s the opposite of what you just said.”

“You have the ideal body. Large yet soft for holding in a male’s arms, strong and healthy for carrying vigorous dragonlets.

Your hair is thick and long, ideal to wind around your husband’s fist as he claims you.

And your lips part in surprise, inviting a male to...

” He broke off suddenly, shaking himself, and stepped back while looking away, gesturing in her direction.

“Everything about you is irresistible to dragons.”

She heated to a million degrees. Waves of surprise and arousal flushed through her.

But all she managed was “Oh.”

He grumpily sniffed the pot of herbal tea she’d made. “You’re too intelligent not to know your own value. Do not bait me again.”

But she didn’t really think she was irresistible to anyone.

She’d dated briefly in college, but it had been a hassle and not that much fun.

No one had ever seemed to “get” her. Definitely no human was as fascinating and magnetic as Sard Carnelian.

Her body thumped, coming alive under his smoldering gaze.

If a male like him found her irresistible, then maybe what he said was true.

But then Sard started avoiding the hair salon. He called to book appointments because he didn’t trust his men with the task. She looked forward to the calls even though she tried not to. Her part-timer always handed her the phone immediately, in a panic, if it was him.

“Yes, we can schedule a new client one week from today,” she told Sard in mid-December. “Oh, wait. Actually, it’s Christmas.”

“So?”

“We’re closed. Would you like to do it the day before or after?”

“Christmas? You don’t work Christmas? All my dragons are working then.”

“I feel sorry for them,” she said blithely, her customer service voice even and

unruffled. “Their boss has no Christmas spirit.”

“What do I care about Christmas alcohols?”

She snorted. “Spirit in the singular, not alcoholic spirits, and it’s not surprising you have no idea what I’m talking about. Nevertheless, we’re closed, so would you prefer?—”

“Hold on.” There was a furious yet muffled conversation on the other end while Julie sipped her seasonal peppermint blend. Then Sard burst back onto the line, huffing with feeling. “How is closing for a day ‘spiritual’?”

“I’ll put you down for the day after.” She typed it in. “And you wouldn’t know since you’re lacking in it.”

“I lack nothing!”

“I suspect your employees would tell you differently.”

“No dragon should want to spend time with his family. Not when he could be spending his time increasing our company value!”

“Bah, humbug,” she replied cheerfully, and hung up on his sputtering.

He called her three more times that week to insist that he wasn’t lacking in the Christmas spirit because he, Sard Carnelian, lacked nothing, and it made her laugh every time.

But, she found out later that he’d given his employees a day off after all.

He’d done it unexpectedly and without calling to brag.

When she heard that, she felt a tingling in her lips and a tightness in her chest. Like, their conversations were more than just sparks or amusement or blowing off steam. They were actually changing each other.

Sard came into the salon more frequently again during the spring, after her not-mom had expanded into the building next door and they were still partly under construction.

With all the new dragon business, the salon had exploded, overflowing with dye, glitter, and the constant ringing of the newly installed multiple phone lines.

Their conversations, and how he continued to stare at her and engage only with her, made her feel more peppy and confident.

“You continue to defy me,” he growled one day out of nowhere.

“Do I?” She smirked at him, quickly schooled her expression to process an incoming client, then laughed at him pacing in the waiting area. “I can’t imagine why you’d say that.”

“You’re looking that way again.”

She hummed *Oops, I Did it Again* while checking out another client, then stood and faced him so he could see her full outfit today, because she was pretty proud of this particular ensemble. “Mind your own business.”

“Your appearance is my business,” he informed her. “You’re distracting my dragons.”

“How? My clothes?” She patted her formfitting halter top, dark purple blazer, and soft, purple flared pants. She flipped her matching purple lowlights. “My hair?”

“All of you. My men can’t take their eyes off you.”

His closest bodyguard, Syenite, stood with his back to them at the glass doors. He was peering out onto the street. Syenite always wore subtly glowing sunglasses, even at night. He was dating their client Eva, and sometimes the two came in together when Syenite wasn’t working for Sard.

Chatting beside him was another employee of Sard’s, Peridot, whose back was also to Julie. “You know my girlfriend Karmel?”

“I introduced her to you,” Syenite murmured.

“Right, well, my girlfriend Karmel said that your girlfriend Eva said that dragons don’t understand humans. Then my girlfriend Karmel said...”

Mm-hmm, clearly Sard’s dragons couldn’t take their eyes off her, sure. She tuned out of the extremely one-track conversation and refocused on Sard. “That’s their problem.”

“And mine,” he snapped. “Because I also can’t...”

Heat flushed through her. Her throat went dry.

The salon disappeared, and it was suddenly just the two of them, a hulking dragon CEO with silver piercings and her in her snappy new outfit that she’d worn just because she knew it would drive him mad.

Her lips parted.

Sard focused on her, his nostrils flaring as though he could scent her throbbing arousal.

Then the door rattled, a client coming in, and broke their connection.

Sard shook himself and stormed away in a terrible mood. “Syenite! Peridot! Get out there and search for enemies.”

His bodyguards scattered.

Sard stormed out after them. He stopped outside the salon, his broad back framed in the window. The new neon sign cast an orange glow on his fine houndstooth suit.

Her heart thumped and thumped as she thought about what he’d almost said...

Spring turned into summer. No matter how she baited him, every conversation ended with Sard breaking away and then staring back at her with glowing red eyes.

Longing thumped in her body, an unfamiliar power pulsing to its own rhythm.

They spoke all the time but somehow never talked about anything important.

Like how she was never able to tell him she was going out of town for a week, her first long vacation since the salon’s popularity had exploded.

By chance, she got called in on the first morning of her vacation to fix one last thing.

So, with her car stuffed full of supplies and parked illegally out front, she was finishing up that final task when Sard walked in.

Everything about him was different.

For one thing, he only smashed the new doors in a little.

The bell barely jangled in its new cradle.

He glared in her direction rather than meeting her eye, and he settled himself in the oversized tangerine armchair that they'd brought with them into the newly remodeled waiting room.

He thumbed through magazines, which he'd never done before, and then, at last, he went over and stared at the herbal tea.

"He's not got a client on the schedule today," Julie's part-timer whispered to her, as shocked as Julie about his strange behavior. "One of us has to ask if we can help him..."

"I'll do it." Julie stood, smoothed her long skirt, and marched over to him, raising her voice. "We don't have you on the schedule today, Mr. Carnelian."

"Sard," he said absently, and poured himself a cup of tea.

"Mr. Sard..." She watched him drink the peppermint tea, her mouth falling open. "Uh, are you okay?"

"No." He made a face. "It's bad."

"What is?"

"The tea." He frowned and took another drink. "Weak, yet strangely aggressive. Nothing like your superior coffee."

"Then why are you drinking it?"

"I thought I should try it once. I associate the smell with you."

Her heart squeezed. He was acting completely out of character. “You took time out of your busy CEO schedule just to try my tea?”

“I am at loose ends today.” He drained the cup and coughed. “As I am no longer CEO, my replacement will be coming in my stead.”

Oh, no. She shifted her weight back onto her heels. “What happened?”

He stared into the empty cup. “It’s a very long story.”

“I’m about to have a lot of free time to listen. If you wanted to talk, I mean.” Her face burned at her boldness. Look at her! She shocked herself.

“Oh?” He looked at her with interest, and for the first time, a blaze of fire shone in his red gemstone eyes once more. “You want to talk with me?”

“I’m going on a road trip.”

“What is a ‘road trip’?”

“You sit in a car together for hours. While your butt goes numb, you listen to music, eat snacks, and chat about life. At least, that’s what I used to do when my mom was still alive.”

“That sounds like hell,” he said bluntly.

Embarrassment flushed her. “Oh, uh?—”

“But if it’s with you, I can think of no other way I’d rather spend my last...my time.”

Heat flooded her. His eyes gleamed red and focused on her like twin lasers, and she

felt hot. “Then is that a yes?”

He hesitated, then clenched his fists. “Take me away from this place.”

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Chapter Six

Julie's heart thumped as she maneuvered her Ford Fiesta onto the highway, stealing glances at Sard's imposing form crammed into the passenger seat.

His broad shoulders nearly touched the roof, and his knees pressed against the dashboard, yet he didn't utter a single complaint.

The lack of his usual grumbling actually worried her.

"No, your salon was of great help to us. Your vivid colors enchanted many females and generated much goodwill for my dragons." He frowned and examined his big, calloused hands.

"My family didn't have much of an opinion about my 'little hobby' to start a clothier of Earth designs until I embarrassed them by losing to low castes."

She'd never really thought about it before, but all of Sard's employees were male. Dragon society was matriarchal because female dragons were larger and could breathe fire. They also had social classes. Females were kind of exempt, but the males fought brutally for honor and recognition.

"We were the number one company outside Draconis for five years in sales volume and revenue. But one loss wipes out any accomplishment. The pressure on aristocrats is enormous. I don't think low castes appreciate how hard it is for us, how painful it is to drop to second place."

“Second place still sounds amazing.”

“But it’s not amazing enough.”

As the double lanes merged into a single lane, a black SUV zoomed up and tried to overtake them.

The line of cars in front of Julie slowed down, and she had to quickly press the brake, leaving no room for it to merge.

The SUV laid on the horn as it dropped back behind Julie, then swerved erratically in the single lane, gunning to tailgate her.

“Sorry, sorry,” she murmured, adrenaline pumping through her.

The big freeway barrier made it impossible for the SUV to pass on the left, and anyway, she was in a line of cars, so where was it going to go?

She’d love for it to get far away from her.

It edged toward the right shoulder like it was going to try to pass her that way.

“That’s dangerous. And illegal. I wish that car would just calm down and back off.”

“I understand.” Sard crunched a piece of brimstone candy, then unrolled his window and unsnapped his seat belt to lean his entire upper body out into the thunderous wind. “CEASE YOUR VEHICULAR AGGRESSION, INSIGNIFICANT SPECK! LEST I REDUCE YOUR PATHETIC CONTRAPTION TO A SMOLDERING HEAP OF SCRAP!”

Fire blazed over the roof of her car for emphasis.

The SUV swerved, nearly careening off the road before dropping well back.

Sard shimmied back into the passenger seat, clicking to roll the window back up, the scent of smoke and brimstone intensifying.

Julie gaped, then raised her voice over the whistling wind. “Did you just light my car on fire?”

“No, I avoided the paint.” Sard fastened the seat belt as the window closed with a pop. “Where was I? Ah, yes. All my employees share my pain. I am lucky not to be disowned as so many of my employees were, but it’s difficult to feel grateful for that at just this moment.”

“Ah...” Julie was still stuck on the flames she’d seen reflected in her rearview mirror and how he promised he didn’t melt the trim. “Huh.”

He looked out the passenger window. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. It’s too depressing.”

She shook herself and offered him a bag from her snack stash. “Cheese puff?”

He inspected the bag. She expected some comment like Humans call this food? and she’d make a joke about how it was food adjacent and they’d both laugh, but instead, Sard just opened the bag and ate the whole thing.

“Save some room for dinner,” she said as he shook the crumbs into his mouth. “Although, I guess we have a few hours until we reach the roadside hamburger stand.”

“I can eat elsewhere.”

“My mom and I always stopped there. They have thirty flavors of milkshakes and amazing fries. It’s part of the ritual.”

“Ritual?”

“Of the road trip.” She told him about how every summer, her mom would take a week off work, and they’d travel up to visit her grandparents, who’d lost all their savings in bad investments and had moved into her great-grandparents’ falling-apart last-century family home.

“My uncle owns it now, but he only goes there for fishing a few times in the summer, so he lets me use it for vacation on other weeks.”

“You go fishing there?”

“No, I read books, toast marshmallows, and start puzzles I don’t have time to complete by myself. It’s lonely now that my mom’s gone, but still relaxing.”

Sard watched her.

Her face heated. “Oh, sorry. I can stop talking if you want.”

“No, it distracts me from unpleasant thoughts. Please continue.”

“It’s not too boring?”

“You are a fascinating woman,” Sard said without a hint of irony. “You could make inarticulate noises sound brilliant.”

She snorted. “You always do that.”

“What?”

“Make me feel like it’s okay to take up my own space.”

He cocked his brows. “Why would you not take up space? Humans can’t alter their own bodily mass.”

“I know, but some people make it a point to crush people as tiny as possible.”

Before Sard had crashed into the salon doors, she’d been made to shrink down and to be less. Less firm, less confident, less vivacious.

The hours flew by.

Sard still had plenty of appetite for the hamburger stand, where he polished off his first deluxe cheeseburger, fries, and a raspberry shake, while Julie had the grape flavor.

Every once in a while, he grew silent and introspected, but even in his subdued state, Sard’s presence filled the car with an electric energy that made her skin pinch, sensitizing for him.

His smoky scent, mingled with sweet candy, was oddly comforting.

He had often spent ten hours with her in the salon, but much of it had been spent pacing and screaming into his communicator-earpiece thing. Today, she got him all to herself.

They reached the old cabin in darkness. Sard offered to make a torch with his breath but she thought that would violate the burn ban. “It’s already a fire hazard, but I will never forgive you if you burn this place down.”

He helped her unload the car, hefting her suitcases and ice chest effortlessly and carrying almost everything in one trip. She organized the supplies as neatly as possible in the old cabin, then found him outside in the darkness, staring up at the stars.

“I shouldn’t have come,” he murmured. “It makes everything harder now.”

“Here?” she asked. “Or to Earth?”

“Hmm.”

She stood close beside him, basking in his warm radiance against the night chill. Despite being summer, in the mountains like this, it got pretty cold.

“There are so many worlds,” he continued without answering the previous questions. “Everything seems so far away.”

“That’s how we felt,” she agreed, watching the sky with him. “Only we also wondered if anyone else was out there or if we were all alone.”

He made a rumble deep in his chest. “If we were alone in the universe, there is only one thing I would do.”

Her mouth went dry. Silent signals passed between them. His eyes glowed red like gemstones, and they focused on her, bright with inner fire.

She swallowed in her dry throat. “What’s that?”

He cupped her cheeks, his huge hands gentle on her face, but his expression fierce and uncompromising. “Claim you.”?

Chapter Seven

Sard was going to kiss her.

His hands cupped her cheeks. The warmth of his touch seeped into her chilled skin.

Julie took a deep breath, then lifted her lips, accepting.

His mouth crashed into hers, filling her with heat. Their lips melted together, the warmth of his breath bouncing between them. His tongue traced the seam of her lips. It sent little sizzles of desire through her.

“Let me in, Julie,” he murmured against her mouth.

She yielded.

His tongue thrust into her mouth, tangling with hers, filling her with his salt and sweet-smoke flavors.

Her heart pounded in her ears, and she let out a soft moan and wrapped her arms around his solid torso.

It was like hugging a warm tree trunk or a living mountain, and his possessive growl only made her hotter.

His confident thumbs slid down her neck and along her shoulder, then down her spine to cup her buttocks.

She whimpered into his mouth. He drew her hard against him until his thick male ridge jutted against her abdomen.

Her breath hitched. That was his desire for her.

It hadn't just been her one-sided longing for all this year.

He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She moaned into the kiss, arching into him.

He slid one hand under her shirt and lifted it to expose her bare belly.

Oh!

She abruptly broke off. "Sorry."

He stood with his hand frozen. "You reject me?"

"No, but, um, I have to prepare you." She wiped her mouth, panting. "I'm not like the female dragons you bring in. I don't have their voluptuous curves and perfect skin. I mean, full disclosure, I like my body, but it's kind of lumpy."

His voice was low, almost hard to hear, and gruff. "I don't understand."

"You once said I had an ideal body type, but even now, I can't help thinking that's because you've only seen me with my clothes on."

The silence between them stretched. Overhead, the stars turned with infinitesimal slowness, the wind rustled between the branches of the evergreen trees, and the fresh outdoor scent filled her cooling nose.

He stepped closer, framed her face again. “You’re not rejecting me?”

“I dreamt about being with you,” she said, into the heavy air. “I’ve fantasized about kissing and touching you like this. But those are fantasies. You’re going to see me in reality and get disappointed.”

“Disappointed?” he repeated, starting to sound like his familiar outraged growl. “Who’s going to be disappointed?”

“You,” she insisted, tugging down her shirt. “Others were.”

“Who were these others? Other males? Females? Who saw your beautiful body and then dared to lie about such a thing?”

“They weren’t lying,” she said miserably. “I mean, I haven’t been naked with any other person. That’s the problem?”

“Did I not say you were irresistible to dragons?” His eyes glowed red, and he gripped her shoulders. “You are the most beautiful female in this entire universe.”

“Nobody else has ever said anything like that. They haven’t even approached me.”

“They’re intimidated.”

“No way.”

“Even I, Sard Carnelian, aristocrat and CEO—former CEO—feel intimidated in your presence.”

“Are you serious?” she asked, tears prickling her eyes as she struggled to believe him.

“Because you are the pinnacle of beauty. No other person is higher.” Sard kissed her cheeks, growled in her ear, and spoke roughly, his voice a low rumble against her skin. “In all the universe, there is only you.”

She half sobbed. “Really?”

He covered her mouth again, unstoppable, and this kiss went on and on, each brush of lips and teeth deeper than the last, until their hearts beat in unison.

He finally pulled away, wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her off the ground.

She gasped, her vision blurry with want as he floated her into the warm cabin and laid her down on the one bed.

His eyes burned. “Now, unveil yourself.”

She obeyed, very carefully disrobing and folding her clothes neatly on the old kitchen chair beside the bed.

She hesitated again at the waist of her leggings because she was wearing plain underwear for extra comfort, not the sexy underwear she would’ve brought for Sard.

But he simply watched, scales shimmering just underneath his skin like he was losing control of his dragon as she got more and more nude.

And that was affirming. Warm cabin air wafted across her bare flesh, and she let out a helpless whimper.

The answering blaze in his expression only made her warm.

Finally, she stood in front of him, bare feet on the old linoleum. “Well?”

His hot gaze traveled all up and down her. “Turn.”

She rotated in place, giving him a view of every vulnerable part of her.

His gaze scorched her. He gripped the hard outline of arousal against his pants like he was trying to contain his own outburst. He felt that way just from looking?

That, more than anything, made her feel vibrantly alive and more beautiful than any tender words.

He made a sound low in his throat. “Now lie on the bed and spread your legs.”

Abruptly, her confidence vanished again. She crossed her arms. “Well, what about you?”

He grunted. “Me? You want to see me unclothed?”

“Why not? I’m totally naked, and you haven’t even taken off your shoes?—”

He flexed. Blood-red dragon scales poured over his body like gemstone rain as he shifted.

His outfit shredded, and the bits floated down to a pile around his clawed feet.

As a male dragon, he filled her cabin, his gemstone eyes whirling on hers, beautiful and majestic.

Then he shrank back down into human form, the scales disappearing into his skin as his limbs slipped back into place, and he stood nude before her.

Hard muscle roped across his incredible body. The power of his dragon couldn’t be

fully contained within his flesh right now. Two piercings glinted in his nipples and one in his belly button.

Sprouting from his body was his proud male member. A thick silver ring protruded from the tip, and then six silver barbell rungs lined his shaft, the beads glinting like precious metal. He was, inside and out, made of riches, wearing his treasure hoard on his own body.

Her mouth hung open. She closed it. “Oh.”

“Now.” He approached. “Lie back and spread your legs so I can see all of you.”

She rested her bent knee on the bed, swallowed on a dry throat as he stalked toward her. Then he was within arm’s reach, and abruptly, she realized a new problem.

His cock looked normal size against his body, but his body was thick and massive, which meant...

She held up her hands in a panic. “Wait!”

He loomed over her, resting one fist on the bed beside her waist. “You’re exquisite.”

“No, just a minute.”

He rested his second fist on the other side of her waist, caging her between his arms. “I will not delay in proving my devotion to you.”

“It’s not going to fit.” She gestured desperately at his cock and then at her cleft, which was neatly trimmed but not shaved or anything because, again, she had not expected this to happen today. “You’re too big. I’m too small. There’s no way.”

He straightened, bringing his proud member close to her face. It smelled like him, smoky and gruff, yet sweet, earnest in his own way. “Are you sure?”

No. She imagined being honest, and then she imagined him saying Then here I come! and jumping on her while she screamed, and so she hedged. “Uh, probably.”

“Very well. I shall become smaller to fit you.”

“You can do that?”

“I will try.” He set his feet and stared at his cock as though he would shrink it by sheer willpower. After a few long seconds, his dick bobbed and swelled.

“I think it’s getting larger,” she commented.

He shook himself. “I lost focus and became distracted by your enticing beauty. I will concentrate again.”

Yeah, she didn’t think that was going to work. But there was his fascinating and huge girth right in front of her face, and she had so many questions, so much curiosity. She was so turned on by his cock. Her body throbbed with arousal. She wiggled her fingers. “May I...?”

He grunted, which she took as assent, and dared to touch his large dick. It was just as she imagined, hard and swollen, and the hard metal also heated to his body temperature. She encircled him with her fingers, her fingers barely clasping over the shaft.

He groaned. “Julie, you are destroying my concentration.”

“Sorry.” She licked her tingling lips. “Can I just...?”

“Anything.”

She nuzzled his dick head, rubbing the warm metal ring against her cheek.

He moaned louder. “I become naked, and the first part you touch is my maleness.”

“Ah, was that wrong?” She inhaled his increasingly smoky scent, enjoyed the damp pearls forming along the ring. “It’s my first time seeing it, and I just wanted to explore you.”

“No, it’s inspiring. I will do the same.” He scooped under her thighs and flung her backward onto the bed.

She shrieked in surprise.

He nestled between her legs, her thighs resting on his implacable shoulders, heels bumping against his back. He palmed her pussy, first stroking down and then moving in a circle. “Yes, you are beautiful.”

Her breath hitched as his fingers explored her, each touch sending waves of pleasure through her body. She went slick with arousal, and the sound of his fingers sliding through her folds filled the room, mingling with their ragged breathing.

“Perfection,” he murmured, his gaze locked between her legs. “Every part of you looks and feels good. It’s even better than I imagined.”

“You imagined me?” she asked, her body responding to his words with an eager throb.

His fingers continued their exploration, teasing her entrance before sliding up to circle her clit. The sensation was overwhelming, and she couldn’t hold back a moan.

“Yes.” Sard’s eyes flashed with satisfaction. “Is this pleasurable?”

“Yes,” she breathed, arching into his touch. “Don’t stop.”

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He obliged, his fingers working in a rhythm that had her panting and writhing beneath him. The intensity built within her, a coiling spring of desire that threatened to snap at any moment.

“Sard, I think I’m going to?—”

Before she could finish the sentence, her body convulsed in a powerful spasm.

She cried out, her vision whiting out as pleasure washed over her in waves.

Sard continued to stroke her through it, drawing out the sensation until she was limp and gasping for air.

Even though she’d pleased herself before, alone, doing this with the man she loved was a different, much more intense experience that made her feel delightfully good yet also dangerously vulnerable.

Because right now, she was totally unguarded.

He could do anything he wanted, tell her anything about herself, and she’d believe it, tear her down and stomp her to pieces, and she’d just let it happen. He could hurt her if he wanted.

As the aftershocks subsided, Sard withdrew his fingers and licked them, closed his eyes. “Mm.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, shocked.

“Memorizing your taste.” He crawled up her body, his eyes gleaming with hunger. “Addictive and sweet.”

Her chest squeezed. “You always make me feel like I’m more than enough.”

“You are everything.” He slid his cock along her slick folds. His hard-soft, bumpy skin stroked her, reawakening her desires with new intensity.

She loved the feel of him between her thighs, claiming him right back. “Ah, but don’t go inside, okay?”

He shoved both hands under her buttocks and squeezed as he rocked his metal-ribbed cock against her. An ordinary man would be incapable of doing that, but he floated at exactly the right angle to make her gasp. Excitement and heat pooled between her thighs.

“Or maybe just a little inside...is okay...”

Sard’s large cock pressed against her damp entrance.

Julie’s breath hitched, her heart pounding in her chest and an answering throbbing in her center.

His eyes glittered on her, violent and possessive, but it didn’t show in his movements.

He pushed forward so slowly, it made her want to cry.

And even though he was large, she rocked against the discomfort, feeling microtremors of pleasure as her pussy welcomed in her first man.

Sard gripped her hips, his breath leaving him in an explosive gust. “Do not...I can

barely contain...”

All at once, the tension disappeared, and he eased in. Her body stretched to accommodate him, and the fullness was both intense and deeply satisfying.

He groaned, pausing to give her time to adjust. Sweat dripped off his body, and he rested his forehead against hers. “Julie. You are squeezing me so tight. I can’t hold back much longer.”

“Claim me, then.” She wrapped her legs around his waist.

With a low groan, he began to move, carefully, so every one of his piercings glided inside her like he was made just perfectly for her.

The ring in the tip thrust exactly into her deepest pleasure spot, and stars glimmered on the edges of her vision.

Each thrust sent shock waves of pleasure through her body, but also something more.

The biggest and most meaningful orgasm of her life built up.

Julie clung to Sard helplessly, her nails digging into his shoulders as she met his thrusts with her own.

The bed creaked with their mingled moans and the wet slap of skin against skin. Sard’s pace increased, his control slipping as he drove into her again and again.

“Julie.” His voice broke. “You...are...mine!”

His release flooded her while he roared, and it unleashed her own orgasm.

She cried, spasming violently over his throbbing cock, her body quivering so intensely, she didn't recognize herself.

He collapsed, crushing her to the bed, and she tremored under his heavy body, feeling pressed in and safe like under a weighted blanket.

Everything was different now. She stroked his damp back. She was broken and remade by Sard Carnelian. And it was so perfect, she didn't even want to speak, because any words would just ruin it.

He must feel the same because they eventually eased apart and fell asleep together in the sheets, leaving all the lights on and everything.

At this exact moment, Julie had never in her whole life felt more certain of herself, more confident, more loved.

Which was why, the following morning as she slowly came awake to him staring at her in the early sunlight, her heart swelled in her chest, and it felt like her whole life led up to this moment, being here in the arms of the man she admired.

"I love you," she blurted.

"I wish I could say the same," he said tenderly.

It took a moment for his words to register because his expression was so loving. She thought, for one happy instant, he'd said he loved her too. But suddenly she realized with a cold flash that he hadn't said that at all.

She sat up abruptly. "Uh, what?"

His expression froze.

Her heart panged. “Sard?”

Outside, a helicopter clattered as if it were low over the horizon.

His eyes flew wide with panic.

She came awake instantly, flushing with the same alarm that clearly went through him.

He leaped out of bed. “They found me.”

“Who found you?” she asked, to an empty room because he flew out of the cabin stark naked, letting the door bang behind him.

She dragged on a shirt and pants, shoved her sockless feet into shoes, and hurried outside, zipping up her light jacket to try to disguise the fact she wasn’t wearing a bra.

Outside, a massive alien ship hovered over her little cabin, causing wind like a helicopter overhead. She staggered back in shock.

Sard stood in the center of the clearing, shoulders thrown back, head high, and still completely naked. Two unfamiliar dragons circled overhead.

To her right side, a man wearing a suit and sunglasses landed. It was Syenite, Sard’s bodyguard.

The two dragons landed on either side of Sard. The ground trembled under her feet.

“It’s time,” one of the dragons growled, his gold piercings glinting against his sky-blue scales.

“I’m ready,” Sard responded.

Maybe it was because she’d spent so much time around female dragons, but she didn’t feel frightened by all these dragon men, just confused.

She stepped forward, into the clearing. “Sard?”

The other two dragons made a growl of warning.

Sard twitched, then abruptly wheeled to her. His expression was totally different from any she’d ever seen before. He was furious, as if she were an employee who had let him down. “Don’t ever come near me again.”

She stopped. “What?”

“Nothing happened between us. Do you understand? Are we clear?”

She nodded cautiously.

“Good,” he spat in disgust.

“But Sard?—”

“From this moment forward, do not contact me for any reason.”

“But—”

“Not even if you’re dying. Not even if you’re dead!” He leaped into the air.

The two unfamiliar dragons with gold piercings flew after him. All three disappeared into the spaceship. The spaceship rose up through the atmosphere and disappeared.

The wind calmed, and forest noises returned as if the interruption had never come.

Her frozen heart started to melt, and the pain turned her into agonized mush.

She struggled to pull in a breath. Her body was still sore from where Sard had touched her, loved her, claimed her.

Now he wanted to pretend it had never happened?

She was never to contact him, not even if she were dead?

The ache fought with her confusion. Her lips went numb.

Syenite glanced at her, then touched his earbud, communicating with someone. “Yes, they took him. He’s gone forever.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat, but it didn’t make the pain disappear. “Who took him?”

“Sard’s escort.”

“To where?”

“His wedding.” Syenite’s sunglasses reflected her open-mouthed shock. “His decades-long engagement to his powerful dragon fiancée is finally being consummated. He never told you about it?”

She shook her head, dazed.

He looked up at the sky where they’d disappeared, his tone wistful. “We’ll never see him again.”

Chapter Eight

Present day

Sard moaned. His chest throbbed with a dull ache. Hours had passed since he'd lost consciousness. How cruel of his pursuers to capture him, knock him out, and leave him in this painful state. He muttered, "At least give me numbing spray or a tranquilizer."

"Best I can do is baby Tylenol and a Band-Aid," Julie said with her usual invigorating harshness.

His stomach flipped. He snapped open his eyes and struggled to focus. Failing that, he rubbed his eyes. Moving his arms pulled on his chest injury, but she must have done something. The laser injury had scabbed over and didn't hurt sharply anymore.

Julie sat in a rickety wooden chair beside the bed, just like a scene from his dreams. Her dark hair fell thick and wild around her shoulders.

The soft fabric of her off-the-shoulder teal shirt cupped her thick curves, and her snug black leggings encased her shapely legs like a second skin.

Had his company ever exported off-the-shoulder designs?

Humans had such endless creativity, adding twists and bangles and beads to the most innocuous things, and then acting surprised when any dragon pointed out how exceptional they were.

Just like how, two years ago in this very cabin, Julie had acted surprised when his resolve not to touch her had broken and he'd given in to her intoxicating beauty.

A noise in the next room made him sit up, the memories washed away to reality. The copper-scaled baby dragon— Julie's son, the one she didn't have with him —tried and failed to stack cans.

Sard brushed his fingers over his injury. He must prepare for war. "I had a healing gel in my pocket."

"I used it on you already."

Ah, that explained why his injury didn't hurt as sharply, but it was unfortunate that it hadn't done more. Because, in addition to his own pursuers, he now had to think about who would come after Julie. "Your son's father hasn't made contact?"

She narrowed her eyes, then leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "So what if he has?"

"He was very foolish leaving you as he did."

"I'm glad you think so, but honestly, what were you thinking?"

"Me?"

"How could you carry us here in this state? You could've passed out on the way and dropped Copper."

"As a dragonlet, he would have been fine."

"But I absolutely cannot fly, and I might've panicked and dragged him down with

me. We could've been really hurt, Sard. When did you become so reckless?"

Pain and fury lanced him. "It's your fault!"

"How?" she demanded, her tone just as tart. As always, she was not at all intimidated by his roar. "Last I checked, I didn't kidnap myself from my house."

"I overthrew the empire for you," he raged. "I signed a new constitution and destroyed the aristocracy so I could finally be with you, and the whole time, you were going off and having your son with another dragon!"

"You were married ," she threw back. "You tricked me, lied to me, seduced me, and you never even told me you were engaged?—"

"That's your fault too."

Her face went white, eyes wide, and she looked like she was about to attack him. "What?"

"I never cared that I'd been engaged since birth until you had to come along and ruin my peace of mind."

"Well, you never once told me?—"

"Of course I didn't. I was trying to avoid you, to keep away from you.

You, looking soft and fierce and voluptuous, a perfect female with secret little streaks of color hinting at what other enticements might be hidden beneath.

But even when I tried to stay away, you got into my mind like a drug, made me think about you at all hours of the day and night, made me fantasize about peeling off every

scrap of fabric and licking every inch of your skin, teasing you and tasting you while you lay beneath me panting, clinging to me and calling my name.

I couldn't stand it. I lasted until the very final hours, and then you came to me in my moment of weakness when I couldn't ignore my fate any longer.

I wanted you to drive me into another life.

I wanted to be carried away by you forever. ”

Her mouth closed.

“I shouldn't have gone with you, I know.

I told myself I would only look at you, not touch, and I would savor the memories for the rest of my life.

But I couldn't hold out. I was so close to you, your feminine scent and your sweetness, and I couldn't stand strong.

Savoring your body was even sweeter than any of my fantasies.

For two long years, I returned to this bed in dreams. You dug your nails into my back, lifted your breasts to my hungry mouth, arched with pleasure for my cock.

Even now, knowing that you've chosen another dragon to be your husband and father your dragonlets, I cannot stop.

Your scent, the memory of your buttocks filling my palms, you writhing wet and helpless beneath my thrusts invades my mind.

I have lain with your ghost every night since the moment we parted.

You're the female who made me forget everything I was and the reason I destroyed everything I am. And you chose another male!"

Liquid shimmered in Julie's beautiful eyes. Something in the other room rattled, but otherwise, it was just the sound of them both breathing, so close now, but still separated by so much wretched distance.

She cleared her throat. "And, um, the chest injury?"

"I left the marriage dissolution meeting too quickly and foolishly rushed here, unable to stay away from you a moment longer. Hurt feelings translated into gunfire."

She swallowed. "Your marriage dissolved?"

"And you had such a hold on me that I willingly flew through gunfire to be with you just a little bit sooner." This confession didn't soothe his feelings.

It just filled him with conviction. He growled, energized all over again.

"Even if you've chosen someone else, I would do this.

If you ever need me, I'll be there. Because, no matter what the world says, I feel in my soul that you are mine. "

The cabin was very, very quiet.

The rattling sound got louder. Julie suddenly shook herself, stood up so rapidly the chair tipped over, and ran into the other room.

Sard lay back in the bed, concentrating on how he could prepare to fight Copper's father.

The male was either ridiculously confident or stupid to leave her without a single scrap of protection.

How could he expect a woman like her not to be targeted?

She'd intoxicated Sard, and he was an excellent judge of beauty.

She came back a few minutes later with an old pot, righted the chair, and sat in it. She crossed her legs, rested the pot on an oven mitt on her lap, and blew over a steaming spoonful.

And then, with a little wobble, but as if she'd taken this entire time to think of a response, she said, "That sounds like a 'you' problem."

"You're irresistible to dragons," he reminded her.

"I'm only irresistible to you," she returned.

"Clearly not only me," he growled, then lay back again with a sigh and closed his eyes. "When I fantasized about coming back here, I didn't imagine having such circular arguments."

"Did you fantasize about kidnapping me?"

"Of course, but the dream-you was more enthusiastic about it."

"What a letdown. Dream-me is such a tease." Julie smirked and munched on the food.

Sard's stomach grumbled. "What are you eating?"

"SpaghettiOs. Want some?"

He leaned over and accepted her spoonful. Her eyes sparkled as she watched him eat off her spoon. It made his chest clench. Feeding a mate was such an intimate act, and she was feeding him instead of her real husband...

He would make her become his again!

Unless... His fangs flexed, and he nearly bit the spoon off.

Her brows pulled together, and she snorted. "Look, eat the food, not the spoon. I made two cans."

"Do you love him?" he asked fiercely, because that was the one thing he couldn't overcome with sheer determination. "Copper's father."

Julie's movement checked. Her gaze trailed across his form under the blanket to his toes. She took a deep breath and scraped her spoon in the food. "I'm trying not to."

Another pang hurt him. He wanted to shout at her. Dragons were decisive. Humans were wishy-washy. Their relationships and feelings were needlessly complex. Maybe it was because they lacked the sharp, long incisors. Plenty could be accomplished with a good, hard bite.

Even though it tortured him, he had to know his rival. "What's he like?"

"Copper's father? Oh, he's an idiot"—she stabbed her spoon into the pot—"overflowing with totally unwarranted overconfidence, yet he somehow always manages to pull off whatever it is he's planning, whether it's starting a business on an

alien planet or overthrowing an intergalactic government, or...

” She straightened and sighed, looking him straight in the eye.

“Making me start to have feelings again after I swore on everything that I wouldn’t. ”

His heart thumped hard. Perhaps he did have a chance. Overconfidence could be exploited. He made his hands into fists, flexed his claws. “So you’re not sure if you fully love this dragon? How is he in a fight?”

She rolled her eyes and stood up, went into the kitchen, and put some of the food into a bowl, handed it and the spoon with his tooth indents over. “I don’t think you should be fighting anyone right now.”

“If you falter in your feelings for him, I will fight to claim you and Copper for?—”

“Quit it.” She waved her hand. “You don’t know what happened after that day you told me never to contact you again. You missed everything. I nearly died in childbirth, by the way.”

His stomach dropped. “That should never happen at a dragon hospital.”

“I wasn’t allowed to go to a dragon hospital.”

“How could your husband?—”

“Focus,” she said sharply. “You had your ‘taste’ of me, which was apparently my fault, and then announced that our relationship ‘had never happened.’ The dragons here are very loyal to you, Sard, so as far as they were concerned, ‘we’ hadn’t happened.

I didn't get any treatment, any scans, any help.

I had to go to a human hospital, and I almost died. ”

He felt sick. “Because of your dragonlet?”

“I had a condition we call preeclampsia. Humans get it sometimes. It came on suddenly. The dragon hospital turned me away.”

“I was promised that you would be left in peace.” He gritted his teeth, made fists. “They made me cut ties with you publicly, but I didn't think... What about your husband's family? Didn't he have connections? That should've overridden?—”

“I'm still here,” she said firmly, cutting off his questions. “But it was hard. When I was lying on the operating table alone, that was one of the many, many times I cried for you, and you weren't there.”

A hard lump formed in his throat.

Julie sniffed, wiped her face, and took a deep breath.

She let it out slowly. “You weren't there, and I recovered on my own.

Now I have Copper to think about. I swore to never, ever love you ever again, but it seems I'm weak to a man overthrowing an intergalactic aristocracy on my behalf, so now I have to think about it. ”

Feelings churned through Sard. That was another thing Julie did to him.

Before her, he'd only felt simple emotions.

He'd needed money to gain enough freedom from his family to do the underhanded, subversive things he'd planned, and he'd been furious at the society that had made him an aristocrat.

He knew better than anyone that the "top" rank was a narrow spire and much too easy to fall from.

But after Julie, he'd felt all sorts of new things.

Longing, hunger. He'd felt the fiery pinch of being in the presence of another person who lit his soul with starlight and showed him glimpses of a different kind of life.

He'd felt pounding fear on her behalf, and desperation to do anything to protect her.

Now, he felt recrimination and grief for how his public declaration had damaged her and for all the hardships he'd missed.

He should've sheltered her. He should've protected her. He should've been there.

But he hadn't been there.

He set aside the bowl and clasped her hands, cool fingers enclosed in his warm ones. "I swear to you that I will be here now."

Her chin wrinkled. She cleared her throat, shifted on her seat, but didn't pull her hands away. "You're still a dragon with wealth and power. Can you really make promises like that?"

"The empire has changed. Nobody cares what I do."

"The injury on your chest says otherwise."

He looked down reflexively, grimaced. “That wasn’t the government.”

“So who was it, then? Your ex-wife?”

“My brothers.”

“Your...your brothers?” She cocked her head, totally confused. “Why?”

“My ex-wife’s family elevated our family’s standing. Even after the rebellion, she was much wealthier and older than us. My brothers are angry I ‘let her get away’ and want me to win her back.”

“Will you?”

“Julie.” He managed to rotate out of bed and rest his feet on the cool wooden flooring on either side of her delicate fuzzy slippers.

He captured her hands again, both of them, and rested them against his scarred bare chest. “If I have not made it clear to you, I pledge myself to you in every possible way. You own my heart, my body, and my soul. I came to life because of you, and you are the only female I have ever wanted. So no, I will not chase after another female, no matter who she is. The only one I want, the only one I have ever wanted, is you.”

Chapter Nine

Sam held Julie's hands and put every ounce of sincerity into claiming the one woman he truly loved and making her understand just how fiercely he loved her since she still seemed to be confused.

Her soft lips parted, and a blush colored her freckled cheeks.

He drew her forward, mesmerized by her. Her lashes lowered, and his cock pulsed with readiness. He had crossed galaxies to reach her, and he would not hesitate to cross the last few inches now, after all this time.

But she pulled back and nailed him with a hard glare, her fierceness matching his. "I let myself believe everything you said once, but now I know better. What are you not telling me? What are you conveniently forgetting or glossing over?"

He shook his head, his heart pounding. "I didn't tell you about my engagement because I was trying not to involve you. It's too late for that now."

"Isn't dragon society matriarchal? What does the head of your family say?"

"Mother doesn't care."

"She doesn't care you're tossing aside a high-class dragon wife for a human fling?"

"Julie, you are much more than?—"

“Just answer the question.”

Sard sat back. His chest was already feeling better. The warm meal of strange circular noodles in red sauce had given him energy, and simply being in Julie’s fiery presence once more made him feel a sense of hope again.

“Mother has twenty-six other dragonlets to occupy her notice. I am, by far, not her favorite. My union with my ex produced no grand dragonlets, and she released me without any demands. The dissolution went incredibly well for our family, and Mother recognizes that. The only people who are upset are two of my brothers.”

“And your mom doesn’t care those two brothers are now trying to kill you?”

“She doesn’t care if we ‘roughhouse.’ Once someone is killed, there will probably be consequences.”

“Roughhouse...” Julie frowned and rubbed her forehead. “I can’t get used to how dragons think. I’m not going to be okay with Copper trying to kill any of his siblings.”

“He’ll have a strong dragon father to take you aside and explain how it’s fine.”

Her eyes snapped open, and she glared daggers at him. “Oh, he will, will he?”

“And, as your other dragon husband has not taken the role of reassuring you, I will do so.”

Sard got out of bed, pulling the blanket off with him and wrapping it around his waist because he knew humans cared about nudity.

He walked carefully into the main room, checking Copper’s location—sleeping on

the rug before the fire—and glanced out the windows.

Peaceful white snow greeted him. No sign of Copper's father yet.

He returned to her bedroom, pleased with his increasing mobility.

It was proof that dragons were hardy and strong.

"I'm not angry you chose another dragon for your husband."

She stood, eyeing him warily. "Oh? That's good."

"Even though I was out across the galaxy doing everything I could to keep you safe, it's only natural that a woman like you should be wooed and hunted by hordes of eager dragon males.

" Her eyes flashed, but he continued. "The only thing I now question is your judgment in choosing a husband who has not already hunted us down! I would go to the ends of the universe for you. How dare you show such bad judgment in choosing a weaker and less determined male to father your dragonlet?"

"Maybe I was still reeling from finding out I'd given away my virginity to a man who already had a fiancée!"

"And? That should have made you more careful in your selection! Just because a male tells you sweet words doesn't mean he'll provide security."

She jabbed him in the chest, above his injury. "I figured that out after you left me."

"Apparently not, because you slept with another dragon!"

“Oh, please.” She went toe-to-toe with him, despite being so much smaller. “How many times did you sleep with your wife?”

“Not once,” he growled.

“Don’t lie!”

“I don’t need to lie. Every word I speak is truth.”

“Except for all the words you don’t say.”

They stood so close, it felt like they were falling into the same gravity well, circling and spinning around each other.

Her wild feminine scent, flushed through her body, made his cock hard and throbbing, and he wanted so badly to clasp her and take her as before, to tear away all the barriers between them and mark her as his.

Her chest heaved, her breasts rising and falling, and he could almost taste them.

And yet she thought the worst of him.

“We did not lie together,” he told her softly, even though his chest burned with fury. “I told my ex on our wedding day that my soul already belonged to another. She was surprised at first, then relieved because she felt the same.”

“No way.”

“Yes, ah, ‘way.’” He frowned at his own use of slang. “It is the reason she made it so easy to dissolve our marriage. And it’s why I was able to assist with the revolution. We were allies in the same cause.”

Julie rested on her heels, softening.”You liked her.”

“Only because of our similar situations. Had I never met you, I would’ve been insulted, probably.”

Julie stared at him for a long, hot moment, so much so that he almost forgot himself, again, and moved straight to crushing his mouth to hers.

Copper made a noise in the other room.

She let out a sigh and stepped back, putting air and distance between them, and went to her son. Sard watched her care for the baby dragonlet with confidence and expertise, changing his diaper and offering him small pieces of cereal from a box.

Copper started crying and flew to the ceiling. He’d gotten free of the line she’d tied around him. Julie hopped to reach him but couldn’t.

Sard captured the sobbing baby, holding the small form to his chest and rumbling with the sound that used to ease his younger siblings. Copper arched his back and twisted, then slowed his movements and finally yawned.

“He’s tired,” Julie murmured. “But he doesn’t want to miss anything, so he’s always fighting sleep.”

“I was the same.” Sard made the deep rumbles as he walked the small child, and the boy abruptly transformed back into human and slumped over his shoulder, heavy with sleep.

Julie reached up to take the dragonlet. Sard eased the boy into her arms, then watched her arrange the child into a kind of travel bed.

Her cheeks were flushed with heat, but the ache in his chest grew more painful.

She was a caring and beautiful mother. Not for the first time, he cursed the engagement that his family had arranged.

It had been a fact of his life for as long as he could remember, like the color of his scales or his position in the family.

But now it had prevented him from being here for Julie, keeping her away from whatever wretched male had used her body and left her on her own.

Normally, this was when he would double down on his determination. He'd snarl and declare that he would overcome any obstacle and claim her as his wife, insist Copper be adopted as his dragonlet. Whatever was hers, or valued to her, he wanted to place under his protection.

But if the past two years and his marriage had taught him anything, it was that some feelings could not be overcome by will or determination.

"Was he handsome? His father." Sard gestured at sleeping Copper. "He must have been. He had the guts to approach a beautiful woman like you."

She straightened slowly and didn't answer.

"Was he bigger than me?" His tone sounded bitter in his own ears. He shouldn't torment himself, but he couldn't stop from asking. This should've been his family and his life, and she'd gone and made it with another dragon. "Was he better?"

She closed her eyes. "Stop."

He wanted to. But the poisoned words spilled out. "You bore his dragonlet, and yet

he's not here. He must have tricked you."

"I forgive him," she said softly.

"I don't."

She smiled faintly and pushed him.

He reluctantly let her guide him back toward the bedroom, leaving her dragonlet to his sleep. "When he comes for you, I'll make him regret what he did."

"He already does, I think." She directed him onto the bed.

He lay back with a pained groan. "You do love him."

She swallowed hard. Tears glistened in her eyes. "So help me, I do."

"I'll hunt him down and destroy him."

"You can't."

He fisted his hands in the blankets. "Why not?"

"Because."

She swung her leg over his waist, the bedsheet between them, straddling him. And his frustration instantly disintegrated. She could tell him any reason when she was touching him like this, but he never expected her next words.

"It's you."

Chapter Ten

Sard's shock fought with denial. "No."

"Yes." Julie swallowed. "Copper's father is you."

It was everything he wanted to hear, but somehow, it didn't make him happy.

Copper was actually his son. The things he most desired were within his grasp—her cheek was in his cupped hand as her soft thighs straddled his waist and her center hovered dangerously close to his ready cock—and grief flooded him.

He'd missed her carrying and giving birth to his dragonlet. He'd missed Copper's entire first year of his life. He'd missed everything. "I shouldn't have touched you."

"You're right. You really shouldn't have."

"Despite that, I cannot regret it. Holding you was the most formative night of my life."

A watery smile crossed her beautiful face, and then she sucked in a wobbly breath and pulled away from him.

"I understand that feeling too." She ran her fingers over his bare abdomen. Underneath the sheets wrapped tightly around his waist, his cock flexed, filling for her. "Sometimes, even though your mind tells you all the reasons not to, you can't resist being with the man you love any longer."

It took a few moments for the import of her sentence to fully strike him, and while he was thinking about it, Julie scooted back and pulled down the sheet, releasing his nudity to her view once more.

And her admiring eyes on this most vulnerable and male part of him reached him more than any clever words.

You can't resist being with the man you love any longer.

...the man you love...

He caught her curious hands, kissed her slim fingers. "Truly?"

She sighed. "Did you really dream about me?"

"Every night. Every hour. Every?—"

She leaned forward and kissed him.

Her soft, hot lips crashed into his, and arousal shot through his entire body, centering in his already-bursting cock.

He groaned, and she opened to him, eating him hungrily.

They'd been apart for two years, and perhaps he wasn't the only one who'd felt the constant missing piece of his soul.

She tasted like heat and electricity and cravings.

Sard crushed her to him, his scales shimmering to the surface as his claws emerged. He hooked one under the edge of her top.

She made a noise of protest and grabbed his sharp finger. “No!”

He immediately sucked in the claw, careful of her fragile human skin. His heart pounded, nerves pulsing out of control. “No?”

“I don’t have a change of clothes. Wait.

” She sat back, resting her divine buttocks on his hardness, and peeled up her shirt and cami-style nursing bra.

Her gorgeous breasts sprang free, even larger and more bounteous than before, a true goddess in human form.

She tossed them onto the chair, her hair wild and enticing, and then turned back to him.

He brushed the long red scar crossing her belly. “This is new.”

“From the C-section.” She rested her palm between his piercings, nipple to nipple, unchanged in their years apart. Her tone was light. “Is it ugly?”

This was a scar from the moment he almost lost her forever.

Imagining that black hole, he would never have recovered, and he would’ve rightly blamed himself for her death every single moment for the rest of his life.

He took a deep breath, tried to keep his voice even when his throat was so tight from emotion that he could barely speak. “Does it hurt you?”

“Not anymore.”

He pressed a kiss to the seam, silently thanking every force in the cosmos that had preserved her life and their son's that day.

She gave a shuddering sigh. He trailed kisses across her soft belly to the button at the center, then up, catching her voluminous breasts with his hands, worshipping her soft pink buds with his mouth.

She gasped and sighed, writhing against his pulsing cock.

He couldn't stand it any longer, and he reached up, fisted her nape, and dragged her down to him, plunged his tongue in, taking her deeply. She moaned against his lips.

"Julie," he growled against her, then nipped her ear. She shuddered, clasped his shoulders, holding onto his head and pressing his face to her. "I need you bared to me, and it's taking all my will not to destroy your leggings."

She rolled off, leaving him bereft, but made up for it by immediately shimmying out of her leggings, delighting him with her jiggling contortions.

Every part of her was soft and full, curvy and delicious, and he needed to be deep within her.

She held the wobbly chair for balance as she pulled the last part of the legging over her ankle, and he snagged her wrist and dragged her back on top of him.

She landed with an oof and an apology. "Your injury?—"

"I feel nothing." He filled his mouth with hers until she was breathless, his desperation rising with their temperatures.

The closer he got to claiming her again, the more dangerous it felt.

This whole situation could evaporate into a dream, and he'd awaken alone once more in an opulent lair that was more of a prison because he was trapped in it alone.

He filled his palms with the solidity of her waist, the feminine flare of her hips, and the satisfying round bounciness of her buttocks.

She whimpered with need, and his arousal throbbed with urgency.

His tongue flicked her nipples, and she writhed for him, then encircled his manhood and gripped his shaft.

Her cool fingers against his heat sensitized him to her, and he surged against her fingers, the wet of his precum making him slippery.

Her breath hitched. "You're so big."

"Julie." He lay back, catching his breath, gazing over her radiant beauty. "Let me in."

She straddled him, the head of his cock resting against her hot entrance, then she gripped his face and pressed her forehead to his, fierce. "If you leave me again, I'll destroy you."

"If I leave you again, I'll be destroyed," he returned through gritted teeth.

She eased back, enveloping his cock and sinking down on him, her chest heaving as she worked him deep inside to her very core.

His cock trembled, his seed building up with her beauty.

Before, as a virgin, she'd been shy and enticing, but now, as a mother and a woman, she was confident and sexy.

She looked down on him, moving up and down his shaft, little expressions of pleasure flicking across her gorgeous face.

He swelled with rightness, and she moaned. "I missed you so much."

He gripped her hips, branding her with his cock. "You are mine."

She smiled, then yielded herself to pleasure, tossing her head as he thrust, surging up into her over and over.

As before, his tip piercing slid in and out of his shaft, giving him doubled sensations and making him heavier and thicker, bumping against her inner core.

Her whimpers turned to intoxicating cries as she finally orgasmed, squeezing his shaft, milking him.

Hearing her lose control made him lose it too.

He erupted with fury, his seed rushing through her as their intense connection made him see stars.

She collapsed on top of him, and he crushed her to him, holding her tight as he shuddered with the aftermath of his release.

Tears dampened his eyes. He squeezed them shut tight, breathing in her addictive feminine scent, feeling the soft tickles of her hair against his taut cheeks.

Eventually, she rolled off and snuggled beside him, and he made a shelter in his arms for her, neatening and tucking the blankets around her.

She looked so sweet and peaceful. He stroked her brow line and cheekbone and chin.

Two long years were finally over and she was in his arms where she belonged.

She'd gone through so much before alone. He would never leave her again.

With that vow echoing in his heart, he followed her into sleep.

But then in the early dawn light, once more, he heard the hovering engine of his pursuers. His eyes snapped open, instantly awake.

They had found him.

Chapter Eleven

For the second time, Julie awoke to Sard stiffening in a panic and helicopter-like noises outside her grandparents' cabin. He once more flew out of her bed—and the cabin—without a scrap of clothes.

Oh, she was not doing this again.

This time, Julie didn't bother with clothes. She wrapped the blankets around her and jammed her feet into slippers. Copper bounced in front of the windows, his cute scales shimmering in the onesie, and she scooped him up and raced with him outside.

Once more, a massive alien ship hovered over her little cabin, causing wind like a helicopter overhead.

It even cleared snow down to bare ground in one spot in front of the cabin.

The wind and noise abruptly cut off as its engines changed tune and it hovered over Sard, who once again stood in the center of the clearing, defiant and completely naked.

She crunched across the frozen ground toward him.

Two unfamiliar dragons wheeled overhead.

“Stay back,” Sard ordered with a growl, and she stopped, but he never took his eyes off the wheeling dragons.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“My brothers’ servants.”

She shivered on the icy ground. Copper wiggled, a warm baby excited by all the noise. In her arms, he was like a magical heater, and she hugged him tight.

The dragon servants landed in front of Sard.

The older, more distinguished servant held a view screen showing two aristocratic dragons.

They looked quite different from Sard, one skinny and tall in blue robes and the other short and squat in red robes, but they also were covered in silver and gold piercings, rings, and unimaginable wealth.

They had to keep their human forms to wear the robes, but let their heads bulge to dragon shaped.

“Sard, how dare you make our servants chase you across this wretched backwater planet?” the skinny male in blue robes demanded. “You’re an embarrassment to the Carnelian name.”

“Go back to your wife,” the squat one in red ordered. Although they didn’t share Sard’s looks, his brothers had certainly inherited the tone. “If you woo her hard enough, she’ll stop having feelings for that low caste and become attracted to you.”

“No,” Sard growled.

“It’s the least you can do,” the blue one said. “First you lose your company to low castes, tarnishing our name, and then you’re publicly humiliated as being incapable of

producing a dragonlet, thus invalidating your marriage. What an embarrassment.”

“Yeah? What company have you started?” Sard shouted back at the view screen. “What company of yours has gone to the number one position of companies outside Draconis?”

“And once more, you force us to collect you from this derelict farm,” the blue one sniffed. “Imagine, throwing yourself at a human! No matter how attractive she is, that’s simply embarrassing. Come at once, or you’ll be kicked out of the family!”

“I’ll rip your faces off!”

The red-robed dragon laughed archly. “Try it!”

“Ah, we must be careful not to issue anything that could be misinterpreted as an official challenge...” The blue-robed dragon looked nervous. “Younger brothers can be sneaky when inheritance is on the line.”

“Our servants will drag him back in chains,” the red-robed one said dismissively. “He can try to fight us that way.”

“Well, if you want to...” The blue-robed dragon frowned. “Servants, bring Sard onto the ship so he can be forced back into a marriage with his ex-wife.”

The servants produced laser guns. The younger, stockier servant clamped Sard’s arm.

“I’m only going with them so I can rip your faces off,” Sard declared.

His brothers chortled.

He muttered to Julie, “Wait here.”

Her heart thumped hard. This was just like before. She was no longer confused or powerless to stop what was going on, and she wasn't going to stand by and let her dragon get dragged away again. "No."

Sard swung around to stare at her, shocked. "No?"

The beefy servant also hesitated.

"You can't take him away to remarry his ex-wife," she told his brothers in the view screen, "because he already consummated and validated his dragon marriage to me."

Everyone looked at Copper.

The baby's scales shimmered as he wiggled excitedly in her arms.

"Oh, yeah." Sard smiled broadly, straightening and pulling free. "That's right."

"That's your dragonlet?" his blue-robed brother shrieked. "You had a dragonlet with a human?"

Sard put his arm around her and Copper. He threw out his scarred chest. "You all heard it!"

"But she's a human," the blue-robed brother whined. "She can't know our laws."

"My wife claims me as her husband. This is our son. We are married according to dragon law! You cannot force me to go to another when my family is here."

"Your family could suffer an accident..." the red-robed dragon mused.

Sard bristled. "Mother wouldn't like it if anything happened to one of her grand

dragonlets. Would she?”

Both his brothers turned a paler shade.

“What’ll we do, brother?” Sard’s brothers conferenced with each other. “He has a son? We can’t force them apart now. They’re married by law. She has a son.”

Sard just grinned at her like he’d won the lottery.

The older, distinguished servant unexpectedly spoke. “You can still force them apart. It’s happened before.”

Sard’s smile dropped. “No.”

“Your family forced your elder sister away from her chosen mate. Your mother allowed it. I was there. I served her, and I saw it all happen. You flouted the laws, ignored her feelings, and destroyed her. Why should we not destroy you?”

Silence blanketed the freezing clearing. Even Sard’s brothers looked deeply uncomfortable.

“It’s because of her that I did everything,” Sard told him gruffly. “I started my business to save aristocrats like my ex-brother-in-law. If he hadn’t died right after their separation, my sister might’ve defied Mother and Father. They could’ve had a second chance.”

“You ‘did everything’ but save her.”

“I was a dragonlet myself?—”

“You did nothing! You all watched as she, a bright and shining star, withered and

died!” The older servant glowered, then addressed the brothers in the view screen.

“If you could do it to her, why don’t you do it to him?

Why don’t you waste his life just like you wasted hers? What was it worth to you?”

The silence stretched.

Sard snarled. “I don’t want?—”

“Who cares what you want? Who cares that you were married already? Do you think I like serving a family like yours? If she had to suffer and die, she who was like sunlight shining through sea glass, then you must suffer too. Now, get in the ship, or I’ll shoot you dead myself.”

Sard heaved a sigh. The gun centered on his injured chest. He released Julie, stepping toward the servant. “Stay here.”

“No,” Julie said again.

“I’ll take care of everything properly and come back.”

“The last time I let you go, you were gone for two years and you overthrew the government. I’m not going to let you go again.” She addressed his dragon brothers. “If you take him away, I’m telling all our clients what you’ve done.”

“As if we care about our reputation amongst humans,” the blue-robed dragon sneered, and the red-robed dragon chuckled harshly.

“Not human clients, our dragon clients at the salon. I’ll tell them how you’ve taken my husband and the father of my dragonlet because you didn’t want us to be happy.”

The red-robed dragon continued to chuckle menacingly.

But the blue-robed dragon held up a hand, frowning. “Wait a minute. I seem to recall... A beauty salon for colorations and body decorations, yes? Who were your clients again?”

“Ruby of House Chromium, Larimar?—”

“Larimar, the daughter of Adviser Wrathmoda?” the blue-robed dragon squeaked, eyes widening. The red-robed dragon stopped chuckling. “She rips off arms when she gets mad!”

“And about a hundred more,” Julie said. “Mostly female dragons, theones nobody wants to mess with. I could go on.”

Sard’s brothers panicked, hugging each other and gibbering. “We take it back! We changed our minds! You can stay, forget we said anything!”

The older servant ignored them. His laser gun was aimed at Sard.

“What happened to my sister changed my life,” he told the servant. “It’s why I came here and why I tried to save as many fallen aristocrats as I could. I mourn her to this day.”

“Come home!” the brothers shouted at the older servant. “Stop this nonsense and come back!”

The older servant glanced down at them in disgust. “Perhaps you are the only dragon in your family who is repentant.”

“I’ve changed, and so can you. We’re living in a new era. You don’t have to work for

my family any longer. You can go out and seek your own fortune.”

“I don’t care about clothes.”

“There are other businesses. Hundreds of opportunities await. You can choose.”

The older servant looked down at the brothers, then lowered his gun.

He gave it and the view screen to the beefy youngservant, took off his earbud communicator, and handed it over along with his ID badge.

The brothers yelled at him as their shock wore off.

He ignored them and flew a short distance away, hovering in the air and staring at the majestic snow-covered mountains of the North Cascades.

“Is he going to be okay?” Julie asked, staring at his back.

Sard watched the beefy servant try to get his attention, then give up and return to the brothers’ spaceship alone. The ship flew away, leaving the older male behind. “Who knows?”

She choked. “After your speech, you don’t know?”

“I don’t know. But he can choose his own destiny as I may finally choose mine.”

Sard pulled her into his embrace, squishing their baby son between them in a loving way. “Do not stand in front of a laser ever again. If something happened to you... Let’s just say I can understand the devastation of my elder sister.”

“I couldn’t let you go again.” She leaned into him, her satisfied feelings mixed with

sadness that she hadn't been able to do this two years ago. "You missed so much."

"Yes. But now I have the rest of our lives to prove I'll never miss another moment."

An enraged scream made them jump.

"The rest of your life is going to be very short!"

The older servant couldn't escape his past. He transformed fully to dragon, claws out, and dove straight at them.

Chapter Twelve

Sard went from the highest high of being claimed and defended by his chosen wife, the woman he most loved, to the lowest low of terror as his brother's former servant, a minor aristocrat who seemed like he had nothing left to lose, flew at them.

Julie shrieked.

Sard burst into dragon, still shifting as the male attacked.

The male's claws raked his still-weakened, scarred chest. He grunted as he scrambled free and launched, trying to lead the male away from defenseless Julie and Copper.

His plan worked. The male flew after him, then hesitated as though realizing what Sard had done.

"Why did you come back?" Sard roared to draw his attention back to him. "You should live and be free!"

"Free of what?" The male's vicious claws dripped with Sard's blood. "Why does everyone else get to live the way that they want but not me?"

"You can?—"

"No, I can't!" The minor aristocrat lunged at Sard, aiming for his throat.

Sard spun midair, using the momentum to lash out with a powerful kick of his hind

legs.

The other dragon twisted away, narrowly avoiding his kick.

Sard flew hard into the cold, white sky. But then he noticed the other male had stopped chasing him. He stopped as well.

“Because otherwise, what was it all for?” the male panted. “All the pain? Everything I had to give up? Why do you get to have what I couldn’t have?”

Sard didn’t know his story. He had no idea how to answer. “You can choose now.”

“Then I choose for you to feel my pain!”

They flew through the sky, chasing and attacking. Sard tried to draw him farther and farther away, even taking hits so as to keep his focus, but the male eventually realized what he was doing and hovered in the air, his wings flapping laboriously, exhausted.

“Come and get me!” Sard taunted. “I’m weak and hurt!”

“You’re playing, but I’m not.” The male whirled and dove for the cabin.

Sard swore and flew after him.

The male landed roughly in front of the cabin.

Julie raced outside wearing clothes instead of the blankets. Her arms were free. Copper must have been left in the cabin.

There was no room to land near Julie. She was under the trees, and it would be too dangerous. He dove at the male.

The other dragon stopped him with a growl. “Attack me and I’ll bite her in half!”

Sard hovered, his wings beating the air helplessly. He was about to do something suicidal.

Julie held up a piece of brimstone candy. “See this?”

“Throw it to me!” Sard shouted.

The dragon undulated between them, blocking her from throwing it.

Sard snarled in frustration.

She brandished the candy at the other male like a weapon. “You back off or else I’ll eat it.”

“So what?” the servant dragon sneered. “You’re human. You can’t be pregnant with a dragonlet after one night.”

“Have it your way.” She crunched the candy, made a face, and swallowed.

The servant tilted his head.

Nothing happened.

The male sneered. “And after all that, you wasted it. You two will die because you’re too stupid to live.”

“If you harm a single hair on her head, the female dragons will end you!” Sard shouted desperately. “Why did you endure so much only to now commit suicide?”

“Because I have nothing left,” the male snapped. “I keep waiting for the pain to subside, but it doesn’t. I can’t move on.”

Again, Sard was at a loss.

“Therapy,” Julie said, rubbing her stomach absently.

“What?” the male said.

“It’s what you’re supposed to do when you can’t move on. Have you ever heard of something called therapy?”

“No, I have never heard of this, which means I don’t need it.” The male arched his neck and showed all his teeth, lurching toward her again. “I’ll feel better when you die.”

“No!” Sard rushed him.

But Julie made a sudden face and clamped her hands on her stomach. “Ugh.”

The male paused, indecisive. “You’re pretending.”

Sard landed to the side of the male. “Julie?”

“Watch...” Her eyes bugged, and her throat glowed red. “...out!”

Flames erupted from her human mouth, spewing across the frozen ground.

The other male scrambled back as the flames licked at his feet and wingtips.

She staggered after him, taking deep, gulping breaths and then throwing out searing

flames across his flank and tail as he turned and flew away in a panic.

Overhead, another dragon alien ship floated on the horizon, but this one, Sard recognized.

His old bodyguard, Syenite, floated down from the ship.

He and other dragons Sard had hired away from ruin to staff Carnelian Clothiers surrounded the male, who nursed some singed wounds.

With lasers, they escorted the limp male into their ship.

Syenite rotated to them and waved.

Sard transformed abruptly back into a human and waved back his thanks.

In another life, he would've tried to help that male himself. If their times had been shifted and Sard had been the oldest sibling, he would've tried to save his elder sister, her first husband, and this male.

Because what if he'd failed and Julie had been killed? Maybe he never would've gotten over it either.

But that wasn't how things had worked out. Now, if he ever saw this male again, he would be ready for a fight.

"Whew." Julie stamped out some coals. "Lucky this happened in winter so I didn't just light the whole forest on fire."

Sard flew to her and wrapped Julie in the biggest, hardest hug, kissing across her perfect face and her smoking lips and her surprised, laughing eyes. "You are my

official wife, and no one will dare separate us again.”

“Yes.” She bit her lips guiltily. “I’m sorry you had to give up your riches and your family, though.”

“What are you talking about? I still have my vast wealth and my lair. I’ve lost nothing, only gained everything so long out of reach.” He tucked her hair back and helped wipe the soot from around her mouth.

“Ugh. I forgot how rough it is to have morning sickness.”

“The timing was incredible.” And then, because he still could hardly dare to believe that this was his actual future and the dream was real, he checked one more time. “Are you sure you were not with another dragon shifter male?”

“Of course not,” she insisted. “I got pregnant after our first night together, so I thought there was a good chance we might be two for two. Why are you even asking that? Now?”

“You are very irresistible to dragons.”

“For the last time, I’m only irresistible to you!”

“Hmm.” He looked down at her archly as she shivered in the cold, then lifted her into his arms and walked her back to the cabin, where their son floated eagerly inside. “I will lock you up in my lair so you will never be in danger again.”

“That’s what you think, you crazy male!”

“I am crazy because of you.” He covered her mouth with his kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:58 am

“ A ll right, Ruby, we’ve got you scheduled for a full-body polish and masque for next Tuesday. See you then!”

Julie hung up, finished her cup of herbal tea, and set it on the cabin’s coffee table.

She scooted forward to escape the cozy embrace of her reupholstered floral couch.

A fire crackled merrily in the familiar wood-burning stove.

Beside it was the cabin’s ancient wooden table with four sturdy new legs. Polished kitchen chairs glowed gold.

Sard looked up from where he was playing with Copper, swinging him around the confined space. “All done?”

“Yep, that was my last one.” She heaved herself to her swollen feet, wincing.

He was at her side in an instant. “We’ll go to the medical office again.”

“Oh, I’m okay. I just sat in the wrong position for too long.”

He touched her belly possessively, his eyes glowing. “Will you...”

She braced herself for more argument, but she really did feel fine, and she wasn’t particularly in the mood to travel just to be told what she already knew—that she had to stop getting so focused on projects and take a few more breaks.

“...let me care for you?” Sard asked, sounding both humble and also having a gruffness, a burr in his throat that made little shivers go up her spine.

When he asked like this, she couldn’t deny him, and she was starting to think he’d figured out her weaknesses because he’d been using this tone on her a lot recently. “Yes.”

He beamed.

“Just let me finish up.” She waved her hand across the stove’s glass.

The “fire” inside turned black. It was just a view screen, although it did have some kind of technology in it to give off real heat if she wanted.

She followed Sard, who’d collected Copper once more, out the old cabin door—which still had the cracked wood around the latch—and into the bustling salon.

Not the original Rebel Roots Salon in Portland.

The windows of this satellite location showed a glowing moonscape against a background of millions of stars.

This “satellite salon” was on a literal satellite.

The people inside, dragon clients, mostly, but also a few training under human stylists, waved and wished her a good night.

Sard led her through the massive tunnels into his lair.

They’d taken her grandparents’ cabin—with the consent of her uncle, who’d been

happy to have the property cleared with no hassle to himself—and the parts they could salvage, she'd brought with her across the stars.

Sard's engineers had reconstructed it to keep the most soothing and calming parts for her private office at the new satellite salon.

She played with Copper in his new dragonlet-appropriate playroom, a vast cavern with plenty of nooks and crannies, while Sard made them an evening snack.

He had more than enough wealth to hire an army of assistants, but he liked to do these little things for her personally.

Watching him, a giant man with piercings, hum as he moved around his kitchen constructing a small meal of hummus, apple slices, and, of course, her eternal pregnancy craving of air fryer french fries made her chest ache.

When she was pregnant with Copper, she ate an unusual amount of blueberries and yogurt, to the point that she was starting to wonder what was wrong with her, and now that Copper was eating solid foods, he absolutely loved all types of berries and tangy yogurt.

Now, with her second pregnancy, she'd started craving all kinds of potatoes, but especially baked french fries, often without any ketchup or sauces. That would've been unimaginable before, but now she just guessed that their second baby—their daughter—might be born a fan of fries.

After dinner, Copper had a half hour of “baby games” on the view screen, which was the time Julie called up several other human moms with dragonlets and let their babies all communicate with each other while they chatted.

Sard had arranged it for her so she never had to leave the convenience of his carefully

guarded lair.

Julie and Copper had already met his mother, a gigantic dragon named Ferocia, and been officially welcomed into the family. Before, Julie hadn't had these resources and had felt isolated and alone. But now, she felt relaxed. This pregnancy was much easier, and she wasn't stressed.

Sard put Copper to bed while Julie stretched out, then she awoke as he came in. He paused, his eyes darkening on her. Even now, he looked at her in a way that made her feel more beautiful than she was. If beauty was in the eyes of the beholder, Sard's gaze made her feel like a total goddess.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he murmured, going to the foot of his vast bed.

This section of his lair was more dragon-like, the cushions fitted to the stone of his cavern. The intercom to where their son was sleeping was one-way, so they could hear his baby snores, but no sounds from this room were transmitted out.

Sard knelt before her, peeled off her socks, and massaged her feet.

She lay back as the delicious feelings of relaxation rolled up her body in waves. "That feels amazing."

He grinned again. She'd never seen him smile, almost never, in the salon, and now he almost couldn't stop smiling. It made her heart swell up again in her chest. He'd been so stressed too.

His fingers traveled up her legs, massaging away any knots in her calves.

She moaned. "You're too good for me."

“I have an ulterior motive.” He massaged higher, then peeled off her leggings and tossed them aside so he could massage her bare thighs. “I get to touch you.”

“It’s good,” she sighed, opening to him.

He continued his loving massage over her lacy hips and extra gentle over her rounded belly, then soothing across her breasts.

He removed her shirt and bra. Her nipples beaded up for him, sensitized by the air and his expert touch.

He rumbled approvingly deep in his throat, then hooked his thumbs in the lacy straps of her panties.

She stopped him. “I have a surprise for you.”

“For me?” His pierced brows lifted, and his red irises glittered like the gemstones of his namesake. “Will I like it?”

“It’s hidden colors.”

She pushed down her panties herself—he sometimes still got excited and accidentally sliced them in his eagerness to get her nude—and revealed her smoothly shaven area dotted with tiny gemstone beads in a pattern of dragon wings and one word.

“Sard,” he read, his hand hovering over them. “Can I touch?”

“Gently. They’re only glued on.”

“Glue,” he repeated, touching her with the softest and most careful fingertips. It was amazing that a man who looked as rough and brutal as he did was capable of such

gentleness. “What is this?”

“It’s called vajazzling,” she said, a little shy from how intently he studied her. “I’ll never shift into gemstone dragon scales like you, so I thought it could be fun.”

“It is fun,” he confirmed, still intent.

She felt embarrassed but also very deeply loved. “My body’s changing even more this time, and you missed it last time. It’s a lot to get used to.”

He looked at her. “I love every part of you.”

“Oh, that’s good, but...well, anyway, I just thought, maybe this would keep your interest...”

“I’m very interested. Let me show you.”

His large hand moved up her inner thigh as he crawled up her body, his eyes burning with passion as he gazed possessively over her bare flesh.

Lowering his head, he captured one of her nipples with his hot mouth.

His fingers caressed her pussy, stroking and playing at exactly the right pressure and speed.

Pleasure radiated outward. She arched into his touch, grabbing his broad shoulders.

The hard ridges of muscle rippled. He rose and kissed her.

His long, thick tongue drove into her mouth, conquering her as he rocked his fingers into her channel.

He circled faster, pushing her toward the edge until she tumbled over.

She cried with release, and he rumbled with approval.

Panting, shaking, Julie held on to him as he pulled back.

His eyes smoldered on hers. "You are my wife."

Tears prickled her eyes. "I am."

His nostrils flared, caught by the same emotion that hooked into her. They'd gone through so much apart, never knowing what the other had endured, and now they were together, and would remain so forever.

He kissed her neck, her breasts, her belly. "Irresistible," he murmured against her skin as he gazed down again at the cute little gemstones she'd had placed. "You're irresistible, Julie."

Chest heaving, heart pounding, Julie slid her fingers down his rippling abs, across his belly button ring, and tugged at his waistband. It fell apart into pieces from his claws. Sometimes he was even more impatient at getting himself naked for her.

She encircled his thick, girthy cock, her fingertips playing over the metal.

He rumbled deep in his chest, a sound that made her own arousal throb once more.

"Your piercings are so pretty," she murmured. "So, I thought, this was something I could do to match you."

His fiery eyes captured hers. "You are perfect exactly as you are."

A lump formed in her throat. She coughed. “Oh, I know...”

“It is common for dragon aristocrats. We show our wealth on our bodies to separate us from the poorer low castes and to make ourselves attractive to future mates. I will have no more done...unless there’s something you think would make me more handsome?”

She shook her head.

“A large number of piercings is less common in humans, I think.” He touched her earlobes. “And no part of your body is pierced. I had no expectation for that to change. I assumed you had a reason.”

“I never liked needles.” She shrugged. Ironical, maybe, for someone who’d ended up at a salon, but she’d never been bothered about it.

He shrugged too, mirroring her. Any reason was good enough for him. “Roll to your side, and I’ll massage your back.”

She obeyed. “You’re making me feel good everywhere.”

Another rich chuckle made her skin bump. “That’s the idea.”

His hard fingers dug into her shoulders and traveled down her spine to her hips, where the extra weight was starting to affect her. His touch evaporated her soreness.

She moaned and heard his own breath hitch, uneven, as he reacted to her. It made her feel powerful and feminine. She arched her back, brushing her buttocks against his hard cock.

He growled against her neck. “Julie...”

She shivered. "Please?"

He gripped her hips, pulling her hard against him. The head of his cock rubbed against her entrance, and she arched, encouraging the contact. He felt good from every direction, and she liked teasing him.

His metal-ribbed cock slid along her slick folds coated in her arousal. He glided forward, his tip to her clit. Pleasure built up inside her, but she wanted more, so she shifted her hips and rolled onto her knees, opening herself for him.

He leaned over her back, nipping her shoulders, and pressed his cock deep.

All the way in, his metal piercings thrummed her sweetest and most sensitive pleasure spot, making her cry from how good it felt.

He pulled out and thrust again, rhythmically, the ribs of hardness gliding his engorged cock over and over in her slick channel.

Their primal coupling filled the room. He moaned her name as he caressed her swelling breasts.

Her pleasure mounted and finally pushed Julie over the edge.

She came with a sharp cry, her pussy clamping down on his silver-adorned cock.

Her climax triggered his, and his release poured into her and he roared.

Afterward, she lay on the bed, totally stretched out, sleep flirting with her. Sard stroked her belly pensively. Her lashes fluttered open. She expected to see his usual proud or possessive look, but this time, he was sad.

“What is it?” she murmured, rotating to him, concerned.

“I thought this experience would erase my regrets, but instead, I’m more aware of what I missed, and my regrets are deepening.”

She cupped his proud jaw. “You had no choice.”

“I know. And that is why I accept these feelings. I accept them deeply.” He heaved a big sigh, then kissed her belly. “I am grateful to have this second chance with you.”

Her heart swelled. She wasn’t beautiful or powerful or rich or a dragon woman, but she was his chosen wife.

Sard’s ex hadn’t had any choice in marrying him. For years, dragon society had been forced to shove down their true feelings and put on an act every day. Living these lies had caused so much damage. Now, they were free.

Because of her. Because of Sard.

Because of love.

And Julie did love her powerful dragon husband with his fierce, muscular heart. His good deeds glinted like his piercings.

She held his face. “Let’s have a super-boring life where every day is normal and ordinary and happy.”

“Just like my dreams,” he murmured, nuzzling her. “I am happy so long as I can wake up next to you.”

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Dragon shifter CEO Malachite “Mal” Onyx doesn’t have time for relationships.

But the domineering billionaire has no choice. He must marry a human female and produce dragonlets, or return to his home planet and take the claw of ancient Empress Horribus.

Where can he find a willing female? One with soft brown hair, mouthwatering curves, and who lights his soul on fire.

Like that mysterious intern, Cheryl...

Cheryl has been drooling over her smokin’ hot CEO for months, but when her “duties as assigned” suddenly include marriage, she’s torn. Should she run from the irresistible dragon and his toe-curling kisses?

Or give in?

A dragon male has never dared to turn down the Empress. The entire universe is about to be rocked by a shy, curvy female from an unimportant little planet named Earth!

Let this yummy alien abduct you ~ Enjoy this brief excerpt!

Today was a good day.

It was product-sample day. Which meant that the dragons of the Onyx Corporation were striding down the hall between their offices half-naked, passing Cheryl’s desk

without a glance in her direction, flexing gloriously.

Cheryl traced Mal's rock-hard abs outlined against the sheer silk nightshirt, capturing every bulge and divot. The rough sketch took shape on her digital art tablet. But it was impossible to capture his flashing green eyes or delicious, rough voice.

"This will beat the Carnelians." The CEO of Onyx Corporation gripped his silk collar, drawing the fabric taut against his broad backside. "It feels like sex against the skin."

She wanted to feel his sex against her skin.

Was that wrong? She'd imagined Mal naked a thousand times in the last six months since she gotten this internship and stepped into the world of over-sexed dragon shifters who were too hot to be real.

How would it feel? Sex in general, since she had no experience, and with Mal in particular? Him clasping her to his broad chest, panting as he pressed his hard member against her soft cleft... The sinful images teased her like hot tongues licking her forbidden places. She flushed to full awareness.

Jasper, her direct boss, was also shirtless and cut like a male model. He held out his hand. "Give me the sample."

Mal stripped off the shirt and tossed it at him, revealing his full masculine torso.

Yes . Thank you.

"We must have this," Mal ordered. "Find me a supplier!"

He stalked, shirtless, to his office and slammed the door.

Even in a gruff mood, he was still breathtakingly gorgeous. All the aliens were. Apparently, their scouts had visited Earth hundreds of years ago and started the lore about dragons, so their reappearance just a few years ago, while shocking at the time, had already worn off to normal.

And anyway, they all looked like Superman in their human forms. Hard bodies, impossible good looks, and with a penchant for defying gravity and floating around.

They rarely took dragon form. Mal had transformed once in front of Cheryl. He'd pissed off his sister and scrambled out a window to escape her fiery rage.

One moment, he'd been standing in the hallway in a casual gray suit, ordering Amber to redo the year-end reports for the fifth time. "And this time, do it right!"

Amber had dropped her file folders, fluttering on the carpet, and turned to him.

Mal had backed up. "Uh ... when you have time."

Amber burst her quiet wool dress and turned a golden honey color. She was a dragon straight out of a storybook. Her wings spread wide, smashing the hallway and breaking the drywall.

The other dragons had scattered.

"I said when you had time!"

Red fire glowed in her throat.

He flinched and flexed at the same moment like he'd been doused with a bucket of water.

Iridescent green scales emerged all over his body, slicing through his suit.

The fabric dropped off him in shreds. His fingers and toes elongated, bursting the leather shoes, and dug into the carpet as he wheeled away.

His nose and mouth elongated while his forehead flattened over eye ridges and his cheeks drew back.

In human form, he towered over Amber, but in dragon form, he was half Amber's size.

Amber ambled on four clawed dragon-feet toward Mal.

He fled. Moments later, his form zoomed outside the building, a flaming female dragon chasing right behind him.

As a consequence, Cheryl realized the otherwise quiet, staid Amber was a wild card who might snap at any moment.

Mal she didn't worry about. They'd spent the last six months in close quarters because her desk was outside his office. He was too gorgeous, too focused, too busy to ever notice her hopeless crush...

... or was he? Mwa ha ha ha! Find out in *Onyx Dragons: Malachite* !