



To Ignite a Dragon's Desire (Sulfur & Spice #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Dragons were not on my apocalypse bingo card.

Neither was getting kidnapped by one.

Life has been crazy, so it shouldn't be surprising that I've been taken by a mythological creature and marked as a potential piece of an apocalyptic prophecy.

Except I'm done being a victim. Dangerous claws or not, I won't cower to the scary beast who says I'm his fated mate.

But Lucan isn't what I expected. He's a warrior who caters to my every need. Beneath his tough exterior is a comforting softness.

For the first time in forever, I feel safe, which is dangerous because real monsters exist. And my dragon makes it easy to forget that fairy tales are for princesses—not for women like me.

If I want my happy ending, I'll have to fight.

It's about time I remember how badass I really am.

Let's just hope it's not too late...

To Ignite a Dragon's Desire, book two in the Sulfur Spice series, is a dual POV, full-length novel where the main couple gets their HEA before the next story takes place. Books are best read in order as the overall plot unravels. Mind the cliff for the next couple in each book. This series is intended for a mature audience who enjoys their banter hot and their relationships spicy.

Total Pages (Source): 33

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Put Me Down

“Put me down you giant lizard!”

I screamed so loud my voice was hoarse, beating my fists against the scaly, oversized fingers tipped with golden claws that curled around my waist in a vice-like grip.

Not hard enough to crush my ribcage, but definitely firm enough to let me know I wasn't going anywhere.

I looked down again.

Why do I keep looking down?

My belly swooped as nausea made its way up my throat.

I wanted off this ride. Now.

My purse was trapped against my side, pinned there by beastly talons, and I couldn't wiggle my hand inside to grab the pocketknife I'd taken from Ember.

The wind whipped at the bottom of the stupid thin dress I was wearing as I tried to kick my feet.

Somewhere over the last mountain peak, I'd lost my sandals. I was barefoot and

dangling hundreds of feet above the earth, warmed by a giant mythical reptile's claws.

This was not my day.

I struggled again, feeling pathetic and weak as I pounded my fists against the scaled flesh. "I swear I'll..."

What exactly are you going to do, Riley?

Nothing.

I wasn't going to be able to do a damn thing to help myself out of this mess.

Clouds passed us by in a lazy blur as his massive wings beat through the air. The altitude this high up had me lightheaded and dizzy. Rolling hills of brown and tan gave way to snow-packed mountaintops and forests of thick evergreens below.

I squeezed my eyes shut, breathing through my nose and trying to calm my overactive nervous system. It was a trick I'd learned dealing with my ex-boyfriend. If it could help with Drew, it should work when getting kidnapped by a dragon.

Just think positive thoughts. Be grateful for...

I couldn't find much to appreciate at this particular moment in time.

"Stupid dragon." Another wave of fury passed through me and I made my anger known with my fists, no matter how ineffective they might be.

I was mad.

And I was scared out of my wits.

It was shocking how much the world could still surprise me. I was used to death and didn't fear it, working at a retirement home was basically exposure therapy.

It was the living that terrified me on the daily.

The earthquakes and crashing economy weren't as scary as the way people handled their panic. When the government started failing us, it was the fighting and blaming each other that really worried me.

And it'd been Drew's chaotic moods I lived with moment to moment.

I'd thought that escaping to the middle of nowhere with Ember and Willow would be the start of something new.

It was my fault. I'd dared to hope.

Seeing Ember fall in love when she'd always been the closet romantic of our group and watching Willow take her first relaxed breath in years had done something to me.

I foolishly thought we'd be safe.

But I should've known...

"Put me down," I whispered one last time, holding back the burning tears that I wouldn't let fall. I'd stopped crying years ago, and learned to go numb instead when I got this afraid.

This beast wasn't going to listen to me. I knew better than anyone that when monsters wanted something, they'd take it.

I was powerless.

Weak.

Done.

I was so fucking done.

Leaning forward a bit, I peered over the edge of the dragon's claws.

Okay, maybe I wasn't that done yet.

The thought of falling from this height into the crystal blue lake below had chills wracking my body. We were so far above the water, flying fast toward another mountain range.

I was going to be sick.

The wind whipped my hair into my face as the dragon banked left, letting out a terrifying roar. I swung to the side like a rag doll clutched in its claws, screaming along with him.

Then he corrected, cradling me softly as a worried whine came from within his throat.

That, I might have hallucinated.

But there it was, the shred of hope niggling the back of my mind that this beast wasn't planning on eating or crushing me. Kieran had been kind to Ember. Rational, even. Maybe this one could be reasoned with. He might let me go when he turned into a man.

The thought had me spiraling again. My breath came short and fast.

I'd almost prefer he stayed as a dragon.

A nice, non-kidnapping dragon.

I didn't like people, and my current track record with men wasn't anything worth bragging about.

Still, there was the hope. That stupid little flicker of hope that was always there even on the darkest days. The one that said wake up, try again, and see if today is the one day where things turn out okay.

And if it wasn't...

I could always run away.

As soon as this thing—

“Put. Me. Down!”

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Lucan

To the Nest

Are you happy now?

Satisfied. My dragon heart slowed to a steady beat as the female fell asleep in my talons.

While I was content that the warring sides of my being were in harmony again, worry replaced the internal rage I'd suffered the past few weeks.

I had a mate.

Kieran's warning still rang in my mind. "Fragile."

I think not, my beast tutted, still awed by the amount of fight this soft human had in her. This one was a warrior. I knew it like I knew every scar on my scales.

If she'd been a dragon...

But she wasn't and I didn't mind in the slightest. I had a mate.

A human mate.

Who'd have thought it was possible?

It'd been a punch to the gut when I'd scented her feminine smell the first time, tasting it in the air on the tip of my tongue. The richness of cinnamon and something spicier like nutmeg mixed with citrus was burned into my senses.

I should've known that day who she was to me. If I hadn't been thrown by Kieran's actions, I might have shifted to meet her in human form. But it'd been centuries since I'd seen my cousin fly with that much fire in his eyes and aggression in his blood.

He'd sent me away from his property, enacting a dragon law that he'd never used with me before.

The scholar's territory was neutral ground. Any dragon showing aggression or refusing Kieran's command to leave would be breaking dragon law—risking the wrath of our entire species. It was why I never needed to protect his home with my wards.

As hatchlings, we'd grown up together and frequented shared spaces with as much familiarity as a brood from the same nest. We were family. He knew I never meant him harm.

But the years had driven a wedge between us.

I didn't want to make the divide bigger, especially not when there was so little time left to rebuild that bridge. Although I knew I could kick his ass—I'd done it plenty of times before—I wasn't going to physically hurt my cousin without reason.

So, I left at his request, flying back to my home and trying to erase the scent from my mind.

That night was the start of many sleepless nights. My beastly instincts were never wrong and I knew this woman was meant to be mine.

I'd fought the compulsion to return to her side as long as possible, giving Kieran time to calm down.

When I'd gotten the call, the one where he explained that he'd met his fated mate and claimed her, I almost lost control.

He couldn't have her.

Not without me getting the chance to prove myself worthy first. I'd been a fool, wanting to give space for dragon tempers to cool before I visited again. But he'd stolen her from me and chased me off—stealing that which was rightfully mine.

It'd taken Kieran two days to get through my blinding rage long enough to explain that there were other females present when I'd landed in his backyard. The misunderstanding of the decade.

I'd been so blind. I hadn't noticed more females standing there that day and hadn't scented any other woman than her.

I didn't even know her name until Kieran told me as I flew away. My beastly fury calmed enough to memorize it, repeating the sweet word like sugar rolling on my dragon's tongue.

Riley.

My sweet and spicy Riley.

The one who'd fought a losing battle and hadn't given up until her physical body forced her to rest. She'd be angry that I'd taken her the way that I did, but I had plans to make it up to her.

Night edged on the horizon, turning the sky a deep purple as the last rays of the sun illuminated the mountain ridge. I crested the peaks and headed toward the glow in the distance where my wards guarded the property, naked to the human eye.

The air warmed as my dragon's wings glided to the valley in the Ruby Mountains.

My oasis.

I hoped Riley would like it here.

As gently as possible, my talons curled tighter, trying to cradle the sleeping woman comfortably in my grasp. Now that I was in sight of my nest and the safety of my property, my beastly instincts relaxed.

After all these centuries, I was blessed with a mate.

She might hold the key to the future, but I'd let Kieran figure that out. He was the scribe, not me.

I was just a dragon who'd fought and bled for Earth more times than I could count.

And I was tired of it.

Earth and Her dramatics were no longer my concern. I'd found the impossible. After all my years, I knew better than anyone that this was something worth fighting for.

All I wanted to do with the remaining time I had left was get to know my mate.

I dared anyone to try and stop me.

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Riley

Bacon

The most delicious smells surrounded me. Campfire and brown sugar. Something smoky and sweet, rich like dark chocolate. It reminded me of s'mores with my dad and mom. A camping trip the three of us had taken back when I was twelve. The stars were so bright then. Earthquakes weren't real—just yearly drills we practiced in school, hiding under the safety of our desks.

I felt safe again now.

That's how I knew I was dreaming.

My heart started to race before I even opened my eyes. I took inventory of my body. Everything hurt. Nothing new there. At least I was still alive.

Alive and where?

I blinked, coming face to face with a fluffy white pillow. It was unbelievably soft. And so was this bed. A stranger's bed.

What the hell happened?

Slowly, I pushed myself up off the mattress, terrified of what I'd find. The world came back to me in a whoosh as the blood rushed from my head.

How long have I been lying down?

Sunlight filtered through gauzy curtains drifting on the breeze from an open window. Birds chirped from somewhere outside.

I was lying under a white down duvet covering the mattress that took up most of the room. A pine dresser stood in the corner with a mirror on top.

I avoided looking at my reflection as I gathered the blanket to my chest.

This wasn't like me.

I couldn't remember the last time I wasn't acutely aware of my surroundings. I didn't wake up in unfamiliar places or in strange beds anymore. I paid attention and stayed on guard at all times. It was how I kept myself safe. I couldn't afford to slip up.

Like now.

Breathe.

I inhaled slowly, trying to calm down. The masculine woodfire scent filled my nostrils. It was oddly soothing, reminding me to focus on the positive so I didn't spiral out.

I looked down at my chest.

At least I was still clothed, wearing the dress I'd worn to Ember's wedding/bonding thing. That meant that the dragon who'd taken me last night wasn't some rape-y beast.

Hopefully.

The scent of bacon drifted into the room as I inhaled again, making my stomach rumble in protest. I couldn't remember the last time I had bacon.

Or the last time I'd eaten at all. From the growls of my stomach, you'd think it'd been weeks.

I crawled the width of the bed before I swung my legs off the side. My bare feet touched the stone floors that were somehow warmed and pleasant. I stood, smoothing down the rumples of my dress despite my heart racing a mile a minute.

Drew would've told me to change before going out like this. But my narcissistic ex was the least of my worries now. The current threat was out there—probably somewhere with the bacon.

The dragon.

If he was like Kieran, he could shift into a human male. That thought made me shiver. I'd honestly rather face a dragon, but I knew it wasn't reasonable to expect the beast that'd taken me to be able to fit inside what looked like a normal house judging from the size of the bedroom.

I spotted my purse on a chair in the corner of the room and felt a rush of relief.

Cross-body bags for the win.

He'd probably gone through and taken the knife, though.

I opened the clasp and dug inside, frowning when I saw everything as I'd left it.

Was this dragon guy stupid?

Why would he leave me armed?

And my phone was still in there.

I picked it up, cursing when I saw it was dead.

That made sense. He wouldn't be able to search through the phone without a charger. Not that I'd give him my passcode anyway. That was one of the first things I'd done after leaving Drew, added a new passcode he didn't know or have control over.

It felt liberating.

Holding the pocketknife in my hand gave me a bit of the same powerful feeling. I tested the blade, opening and closing it before taking a breath.

I wasn't a victim. Not anymore.

And I'd never be one again.

?

I tiptoed out of the bedroom, careful not to make any sound, and inched down the hall toward the smell of bacon and noise of pans clanking.

The knife was still in my hand as I rounded the corner to the kitchen.

Granite countertops, sage green cabinets set off with wood undertones, and plants on every window pane turned the kitchen into a cozy little space made even smaller by the beast of a man standing in front of the stove. He had almost a foot on me and was wider than two of me put together.

His bare back and broad shoulders rippled with muscles and tapered down into a trim waist, hugged by a pair of light gray sweatpants.

Ink in an intricate Celtic knot pattern crawled up his right shoulder and dipped under his ribcage. His long dirty-blond hair was messy as if he hadn't bothered to style it this morning. He was barefoot too.

Barefoot and bare-chested and making bacon.

I quickly closed my mouth.

"Morning." The deep timbre of his voice rumbled across my skin. He still sounded sleepy.

If he was anything like Drew, that meant I'd need to stay quiet until he fully woke up.

"You're hungry," the man said, looking over his shoulder. Bluish-green eyes pinned me in place. They were unnerving in their color, bright and arresting in their intensity. Like stained glass, so pretty you wanted to keep staring at them.

I forced myself to look down.

His jaw was huge, stubbled with the shadow of a beard, and an easy smile made my heart flutter.

I said nothing.

It was a statement, not a question anyway.

My stomach gurgled.

The man frowned.

Our gazes both dropped at the same time to my hand still holding the six-inch pocketknife.

It wasn't going to do much damage. I wasn't sure it'd even be able to pierce his solid looking flesh.

The man arched one of his heavy brows. Humor danced across his face. "I'm cooking as fast as I can."

Mortified, I put my hands behind my back and breathed slowly through my nose. The tease of his words made me sick.

He doesn't mean it like that.

Learn to take a joke.

"Have a seat." The man motioned to the breakfast nook next to a large bay window that overlooked aspen trees and trimmed hedges outside. "Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

I gripped the knife tighter behind my back, knowing it was useless, but needing something to feel more in control. Licking my lips, I stood up straight.

"Are you the dragon who kidnapped me?" My voice came out dry and cracked, but I was proud of myself for speaking up.

"Are you going to stab me if I say yes?" The man returned to the sizzling skillet on the stove as if he wasn't worried in the slightest if I stabbed him or not.

Anger rolled through me as I flicked the knife closed. “I’m assuming that’s a yes.”

He shrugged with one shoulder.

“You need to take me back,” I said, adding more strength to my tone.

“Aye. I will, love. But first you need to eat.” He motioned to the breakfast nook again as he cracked eggs into a bowl. “Sit and talk to me while I finish with these.”

What is happening?

I looked at the breakfast nook and then back to him. The window was open above the sink. A hummingbird came to the feeder hanging from the roof and the dragon-man started to whistle, drawing the bird’s attention as it drank.

I blinked.

“We can eat standing if you want.” He turned off the burner and started plating the bacon.

I stood there a moment longer, testing to see what his reaction would be. He resumed whistling that soft tune. The bird called a friend over. A breeze drifted through the trees in the garden just beyond the kitchen window.

Slowly, I made my way to the circular bench seat and sat, resting my arms on the wood table.

I must’ve fallen and hit my head.

Then I’d woken in some weird alternate reality where a hot, shirtless man sang to the birds like a frighteningly large Disney princess as he arranged thick slices of meat on

a plate.

Don't think about his meat.

He turned from the stove. My eyes immediately went to his gray sweatpants and the outline of the bulge underneath. He definitely wasn't wearing boxers. There was a pulse, like he flexed as I perused, and my eyes shot back up.

"I didn't know how you liked your eggs." His voice was husky as he watched me.

Fertilized, apparently. Heat flushed my cheeks. "Whatever is fine."

He frowned and my heart started beating for an entirely different reason. I was pushing too hard, too much.

"I mean, I like them multiple ways. All the ways. However you'd like to make them. I'm not picky. I'll eat eggs." Come on, Riley. Shut up.

That earned me a strange look and I lowered my face to the plate he slid in front of me.

Fresh strawberries sat next to a hunk of rustic looking bread drizzled with butter and honey. I hadn't seen strawberries in years. Soft scrambled eggs with pepper and thick slices of real, honest-to-goodness bacon stared up at me, begging to be eaten.

I tried not to drool as I lifted my face again, waiting to see what the dragon-man would do.

He moved slowly, taking the seat across from me on the bench, and studied me with a curious expression. I felt more exposed than I ever had. Raw and vulnerable under his gaze.

It was too intense.

I picked up the fork, needing something to do with my hands. “Thank you for breakfast, Mr...”

He smiled as my voice trailed off. “Lucan O’Sullivan, but please call me Lucan. You already met my cousin Kieran. I’m not sure how much he told you about me.”

Absolutely nothing. A warning would’ve been nice.

“Lucan.” I nodded. “I’m Riley. The woman you kidnapped who’d really like to return to her friends and cat soon.”

“Riley,” he said, as if that was the only part he’d picked up. “It’s a beautiful name.”

Thanks. I didn’t choose it.

I kept my face neutral as I reached for the bacon. My blood was pumping faster. I wasn’t sure what his angle was or how I’d get out of this. If he refused to acknowledge he’d kidnapped me, would he ever bring me back?

I needed to figure out what he wanted.

“Eat before it gets cold,” Lucan said.

I bit into my bacon, holding back a moan as the salty explosion of heaven burst across my tongue.

Hello, old friend. It’s been a while.

I hadn’t had bacon in years and the taste was orgasmic.

Lucan coughed to clear his throat. The playfulness from his face was gone and I chewed in a hurry, wondering if this was the moment he'd reveal his true colors.

It usually happened like that. As soon as I tried to enjoy myself, things turned around.

You'd think I'd have learned the lesson by now.

He set down his fork and gave me a serious expression, one that showed there would be no room for argument. "Everyone has a preference on how they take their eggs."

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Lucan

Dragon Promises

She liked her eggs over-medium, but only if she was ordering from a restaurant, and that shouldn't have been so hard to tell me.

I sipped my black coffee, watching Riley eat like she'd never enjoyed a meal in her life.

She was beautiful.

Not that I expected anything less.

The simple dress she wore left nothing to the imagination as it clung to her form. Her bony shoulders folded in on themselves, making her appear smaller, but I'd put her at about five-foot-ten.

The perfect height.

Everything about her was perfect.

Her honey-brown eyes darted around the room. They were large and expressive and I already knew one blink of those long lashes would have me rushing to do her bidding. Darker brown hair, rich like chocolate, barely brushed her collarbone.

Her beauty was classic, but there was something haunting about it. As if her cheeks

had been rounded once and now sat sharply hollow. Or that the brightness in her eyes had dimmed.

“Where did you find bacon?” She eyed the last piece on the plate between us.

I pushed it over.

She shook her head.

“I’m full,” I insisted, trying to control the rage of my internal beast. “And there is plenty more.”

I will kill whoever put this fear in her.

“Okay.” She tentatively grabbed the bacon. Then she made that little moan again as she took a bite.

I adjusted myself under the table, mentally adding bacon to the grocery list. I’d feed it to her every day if she kept making those sounds.

Silence stretched between us as she chewed and I realized I hadn’t answered her question.

“I employ a butcher,” I said.

The color drained from her face as she looked up from her plate.

“For the bacon,” I explained. “All my meat comes from the ranch in the next valley. I keep them well stocked with supplies they need and they, in turn, keep my freezer full when I’m not in the mood to hunt.”

“So... You have... Lots of meat.” Riley nodded as she reached for her napkin. Her gaze nervously darted around the room. Skittish. Worried.

I swallowed the sound of my dragon’s growl.

Shell shock. Battle fatigue. PTSD.

They’d used many terms for it throughout the centuries and I was no stranger to the aftermath of war. There wasn’t a major fight on this soil or overseas that I hadn’t played some part in.

When you lived as long as I had with a beast as strong as mine, you learned to put that strength to use.

Over thousands of battles, I’d chosen a side. Giving aid and coming to the warrior’s call. I’d lost count of the times I’d been labeled as an “unidentified flying object” or a strange miracle, explained away by human governments keeping supernatural secrets.

I was numb to violence in a way most weren’t.

But it killed me to know my sweet Riley had demons I wouldn’t be able to fight for her.

But I’ll try.

I nodded as I sipped my coffee.

“Do you have a car?” Riley asked softly.

“I have motorized transportation,” I said. “And whatever else you need. I figure you’ll want a phone charger. I’ll see if I have the right one after breakfast. There’s a

signal booster and Wi-Fi here in the house I'll connect you to. You'll have access to whatever shows you like on the TV in the living room. If you want a certain kind of food, let me know and I'll make a grocery run. Anything you want, I can get."

Her shoulders relaxed a bit and pride rushed through my beast.

"You can take me home, then," she said.

"You are home." I cocked my head to the side, looking around the kitchen. "If there's something about this house you'd like to change, we'll do it."

Her shoulders tensed again.

My beast roared in anger at seeing her fear.

I beat my fist against my chest, coughing to cover the sound. "What else do you need?"

"I have a cat," she said.

That didn't answer my question. "I'll get the critter."

"He doesn't travel well." Riley looked at me like that would explain the reason she couldn't sit still or relax in her seat.

"I'm taking care of it," I assured her.

"I have to go back," she whispered. "My friends need me."

I finished off my coffee and began to gather the dirty plates. "Are these the same friends that allowed whatever abuse you've endured to continue as long as it must've

gone on?”

I wasn't Kieran. Not even on a good day. Diplomacy wasn't my strength and my tongue was as sharp as my fangs.

My beast knew that and still he berated me for being as blunt as I was with Riley.

But he stopped complaining when he saw the warrior flash in her eyes.

“Don't you ever disrespect them again,” Riley said sharply. “Willow and Ember are my family. They've done more for me than I deserve.”

I doubted that.

My mate deserved the world.

But if what she said was true, “Then they'll understand your need to rest and heal somewhere safe with your fated mate.”

“Of course they will...” Her voice trailed off as she pieced together her words. “Wait. That's not... I'm safe with them.”

I stood with all the plates in my hands.

“There's nowhere safer than with me.” It was a matter of fact, and my beast didn't like the doubt in her eyes.

“Because you think...” She swallowed hard as she stood, reaching for the plates as if I'd let her do the dishes and lowered her voice to a whisper, “You think I'm your mate.”

There it was again—the doubt laced with fear.

My beast growled his frustration and Riley took a step backward, pausing before she followed me to the kitchen sink.

“I’m not angry at you,” I was quick to reassure her. “My dragon is angry at the world for putting that fear in your eyes.”

“I’m not afraid.” There was a small spark of defiance even as her heart beat faster.

“Good. You can get settled in while I do the dishes.” I put the plates in the sink.

“I’ll do the dishes.” She stood behind me.

I turned, folding my arms over my chest and blocking her view of the dirty plates. “You’ll do no such thing.”

“Is this a part of the mate stuff?” Panicked, she took another step back.

I’d have to be cautious about discussing fate if she was so skittish about the topic. Though there was much to explore.

She didn’t realize how special she was. Not just to me, but to our entire species. It’d been years since we’d seen any other fated pairs. Centuries without a new dragon birth.

I wasn’t sure if Riley’s body could carry our young, but the thought of fattening her with child had my balls aching in a primal response.

If it was meant to be, it would happen.

But I wouldn't test that yet.

Not until she'd gotten more color in her face and accepted my presence in her life.

"No, this is a 'you've had a hard time' thing," I said. "Go relax and take a bath while I clean up in here."

"Things wouldn't be so hard if you hadn't kidnapped me." She glared from under those long eyelashes.

Down, boy, I scolded my dragon as he unfurled his wings. "My apologies for the shocking flight. It was an effort to rein in the protective urges of my beast, knowing my mate was out there without me. I promise you, I'll keep the dragon on a leash now."

For a while.

"And I'm supposed to trust you," she said.

I shook my head. "Kieran must be failing as a scholar if he didn't teach you the first thing about dragons yet."

"And that is..."

"A dragon always keeps his promises." I smiled, loving the way the corner of her lips quirked in response automatically, as if she couldn't help but be drawn in by our bond.

My dragon sighed as a deep-rooted happiness settled in my chest. Fate has done us well.

Everything would work out perfectly.

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Riley

Lavender Bath Salts

This is crazy. I need to get out of here. He's insane.

I stood with my back to the bathroom door, breathing in and out as I tried to calm my racing thoughts.

The problem was that he didn't seem insane.

But I knew better than to trust first impressions. Hadn't that been my mistake with Drew? Because my ex-boyfriend was certifiably insane.

He'd never admit it and I'd never say it to his face, but the past few weeks had given me a sort of clarity as I dug through all the memories of our relationship and held them up to the light.

I'd learned not to trust my instincts.

Except the books say to trust your instincts.

I didn't know what was right.

There had to be an angle, though.

I just needed to wait for Lucan to show his hand. If I stayed on guard, I could prepare

for the coming blow. The nice guy routine would wear away eventually.

Hopefully, I'd be long gone by then.

He said he'd find me a charger and there was cell service out here. Whether I believed his line about dragons keeping their promises was irrelevant. We'd know soon enough if he was telling the truth.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I got a whiff of myself.

Maybe Lucan was right and I should clean up.

I grabbed the edges of the sink, not bothering to look at my reflection in the mirror. I already knew what I'd see. Dry skin, limp hair hanging around my shoulders that frizzed up in the humidity without enough length to weigh it down. Bags under my eyes and hollow cheeks.

At least the bruise had gone away.

I still couldn't believe Drew hit me in the face.

He was usually smarter than that, knowing to leave marks in places no one could see. Proof of his anger didn't linger long on the outside. Inside was where the real mess was made.

But he'd been slipping over the past few months as the worry about the future started to get under his skin. He'd lashed out more, losing his temper in public a few times.

And he'd started to let himself go. A few extra pounds around his waist made his constant nitpicking of my body worse.

I couldn't believe I'd once thought him attractive.

Compared to the kidnapping dragon in the other room, there was no comparison.

Lucan's body was sculpted like an ancient Viking warrior god and he wore his skin comfortably. It'd been an effort to sit there all through breakfast, eating his bacon and keeping my eyes away from his muscled chest.

He thought I was his mate.

My heart started beating faster again.

I slowly raised my eyes to the mirror, wondering what it was he'd seen in me. Maybe he was just lonely.

Guys like that aren't lonely, Riley.

I snorted.

Okay, maybe he was insane.

I looked around the spa-like bathroom.

An oversized jacuzzi tub sat under frosted windows that looked out toward the mountains behind the house. Stone-tiled floors led to the walk-in shower. White terry towels were pristinely folded on the rustic wood wall shelf. A basket of bath salts and soaps sat on the ledge of the tub.

My eyes narrowed as I read the labels.

Lavender and almond milk and Moroccan oil scents. A sinking feeling twisted my

gut, which instantly made me sick.

I had no right to care if another female had been here. Jealousy wasn't my vibe; Drew had the monopoly on that. Not me. And I wasn't starting now.

Besides, Lucan said I was welcome to anything in his house. If I was going to be kidnapped, I could at least enjoy the perks.

See? I was doing great at this gratitude thing.

Willow would be proud of me.

Later, I'd process how twisted things were getting. Just as soon as I was clean.

?

One long, luxurious soak later, I stood wrapped in a fluffy towel holding my clothes in the air. My skin had never felt smoother. Those lavender bath salts were magic. I didn't want to waste how good I felt by putting on dirty underwear.

I tiptoed out of the bathroom, pushing open the door to the conjoining bedroom that I'd woken up in.

The bed was made with the down duvet fluffed and wrinkle-free. Frowning, I made my way to my purse. It was where I'd left it on the chair and my phone was still dead. Lucan must've cleaned up the bedroom, but I guess he hadn't had any luck finding a charger.

I made sure the door was locked and then searched for something to wear. I didn't know what I was hoping for. Maybe a guest-bedroom robe I could put on while I tossed my clothes into the wash.

The top dresser drawer was all men's boxers and socks. Panic tickled its way down my spine as I opened the second drawer to see T-shirts folded in a stack. I looked back to the bed, swallowing hard.

Did we sleep together?

I honestly couldn't remember anything about last night. That wasn't like me. I hardly ever slept. But I didn't feel different or sore anywhere I shouldn't have.

It'd been a long time since I'd gotten laid, so I'd know if things were... used.

I'd assumed this was a guest room this morning, especially after I'd gone to this bathroom at Lucan's suggestion. But this was definitely his bedroom. Now that I knew what he smelled like—campfire and s'mores—it made sense why the scent was so strong in here.

None of his clothes were going to fit, but I grabbed a T-shirt from the drawer anyway. The dragon-man folded his shirts. If that didn't scream psycho red-flag then my male-o-meter was broken.

Okay, it'd been broken.

That was beside the point.

The vintage shirt was deliciously smooth as it settled against my newly moisturized skin. I debated on grabbing a pair of his boxers, but that seemed too intimate and gave the wrong idea—like I was the kind of girl who was okay sleeping with a strange man in his bed.

Spoiler: I wasn't.

I grabbed my purse and dead phone on the way out of the bedroom, intending to set some boundaries. If I was going to be kidnapped, then I had demands.

Yes, I knew I was slowly losing my grip on reality. In my defense, it'd been a hard few years.

It'd been a hard few decades, actually.

The house seemed empty. Everything was too clean and too quiet. A gentle harp-like music played at soft volume on the TV.

He is definitely a murderer.

The French doors to the back patio were cracked open. I thought about exploring the house more, but headed for freedom instead, testing the limits of this hostage situation.

He had gardens. As in plural. Romantic flower gardens with a bird bath and stone bench lined the patio, stretching out into an overflowing vegetable garden sowed in rows down the hill.

I marched past them, not stopping to smell the literal roses.

My bare feet barely felt the rocks and dirt as I walked out of the gardens, checking over my shoulder every so often as I kept walking up the hill.

When I reached the top, I realized why Lucan hadn't bothered to lock me inside.

Miles and miles of open mountain range sloped around the property. There was a crystal lake and sparse trees in a valley dip leading past a winding two-lane road, but nothing else as far as the eye could see.

Lucan's house sat like its own ecosystem tucked away in the mountains. The lush gardens surrounded the modern, angled structure.

Solar panels lined the top half of the house, making room for a solid landing pad-like roof. It was a smaller version of the one Kieran had.

He wasn't lying when he said he had everything we'd need. This was a fortress. A hide-away. I spun around again, realizing how truly separated from the world I was.

No one would find me out here.

I'd never be able to find my way back.

I pulled out my dead phone and stared at it.

I couldn't even call an Uber to come get me.

Tears welled in my eyes. I blinked until they cleared. It was so stupid how dependent on modern conveniences we were. Stupid how easily I trusted the world would somehow be a sturdy place. That it wouldn't all fall apart.

The ground shook beneath my feet and I panicked, looking around to make sure nothing would come crashing down. It was just a small tremble, but it was enough to bring me to my knees.

A single tear slipped out, dripping down my cheek.

I hastily wiped it away.

Don't cry. We'll figure this out.

Another tear rolled down my face.

Then another.

I dried my eyes, but it didn't help.

How much longer can I hold on?

I didn't know anymore.

Or I could just let go...

A painful sob escaped my chest.

My insides cramped as I doubled over, gripping my waist and trying to suck in breaths, but my throat closed up, and I couldn't get enough air.

Hot, fat tears ran down my face as the world around me blurred into a kaleidoscope of color.

I wasn't sure that anything would be okay.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Aggressive Cuddles

She hurts.

My dragon landed on the roof, opening his maw to roar as he sent away the molecules of his form and released our human skin. Riley's tear-filled eyes shot up in my direction from where she lay crumpled into a heap on the path leading out of the gardens.

A terror unlike any I'd ever known seized my chest as I dropped the duffle bag and cat carrier.

I'd kill whatever hurt her.

"What's happening?" Kieran circled above. His blood-red scales reflected the morning sun.

"Give me a minute," I spoke through our familial link, praying my words would penetrate his thick skull. The shadows of my wings refused to disperse as I leaped off the roof, clinging to me as if preparing for battle at any moment.

If Kieran refused to listen to my command, I wasn't sure if I could contain the protective rage of my beast.

No wonder he'd been so aggressive when our roles were reversed.

But I didn't worry about that now. My singular focus was on Riley. She needed me.

I landed on an azalea bush, not caring that it crushed under my weight. Though it would've been smart to put on pants. My gardens I'd cultivated, weeded and pruned for the last century, meant nothing if something happened to my mate.

Riley scrambled to her feet and wiped at her eyes as I approached. The sight of her wearing nothing but my shirt had blood rushing to my lower region.

If it wasn't for the pain on her face, I might've felt inclined to comment on her state of dress.

As it was, I could hardly contain the rage working its way through my being.

"Are you all right?" My voice was thick with the beast. "Did something hurt you?"

My angry tone had Riley taking a cautious step back. Her pupils widened in fear. That spicy scent of hers was tainted and muted into something sickeningly sweet.

Idiot, my dragon cursed.

I sent away the shadows of my wings and tried to control the dominance pulsing from me in waves. "What happened?"

Yet she still cowered backward. Her eyes were wide and blown in the classic fawn response.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I pulled her into my arms, sweeping her legs from under her and cradling her against my chest.

Maybe aggressively hugging her wasn't the best response to a shot nervous system, but I was working with beastly instinct.

"Put me down," she commanded with fire in her voice. That I could take. It was the fear I never wanted to see again.

"Not until you tell me what happened," I said, trying to keep my tone soft.

"You happened, you big oaf!" Riley cried as she slapped her palm against my chest.

My pectoral muscle flexed at the contact and I had to bite down on the smile I was sure wouldn't be welcome in the moment. "Me?"

"Yes, you." Her breath hitched. "I didn't ask to be kidnapped and stuck in the middle of nowhere away from my friends and my cat. And it's the stupid apocalypse and you smell so good and it pisses me off because I already know I have the worst taste in men."

Her words rang in my ears and I stared into her beautiful, tear-filled eyes as her chest heaved with panicked breaths. I held her delicate body closer, not letting her get away as a grin spread across my face.

"You smell good too."

"That's not the important thing to take from this conversation." Riley pushed back, gasping as she saw the dragon in the sky. "Is that Kieran?"

I held in a growl at hearing the sound of relief spoken with another male's name. But I wasn't noble enough to let him be the hero.

"I asked him to come," I explained. "And I asked him to bring your friend." I held

Riley closer, unashamedly redirecting her focus to me. “I’d hoped to surprise you with your own belongings before you got out of the bath.”

“You flew all the way back there?” The awe in her tone took some of the wind from my sails.

I wouldn’t lie to get her respect.

“I called him last night after I tucked you into bed and asked if he’d bring your personal items.” I turned back to the house, still not setting Riley down. She fit nicely in my arms. “They flew out early this morning and I met them at the border of my property while you were soaking.”

“Why didn’t he just come up the road?” The fight had gone out of her voice, but the tears were drying on her face.

“No one other than the guardian, Malachy, can enter my territory without my permission.” I resisted the urge to bury my face in her hair as I carried her through the gardens. “My property is marked by wards. It’s a part of my skillset, crafting magical boundaries. Like I told you this morning, there’s nowhere else in the world as safe.”

“It’s truly safe?” The way she questioned it had my dragon ready to prove himself in battle.

But I’d already shown enough pride for one day. “Yes. You’re safe here with me.”

“With you?” She stared into the distance as I carried her to the house. “As your mate?”

“As whatever you’ll have me as for now,” I explained as I reluctantly set her on her feet. “You’re not a prisoner here. I do apologize for your abrupt arrival, but when I

thought you'd mated Kieran, my beastly impulses overacted a bit."

"Why would you think that?" Her brow furrowed as she slid down my body, keeping her hands on my arms to stabilize herself.

"I'm not sure I've had a clear thought since the minute I scented you." I shivered as her fingernails gripped my forearms, missing a breath as I stared down into her expressive eyes.

Her lips were so soft.

I could only imagine tasting them.

"The other day when you landed at Kieran's house. I couldn't focus either." Riley shook her head as if that was an afterthought, breaking the spell between us. My heart soared at her admission anyway.

She stopped touching me, but I'd take the small victory of her not cowering away. "I'm not a prisoner, even though you kidnapped me?"

"What can I say?" I grinned as I pushed open the French patio doors that led to the living room, unashamedly enjoying the way she brushed past me as she walked inside our nest while wearing nothing but my shirt. "I'm not that much of a beast."

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Stockholm Syndrome

“Come here, baby.” I pulled my big, orange furball of a cat from the carrier. Dobby swiped at me with a hiss and scrambled out of my arms, bolting under the bed.

“I know. It’s a lot of change, really fast.” Tears misted my eyes again.

Something was wrong.

I hadn’t been able to turn off the waterworks all morning. Lucan had brought me my suitcase and cat. I’d shoved him outside the room, needing a moment to put on fresh panties and collect myself. It was like my eyes were leaking for no good reason.

I was a mess.

It wasn’t the fun kind of mess I used to be before my ex made me start to worry too much. This was more of an emotional rollercoaster ride I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

Except maybe Drew—because fuck him.

Seriously, that narcissistic prick never would have brought me clothes. I couldn’t even imagine crying around him. He would’ve berated me for being weak. And he definitely never would’ve carried me inside the house.

Not like Lucan...

Stop right there. I pushed the heels of my palms into my eyes. You are not going to be this woman.

I wasn't running from one monster just to fall into the arms of another. So what if there was bacon and baths and kindness?

The dude still kidnapped me.

"Don't get too comfortable. You can use the litterbox and get some water," I told Dobby as I put on fresh clothes and then zipped up my suitcase. "Hurry, because we're getting out of here."

?

"There you are," Ember said. My bestie was glowing as she clung to Kieran's arm like she couldn't stand on her own if he wasn't around. "This big guy had me worried sick. Willow is still freaking out, but she calmed down a bit when we got the phone call."

"Yeah. I was worried too." I forced a smile.

Ember wasn't talking about Kieran, though. I'd thought he was big when we first met him, but Lucan had twice the shoulder width and a few inches on the other dragon. Admittedly, it did make sense that all dragons were big in human form.

My eyes dropped to Lucan's crotch.

He'd put on pants at least.

There'd been too many tears in my eyes to get a decent look at his manhood when he'd marched naked through the garden to get me.

So embarrassing.

"My apologies for the confusion with my cousin," Kieran said as I dragged my gaze up to meet his. "I was fortunate to already be living on my mate's property when we met. Dragons are very territorial and I shouldn't have sent Lucan away like I did. If I'd known you were mates, I would've been less hostile."

Ember squeezed his arm.

"This is exciting. Isn't it?" She winked at me. "What are the odds of you meeting your mate too?"

"I wouldn't have bet on it." I glanced at Lucan. He stood there stoically, like a statue in the garden, listening to the conversation.

His expression softened as our eyes met and I quickly looked away.

"Once Willow calmed down, and I stopped screaming at Kieran, we figured this wouldn't be so bad for you. Apparently, Lucan is a good guy," Ember said as she left Kieran and pulled me to the side. Her walk was a little bowlegged.

"Are you okay?" I chuckled, wondering if her funny walk was from riding the dragon over here or riding the dragon like she'd been doing non-stop over the past few weeks.

"I'm perfect." Her eyes were wide as she motioned to Kieran with an appreciative look and mouthed, "Oh-my-freaking-God-I-love-him."

A real smile teased my lips.

She was happy.

If anyone deserved that, it was Ember. She'd been through life's wringer and hadn't let it harden her—even when she thought it did. Ember was tough around the edges, but she had a heart of gold and always made sure we were okay. She was the glue that kept us together. The ride-or-die friend who picked us both up time and time again.

I suddenly felt awful for ruining her romance story and messing up her special day.

It wasn't fair of me to be this upset and cause a big commotion, demanding she take me back to the cabin. There were bigger things at play here. I could suck it up and make the best of the situation.

Find your gratitude.

It could always be worse.

At least I wasn't dragon food.

"Are you hungry?" Lucan asked, breaking his brooding silence and I realized he'd been watching me intently.

Not a great feeling.

I nodded, hoping for a chance to escape. "I can go make us lunch."

"Sit with your friend." His brow furrowed as he pulled out a wrought iron chair from the patio set. "I'll bring you some food."

Out of principal, I wanted to refuse his order. But Ember let out a dramatic sigh as she took a seat.

“They have a big thing about feeding their mates,” she said, as if that explained everything. “Did he mark you yet?”

“No.” My face flushed as I dropped down beside her.

Lucan was already heading toward the house and I had to keep my eyes on Ember so I didn’t turn to watch him walk away.

I’d forgotten about Ember’s mark and the whole apocalyptic prophecy thing, which might’ve said something about my mental health at the moment.

But I’d just been kidnapped by a dragon, so I decided to give myself a break.

“Did you and Kieran figure it out?” I motioned to the little tattooed rune on her neck.

“We didn’t have time to meet with Bemouth and the other scholars yesterday.” Ember stared pointedly at Lucan’s backside.

Something had broken inside me because I felt that little flare of jealousy again.

I leaned forward to block her view. “Sorry about that.”

“Why are you sorry?” She huffed. “He’s the one that went all caveman, dragging you up to the mountains.”

“It’s not a cave,” I looked around the garden, feeling the urge to defend him.

I needed therapy.

“You’re right, it’s pretty nice up here.” Ember sighed. “It must be exciting to get time alone.”

“About that...”

Ember’s phone started ringing.

“I knew Willow wouldn’t wait for our call.” Ember laughed as she answered, turning the phone to face me.

“How did you get service up here?” I asked as Willow’s face filled the screen.

“Same password as Kieran.” She shrugged.

“You’re alive,” Willow cried.

“I am still in the land of the living,” I muttered, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt under the table.

I hated when they fussed over me.

“Swear to me that you’re all right or else I’m coming to get you,” Willow demanded.

“Can I come too?” Harper called from the background.

Willow’s eyes were red-rimmed from crying and I felt sick about worrying her.

“I swear I’m okay.” My smile was genuine and I hoped she’d relax for me.

“Good.” Willow blew out a heavy breath. “They said you’d have service there so turn on your phone and we’ll talk every day. Your charger is in the soft pocket of your

suitcase. I packed up your clean clothes, but let me know if you need anything else.”

“I don’t. Really. You’re doing too much. Everything is okay.” My cheeks hurt from smiling. “Better than okay.”

Willow put her fingers in her ears, motioning off-camera for Harper to copy the motion.

When she was satisfied, she turned to me again. “I’m glad you’re both getting lucky, but you don’t have to rub it in.”

“I want to get lucky!” Harper said.

“You have elephant ears,” Willow groaned.

“We’ll talk to you later.” Ember laughed as she hung up the phone.

Then she saw the mortified look on my face and sobered up. “You aren’t... getting any?”

I feverishly shook my head. “No.”

“It’s only been one night.” Ember smiled as she clasped my hands between hers, leaning forward to whisper, “And don’t freak out, but it’s huge and ribbed and if it’s anything like Kieran’s, it’s beyond amazing.”

If my cheeks could burn hotter, they’d ignite into flames. I squeezed my thighs together, trying to ward off the sensations Ember’s words invoked.

If I hadn’t been crying so much earlier, I might’ve gotten a better peek.

“There’ll be none of that,” I giggled nervously, wishing I could escape to the kitchen with Lucan. Was it too early for Stockholm syndrome to kick in? Because I suddenly missed the quiet presence of my captor. “We’re still getting to know each other.”

“That’s why you’re lucky to have all this alone time.” Ember sighed wistfully. “We’re going to be elbows deep in the scrolls and texts for the foreseeable future until we figure this prophecy thing out. He’s even got these witches coming over to assess the new rune. And, no pressure, but Kieran has a theory that you may have a part in this too.”

“In the magical apocalypse prophecy?” I asked to make sure. First hot guys that turned into kidnapping dragons, and now this.

“It makes sense, right?” Ember didn’t miss a beat. “What are the odds of you also being a dragon’s mate? Kieran said before we arrived, they didn’t even know dragons and humans could be fated mates. It’s got to mean something bigger. In every book, this is the start of a great adventure.”

“I think I’d prefer a ring instead of a tattoo.” I touched my unmarked neck, trying to make a joke.

“Wrong story.” Ember rolled her eyes.

I thought it was funny, but she was right.

I needed to be serious. “What exactly does it mean to be a dragon’s mate?”

“Lucan hasn’t told you yet?” She looked to the kitchen window where Kieran stood next to Lucan inside fixing up sandwiches for lunch. That love-drunk look in her eyes suited her romantic little heart.

“We’re still working out the details,” I mumbled, leaning back in the chair.

I couldn’t ask her to take me away. She wouldn’t understand why I wanted to go, not when she was clearly so Team Dragon.

And now they were all waiting to see if I’d somehow get a magic prophecy tattoo. Didn’t I owe it to the world to at least try and see where this situation led?

Sometimes being a responsible adult sucked.

“I’ll have to let Lucan explain the intimate parts of the fated mate relationship to you.” Ember patted my knee. A conspiratorial glimmer shone in her heart-shaped eyes. “But trust me, you’re going to love this part.”

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Lucan

Keep You Close

I didn't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't for Riley to tuck in close to my side and wrap one arm around my waist, waving Kieran and Ember off like we were a domesticated couple.

Not that I was complaining.

She fit next to me perfectly.

A puzzle piece I hadn't known was missing.

All mine. My dragon basked in the joy of having her alone again.

My cousin and his mate had stayed through lunch and past dinner with Kieran taking over the grill to make burgers, insisting on feeding Ember more meat. I'd thought they'd never leave.

"I heard you tell Ember that you wanted to stay here with me," I said to Riley, barely containing the happiness of my beast.

"Don't say anything else," she spoke through clenched teeth, smiling so big my cheeks ached in sympathy for hers as she continued to wave.

Kieran took to the sky with his mate clinging to his back.

“Can I talk now?” I asked, amused.

When the dragon flew past my wards and out of view, Riley stepped away.

The cold was instant.

She covered her face with her hands as her shoulders curled in. “I’m tired.”

“Let’s get you to bed then.” I smiled as I opened the door.

“I don’t want to stay here.” The sharpness of her words rattled my dragon.

Fine. I’ll take you wherever you want to go.

But I was confused. “Why did you say you wanted to stay?”

I’d felt it in our shared looks all night. The way she turned to me for support when Kieran and Ember got a little too open. Her body angled towards mine, seeking connection between us. It was more than instinctual. She’d been acknowledging our bond, and now she was cutting it off.

“Because Ember and Willow have done so much for me, I can’t ask them for more,” Riley whispered.

Despite the resigned frustration in her tone, her eyes told a different story. That look was pleading with me to understand.

I leaned against the doorframe, keeping my limbs relaxed as I considered her words. “They’re like family to you.”

“Yes.” Riley bit her bottom lip as she looked over her shoulder and took a tentative

step back.

She wanted to run.

As much as I loved that game, my beast would terrify her if she acted like prey.

We needed more time. More trust to repair that which was broken and strengthen the ties between us.

I tightened the reins on my beast and focused on keeping my voice soft. “And your friends like family, they consider you a burden?”

Anger flashed in her eyes as she turned back to me. There she was. My fighter.

“They would never.”

I shrugged with one shoulder. “Either they’ve made you feel that way or you make yourself feel that way. Which one is it and why?”

Color flushed her cheeks and fire danced between us. My dragon wanted to unfurl to meet the challenge, but I commanded him to behave.

It took everything in me not to smile as Riley marched forward, shoving her pointed finger into my chest.

“You don’t get to do that,” she said.

“Do what?” I reached up and caught her wrist, holding it soft enough so she could escape, but firm enough to let her know I was here.

“That.” Her breath caught as she looked away. “Psychoanalyze me. It’s none of your

business why I am the way I am.”

I inhaled deeply, tasting her sweet scent as the bitter hint of fear faded. “Anything that concerns you is my business.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t want your concern. Or your pity. Or your...”

I licked my lips and she quieted, looking at my mouth.

“Or?” I prompted.

A frustrated sound came from her chest.

Such a precious growl. My dragon grinned.

Quiet now. I held back my smile.

“Is this some kind of dragon magic?” Riley blinked, focusing on my eyes again.

Still, she didn’t back away.

“My magic only works to keep people out,” I teased as I set one foot in the house, gently guiding her with me. “But you’re tired and it’s late. Let’s get you to bed.”

I wasn’t expecting her to give in so easily, but my Riley was full of surprises. My beast rumbled his quiet approval as she walked through our nest, making her way to the bedroom. I’d clear out more space for her needs as soon as she let me know what she desired.

“I don’t know whether I should hate you for kidnapping me or thank you for being so kind,” Riley muttered as she walked down the hall. “Does your dragon make a habit

of taking things without permission?”

If I want them...

I smirked. “I take it you don’t know much about dragons.”

Riley paused outside the bedroom door and shook her head. “A few weeks ago, none of us knew you existed. Then Kieran and Ember hooked up and, well, there was the ceremony and some talk about the prophecy and the random magic tattoo.”

Her fingers brushed her neck.

My vision narrowed on the spot. “I know Kieran thinks this is a part of it, but I don’t want you to worry about that.”

“This?” She arched a brow.

“You and me.” I pointed between us.

Riley took a step back. The bitter scent of fear tainted the air.

“Anyway,” she redirected. “We were learning more about your kind when you showed up all...”

She flapped her arms in the air and roared. “Then kidnapped me.”

Is that how I looked?

This time I couldn’t hide my smile.

“Dragons are territorial,” I explained, hating the way she tensed when I stepped into

her space. “We keep what’s ours close. My dragon didn’t like the idea of you unprotected and outside of our territory.”

“Because I’m your mate.” Her gaze dropped to my lips again. I resisted the urge to lean closer, to close the distance between our lips, as I reached for the doorknob.

“Because he knew you needed us.” I pushed open the door to the bedroom.

Riley sucked a breath through her teeth as she ducked under my arm.

“About the mate thing,” she said. “I don’t know that I’m really yours or you’re mine or however that works.”

Does she not feel it?

I ignored the stab straight to my dragon’s heart, soothing my beast with thoughts of a hard-won future once we defeated our mate’s demons.

“It’s a good thing I have enough conviction for both of us,” I said, keeping my tone light.

She’d been frightened enough for one lifetime.

I didn’t bother telling her what became of dragons who denied their fated mates. That was my cross to bear. But I wouldn’t die for lack of trying.

And I was just getting started here.

“What are you doing?” Riley picked the fluff ball of a cat off the floor and held it in her arms as if the meowling beast would keep me at bay.

I opened the top dresser drawer and pulled out a pair of clean boxers. “Getting ready to sleep.”

Her eyes widened as she looked around the room. “Not in here.”

“And why not?” I pulled the shirt over my head, flexing a little when her eyes dropped to my chest and she visibly swallowed. “It’s my room.”

“I can stay in the guest room.” She tore her gaze away and hugged the cat tighter to her chest.

“The guest room is off-limits for now,” I explained gently. “It’s full of shelves with my hoard, but I’ll move things around for you soon. I already cleared out half the closet and these drawers for your use.”

Her pulse quickened as I reached for the button on my pants.

I slowly eased them off and tossed the wadded material into the hamper. It was getting harder to control the twitch of my muscles as she studied each part of my body. The boxers I wore were the only thing separating her eyes from the completeness of my bare human skin.

“Your friends said you only had the one suitcase. Tomorrow, I’ll take you shopping to get you whatever else you need.”

“Huh?”

“Riley,” I teased, holding perfectly still. “My eyes are up here.”

With a panicked cry that went straight to my cock, she looked up at my face again.

Color flushed her cheeks. “Where are you going to sleep?”

“Right here, of course.” I pulled back the duvet, motioning for her to climb under the covers. “I only have one bed.”

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Riley

One Bed Trope

Excuse me, Mister-One-Bed-Trope...

I'd seen this before and knew how it ended. Despite my core clenching at the idea of being curled up next to Lucan and his deliciously sculpted body, I kept my legs closed and my cat held safe in my arms.

Dobby meowed as I tightened my grip.

I'm saving us from falling into a trap.

Ember had gotten one taste of dragon dick and hopped straight onto the mate-train. But I'd had enough practice with men to know how to think with the right head when you were living with them.

"Do you have another room on the lower level?" I asked, thinking of the stairs leading down from the kitchen.

Dobby struggled in my arms.

"That's the garage and basement." Lucan bent over to change his boxers, giving me a show of his tight abs and smooth ass. "I converted the basement rooms to my gym, but we can move equipment around to give you space for your hobbies."

Of course he had his own home gym.

“Speaking of that, what are your hobbies?” He stood up and hooked his arm through his elbow, stretching his shoulders and triceps.

I closed my eyes because I didn’t know where else to put them.

“No hobbies.” Unless binge-watching comfort movies and drinking wine counted as a hobby. “I can sleep on the couch.”

“You’re not sleeping on the couch.” Lucan crawled into bed and patted the empty spot beside him.

Damn this frustrating dragon-man.

“Fine, then,” I growled. “You go sleep on the couch.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I wanted to clap my hands over my mouth.

Who was I?

My heart started beating faster.

Raising my voice with Drew would’ve gotten me...

I ignored the memories my thoughts were spiraling towards, focusing on the crisp, white sheets. “Never mind. I’m sorry. This is your room.”

“And I plan to share it with you.” Lucan’s voice was calming as he leaned back against the headboard, crossing his arms behind his head. “The bed is big enough for more than two and we’re both adults. I won’t touch you.”

I frowned.

Nope. Didn't like the sound of that for some reason.

Lucan arched an eyebrow. "Unless you want me to touch you."

"No." I shook my head, backing slowly towards the door. Dobby chose that moment to bolt from my arms.

My traitorous cat landed on the bed and pranced his way across the covers. He sniffed and kneaded the down comforter a few times before plopping his butt onto Lucan's bare chest.

Wide-eyed, I stared at the two of them. "What did you do to my cat?"

"Gave him a place to sleep?" Lucan shrugged as he scratched under Dobby's chin. My cat, who hated all things male, and barely tolerated me, started to purr.

Lucan's grin was playful as he looked up. "Maybe you should follow his lead. You need your rest."

"I..." I was out of excuses and feeling ridiculous. As a fully grown woman, I could sleep next to a half-naked man in a bed with no funny business going on.

"What are you doing?" Lucan asked as I started moving the pillows. There were so many and they were all so fluffy yet firm. They must've cost him a fortune.

"Building a wall," I huffed as I stacked them in the middle of the bed.

This would be fiiineee.

It's not like I was a heavy sleeper anyway. It'd been years since I'd gotten a decent night's sleep. The older I got, the more it seemed that my brain was on high alert and never completely shut off. It was always ready to act at a moment's notice.

"You think a pillow wall is going to protect you from a dragon?" Lucan chuckled.

Even if his words sounded dangerous, I knew there was no malice to them. Besides, if he decided to turn into a dragon, he'd do more than ruin the pillow barrier.

I nodded, pulling the comforter up to my chin. "And the blanket will keep the monsters away from my feet."

Lucan's face softened as he watched me.

It was unnerving.

I looked away.

"Are you ready for me to turn out the light?" he asked.

Dobby was still curled onto Lucan's chest. But he was a free cat. He could do what he wanted.

"It's your room," I said. "Turn out the lights when you want."

"It's yours too," Lucan whispered as the bedside table lamp clicked off and darkness fell. "Goodnight my Riley."

"Night," I mumbled, trying to not let the kindness in his tone get to me.

He was being nice now, but it was only the beginning. Soon, his true colors would

shine through. I just needed to keep my eyes open this time.

?

I woke with a start, disorientated and groggy like I was waking from the dead as I tried to pull myself back to the land of the living.

The sun had fully risen and the glow of it shone behind my closed eyelids. A strange sensation made me shut my mouth, feeling the trail of drool dried to my face as I pulled my sticky cheek away from other human skin.

No, no, no.

I pried one eye open.

The masculine chest underneath me was much softer than I'd imagined. But the arm wrapped around my back was just as heavy as I thought it would be.

My other eye opened as reality sank in and I came face to face with Dobby, who was also lying on Lucan's chest. His jeweled cat eyes watched me with that judging expression he'd perfected over the years.

What happened?

I tried to force myself awake.

My heart pounded as I raised my head, about to ream Lucan for breaking his promise, when I saw how we laid on the bed.

We were way too close to his edge.

I was a starfish, taking up most of the room on the oversized mattress big enough to hold Lucan, but apparently not big enough for my needs.

I couldn't even pretend he was the one who violated my pillow wall.

This was all on me.

One of the pillows was smashed under my tits like a wedge so that I rested comfortably on his muscular chest and another pillow was beneath my hips, providing the perfect ramp for my leg thrown over his legs. Like I'd scaled the wall and flattened it in my haste to cuddle.

I squeezed my eyes shut as Lucan stirred beside me. If he'd just move his heavy arm, I could sneak away with my shame and pretend this never happened.

No such luck.

He tightened his grip.

I breathed in slowly, feeling a sense of peace.

Sleep must've still had me in her grasp, because it smelled so good being this close to Lucan and it was so warm and so soft here in this bed.

If I closed my eyes, I could—

“Good morning, love.” Lucan's voice was throaty and rough—sexy as hell. “How'd you sleep?”

I tried to pull my leg back to my side and ended up rubbing my core against his hip.

He went ramrod straight.

Blood rushed to all my sensitive areas and I was acutely aware of every place our bodies touched.

There was my morning dose of adrenaline.

“Can you let me go?” I whispered, mortified.

“If you insist,” Lucan teased as he raised his arm.

The cold air was a welcome distraction, shocking me awake as I scrambled off the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Lucan asked. “You slept as hard last night as the one before.”

The world spun a bit as I landed on my feet.

But I felt better than all right.

The pinching headache I always had in the mornings was gone and despite my bladder being really full, all my aches had eased.

And my brain was clear.

“I can’t remember the last time I slept through the whole night,” I said honestly.

Lucan was a vision of sleepy masculinity as he turned to the side, propping his head up on his arm to look at me. His golden hair was wild and loose about his face. An angel—or the devil—depending on which side you were watching the fall.

“That’s good.” He smiled. “Your body feels safe enough to relax here.”

I didn’t know what to think about that.

But my body did feel the need to pee.

“Take your time in the bathroom,” Lucan called after me as I marched across the room. “I’ll get your breakfast ready and then we’ll go shopping.”

“Shopping?” I stopped in my tracks as my heart fluttered in a way that didn’t feel all that bad.

“Yeah.” Lucan’s grin was full of mischief. Definitely the devil this time. “I made you a promise, didn’t I?”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Whatever You Like

“It’s not safe for you on my back. Kieran needs to get Ember some sort of saddle if he’s going to continue flying with her that way. I’ll insist on carrying you if that’s how you want to travel.” I checked Riley’s phone, making sure the signal booster attached to my bike worked, and handed it back to her.

I’ll carry her in my claws...

But she might still need a safety harness.

“And this is safer?” Riley eyed the motorcycle warily as she tucked the phone into her back pocket.

“Yes.” I slid the helmet over her head and made sure it was a good fit. She looked adorable. My chest welled with pride at the sight of her protected and trusting me to provide for her. “We’ll take it slow.”

?

“This is not slow!” Riley screamed into the wind.

My hearing was advanced enough to pick up her words, but it was her body language I paid more attention. The way she relaxed against my back and the grip of her hands on my chest. She was pliant, soft, and perfectly molded to me.

I grew hard thinking about the way we'd fit once I tore those barriers down.

She gasped as I rounded the bend of the road and held to me tighter.

I eased off the throttle, feeling the heat pulse between her legs, and had to bite back a feral groan at hearing her little sound of disappointment.

My Riley liked this.

I increased the speed again.

She let out a laugh, relaxing.

Her head rested against the back of my shoulder.

A little faster... my dragon conceded.

It seemed my mate did want to fly.

?

"How was that?" I asked, removing her helmet.

Riley's smile was bright as she tried to tame her wild hair. "It was all right. I used to ride dirt bikes..." Her voice trailed off as her smile fell. "A lifetime ago."

My mate's surprises knew no bounds.

"I hardly think it was that long ago," I teased, excited to be given this new tidbit.

"Oh yeah, I forgot you were ancient." Riley smiled again and my heart soared.

“When I was a kid I used to ride dirt bikes and quads with my friends during the summer. It’s been long enough that I’d almost forgotten.”

“You can drive us back then. I’ll help you remember the basics.” I put the helmets in the empty saddlebags.

“Maybe.” Riley chewed her lip as she looked around the deserted parking lot. “Where are we?”

A tumbleweed blew across the asphalt.

The sun’s heat beat against the distant sand.

“Nevada.” I placed my hand on her lower back, guiding her toward the old shopping mall. “Just outside of Reno.”

“This is crazy. I’ve never been so far south.” The wonder in her voice did something to me.

If she wanted to travel, I’d take her anywhere, even further south than this. The laws of the land and the prophecy had no hold on me anymore. My only job now was to spoil my mate.

I was calling it early retirement—and glad to experience this before the end.

We can’t leave him, though.

The bitter anguish was a sharp reminder.

I turned to Riley, discreetly inhaling her invigorating, spicy scent.

It revived me in a way nothing else could.

“Is there anything in particular you need?” I asked.

“Is anything still open?” Riley frowned as she looked at the darkened windows and chains on the doors. Trash blew against the walls on the south side of the mostly abandoned building.

“A few stores,” I said.

The pain in her eyes was old enough that I had trouble remembering how young she really was. She’d witnessed her generation’s decline and would mourn seeing a once thriving marketplace become a ghostly shell with limited options.

Me? I’d seen the rise and fall of nations and had fought in battles on both sides.

If this was the end, I planned to go out in a blaze of glory, living life exactly the way I wanted with whatever time I had left and enjoying the bits of existence hard enough to survive the downfall.

And protecting what was mine.

Riley’s phone pinged with an incoming message. Her pulse quickened as she looked at the screen.

“Who is that?” I kept my tone casual, feeling anything but. If something worried her, I’d—

“No one,” Riley said as she put her phone in her back pocket again. “So, shopping... I don’t have any cash.”

“Your money is no good here. My bank account is at your disposal.” I’d assumed that was obvious.

“Is that right?” Riley’s look of disbelief had my beast wanting to unfurl his wings. But her pulse slowed and the small hint of a smile ghosted her lips. “I guess I can let you pay. Only if you insist.”

I insisted.

After a few slight protests upon entering the department store and her measurements were taken, Riley stood at the base of a mannequin running her fingers over its silk dress.

“Who can afford to shop here?” She shook her head.

“I can and so can the casino owners who kept this store open.” I nodded to the attendant. She gave me a knowing smile before hurrying to get one of the black silk dresses in the correct size.

“It’s too much.” Riley’s cheeks were a pretty pink shade of embarrassed.

“I have centuries of unspent funds,” I reassured her. Not to brag, just stating fact. “This will hardly make a dent.”

She chewed her bottom lip, stopping in front of the shelf with folded leggings in soft gray. “I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to be modest, or at least not encourage you.”

Encourage me?

My dragon bristled as I stood waiting for Riley to come to terms with the reality of her situation. She was getting clothes. This wasn’t up for debate.

“But you did kidnap me and I’m getting tired of pretending I don’t want nice things.” She winked.

My beast relaxed as Riley leaned forward, calling to the attendant, “Can I get a pair of these in black, please?”

Two glasses of champagne later, Riley stood waiting outside the doors while I paid Vanessa and her team to deliver the shopping bags to my house. When I was done, I met her in the open walkway that led through the center of the old mall.

“Is that what it’s like?” Riley tossed a piece of popcorn into her mouth.

“What’s what like?” I asked.

“Having money. People just bend over backwards and make food when you ask.” She held out the bag of popcorn to me.

I smiled as I grabbed a handful, feeling my dragon sigh at the gesture. I’d made sure she had something to eat along with the champagne they poured while she was trying on her wardrobe.

Now my mate was feeding me.

“It’s common decency to feed paying customers,” I teased, offering my arm. “It doesn’t take money to be kind.”

“Touche,” she said.

When she slid her arm through the crook in my elbow, I felt ten feet tall.

We strolled casually through the darkened walkway past the closed shutters and old

‘Going Out of Business’ signs. Dust gathered in the corners and our steps echoed through the grand space.

“I don’t know when I’ll ever wear that gown.” Riley smiled wistfully. The softness of the champagne was wearing off and logic tried to return.

“There doesn’t need to be a reason.” I realized I was walking extra slowly, trying to enjoy the feeling of having her beside me. “But if you need an excuse, I’ll set a time and date.”

“You’d do that for me?” She giggled, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

I took her wrist and tugged it back down. “That and more.”

Riley blinked as she stared into my eyes. “Is this all because you think I’m your mate?”

“Maybe.” I couldn’t lie, but I didn’t want to scare her again. “Or maybe it’s because you deserve it.”

“You don’t even know me. How do you know what I deserve?”

I smiled as I tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “What do you think I’m doing now?”

We stared at each other for a breath.

Then another.

Riley broke first, looking away. “I need to get to know you, too. They said you’ve been in battle.”

“You could say that,” I chuckled as she started walking. At least she didn’t take her arm away.

“Oh no. You’re not getting off the hook that easily.” She scooped out another handful of popcorn. “Why did Fredrick say you were, and I quote, ‘scarred, not soft?’”

Nosy old dragon.

I tsked. “Fredrick is telling stories again.”

“Why don’t you tell me a story, then?” Riley rested her head against my shoulder.

I wracked my brain for something easy to tell. A tale that wouldn’t frighten.

And settled for the truth.

“I’ve done my share of fighting,” I said, keeping my tone soft. “I was cursed with a guardian’s size and strength, so I found ways to make it useful.”

“Are you done fighting now?” There was a hint of fear in her voice. I prayed it was for me and not because of me.

“I hope to be,” I said.

It was the same answer I always told myself.

Riley studied me. My dragon puffed up with pride at being the object of her gaze.

“How does it work with your dragon? Kieran says his talks.” Her curiosity almost made him sing.

She doesn't hate me.

"It's not that he talks exactly," I mused aloud. It wasn't often—if ever—I discussed this part of my being. "We aren't separate. I am my beast. But we don't exist on the same plane."

"So... he's like a voice in your head?" she asked. "Or sensations that make you think?"

"Something like that." I nodded.

"I've got plenty of those." Riley gave a self-deprecating laugh as she looked around. I could see the moment where she beat herself up as if she'd said something crazy. Then she shrugged it off. "You know, the last time I was in a mall, my dad was taking me Christmas shopping for my mom."

I embraced the change of topic, but made a note to remind her that there was nothing she could say I didn't want to hear. "I'd like to meet your parents. Where are they now?"

"Dead," she said.

I almost missed a step.

"They died in a car crash when I was sixteen," Riley kept talking as she patted my arm. "That's why me and Ember get along so well. Trauma bonding. We're both orphans. That, and she gives good book recommendations."

"I'm sorry, love. I didn't know."

"Don't be," Riley said. "It's awfully convenient for you."

“Excuse me?” I pulled her to a stop.

This was spiraling fast.

She shrugged. “See, now you can kidnap me and declare me your mate without having to answer to any potential father figure.”

“I... I...” For the first time in centuries, I was struck speechless. Things had gotten dark.

Even for me.

“Geez.” Riley rolled her eyes. “I figured you could take a joke.”

A what?

“Never mind.” She turned and kept walking, leaving me gaping like a fish as I stared after her. “Where are we going anyway? The parking lot is in the other direction.”

Riley

Arts & Crafts

A craft store? Seriously?

Yep. He'd taken me to a craft store.

Lights flickered on as a generator started humming somewhere in the back.

The young male clerk, who looked barely old enough to drink, rolled down the grates behind us and addressed Lucan by his name, seemingly excited to see him. It was just like at the clothing store where the done-up female sales associate had tripped over her own heels to please the massive dragon shifter standing at my side.

It wasn't only because he tipped well, either.

I'd seen the way she stared at Lucan's ass. The hunger in her eyes when he smiled at her. And, yes, I might've held onto Lucan's arm as we walked away to establish he was with me... for the time being.

I didn't know why I'd done that.

Lucan wasn't flirting back, not like Drew would've done. Though I'd stopped being jealous of my ex-boyfriend years ago. Right around the time I swore he started cheating on me.

But I couldn't prove it.

It was hard to prove anything.

I did stop sleeping with Drew, holding to whatever shred of dignity I had left.

That only made things worse.

The nitpicking. The silent treatment. The mental gymnastics I had to jump through for each explosive fight, trying to maintain calm while getting screamed at and then exploding at the smug face of a man who'd listen to what I had to say if I'd just learn to "get control of myself and my emotions."

It was easier to shut my mouth and walk on eggshells than to piss him off again.

My phone was burning a hole in my back pocket.

I'd already deleted two texts from unknown numbers, but I knew they were from Drew.

Connecting the phone to the cell booster on Lucan's motorcycle had been a mistake.

If it wasn't for the reminder of my past, I'd actually be having a great time today. It'd been a while since I did something nice for myself, and since Lucan was paying for the whole kidnapping thing, I didn't feel all that guilty.

The nagging voice in the back of my head kept reminding me to enjoy this while it lasted because it was all coming to an end soon.

Thankfully, Drew had no clue where I was.

I could hardly believe I was here anyway.

A craft store in an abandoned mall in the middle of the desert with a beast of a man that turned into a dragon whose eyes were lit up with delight as he studied...

“Yarn?” I asked, following him down the aisle of ceiling-high shelves containing baskets of brightly colored string on either side.

“What do you like more? Pink or purple?” Lucan weighed two balls in each of his large hands, brow furrowed as if this was a vital decision.

“Are you asking my favorite color?”

He raised his bluish-green speckled eyes to me, causing something to flutter in my stomach. That might’ve been the champagne and popcorn, though. It’d also been a long time since I had either of those.

“Will you tell me your favorite color?” he asked.

I thought about it for a second, deciding against blurting out the first thing that came to mind, which was turquoise because it was the closest color to his eyes that I could think of.

When was the last time someone asked me what my favorite color was?

Did I have one anymore?

Lucan waited patiently while I came to a decision.

“Orange,” I finally said. The color of the sun setting on the beach. “But of the two in your hand, I like the purple better.”

Lucan's smile did something to me. The way it transformed his whole expression from a menacing scowl into the open, relaxed face of someone much younger.

"How old are you?" I blurted out.

"Four hundred and twenty-five." There it was again. That easy smile.

"Younger than Kieran." I couldn't believe I was saying that like there was much of a difference. What was twelve years to a dragon when they basically lived forever?

"Aye." He nodded. "By a bit."

"You don't have to put those back," I said as Lucan returned the pink and purple yarn to their bins.

"Oh, but I do. It was sexist of me to assume those were the colors you'd like. I'm sorry." The way he admitted fault and apologized without argument had me second-guessing myself.

Is this some kind of Jedi mind trick?

"What do you need yarn for, anyway?" I trailed behind him as he returned to the hunt.

"Not sure yet," he mumbled, zeroing in on the section of sun colors. "Is this soft enough for you?"

I went perfectly still as he rubbed a ball of yarn against my cheek. "It's really soft. Why do I need it to be?"

"I'm going to knit you something." He shrugged.

My jaw dropped. “You... Knit?”

“Why is that so shocking?” He held up a few different colors of orange, waiting for me to pick.

I didn’t even know they made this many types of yarn. Or that a guy Lucan’s size could look so at home among them.

“Now I’m the one being sexist.” I shook my head. “It’s great that you knit.”

I tried to think, harder this time, about what hobbies I’d have if I’d had any space to develop them over the years. Hiking and camping were something I enjoyed. Watching movies and reading. I wasn’t all that creative.

Lucan studied me as if he knew what I was thinking and I wasn’t sure I liked being the object of his intense gaze despite the way it awakened hidden parts of me.

I busied myself with testing the softness of the yarns on the bins across the aisle.

After way too much awkward silence, I said the first thing that came to mind, “I think I have more than one favorite color.”

Lucan’s presence warmed my back even though he stepped a respectful distance away. He rested a comforting hand on my shoulder that made me want to lean against him as he lowered his mouth to speak softly next to my ear, “Let’s see what else you like.”

It turned out that I liked burnt orange, cyan blue, turquoise, hunter green, and some lavender purple after all. Lucan somehow found the softest yarn in the whole store in all my favorite colors.

Can you have too many favorite colors?

Maybe I'd gone overboard.

But Lucan didn't seem to mind.

I looked through the rack of cheap sunglasses as the clerk rang Lucan up, pretending not to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"They closed down the highways into and out of Reno and she can't get to the hospital," the young kid was saying in a hushed tone as he bagged the yarn.

"There's a doctor who works out in the boondocks. I'll send him your way." Lucan pressed a fat wad of cash into the kid's hand—way more than you'd think yarn would cost.

The kid nodded. "Thanks, Mr. O'Sullivan. I'll close up shop and head home now to wait."

"Thank you for rushing down here." Lucan gathered the bags. "And next time, let me know if there is a problem in advance."

"Will do," the clerk said.

Lucan was already walking away and typing something into his phone.

I stepped outside and waited for him, hoping he wouldn't realize I'd been listening. The late summer heat was brutal as it beat down on the empty parking lot.

There were cracks in the asphalt, but I hadn't felt any tremors for the last few hours. The world seemed as still as the stifling desert air.

I tucked my hair behind my ears. It was growing longer, the longer I was away from Drew. My phone and missed texts were burning a hole in my back pocket.

I ignored it.

“Ready?” Lucan pushed open the glass door and started towards the bike.

“Do you own this store?” I hurried after him. My legs were long, but his were longer and I had to quicken my pace to keep up.

Lucan slowed without missing a step. “It’s the closest spot to buy yarn so I purchased it when the mall was going under.”

“And the clothing store?” I asked, wondering if I’d been put through a charade and the women associates were really his employees kissing butt because they were paid to do it.

“The casino owns that one.” He motioned to the stucco building shimmering on the miraged horizon. “It’s hard to get tailored suits and evening wear all the way out here. But they don’t mind the extra business. Belts are tightening everywhere.”

That didn’t seem to be the case with Lucan.

He walked through the apocalyptic desert landscape like the world was his oyster and there was nothing to fear in it.

Maybe for him that was true.

“How do you know I’m your fated mate?”

I shouldn’t have asked that.

But something about him made me bold and not afraid to blurt out what I was thinking. My tongue had been tied for so long. It was refreshing to ask the hard questions again.

Lucan stopped walking to look at me. There was an ancient pain in his eyes that showed how old he really was and how much he'd seen in his life.

It made me trust him more.

"I can feel it," he said.

That's what I was scared of.

"What if I can't feel anything?" I whispered, biting my lip.

I wasn't expecting to see the relief in his smile as he reached out to touch my cheek. His thumb brushed against my bottom lip, pulling it free from my teeth.

"You're not trusting your instincts and experiencing life with your whole heart because you've second-guessed yourself too many times. That numbness you feel is your body's way of protecting you from feeling anything—even the good. But it'll work itself out as you feel safe again. Things like this take time."

According to Kieran and the government and the prophecy nonsense, time was something we didn't have. You wouldn't know that from looking at Lucan, though. The patience in his gaze was comforting.

How long had it been since I felt this at peace?

Too long.

And I knew this was reckless.

A loud voice screaming in my brain said I was giving in too easily. That Lucan was dangerous. He could destroy me. That I'd been swayed and bought cheap for some clothes and yarn and a little kindness.

But I didn't have to go all the way.

I could test the waters a bit.

I laced my hands behind his neck—registering the surprise as desire flared in his eyes—before I captured his lips with mine.

There wasn't a moment of hesitation on his part. I might've started the kiss, but he controlled where we led. His lips were firm and possessive as he parted my mouth, allowing me to taste as he tasted me. The sweetness of him held a smoky warmth that curled my toes, making me moan silently as I yearned for more.

I was out of my depth.

Drowning.

My hands clung to the back of his neck as he held my lower back, pressing me tighter against him. A fire burned deep and low in my belly, starting to spread as he kissed me like I'd never been kissed before.

Dangerous. It was too much.

I broke first, pulling away and gasping for air.

What did you just do, Riley?! Stupid. Stupid.

Lucan didn't let me go as he panted, resting his forehead against mine. "I planned for today to go differently."

The panic in his voice shut up the worry in my mind and I couldn't help but smile. "And what did you plan?"

"More wooing, less parking lot." He grinned.

A laugh escaped me, unbidden, as I placed my hands against his chest, making some space between us, but still touching him. "In that case, maybe I should get you back to your home."

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Unwelcome Guests

The taste of her was burned onto my lips. Her spicy flavor intensified as the fear ebbed away. My body tensed with restraint as I held perfectly still wrapped around her, riding the back of my bike while Riley navigated the mountain roads.

Yet another surprise.

She'd struggled at first, but after a few miles, she'd relaxed into the drive.

I was wound tight.

Not from fear, though my dragon worried each time Riley increased the speed, but from the knowledge that I'd have to continue to tread lightly so as not to squash this newfound trust blooming between us.

The beast in me wanted to throw caution to the wind. To get Riley back to our nest safely and take my time exploring every inch of her body, before sinking my cock in hilt-deep and burying my fangs into her neck, claiming what was mine.

Then doing it again.

My loins ached with need.

Having her lean back against me with each turn didn't help.

I tried my best to hide my erection, but I could only do so much.

My muscles were taut with the effort as I stepped off the bike, putting some distance between us.

“Are you hungry?” My voice sounded throaty and hoarse as I removed the helmet from her head. My eyes were drawn to those luscious lips, begging for another taste.

The tip of her tongue wet them before she spoke. “I could eat.”

Delicious torture.

In all my centuries, I’d never experienced a primal ache like this. I normally took what I wanted and didn’t waste precious moments dancing around desires, but not this time. Riley had me tripping over myself like a brooding, clueless youth.

I guided her to the kitchen, not sure when her hand had slipped into mine, but delighting in the fact that it was a perfect fit.

“You’re going to cook for me again?” Riley noticed our conjoined hands and gave mine a gentle squeeze before releasing it.

“Always.” I stepped away, ignoring the cold tightness in my chest at the loss.

“You need to let me help,” she said, sliding onto the booth at the breakfast nook. “It’s not fair for you to do everything by yourself.”

She wants to cook for us.

“In time,” I reassured her, taking out the cutting board and pulling some gouda and sharp white cheddar cheese from the fridge.

I worked quickly to create a snack board with sliced cheese, olives, salami, stoned wheat crackers, and grapes. Riley continued watching me. Her eyes were alert, like a cat, but her body stayed relaxed.

It was a win.

I carried the tray to the table when the unmistakable sensation traveled over my skin. Like the blade of a dull knife dragging across my chest.

“Come with me.” I set down the board.

“Why?” Worry flared in her eyes and I cursed the Gods for ruining this peaceful day. But she stood when I beckoned to her, trusting me.

“Something is approaching my wards,” I explained.

“I thought you said it was safe.” She looked back over her shoulder to the kitchen as I ushered her down the hall toward the bedroom.

“It is. I just don’t want you to have to see—”

The painful roar of an injured dragon came right before the crash on my roof that shook the house harder than any earthquake it was built to withstand.

Riley screamed as she clung to my arm. “What is that?”

I let out another cursed sigh as I sat her down on the bed and tucked her short hair behind her ears. “You stay here and relax. I’ll go deal with my brother.”

?

Damn you, you bastard.

I approached Malachy's broken and bleeding human form as he pulled himself up to stand on two feet. "Who did this?" I barked.

My older brother was a general pain in the ass on the best of days and I was one of the few who told him as much.

He grinned with a busted lip. "Is that how you greet your guardian?"

"Don't start that shit with me." I folded my arms over my chest. "What happened?"

"I wouldn't have to throw titles around if you'd..." His nostrils flared.

I stepped to the side, possessively blocking his view while Riley's dainty steps sounded on the stairs to the roof. As proud as I was that she felt safe enough to disobey my order to stay put, I wished she'd picked a better time.

"Is that a human?" he sneered.

Apparently, he wasn't injured enough because he was searching for more pain.

"Watch yourself, Guardian," I growled.

My brother may have been big enough to fit his destined role, but it was only birth order that determined his place. We had the same genetics. I was just as big and mean, and I'd had plenty of opportunities to prove it.

"You have company." Malachy remembered decorum, standing taller even as he swayed a little to the side and the slash on his chest opened, spilling more blood. "My apologies for interrupting."

Shadows gathered at his sides and his skin turned green as scales tinted with gold began to form.

“Knock it off.” I grabbed him by the back of the neck, hating Riley’s frightened gasp. “You’re in no condition to shift, much less fly. Now tell me what happened before I have to beat it out of you.”

Malachy tried to shake me off, but he was weak from blood loss and it didn’t have much effect. “It was the—”

A shrieking cry came from outside my wards.

Malachy’s eyes widened. “I led them here.”

I followed his gaze to where Riley stood.

“Lucan?” The fear in her tone went straight to my heart. My skin crawled. A rumble came in the distance, echoing like thunder. Sparks flew when something crashed against my wards.

Earth chose that moment to shake, reminding us of her power, and how easily we played the game of life and death on her fields.

So far, I was still winning.

My wards would hold against any invaders, but I wasn’t sure how long Riley’s newly found boldness would last with yet another shock to her system.

“Let’s get you both safely inside and then I’ll handle them.” I grabbed my brother’s arm, helping him along a bit faster and ignoring his sharp intake of breath.

He'd heal with a few hours of rest.

More blood ran down his chest when I put his arm over my shoulder. A hint of white bone poked through torn skin on his ribs.

Might need a few days.

"I've got him." A shutter slammed over Riley's eyes as her jaw clenched. She rushed to my side, pushing me out of the way. "You go take care of that."

I stumbled back at the force of her command.

Despite the pounding of her heart, there was no scent of fear, and she managed to hold my heavy brother up with her own strength.

Malachy gave me a confused look as I swallowed my dragon's possessive roar.

Thunder clapped again as sparks shot across the arc of my wards.

"Go!" Riley cried.

"Everything is going to be fine. I'll be right back." I gave Riley a strained smile, pulling off my shirt and turning to my brother.

The shadows gathered around me as I spoke to Malachy through our familial link, "If anything happens to her, I will tear off your wings and bathe in our shared blood, brother."

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Look At That... Tail

Lucan's muscular body twisted and contorted as what looked like shadows rushed toward him. A mist of blues and blacks shimmered around the roof, rising high and blocking out the sun as giant wings unfolded from Lucan's back.

My heartbeat quickened.

I should've been terrified.

The otherworldly creature that took shape before my eyes was a monster of legend. Scarred scales ran along his underbelly and the golden horns atop his skull were tarnished, and deadly sharp.

The talons that clicked across the roof were large enough to crush a vehicle. I remembered the vice-like grip they'd held me in the other day. His powerful hindlegs made the house sway as he leaped into the sky.

Barbs on his tail slashed through the air. Flames burst from his maw as it opened and he roared loud enough to shake the trees.

Any sane person would've pissed themselves running.

But all I could think was, 'That's my beast.'

I wasn't right in the head.

And he wasn't that scary.

In fact, hours ago, I'd learned he liked to knit.

Laughter bubbled in my chest.

"Are you well?" The hoarse male voice brought me back to my senses.

Oops. I'd almost forgotten about the bleeding dragon guy.

"I should be asking you that question." I adjusted his weight, drawing on muscle memory as I used my thighs so I didn't throw out my back. Plenty of times I'd transferred patients who were heavier than they looked from bed to shower and back again. "Malachy, right?"

"I can walk," he said, still resting his arm on my shoulders. "Give me a minute."

"Or I could help you..."

He stared at me, unblinking.

I stared right back, mostly so I didn't look at his naked body too long. I'd gotten a glimpse of strange tattoos and scars under all the blood on his right side, but I didn't want to comment on them. These dragon guys were naked often. Not that I was complaining.

But it was more polite to look at his face.

His eyes were a similar shade to Lucan's, but they lacked... something.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

They were both heavy males, though, and built like tanks.

Gosh, it was strange to think these human bodies somehow housed a dragon inside. If that's how it worked. Honestly, none of this made sense.

But the sky crackled again with that thunderous boom, lighting a fire under my ass.

"All right, buddy. Minute's up. On the count of three, you're with me." I didn't let him go as I guided his grumbling self to the staircase.

"Did... you call me... buddy?" Malachy panted as we made it down the first three steps.

"Sure did." I glanced over my shoulder, looking up at the sky. Lucan's blue-tinted dragon met the flash of light in the distance.

A roar so deep and soul-crushing it could only be described as a battle cry came from the massive beast, sending shivers down my spine.

I faced forward again, fighting the urge to stay on the roof and make sure Lucan would be okay.

He was bigger than Kieran. More ferocious looking than anything I'd ever seen. I had to believe he'd be able to hold his own against whatever the hell was trying to break into his wards.

But I sent up a silent prayer anyway—despite it never working in the past—that Lucan wouldn't get hurt as I helped his injured brother down the stairs.

I was starting to like having my dragon around. It'd be just my luck for something bad to happen to him now.

Lucan

Bone to Pick

The talons in front of me swiped through the air, missing my snout by inches as I reared back. Pale underbelly scales—the telltale color of the MacAlister Clan—flew past the reach of my jaws.

I'd planned to rip a chunk out of the youngest brother's neck before he'd gotten smart and flipped out of reach.

Even if his yellow and green coloring hadn't given him away, I would've known this particular dragon was Shawn. He still had the scars on his right flank from the last time I'd kicked his tail a few centuries ago.

I should've ended the MacAlister line then, back before they rose to such power. They'd always been a thorn in our sides. But Malachy had ordered peace despite the threat they posed to him.

Over the centuries, as they amassed a following of idiots, they'd grown bolder in their attempts to take over the O'Sullivan birthright. Kieran—curse him and his diplomatic ways—along with Malachy had allowed such foolish behavior to continue, going so far as to indulge them when the oldest brother thought he'd be able to take on the role of guardian and change the prophecy.

Predictably, it hadn't worked.

As far as I was concerned, they'd overstepped their boundaries one too many times.

I would've killed them for less.

Verminous snakes.

Shawn's dragon let out a furious roar as I slammed my barbed tail into his side, sending him spiraling toward Earth in a freefall.

I beat my heavy wings, rising higher into the troposphere as I checked the horizon for the other two. If one MacAlister were here, the others weren't usually far behind. By the looks of Malachy, it would've been an ambush from the three of them after he was weakened from guardian duties.

Come out, come out wherever you are.

I couldn't wait to end this.

But the air was calm except for two smoke trails cutting paths through the blue sky leading to me and Shawn. Mine ended at my tail. His went spiraling downward.

It seemed as though they'd abandoned him.

I didn't sit with the knowledge for long.

Shawn's eyes blazed a furious, feral red as he caught himself and changed course, heading my way.

He'd chosen today to risk it all and I wasn't about to keep him waiting for the consequences of his actions.

I tucked my wings in tight, allowing gravity to take hold and turn my body into a missile. Years of studying various warfare techniques and this was still one of my favorite moves.

Unfortunately for the dragon below me, he'd never engaged in this style of fighting before and his moment of confusion caused too long a delay.

Because of my velocity, he missed the window to move his giant body until my skull crashed into his shoulder, crunching bone and knocking him tail over head as his painfilled roar echoed through the sky.

That cry only fueled my anger.

He was the one who started this, attacking my brother and causing a ruckus outside my wards that frightened my mate.

So I'd finish it.

My wings unfurled, stopping my descent, and the force at which I whipped upward allowed my body to turn almost impossibly fast.

I grabbed Shawn's spine with my front talons, digging in tight as he tried to flee, and snapped my jaw closed around his exposed neck column.

The position gave me complete control.

If he tried to move, he'd snap his own neck. Or I'd snap it for him if I decided.

But I hesitated, breathing slow as I scanned the ground with one eye.

We were too high up for her to see me if she was looking this way. I'd worked hard

today to show her I wasn't a monster and I worried about the delicate trust we were building.

Shawn struggled under my hold, testing the limit.

I bit down harder to remind him who was in control.

“Why?” The human question came out garbled with the voice of my beast and muffled by the mouthful of the idiot dragon's neck. The two of us didn't share a telepathic connection because we weren't close kin.

Nor were we friends.

Shawn seemed to remember that as he stilled beneath me. He didn't speak.

End this now.

For some reason, I couldn't.

Not quite yet.

I beat my wings slowly, moving further and further from my property until I found a place to touch down within a deep mountain ravine, hidden enough that not even a dragon flying in the sky could witness what I was about to do.

My hindlegs hit the dirt first as I shook Shawn's body, reminding him of his place before releasing my hold.

“Shift,” I commanded.

I might not have been the guardian, but I possessed the dominance and size of one

and the blood of it ran in my veins. The younger, weaker, more foolish dragon had no choice but to obey.

On bleeding human limbs, Shawn tried to scramble away through the sagebrush and brambles.

I shifted and grabbed hold of his neck, dragging him back into the air as if I could shake some sense into him.

Dragons fighting each other was nothing new, but this defied anything rational. One alone couldn't challenge me or come close to finishing off Malachy even in his weakened state.

"What were you thinking?" I asked. "Where are your brothers?"

Little twitching shakes rocked Shawn's human body and I realized he was laughing silently when I turned him to face me.

But that wasn't why I threw him down as if he was diseased. Dark, angry magic poured from his nostrils and tried to wrap itself around my wrists.

I closed my fists, allowing the protective ward magic I carried in my soul to pulse around me, cleansing the taint from my skin and pushing away whatever evil he carried.

He hadn't been a magic wielder before. This was new. It was weak enough that I knew he couldn't contain it or be any real threat, but I had to wonder what the MacAlisters had gotten into this time.

"Don't worry." Shawn's eyes were still blood-fueled and feral even as a smile curled his bruising mouth. "You can tell your guardian that my brothers will be coming for

him again, soon.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Brotherly Love

Okay, Riley. He's a dragon-human-male-changing-thingy. It's believable that he also heals abnormally fast.

I stared in shock at the long gash in Malachy's side as the bone retracted and his skin knit itself together. I had a strong stomach, but it still rolled a bit.

Totally believable.

It'd only taken me a minute to find the first aid kit under the bathroom sink, but that was long enough for most of the bleeding on his other gashes to stop and the big one to start this magic healing process.

"As I've said, I don't need your assistance." Malachy dwarfed the stool he sat on as he leaned over the kitchen counter.

His tattoos on the unmarred side of his body were hidden from view and he was wearing sweatpants he'd gotten from the closet in the hallway. Scars crisscrossed his back, but I pretended I didn't see them. The man was a beast, just as big and domineering as his brother.

And I thought Kieran was huge.

"Thank you, though, Miss..." His bluish-green eyes searched me, looking for a name.

The color was so much like Lucan's but the difference was subtle.

Where Lucan's eyes burned bright with intensity, Malachy's were muted. Older somehow. The color fractured into pieces like broken glass instead of blazing into a beautiful mosaic.

But Lucan didn't scare me, so I decided Malachy wouldn't either.

"Riley, just Riley," I said before he did something silly like call me 'Miss.'

I went to the fridge and grabbed a beer, offering one to Malachy. He nodded his thanks and I dug around for a bottle opener like this was my kitchen or something.

I was getting too comfortable here.

"Is it your venom that makes you heal so fast?" I slid over the open beer bottle.

Malachy frowned as he stared at me. "Did Lucan tell you about dragon venom?"

His tone sounded too light and breezy for his injuries, like he was used to keeping it at a certain level and could do it on command.

But the pleasant voice didn't hide the fact that he was fishing for information.

"Nope," I popped the P as I raised the bottle to my lips.

"I see." He was still watching me, but there was something amused about his expression. "You're a nurse, I assume." Malachy motioned to the sorry excuse for a first aid kit that sat unopened on the counter. It'd probably come with the house.

"I'm a CNA." I shrugged.

“Not your first choice of career?” He guessed, trying to read me.

Good luck with that, dude. I barely know myself.

“No. My bachelor’s is in business, but I took whatever job was hiring when the economy started to crash.” I sipped my beer. “I went back to night school while I worked in the kitchen at the retirement home until I got certified as a nursing assistant. I’ve been doing that for the past ten years. Or I was until we decided to... leave.”

And that’s all he was getting from me.

“I see.” Malachy’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “No wonder my brother is interested. You’re smart, capable, a hard worker, beautiful, and kind.”

He listed off the qualities like facts—not flirting—but I felt the blush creep onto my face anyway. These brothers sure knew how to make a lady swoon. He had to be lying to butter me up.

My eyes narrowed. Why?

“What?” Malachy asked.

“Nothing.” I shook my head, not sure if I could trust my instincts. Was he just being nice?

Should I be worried?

What I needed to do was change the subject.

I pointed to his healing injuries. “Want to tell me how those happened?”

Malachy took a long sip of his beer, studying me before he spoke again.

“Nope,” he popped his own P.

“Touché.” I raised my beer toward his and grinned when he toasted me. It felt like a victory. My radar still wasn’t fixed. He didn’t seem that bad. And I guessed he did kind of protect the world according to the other dragons. “So, you’re the guardian.”

“You sound disappointed. Did you expect something else?” He drained the rest of his beer.

I hadn’t sounded disappointed. At least that wasn’t what I intended. But something told me this was more about him anyway.

“Someone bigger, maybe,” I teased, trying to lighten the mood again.

“They don’t make them much bigger,” he smirked, sliding his empty bottle across the counter. “Can I get another one?”

Since he didn’t need medical assistance, the least I could do was help with the pain. I cracked him a second beer and got us both a glass of water.

The phone buzzed in my back pocket and I pulled it out, hoping to see Ember or Willow’s name.

I deleted the unknown text without reading it.

“It must be hard, dealing with this whole prophecy-ending thing,” I said, trying to focus on problems that weren’t my own. I couldn’t imagine being pushed out of a job that important, especially when he’d been doing it for the past few hundred years.

Malachy huffed a hollow laugh. “You could say that.”

Kieran had explained that Malachy somehow absorbed the energy of the earth and calmed the seismic activity every time it fired up. But then things started getting out of control and Malachy had grown weaker as his term came to an end.

I wanted more details. Maybe then I’d understand how and why it was so important to Lucan that I was his mate. Then I could decide if I even wanted that role.

“You seem to know a lot about dragons for a human,” Malachy interrupted my thoughts.

“She knows what Kieran’s told her.” Lucan’s booming voice had butterflies swooping in my stomach. The tension eased in my shoulders—tension I didn’t even realize I was holding.

“Is everything all right?” Eww. Why did I sound so breathless? He was the one who’d changed into a dragon and flew off to fight... someone or something.

“It is now that I’ve dealt with the dragon.” Lucan’s smile had my toes curling. “Shawn is dead.”

I nodded as if this was the most natural thing in the world to hear. Took out the trash. Grabbed the mail. Killed the dragon knocking at my wards.

And I was still smiling.

Something was seriously wrong with my head.

I took a step back, trying to get myself together. “I’m sorry, did you say, ‘dead?’”

“He was infected with dark magic.” Lucan tore his gaze away and looked to his brother. “But you already knew that.”

“I smelled it on him right before they attacked.” Malachy was still staring at me. “Why is Kieran talking to you about the prophecy?”

Lucan stepped closer to my side. “If you’d come down from your ivory tower for either of our calls, then you’d know what our cousin found.”

“Do we need to call the cops?” I swallowed, still thinking about the dead dragon guy.

“What? No.” Lucan rested his hand on the small of my back. Such a simple gesture, like he just had to touch me. And I was glad that he did because it was instantly soothing.

I leaned against his side, feeling my worries ease. “That’s good.”

Wait...

“And what does Kieran say about the prophecy now?” An ancient exhaustion colored Malachy’s sigh.

Lucan glanced away. “He’s still figuring that part out.”

“Of course he is.” Malachy laughed bitterly as he took another sip of his beer. “Forgive me for not knowing this latest, undiscovered development.”

“It’s more than that,” Lucan snapped. “He’s found his mate.”

The anger brewing in Lucan didn’t scare me. Adrenaline from his earlier fight still pulsed through him, making him look hungry and tense. I rested my hand on his arm,

instinctually knowing it'd help him relax. And it did.

The gentle giant blew out a hot breath, looking down at me with a warmth in his eyes that made the rest of the world fade around us.

“Mate?” Malachy interrupted.

It was a good thing he did because I was moments from pulling Lucan down to my level and tasting his lips for a second time.

Those sweaty endorphins and pheromones pulsing from him were no joke.

“We’re still working it out,” I said, breathless all over again.

Malachy’s eyes darted between the two of us, widening in realization. “What is this?”

“Go ask Kieran,” Lucan’s voice was a possessive growl as if he could frighten his brother away.

“I can’t,” Malachy said.

“You won’t.” Lucan clenched his jaw.

The air was thick with manly testosterone.

I forced myself to stand steady. “Should I give you two a minute alone?”

“No,” Lucan said just as Malachy said, “Yes.”

“She stays,” Lucan ground out his words. “You’re free to leave, though.”

My heart swelled ten sizes right then. Drew never would've stood up for me this way. If his friends said anything bad about me, he was the first to laugh and the first to tell me to find somewhere else to be.

"My apologies, Riley." Malachy hung his head. "I'm not feeling myself as of late. I'm sure you're confused. Kieran and I have a strained history."

I gathered that, but I didn't rub it in. "That must suck," I said.

"Strained history," Lucan huffed. "And it's your fault that it is. If you hadn't disappeared—"

"She called," Malachy growled.

"Yeah, well, you could've come back. He had an entire coven waiting for you the last meeting and you never showed," Lucan said.

"They weren't even real witches. It was a group of practicing humans who thought they were in touch with Earth." Malachy's gaze darted my way. "No offense."

"None taken?" I glanced around. "Though I'm sure there's a religious group somewhere out there that might think you're being a dick."

Lucan pinched the bridge of his nose, but I saw him hiding his smile. "Whatever the case, they wanted to help. And so does Kieran. He's been trying everything for the past two hundred years and you couldn't be bothered to come when called."

"You're right, brother." Malachy suddenly stood and finished chugging the rest of his beer before he wiped his mouth. "You would've been the better guardian. Mind if I sleep on your couch?"

“Of course I fucking mind...” Lucan’s voice followed Malachy as he stomped out of the kitchen.

I held Lucan back from chasing after him, still trying to process the whirlwind of male ego that just swept through the room.

“I think he needs a few days to crash,” I said. “He’s hurt.”

“He’ll be fine,” Lucan grumbled, but I felt him softening again under my touch. “How are you?”

“I should be asking you that. Did you really...” I lowered my voice, “Kill someone?”

He flinched as if I’d stabbed him.

I hurried to soothe his fear, “It’s okay. I’m sure laws work differently for dragons. I just want to make sure you aren’t hurt too.”

Something wondrous lit up his eyes as he leaned forward, caging me on either side against the counter with his arms. It wasn’t a cage, though.

It felt more like a nest of yummy male scent and warmth.

“You’re amazing. Did you know that?” he asked.

Now I was really blushing. “Do you have to fight like that often?”

Lucan shook his head. This close, his smell surrounded me making me hungry for some reason.

“I’m my brother’s keeper,” he explained. “It’s my duty to keep him safe. There are

those who don't believe he's still Earth's guardian or think they can do a better job. And before they knew the prophecy was ending, there were many jealous of his fame. He's always had enemies. He deserves someone in his corner. If he needs me, I'll be there."

I nodded. This I understood, admired even.

"Is there anything you need?" Lucan asked.

His eyes dropped to my lips as I licked them.

The breath caught in my chest.

What did I need?

I thought about it, but really, there was no reason to. The answer came instantly and I wrapped my arms around Lucan's back, hoping he wouldn't deny this request. I wasn't sure how long his kindness would last, but I'd take advantage of it now.

"Anything?" I asked.

Lucan's growl went straight to my core as a smile lit up his face. "Anything."

My words came tumbling out, "Can you teach me how to fight?"

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Cock Block

Three weeks.

My brother hadn't left my house in three fucking weeks. It was the longest he'd spent in my company in years.

While three weeks was nothing in our lifespan, one universal truth on time remained no matter the species: Guests and fish stunk after three days.

It'd been twenty-one days of grueling torture where Riley threw herself into lessons, walking around the house in a sports bra and leggings like a model from a human fighting gym while she raged, drilling me with small fists of fury.

If it hadn't been for my cock-blocking brother always hanging around, I might've convinced Riley to work out some aggression in other ways.

But she had a single-minded focus when it came to learning different fighting techniques and I obliged her every whim—despite the temptation it was to watch sweat roll down her cleavage and see her face flush with exertion, knowing what she'd look like if I could really give her a workout.

“Don't you have somewhere to be?” I grumbled through our familial link as Malachy leaned against the doorway, scratching his unshaven face and wearing old sweatpants. “A job to do? A mountain to climb? Your own beer to buy?”

It wasn't lost on me that the past three weeks had been quiet as far as Earth went. Malachy must've been hurt worse than he let on if even She was giving him this long break.

Or this was the signal that something bigger was coming. The quiet before the storm.

"Thought you wanted me around more." Malachy smirked as he raised the beer bottle to his lips.

I cursed my earlier words as Riley grunted. Her leg swept out in a perfect arc.

I caught her by the ankle, dodging a well-timed fist. Unsurprisingly, my Riley was a natural at this.

She seemed to be good at all she put her mind to. And it was a beautiful thing, watching her mind slowly start to open up.

Even though it also released all this anger.

Riley screamed as she pulled herself free, raining blows I was forced to move quickly to avoid.

She'd learned there wasn't much she could do that would hurt me, which only made her try harder. There was so much rage packed into her slender body. In three weeks, she'd begun to add more muscle onto her form, hardening edges that were soft.

I hated this.

There were other channels for her rage that I could put to good use, ones where I could appreciate her body in a gentler fashion.

But Malachy was never far enough away.

Riley spent her nights with me, building pillow walls just to knock them down, and there were a hundred sweet moments in passing. A touch here or there, the whisper of a stolen kiss, her body brushing against mine as she passed me in the hall...

It wasn't enough.

I was on edge constantly, driven to near insanity with the need to have her to myself and explore the pieces I had yet to discover.

It's all his fault.

I narrowed my eyes at my brother who sat there watching, enjoying a show that wasn't for him.

Pain exploded across my cheek as Riley's hard fist caught me off-guard.

"Ha!" She cried. "I got you."

I stumbled back as all five-foot-ten of fiery woman came charging at me full force in a sweaty, beautiful package.

She bared her teeth as I caught her by the arms, kicking her feet out as I lifted her into the air. One foot almost caught me in the dick and I jerked my hips back, growling a warning.

Maybe I'd let this go too far.

Riley shook with adrenaline as her chest heaved.

I lifted her higher so we were face to face. “Ouch.”

That smirk of hers went straight to my groin.

She sensed it. Her scent heated, swirling spice rapidly filling the space as her eyes widened with a frantic desire, dropping to my lips.

My fingers tightened on her arms as I leaned—

“Bravo.” Malachy slowly clapped, reminding us of the audience. “I think you might’ve bruised him.”

“Yeah, I did.” Riley’s smile was full of pride even as the scent of embarrassment washed over her, making the notes of orange taste sour and too sweet.

I was learning everything I could about her, cataloging her scents and dancing to her rhythm, forming a picture of the mate fate intended for me.

This was my greatest adventure yet.

She wiggled out from my hold and landed on her feet, placing a gentle hand against my chest. “I’m going to take a bath.”

My thighs shook with the effort it took to keep standing in place as Riley pressed a quick kiss to my cheek, turning to walk away.

The black leggings hugged her round ass perfectly, the sight nearly causing me to drool.

Malachy stepped out of her way and arched an eyebrow in my direction. “Goddess, brother. Could you be any more pathetic?”

He needs to go.

I snapped my jaw shut as I turned to growl at him. “I think it’s time that you and I had a little chat.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Girl Time

I stared at my phone on the bathroom counter, debating smashing the thing. If it wasn't my only connection to Willow and Ember, I might've just thrown it away.

For the past few weeks, Drew had been texting and calling. I'd turned off my voicemail so I wouldn't have to hear his voice, but I knew it was him. Not that many unknown numbers would keep pleading with me to answer the phone. I didn't know that many people. Not anymore. Only Ember and Willow stuck around when Drew started keeping me away from my other friends.

He'd said I hung out with bimbos who'd only bring us down when the world fell apart. Yet his friends were a bunch of 'bros' and losers who talked a big game and never backed it up.

Thankfully Willow and Ember didn't care when Drew gave them the cold shoulder. They only came to visit me anyway. I hated to think about what would've happened if he'd succeeded in isolating me completely.

Isn't that what Lucan is doing now?

I deleted the new text without reading it, tossed my phone on the rug by the tub, and stood in front of the sink as I looked into the mirror.

The difference was hardly noticeable, but I could feel it. Every day I got stronger and

more confident in myself.

And I need to stop comparing Lucan to Drew.

It wasn't fair to Lucan. True, it'd only been a few weeks, but he wasn't anything like my ex-boyfriend. He encouraged me to call my friends. Asked questions to learn more about them. He listened to all our stories and paid attention to the details. Lucan was the kindest, sexiest man I'd ever met.

That's because he's not a man.

I rolled my eyes at my own reflection, laughing to myself as I remembered what Ember had said about dragon dick. The thought of how that might feel had a delicious ache building between my thighs.

The chemistry between Lucan and me was insane, but he hadn't made a real move since I'd been here. We'd shared a few kisses and touches, but nothing that screamed, "I want to be your mate."

I was thinking about taking matters into my own hands if he didn't do something soon.

It'd been almost a year since I'd gotten laid—which caused some great fights with my ex—but I was excited to brush the dust off my vagina and take her for a test drive again. Just once, at least.

Yet I knew sex with Lucan wouldn't be a one-night-stand type of thing. It was frustrating because I wanted to take care of these urges before I decided if I was making decisions about the future with the right body parts.

If I was being honest with myself, since meeting Lucan, I didn't even want to look at

anyone else. My comfort TV characters paled in comparison to the giant dragon shifter. Sure, Malachy was also hot, but he was no Lucan.

No one was. And that scared me.

“Nobody else will want you.” Drew’s words in my head took me by surprise, but I shook them off, forcing myself to look at my reflection in the mirror.

“Screw you,” I said out loud. “You don’t know anything about me.”

I was done being told I wasn’t good enough.

I’m hot. Strong. Capable. Smart.

I turned to look over my shoulder, getting a view of my rear end in the mirror. Lucan was checking it out earlier and he seemed to like what he saw, so I decided to like it too.

I filled the tub and dumped in some honey lavender bubble bath. Once it was full, I slipped into the sudsy warm water. My muscles instantly relaxed as I breathed in the calming scents.

Heaven. A girl could get used to this.

My phone buzzed and I groaned.

I needed to get a new number. Lucan would help me with that.

Or you should stop depending on him for everything...

I took a deep breath of the calming lavender and gathered enough courage to just do

it. I'd answer and tell Drew to fuck off. To leave me alone and never call again.

Suds rushed over the rim of the tub as I reached for my phone on the floor, not giving myself time to second-guess my decision.

Relief rushed through me when I saw Willow's name on the Facetime.

I sank back into the water as I answered.

"Look at you living your best life." Willow whistled as her smiling face filled the screen. "Must be nice to be a dragon's mate."

I chuckled nervously. "Not a mate." Yet... The unsaid word hung in the air, but Willow was tactful enough to know I didn't want to talk about it. "Speaking of that, how's Ember doing? I haven't heard from her as much as you."

"I barely see her anymore either." Willow sighed. "If she isn't working on the prophecy with Kieran, then she's off riding the dragon or..." she whispered, "riding a dragon."

"I can't wait to ride a dragon someday," Harper's wistful little voice came from somewhere offscreen.

I burst out laughing at the horrified expression on Willow's face.

"Why's Aunt Riley laughing so hard?" Harper asked.

I laughed harder.

Willow chuckled along with me as she shook her head. "No reason, honey. Go finish your snack while I talk to your aunt."

I took a few deep breaths to compose myself.

Willow was still smiling. “It’s been forever since I’ve heard you laugh like that.”

The thought was sobering, but a stray laugh slipped out. I shrugged, raising my bare shoulders above the bubbles. “I can be loud here.”

Tears filled Willow’s eyes. Like always, she wore her heart on her sleeve. “I want to kill him for hurting you. I’m so, so sorry. I should’ve forced you to come live with us sooner.”

“I wouldn’t have listened.” I took a deep breath to calm my nerves before saying what I needed to say. The excuses and not wanting to talk about it hadn’t done me enough good. “I was embarrassed and didn’t want you or Ember to see how bad it’d gotten.”

By the look on her face, I could tell she’d known that, but Willow wasn’t an asshole. She’d take her ‘I told you so’s’ to the grave. Really, she was the best of us. If anyone didn’t deserve our screwed-up luck, it was her.

“Have you heard from him?” Willow tried to keep her smile pleasant, but she couldn’t hide the murder in her eyes.

Dang it. She’d know if I was lying.

I glanced at the door, silently willing no super-sonic dragon ears to be listening. “Actually, I have. He keeps blowing up my phone, apologizing and asking to meet up.”

Willow hissed through her teeth. “You know it’s bullshit, right?”

“I do,” I said. “And I’ll probably just change my number somehow. But enough about me, please. How are you?”

She wanted to keep pressing, but Willow let it drop. “We’re great. Harper and I are working on her schooling. We’ve been visiting Kieran’s hoard. Everyone loves her around there. Sometimes we have dinners at the compound.”

I could hear what she wasn’t saying and it just about broke my heart. “You’re lonely.”

Willow blinked her bright green eyes dry, plastering on a big smile. “We’re safe. That’s all that matters. It’s been nice and quiet. I like the extra time alone. I actually finished reading a few books.”

“Any good ones?” I asked.

Willow looked past the phone, checking to see if Harper was listening.

“Ember gave me her Kindle,” she said. “I have access to the whole eBook library.”

“Uh oh.” I started laughing again, trying to keep it quiet so I wouldn’t alert Harper. Ember’s choice of reading material was basically porn. “I’m sure that’s been a good time.”

“It’s been... interesting.” Willow’s face couldn’t get any redder.

And my skin was starting to wrinkle as the bath water cooled. “I’m going to come visit you, soon,” I promised as I pulled the plug for the drain.

“You don’t have to do that,” Willow said, too quickly to be believable. “That’s a beautiful bathroom. I wouldn’t want to leave either.”

I smiled because it really was a gorgeous bathroom. “I want to come. Give me some time to talk to Lucan and work out the details.”

“No rush.” Relief relaxed her face. “But I’d love that.”

“Me too.” The past few weeks had been a blur, but I was feeling better—stronger—than I had in years. I think I was starting to accept this whole dragon mating thing because Lucan made it easy, but it was about time to rejoin the real world. I missed my friends. It’d be good to see them in person. “I’ll call you back soon.”

“Okay. Oh, and Riley,” Willow said before I hung up the phone, “make sure to change your number. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“I will,” I swore, hoping to ease her fears.

They’d been worried about me enough for one lifetime. I didn’t want to stress them out anymore.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Dinner Party

I'd aired out and set the table in the formal dining room. The second bedroom containing my hoard remained closed off—though I planned to introduce Riley to it soon—but this part of the house also saw little use.

It was time to remedy that.

While I preferred the cozy intimacy of the breakfast nook in the kitchen, Riley had spoken about wanting to wear her gown tonight and there was nothing I'd deny her.

Besides, Malachy needed an excuse to shave and clean himself up. It was one step closer to getting him out of my house.

He hadn't told me why he was still here, but I got the feeling that he needed more time to regain his strength. I'd worked out the details of the MacAlister attack—how they'd swooped in on him during an absorption and hit him in that weakened state—but it was only the two younger brothers, Shawn and Jeremey, who'd come.

I hadn't thought them capable of making decisions without their older brother, Cain, but Malachy reasoned that Cain might be behind the attack anyway.

The part of me that wasn't pissed at my brother's cock-blocking ways, was glad that he stayed close enough to keep an eye on him.

Speak for yourself.

It's easier to have him here when the MacAlisters attack in retaliation for the death of their youngest brother.

I'd assumed that would occur shortly after they realized Shawn wouldn't be returning. Dragons moved slowly on most things, but they were known for their quick temper and bloodlust.

We were still waiting for their revenge weeks later.

Malachy had healed enough that I didn't worry about him taking the two remaining brothers in a fight. That would change when Earth called, though. And the longer he was given to restore his strength, the better. Especially if, according to him, each time it took longer to get back up.

Kieran was also waiting to learn if I'd mated Riley and if she bore the mark. But he could keep waiting a moment longer.

Despite the chaos of Earth and the impending doom the prophecy foretold, I dug my talons in on this issue.

Riley could have as much time as she needed.

I finished laying sprigs of rosemary on the plates and capped them with the silver lids just as Malachy walked into the kitchen, adjusting the sleeves of one of my suits.

He dares to impress in my clothes.

Smoke billowed from my nostrils, but I held back the growl of my dragon. At least my brother wasn't wearing sweats to dinner.

“You really believe Riley is your mate,” Malachy said, taking me by surprise. He’d danced around this topic for the past few weeks.

I looked beyond his shoulder, sensing that Riley was still in the bathroom getting ready. “She is.”

I untied my apron and hung it on the hook before pushing the bar cart toward the dining room.

“These too?” Malachy lifted the serving trays when I nodded.

“I’m surprised your pompous tail still knows how to perform manual labor,” I scoffed. It’d been a long time since our childhood and the training Malachy went through before becoming guardian.

I didn’t know if life was better or worse now, but as his only brother, I still got to tease him.

“I’m surprised you found someone who can tolerate your insufferable ass.” Malachy sneered as he placed the trays on the table. “One you’d even play dress up for.”

I buttoned my sleeves and then removed the jacket I’d left hanging on the back of the chair and put it on. The suit was stuffy and restricting, but Riley deserved to feel like a princess for the night.

“It’s only a suit,” I said, uncorking the wine. “I didn’t think I’d ever...”

My voice trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished.

It didn’t need an explanation.

None of us had hope of meeting our fated mates, not with the way things had been going for the past few hundred years. To watch your species age and retreat to loneliness around you with no hatchlings being born. The empty classrooms. The stories passed down becoming more and more far-fetched.

When we were young, we didn't know the prophecy signaled our lifetime. But the signs foretold this long before we figured it out. As Earth's activity increased, ours decreased.

It'd been a long time since we had any sort of hope for a brighter future.

Malachy cleared his throat. "I'm happy for you. Truly." I glanced up, seeing the pain and clarity in his eyes. "And I'm happy for Kieran, too. I think I'd like to meet his mate and give a late bonding blessing, especially if she's anything like our Riley."

My Riley. My dragon awoke.

I held him back, just as delicate footsteps sounded outside the dining room.

"Did you say you wanted to visit Kieran?" Riley's sweet voice was less timid than it had been and the relief it brought couldn't be matched.

I turned to her, feeling the air rush from my lungs as my beast roared his approval.

Black silk curved around her heavy breasts, gathering at her hips and waist before cascading toward the floor. The front bits of her hair were pinned up in curls, leaving the growing length to brush the tops of her exposed shoulders.

Smoky eyes regarded me demurely and she'd put on a splash of dark red lipstick that made my cock twitch just thinking about those ruby lips wrapped around it.

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” she asked. The makeup on her cheeks hid her blush, but her scent heated all the same.

“You’re perfect,” my words rumbled out and my chest kept vibrating as she took my hand.

Are you purring?

I’m happy.

“Where do I sit?” Riley asked.

Malachy stepped back, tactfully averting his gaze as he pulled out the seat at the head of the table.

“Here,” he said, giving her his designated place.

I didn’t let the shock show on my face as I got Riley seated and pushed in her chair.

“It smells delicious.” Riley settled in and draped a napkin over her lap. “I feel silly putting on such a pretty dress just to eat dinner.”

“Don’t be.” I nodded at my brother, discreetly showing my thanks, before returning my attention to my mate. “I’ll buy you a whole wardrobe of dinner gowns if you’d like. One for every night of the week.”

“Tone it down,” Malachy scolded through our link.

“You know what?” Riley smiled. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Why should I?” I resisted the urge to tell my brother that he’d understand someday.

Because despite the happiness consuming me, I knew that not all dragons were as lucky.

Instead, I just smiled. “She’s my mate.”

Dinner passed in a blur of free-flowing wine and conversation. Malachy was more animated than I’d seen in years. Riley cleaned her plate.

My chest filled with a quiet sort of pride at feeding her—feeling fuller when she kicked off her heels and her bare foot brushed against my leg under the table, resting there as if she couldn’t bear to not touch me for this long.

“And that’s when he landed in the training yard with the blueberry filling smeared across his mouth,” Malachy explained, laughing at his own joke.

It wasn’t funny.

“I didn’t steal the damn pie,” I growled.

“I know the story.” Malachy rolled his eyes. “The plate was sitting there on the log complete with a fork.”

“It was,” I defended myself for the millionth time.

“Wait. Your father starved you as he trained you for... what exactly?” Riley paled, not amused at our childhood memories even though she’d asked for them.

I wished we could give her better stories.

Malachy gave me a knowing look. It wasn’t the first time we’d had to explain that being a guardian wasn’t the glamorous lifestyle others perceived it to be.

“Life as a guardian is lonely and isolating,” he said. “It takes a special kind of dragon to pass the test and survive the years of service. My father wanted to ensure I was ready.”

“I thought the Earth chose you.” Riley frowned. This was a lot to take in for a human who didn’t know of the supernatural world.

“She did,” I said. “The position of guardian always falls to the first-born hatchling of the current guardian’s bloodline. Unless...”

“Unless he can’t absorb the shock or fulfill his role. Or if there are no hatchlings born. Then another family can step in.” Malachy sipped his drink.

“Has that happened before?” she asked.

“Once in our entire history,” I said. “And that’s why the MacAlisters think they’re the solution to our current woes.”

“I don’t understand.” Riley traced the rim of her wine glass. “Kieran said your family has held the guardian role for over a millennia.”

“More than that,” I explained. “Our ancestors have been chosen for longer than written history. But there was a story passed down orally telling of a giant O’Sullivan dragon who took over as guardian when a MacAlister failed. There’s been bad blood between us ever since, despite us being distant cousins. They’ve undermined Malachy every chance they could get.”

Stories of old. My dragon sighed mournfully.

We’ll write the new ones ourselves.

“And you recently killed one of these MacAlisters. Good.” Riley spoke so casually, twirling her wine around the glass before she sipped, that it took me a moment to process her words.

I expected her to hate me for it, not sit at the table calmly as if discussing war strategy.

She continues to surprise.

Damn if that didn't make my dick hard.

“I did,” I said, topping off her glass. “They’ve crossed us once too many times. At Kieran’s insistence over a hundred years ago, Malachy stepped aside to allow them the chance to prove themselves when we figured out the prophecy would end with this cycle. They failed and yet they still attack, claiming it’s their birthright. Honestly, all they did was piss Her off more.”

“Earth.” Riley glanced at the window. “You speak of her like she’s a person.”

“She’s the mother of all this land,” I said. It always fascinated me how humans were taught to ignore this fact.

Riley nodded, accepting. “Why is She so angry then?”

“Earth isn’t angry.” Malachy broke his brooding silence, rejoining the conversation. “She is chaos and creation. A feminine energy of birth and death that requires a conduit to channel excess energy.”

“Sounds like she needs to get laid and have a girl’s night out,” Riley muttered under her breath.

The shock of her words had me barking out laughter. I beat my fist against my chest before I choked. Malachy and Kieran were the religious, reverent ones. They suffered at the thought of being cast aside.

I never understood the concept of holding fast to beliefs and labels. Maybe it was because I'd seen the folly of mass destruction when someone waged war in the name of a strongly held belief. Abstract concepts of justice and purpose no longer mattered when you were standing on a battlefield, fighting for your life and the lives of those beside you.

My laughter faded.

Riley's hand found mine under the table. Her soft fingers wrapped around my rough fingers, capturing my heart.

"I still don't understand why you trained with him." She looked at me. "I thought it was only the firstborn who became guardian. Why was your father preparing both children?"

I cleared my throat, searching for an answer.

Malachy beat me to it. "Lucan wouldn't let our father train me alone, saying that if I was starving, he'd starve too. That it wasn't fair for him to eat if I was hungry. Even when our father refused, Lucan stayed just out of fire reach down the mountain, training alongside me until our father had no choice but to give in so he didn't kill himself."

"That's awful." Riley's eyes brimmed with tears as she squeezed my hand harder under the table. "No wonder he stole the pie."

"I didn't steal the pie!" I moaned. "Fuck, at this point, I wonder if I should've just

stolen it, since I've gotten the blame."

Riley's laughter soothed my beast. "Where was Kieran in all of this?"

"I still think he was the one who stole the pie and left the trap for me to fall into," I grumbled.

Malachy smiled as he shook his head. "That lucky bastard grew up with his nose stuck in a book, but we had some fond memories—the three of us—when I was a fresh, young guardian."

I'd rather talk about those memories instead of our darkened hatchling days, but Riley let out a big yawn.

"It's getting late." I scooted my chair backward, draping my arm over the back of her chair.

She smiled at me sheepishly before resting her head against my shoulder. "I'll be all right. We can keep talking like this."

Perfect.

She fit against me snugly and my beast soared with the knowledge that I was providing her comfort. Little by little, she'd trusted me.

I was the luckiest dragon in the world.

"Come on, now." Malachy stood suddenly. I swear I saw the hint of jealousy in his eyes, but it was gone in the next second as he blinked. "Don't you dare fall asleep on me yet. I have a gift for you two."

Riley

Two Left Feet

Amber bulb lights were strung around the garden. A gentle breeze drifted through the jasmine vines on the trellis wall. The vast expanse of the universe shimmered with stars in the clear night sky overhead. Soft music played from the hidden outdoor speakers, making it the most romantic scene I'd ever experienced in my life.

"It's beautiful," I said. "You did all this?"

Malachy looked at his feet. "It's not much. I just hung up some lights."

"This is..." I blew out a slow breath as I spun in a circle, feeling like I'd stepped into some sort of fairy tale world. "Incredible."

"I hope you enjoy it," Malachy said.

"You're not staying?" Lucan's rough voice called out to his brother as he headed off into the dark night.

"I'm taking a walk." Malachy raised the half-empty bottle of wine above his head. "Don't have too much fun without me."

Lucan stared after his brother until the shadows swallowed him.

I stood there in companionable silence before nudging his side. "You can go with him

if you want.”

“Hell no.” Lucan’s smile lit up my whole night as he returned his attention to me.

“I’ve been waiting to get you alone for weeks.”

“Is that so?” I teased, taking a step back.

My heart was beating faster for all the right reasons, but I still felt my nerves like livewires, sparking off in wild directions.

Be bold. Take what you want. This is your life.

I reached for his hand. “Come on then, big guy. Dance with me.”

It’d been forever since I last danced with a man—forever since I wanted to.

I should’ve known he’d be a great dancer. Lucan was light and limber on his feet.

I bet he fucks like he fights and dances.

I really wanted to test that theory out.

He’d been nothing but a perfect gentleman, showing me off with a few graceful dips and twirls despite the rust on my heels.

I laughed as he dipped me again, trusting his strong arms to keep me from falling, and missed the next step, stomping on his toes before he carried me back to the beat.

I should’ve been embarrassed—Drew always said I had two left feet—but I wasn’t. Lucan made me feel graceful and beautiful and alive.

My cheeks ached from how hard I was smiling and my hair was a sweaty mess, but I'd never felt this... free.

The music was still playing, yet the world around us came to a standstill as Lucan slowed, staring into my eyes. There was pure hunger in that look.

It made me burn with need.

I'm not ready.

I panicked, resting my head against his chest as he pulled me closer. It was safe here. I'd laid on this particular spot almost every night for the past few weeks.

The comforting motion helped me think.

I am ready. It's okay to get what I want.

Lucan trailed his fingers down the exposed skin of my back, stopping a respectful distance from my hip before moving their way back up.

"Tell me about your parents," he said.

I tensed, and then relaxed as his fingers continued to work their magic. "What do you want to know?"

"You heard all my embarrassing childhood stories." He scoffed. "It's only fair I learn some of yours."

I smiled against his chest. He did have a point.

It didn't make this any easier, though.

“They were wonderful.” All these years and I still hated to speak of them in the past. “I was an only child, but they never let me feel alone. They took me camping in the summer and skiing in the winter and never missed one of my volleyball games. My dad loved astronomy. He taught me all the constellations. I can’t remember them anymore.”

I looked up at the stars, remembering all the nights by the campfires with s’mores and tales of immortalized Greek legends as we peered through his telescope.

Inhaling deeply, I let Lucan’s scent wash over me.

“That one is Orion.” He pointed with our conjoined hands, still swaying us both to the beat of the music as it drifted through the garden. “I’m sorry for your loss. I’ve known much change and death in my life. It never gets easier.”

Almost forgot I had the hots for someone old enough to be my great-great-great-grandfather. I laughed to myself, trying to shake off the melancholy mood, and released a truth I’d never spoken out loud.

“In a way, I’m glad they died when they did.”

There was no judgment in his tone when Lucan asked, “Why?”

“Because I was still young enough to be their perfect daughter. They didn’t have to see me fail.”

Lucan’s chuckle was warm-hearted. “I don’t think you could fail at anything if you tried.”

“Then you don’t know me that well.” I planted my hands against his chest, pushing back so he could see the seriousness on my face. I needed to tell him how broken I

was before he fell too deep and thought I'd tricked him into a mistake. "I've made so many bad choices."

"I forgive you for being human," he teased.

But this wasn't funny.

Stupid burning hot tears filled my eyes.

I had to make him understand. "I complain too much and I know he's lying about most things, but maybe there is some truth to it after all. I'm not smart like Ember or gentle like Willow. I don't even know who I am anymore, but I do know you won't love me once you get to know me."

"Lies," he hissed.

His pupils slit to black diamonds as the turquoise mist swirled in his eyes.

It was the first time since I'd met him that I felt real fear in his presence.

Not for me.

Never for me.

Or is that what you want to believe...

I was getting tired of hearing myself think.

"I've waited for you to speak his name. The one who did this to you," Lucan growled. "But my patience is wearing thin."

I didn't want to protect Drew, but I hated the anger and aggression gathering around Lucan. Shadows grew heavy in the garden. He'd leave right this second if I asked him to and go burn the world to find my ex. I knew it.

I couldn't tell him about the phone calls. Not right now when he was all worked up.

But I could tell him, "Thank you."

The words rushed from my lips as I stood on the toes of my shoes, putting my hands on his shoulders and trying to stand at his level.

"Thank you for what?" He blinked, taken aback.

"For being kind and gentle with me. For giving me time to process all this. For helping me feel strong again." I had to ignore the inner voice that was screaming at me for being too vulnerable and opening myself to get hurt.

Because I needed to trust my instincts and they were leading me to this. I think my body knew before my brain did that Lucan was it for me.

I expected him to brush off my gratitude, to say it was his job as my mate, but I wasn't expecting the confident quirk to his smile.

"I can be gentle," he spoke softly as he lowered his face to mine.

My heart beat faster at the meaning behind his words. His lips brushed my lips, just a whisper, and I melted. I wrapped my hands behind his neck, holding to him like I'd fall without his strength.

"What if I don't want you to be gentle?" I breathed the question against his mouth.

The dark chuckle he gave in response went straight to my core as he swept me off my feet, growling, “I’ll be whatever you need me to be.”

Lucan

Finally

My dragon roared in triumph as I carried Riley through the garden. These last few weeks had been a battle well won and I couldn't wait to devour my prize.

I mentally sent a warning to my brother, threatening death and dismemberment if he didn't take a long walk and return quietly, before bringing Riley into the house.

She giggled in my arms as I closed the door behind us. Such a carefree sound compared to the whimpers she'd made in her sleep when she first arrived. I planned to elicit many different noises from her tonight, as soon as I got these damn clothes out of the way.

"You look beautiful in this dress." I kissed her bare shoulder as I set her on her feet.

"You're not too bad yourself," she said, turning so I could access the hidden zipper on the side.

A growl built in my chest as I dragged the zipper down, exposing inch by inch of her tender flesh that I kissed along the way.

I sank to my knees in front of her as she unhooked the fabric from the back of her neck, letting the black silk pool into a puddle at her feet.

Beautiful.

Mine.

Her breasts were bare and free from the confines of the dress, begging for my touch, and her knees knocked together as I came face to face with the black lace panties she wore.

Fuck me... I groaned, taking my time as I traced my fingers down her shivering thighs and reached for her ankle. I undid each strap of her heels, helping her step out.

I stood and pulled on my tie, trying not to rip it off. My cock strained the thin material of my slacks.

Riley leaned forward, pressing her bare stomach against my aching groin and smiling with timid confidence. "Let me?"

I'd let her do whatever she wanted.

My pulse raced as she slowly removed the noose from my neck. Her deft fingers made their way quickly through each button of my shirt.

I remained as still as possible. My skin rippled with anticipation. She tugged my shirt tails free and slid the fabric from my shoulders, pushing it to the floor.

"What do these tattoos mean?" Delicately, she followed the pattern of ink on my chest with the tip of her finger.

I could hardly breathe. "It's a visual representation of my power to ward. The knots tie magic together in a protective hold."

"Do all dragons have magic?" Her eyes captured me as she looked up and I was caught in the depths.

She is magic.

“Not all dragons can use magic, but we all have some within us,” I said. “And I can’t do anything other than create my wards.”

I’d explain more to her later. Another time. One where the distractions weren’t so tantalizing. Someday. Not now.

“I like your tattoos.” She pressed a kiss to the ink above my ribs.

I shivered. This human goddess had no clue of her power. It threatened to bring me to my knees.

My mate.

“Is this okay?” she whispered.

My balls drew tight as she traced her nails over my v-line and rested her fingers on the top of my leather belt.

Her heart fluttered nervously as she lowered her eyes.

I caught her by the chin and forced myself to stand steady. “There isn’t anything you couldn’t do to me.”

And that smile...

I welcomed the aching pain that settled in my bones as I let her explore at her own pace. The beast in me trembled as she gently pushed down my pants.

My cock jutted out to greet her, already glistening with precum. She wet her lips.

I forced my hands into fists.

“It is ribbed.” Riley’s eyes were blown as she looked up to my face. “Can I touch you?”

“If you don’t, I’ll die,” the words rushed out.

I wasn’t sure how much longer I could take this.

But the boldness with which her hand wrapped around my shaft and the gentle way that her fingers explored the length, stopping to trace each ridge eased some of the tension.

“Ember said it was... different.” Riley spoke in a hushed, reverent whisper.

“I really don’t want to hear about Kieran’s dick right now.” I involuntarily thrust into her hand as she traced the base of the third ridge. It was larger than the first two and would swell with my release. I’d only be able to make it fit after I’d stretched her to accommodate the others.

Goddess, how I wanted that.

The little vixen gave me a teasing wink as she tightened her grip, stroking harder. “I was only wondering if all dragon dick felt as good as she said.”

“Allow me to demonstrate.”

Riley gasped as I lifted her onto the bed, breaking my silent promise to let her work at her own pace. Pillows fluffed around her shoulders as she propped herself onto her elbows like a princess surveying her domain.

There was still one restriction between us.

I grabbed her by the ankles, lifting her legs together as I slowly peeled the lace underwear off, exposing her pink and sensitive flesh.

The spicy, sweet scent of hers flooded the room as she tried to squirm away.

“Don’t hide from me.” I released her ankles and gripped her knees, spreading them apart when she tried to keep them closed.

“Lucan, I...”

I slid my finger between her folds, capturing her little moan of pleasure with a kiss, as wetness coated my palm. I used her to make my fingers slick, rubbing and gently rolling her clit, until she broke our kiss to cry out against my tongue.

“So ready and wet for me,” I praised, slipping a finger inside her warm sex.

Riley bit down on her lip as she nodded.

Her tight channel squeezed me as I moved in and out, locating her G-spot and watching her throw back her head. She panted as I caught the rhythm, rocking my thumb against her clit and coaxing her toward the edge.

Too quickly, she started to tremble.

“That’s it,” I guided her. “Come all over my hand.”

She obeyed easily.

My dragon roared his approval as my Riley moaned through a needed climax.

But I was only getting started.

I pumped my finger in and out lazily, kissing my way down the curves of her body. That orgasm wasn't enough. I wanted her screams. Her essence wrapped around me. I needed to be deeper.

I pulled my fingers free, lifting her ass in my hands as I raised her core to my mouth and licked up her sinful taste.

"Lucan, please." She panted, dragging her fingers through my hair and yanking.

I growled as I tore my mouth away, seeing the hesitation on her face. "If you want to stop, we stop. No questions asked."

"It's not that." She shook her head frantically. "I need you inside me. Now."

Don't you dare deny her.

Groaning, I lowered her back to the bed and rocked my hand against her clit, slipping two fingers inside to stretch her and make sure I could fit.

The thought of her sex squeezing me had my dick weeping with joy.

I was so hard I ached as I kneeled between her legs, lining myself up and dragging the velvet tip of my cock against her center.

"You'll tell me if it's too much," I commanded.

She nodded once before resting against the pillows; her mouth popped open in a perfect circle of ecstasy as I eased my way into her tight heat.

Sensation overwhelmed me, making my muscles tighten as I braced over her, pulling out and pumping back into the tip of my first ridge.

“I can take more,” she whined, dropping her legs open to either side.

“I know you can, love.” I slowly thrust again. “This cock was made for you.”

Riley’s eyes rolled to the back of her head and she cried out as I broke the ring past the first ridge and stretched her wider.

The slightly hardened base of the first ridge rubbed against the internal spot I’d mapped, making her hands search wildly for something to hang onto as I dragged out her pleasure.

“More,” she begged.

I increased the pace, barely containing myself as the effort intensified to not take exactly what I wanted while giving her everything she needed.

Riley felt too good.

My fangs descended and I shut my mouth, biting down hard as I circled my hips.

“R iiiggghhtt.... There. Oh. Oh, please.” Her walls fluttered, squeezing around my cock as her fingernails dug into my shoulders.

I welcomed the pain, even as blood filled my mouth from my fangs piercing my lips and the effort to maintain a steady rhythm made my muscles shake.

It was worth it to hear her scream my name in worship as her second orgasm crashed over us both, urging me along with it as she tightened so beautifully and milked the

length of my shaft as I thrust once, twice more. My release spilled in hot jets as the third ridge began to swell.

Claim her, my beast roared as the bitter, fiery taste of venom burned my tongue.

Riley's tendons stretched as she arched her back, turning her neck to the side. The smooth skin was an invitation just for me.

Mine.

I nuzzled into her neck, feeling my fangs graze her skin.

And I turned at the last minute, pulling her sated body to my chest and wrapping her in my arms.

We weren't locked together. I hadn't gone all the way in. But I needed this moment with her pressed as close as possible while the dangerous possibilities swirled in my mind.

What if she never accepted my claim?

What then?

Could I go on this way?

We'll do whatever it takes.

Slowly, Riley raised her head. Mascara smeared around her eyes and her hair was sex tousled, coming undone from the pins.

Never had my Riley been so beautiful.

“You wanted to bite me. Why?” she asked.

I thought I’d done a good job holding back, but maybe she was instinctually sensing things through the bond.

That was a good sign.

“It’s part of my nature. The way dragons claim their fated mates,” I explained as I gently traced the bones of her spine.

Riley shivered beneath my touch as she buried her face against my shoulder again. “I guess that wouldn’t be so bad.”

My hand stilled at her admission. Not so bad?

It’s a start.

“But first,” she sighed into my chest as her hand moved further south. “I’m going to need you to be a little less gentle. I want more. You didn’t give me the third ridge.”

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Riley

Happy Girl

“I’m so sore.” I yawned as the morning light filtered into the bedroom. The blanket was tangled on our feet and the pillows were bunched around us like a nest. My body ached deliciously, but I’d never been more relaxed.

“That’s why we didn’t get to the third ridge.” Lucan chuckled. “But I can kiss it better.”

His lips pressed against the unbroken and unmarked skin at my throat where he’d ‘one day’ leave his claim. We hadn’t gone deeper than that explanation of biting to seal the bond before exploring each other again.

Orgasms had taken precedence over talking last night.

Still, something seemed missing.

It was hard being both utterly satisfied and a bit disappointed that I hadn’t been given everything I wanted.

And that isn’t the only thing hard around here.

Lucan’s beautiful dick brushed against my leg as he kissed his way down my chest. I loved his cock almost as much as I loved his tongue. My toes curled as I anticipated all the ways he could—

Dobby chose that moment to meow from the other side of the closed door.

“Someone’s upset that he wasn’t allowed in the room last night.” I threaded my fingers through Lucan’s hair. It was lush and thick, just like the rest of him. I couldn’t get enough.

“I’ll make it up to him at breakfast.” Lucan’s smile was wicked as he placed a kiss on my lower stomach and then disappeared under the covers.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I protested half-heartedly as he made his way lower and lower, spreading my legs open and settling his body between them.

Dobby meowed louder and more painfully this time.

“Stop,” I sighed.

The minute the word left my mouth, I panicked and wanted to take it back. I knew better than to start what I couldn’t finish.

Lucan stopped kissing me.

The blankets rose along with his head.

I kept my lips pressed tight, remembering how it was with Drew. In the beginning, before I’d begun denying him altogether, I couldn’t walk away in the middle of things without him pouting and blaming and then shouting and all the self-loathing that followed.

It was like a child’s tantrum meant to exhaust me until I finally gave in. By then, I was so disgusted with how it made me feel, that I rushed through the job.

Lucan pulled the blankets from his head and rested his chin on my stomach as he gave me a sly smile. “Later?”

“Later,” I agreed, feeling my muscles relax.

I had to stop comparing the two of them. There wasn’t a competition. Drew was an asshole.

And Lucan was...

I touched my unscarred neck, feeling the cold loss of his body heat as Lucan padded barefoot across the bedroom and opened the door, scooping up and cuddling my needy cat.

Lucan is my mate.

“How exactly does this bond thing work?” I asked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

He looked away but not before I saw the hope flash across his eyes. For such a big, ferocious guy, he expressed himself easily. That only made me love him more. There were no hidden surprises.

What you saw with Lucan was what you’d get.

“After I bite you, you’ll take my venom through my fangs. Dragon mates exchange venom and that gives them the power to heal each other. I don’t know what it means for humans. But Kieran was able to heal Ember and he thinks that it might also do something to extend her lifespan.” Lucan continued to stroke Dobby behind the ears.

My cat looked at me with his judgmental eyes, waiting for my response.

I wasn't sure about the longer life stuff, but we'd cross that bridge when we came to it.

"And what does being bonded mean?"

Lucan smiled.

That smile was dangerous. "It means we'll have a connection that transcends the human and dragon barrier. We'll form our path of communication and be able to feel each other in stronger ways."

I chewed my bottom lip. "And what happens if we choose to break this bond?"

"Why would we do that?" he growled like the idea was a personal offense.

I had to stop myself from brushing off my worries by pretending they weren't important. He deserved to hear the truth.

"What if you hurt me or if I hurt you?" I asked.

"Intentionally?" He shook his head. "Impossible. It would be like physically ripping my own heart out to hurt you on purpose. I'd tear myself apart if any harm came to you from me. Even now, without the bond, it kills me to see your fear. Could you imagine how much stronger that pain would be if I also felt what you are feeling and knew I had some part in it?"

"Sounds too good to be true," I laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

Lucan's smile fell. "You doubt me."

"It's not that." I scooted closer, clutching the sheets to my chest. "It's just my ex..."

Drew.”

I flinched when Lucan’s pupils narrowed into slits, but forced myself to sit tall.

“Drew is his name. He screwed me up in the head. It’s hard to trust again.” I took a deep breath. Lucan needed to hear this.

“It was so much. He lied all the time. He’d promise one thing and do another. All his paranoia I dealt with. Sometimes I didn’t know what was right anymore. It was a web of confusion I got tangled in deeper whenever I tried to escape. He’d be sweet one minute. Angry the next. And then he’d break down, needing me. I’d be walking on eggshells and know I should leave, but then somehow, I’d think it was all my fault and I couldn’t...”

Tears burned my eyes.

Just shut up, Riley.

I looked at Lucan, letting him see the vulnerability written on my face. “I was stupid and weak for staying with him so long.”

“No, no, no. My Riley.” Lucan’s growl was primal, but his touch was tender as he cupped my cheek. “You suffered and stayed because you thought you were needed. Love makes you a warrior, not a fool. Anytime you act from a place of compassion, you show strength. He was the coward who took advantage of and hurt you.”

“By that logic, didn’t he love me in his own way? Don’t you always need the ones you love?” I laughed derisively at myself as I wiped my eyes.

Dobby began to purr as Lucan stroked under his chin. My traitorous cat didn’t bother to check on me.

“A loving relationship shouldn’t be one-sided.” The pity on Lucan’s face made me look away. “What did you ever need from him?”

Tear my heart out why don’t you?

I drew in a ragged breath. “I needed what he couldn’t give.”

Stability, safety, kindness, romance...

All the things Lucan gave so freely.

I didn’t want to wait anymore.

Straightening my shoulders, I swept my hair to the side. It’d grown, like I had, and was long enough to get in my way now.

“I want you to claim me,” I said.

Lucan stopped petting Dobby and dragged a hand over his face, taking his time before he responded.

“No,” he said, breaking my heart. “Not yet. Not when you’re this vulnerable.”

“I’m not some little girl,” I snapped. “I said I wanted this, so stop holding back. It’s not just about us anyway. Ember and Kieran need to see if the rune will appear. We have people counting on us. And I need to go see Willow.”

Lucan captured my hands and held them within his. “You don’t owe anyone, anything. We have time to make this decision. The prophecy isn’t important. You are—”

The slamming of the door to the roof echoed through the house, sending Dobby bolting from the bedroom as Lucan's grip tightened on my hands.

"Malachy," I said, looking toward the hall.

Lucan shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. He's your brother." I shoved the big oaf off the bed. "Go after him. Make sure he's okay."

Lucan stood, releasing my hand, and pressed a kiss against my cheek. "You're too good, Riley. Stay here in the safety of my wards. I'll be right back and we'll continue this conversation then."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

I'm Going to Kill Him

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Green-hued scales glittered in the rising morning sun as my beast of a brother flew away.

When I caught up to him, I was going to wring his neck.

“We discussed this,” I growled through our link. “Earth hasn’t called for you and it’s safer if you stay with me.”

That last part had been implied.

And honestly, it felt like Earth was on my side.

Almost a month since a major activity shift gave Malachy plenty of time to heal after the last encounter. He was looking stronger. Healthier.

Besides him being a cock-block, it eased my worries to have him around. Not that I didn’t want him to return home eventually. But I wasn’t that much of a dick.

“I’ll be fine.” Malachy growled from up ahead as I gained on him. “Go back to your... mate.”

His wings cut through the sky with powerful strokes, flying harder and faster than most other dragons could. Most—but not me.

I flew directly into his flight path, avoiding his wings and claws as I dropped down to look my brother directly in the eye. “What are you? Jealous?”

I dodged left, barely missing the stream of fire that blazed from his open maw. It grazed the tips, singeing the feathers of my wings.

“You’ll pay for that,” I swore, correcting course and flying out of his path higher into the sky.

As soon as I got into position, I tucked my wings in tight. Three, two...

Malachy weaved away from my torpedo dive at the last second.

I kicked out with my rear talons, sending him somersaulting backward as I extended my wingspan to catch air.

My talons flexed as I roared my fiery fury.

The sky would be littered with our cloud trails today. Leave it to the human government to explain to their citizens why it looked like a chemical war zone up here.

My sole focus was latching onto my wayward brother’s neck like he was a hatchling and dragging his brooding ass back to my nest.

Malachy turned before my jaws made contact.

He roared at me.

I roared at him.

Air slipped through my talons as a gust of wind blew between us; his green underbelly moving out of reach. His back leg kicked me in the head.

Pain burst through my skull as I spun away.

“Are you done playing games?” Malachy panted through our link.

My ears were still ringing.

I glared at his stuck-up, retreating tail.

Of all the times I’d—

Enough.

I shook my head as the ringing stopped, calming myself with a few deep breaths. I wasn’t foolish enough to keep raging for no reason. Blind anger only clouded your vision and hastened mistakes.

“We’ve talked about this.” I steadied my course so I flew alongside my brother. “It isn’t safe for you to be alone anymore.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Malachy grumbled.

Arrogant. Ignorant. Asshole.

We flew in silence for a few moments as I bit my tongue, long enough to slow my heart and not regret the words I’d next speak.

“You force me to leave my mate,” I said when I was sure my dragon wasn’t going to tear my brother apart for being a dramatic idiot.

“Go back to her.” Malachy sighed. “Claim her. Be happy. If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

So he had heard our conversation.

I’d assumed as much but didn’t know what part he had the issue with.

I had a feeling though. “Is this about the prophecy?”

His snort and black smoke that rolled from his nostrils was the only reply I needed.

Duty and honor. It was what once bound us together. But his responsibility was to Earth.

I looked over my shoulder at my house and wards no more than a speck in the distance, torn on where my duty lay now.

“If you’d have listened to me earlier... Kieran thinks this could be the answer.” I flew faster as my brother increased his speed. “There’s a third woman. Don’t you at least... Malachy, wait!”

I chased after him as he tucked in his wings, doing the same technique I’d taught him as he tried to get away.

But the asshole wouldn’t escape that easily.

“Seriously, what is wrong with you?” I yelled as I matched his lower flight path and finally caught up.

Just when I was about to smash into him again, Malachy turned a tear-filled dragon eye my way.

The sight of it wrenched my stomach.

“You’re wrong, you know. I’m not jealous. I don’t want a mate.” His haunted voice made me sick, reminding me of our father during his final hours after our mother passed and his heart went with her. “All I want is for this curse to die with me.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Riley

Curiosity & the Cat

“We really shouldn’t be doing this.” I held Dobby pressed against my chest as I tested the door handle to the second bedroom—the room Lucan said didn’t have a bed and held his special treasures.

He didn’t exactly forbid me from entering this part of the house, but he hadn’t shown me it himself either.

The door was unlocked.

I was bored from sitting around all day waiting for Lucan to return. There wasn’t anything good on TV. The major news networks broadcasting the stay-home and lockdown orders for the rest of the world were too depressing. I wanted to explore and stretch my legs a little bit.

Dobby was the perfect scapegoat.

“Oops.” I placed my cat on the floor as I pushed open the door.

Dobby sat down and meowed, not moving.

“Don’t be a scaredy-cat,” I laughed. “It’s not like he can get mad at you for being curious.”

I gave him a little nudge with my foot.

Dobby climbed dramatically to his feet and stuck his tail in the air as he walked inside.

I didn't even recognize myself anymore.

That's not true.

The old, old me wouldn't have taken so long to investigate every place that'd been closed off. It was only the jaded adult version of myself that refused to take risks and cause some trouble.

Apparently, dragon-peen made me bold.

I missed not being afraid of everything.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the door wide enough for me to step foot into the room. "Here kitty, ki—"

I gasped. "Oh, no. Dobby you can't be in here."

No wonder Lucan closed the door.

Baskets of yarn filled the shelves. A row of multi-colored needles was organized in a wood rack against the wall. On the corner chair sat the yarn we'd picked out at the store and the beginnings of what looked like a scarf lay across the arm of the chair.

I should've guessed what was in here.

I scooped Dobby up as he made a beeline straight for the dangling string, scolding

myself for letting the cat inside.

He hissed at me.

I hissed back, laughing.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket and I dug it out with one hand, kicking the door to Lucan's treasure hoard closed behind me.

Dobby bolted to freedom and I was still giggling as I pressed the phone to my ear.
“Hello?”

“Sounds like I'm interrupting something fun.”

A stone sank to the pit of my stomach at hearing Drew's voice.

My smile fell. Stupid, Riley!

“Don't hang up,” he said.

I was going to be sick.

Slowly, I pulled the phone away from my ear.

“If you hang up, I'll have to drive to the cabin to see you.”

I froze with my finger hovering over the 'end call' button.

Tendrils of fear laced their way around my neck and squeezed. I pressed the speaker button instead.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.” His laugh was raspy and harsh, nothing like Lucan’s deep-chested rumble. It brought back old, disgusting memories.

That laughter. I hated it. Hated him.

“Good plan you girls had getting out of the city before they locked it down. It took me weeks to get out myself. I had to tell them my fiancé was waiting for me here in the mountains.”

Vomit rose up my throat. “I’m not your fiancé.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering the night I’d left. The one where he told me we were getting married. My life had flashed before my eyes and it was horrible. I’d said I was leaving.

He didn’t take it well.

And I took a fist to the face.

I’d never thought he’d go that far—far enough to leave bruises where people could see them.

A few hours later, after he’d cried and apologized, I slipped an Ambien into his soda and called Ember to pick me up.

“I get it now,” Drew said. “I was coming on too strong. But you’ve always known that you’re it for me, babe. We can wait a few months if you need more time to get on board with a wedding.”

Time. Just like Lucan and this mating mark...

No. It wasn't.

The voice in my head was a liar.

It was my instincts I was supposed to trust.

Because I'd been together with Drew for years and I still didn't want to be his wife. But I'd only known Lucan for a few short weeks and I already felt it deep in my soul that he was the one.

"Wait." I opened my eyes. "How do you know about the cabin?"

I hadn't told him. He was always talking about his conspiracy theories and how he wanted a piece of property 'off-grid' one day. The little part of my intuition that I couldn't ignore said to keep Ember's cabin a secret from him—just in case.

Drew made a condescending tsking sound into the phone. "You're so trusting. I had to make sure I knew your friend's backgrounds so I could keep you safe. Ember's cabin is public record."

"No, it isn't." My back hit the door behind me.

If what Kieran said was true, the government seized Ember's ranch ten years ago.

That meant...

I looked at the phone in my hand.

"You're tracking me." How is this possible?

“I care about you,” he said.

“Bullshit!” I seethed.

I raced to the windows, looking through the blinds. Lucan said the wards would protect me. Did he mean against humans too?

Those were the real monsters.

I took a deep breath, calming myself down. I was safe here. “If you’re really tracking me, then you’ll know I’m not at the cabin.”

The minute the words left my lips, I regretted every choice I’d ever made in my life.

Drew’s raspy laugh reminded me why.

“You didn’t know that,” I whispered. “Because you can’t track me anymore.”

I didn’t know if it was the wards or if he’d tracked me to the cabin another way. He might’ve mapped it out when he was at home and now he didn’t have the equipment to pinpoint my location.

I could go down spirals trying to discover the how and why with him. It was always mind games—always trying to stay one step ahead and backtracking enough to make me crazy.

“There’s my smart girl.” His praise made me angry. “Since you’re not at the cabin, why don’t you tell me where you are so I can stop by for a visit?”

“No.” I stood taller, feeling Lucan’s love and protection surround me. I was safe here. Drew couldn’t hurt me anymore. “You can go fuck yourself. We’re done. Leave me

alone and get the hell out of my life.”

The sigh on his end brought chills.

I shouldn’t have made him mad.

“You hurt me, Riley. Since you don’t want to be at the cabin, maybe I’ll go visit your friends instead. Are Ember and Willow there with her little girl? I wonder if they have enough room for me to stay.”

“Stop,” I growled. “You leave them out of this.”

“What do you care?” He baited. “Some friend you are. You’re not even there.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

How do I fix this mess? I wanted to ask.

Tears blurred my vision. I did this. If I hadn’t been so stupid, then he wouldn’t be in our lives. I’d brought him here. It was all my fault. I had to make it right.

“I’m just messing with you.” He sounded so earnest it confused me for a second. “All I want is to see you again. I have some of your stuff with me anyway. I figured you should have it.”

Lies!

“Will you go away for good if I meet with you?” I knew I couldn’t believe whatever he said, but I needed to stall so I could think this through.

“If you still want me to leave, I’ll go.” No one could sound as defeated as Drew.

“Where are you?” I walked to the kitchen, seeing the keys to Lucan’s bike hanging on the hook by the garage door.

“I thought you’d never ask.” His tone was smug again. I knew that voice. He thought he’d won. “There’s an old motel on HWY 10 right outside of Christmas. I’ll be waiting for you in room twenty-three. Oh, and Riley, don’t bring anyone else. You know how shy I can be.”

Lucan

This Place Could Use Some Work

“Where are we?” I wrapped my arms over my chest as I stared into the darkened cave. Water dripped down dirty stone walls and moss clung to the sides of the entrance.

“No one asked you to come.” Malachy growled as he crouched over a rock pit, breathing fire onto thin branches.

We had no clothes stashed here. In the lodge where he used to live—the place I’d warded for his protection—I wouldn’t be standing naked shivering my dick off.

“Is this... your new place?” I peered deeper into the cave. A stack of picked-clean deer bones lay in the back corner before the tunnel lined with bat droppings headed deeper into Earth’s depths.

It must’ve been a mid-life crisis.

He’d gone full dragon stereotype. All that was missing was a pile of gold coins under his ass and some screaming princess tied to the walls.

“Like I said, no one asked you to come,” he grumbled under his breath as the sticks caught light, casting deeper shadows around the cave.

Earth Almighty. He’s gone insane.

I inched closer to the fire, holding out my hands as if approaching a wounded beast. “What made you decide to move?”

“Fuck you,” he snarled.

I stopped shivering long enough to glare at my idiot brother. “You show up at my house broken and beat to shit after not speaking to me for years with a MacAlister hot on your heels breathing some dark magic curse. I nurse you to health, even though you cock-blocked me for weeks, and then you fly off in a tantrum forcing me to chase you like some flighty bird. Now you’re going to tell me to fuck off?”

The flames continued to grow making the shadows lengthen and shrouding Malachy in darkness as he rested back on his heels.

I crossed my arms and waited.

Finally, he sighed. “I had to leave.”

“Care to explain why?” I arched an eyebrow.

“You weren’t claiming your mate because of me.” He looked away. “I refuse to play a part in your idiocy.”

My brow furrowed as I replayed the conversation between me and Riley this morning.

“You think...” I glanced up as if the ceiling could give me patience to deal with this. “Is your ego that inflated? Forgive me, King Malachy, but not everything in this world has to revolve around you and the prophecy. Riley needs time to heal before she’s thrust into our world.”

“She begged you to claim her and you didn’t,” he said, confused. “I can understand wanting to protect her from this. From me.”

“But you can’t understand that I’d put her before the prophecy?” I chuckled.

The way my brother stared at me had the laughter dying on my tongue. I knew that face—had seen it before. His mind was warped, far beyond where I’d thought.

He looked just like our father.

“No, you wouldn’t get it,” I whispered, not unkindly. My gaze fell to Earth and I clenched my fists by my side.

It happened at times like this, the overpowering feeling of being too weak to do anything to stop the rushing tide. In these moments, I hated with a passion that I could hardly contain.

It made me young again. A hatchling of no more than twenty, watching my father lash out with fire and burn it into Malachy. The worst part was that he’d done it with love, knowing if Malachy wasn’t strong enough to withstand Earth’s rage, She’d eat him alive.

And they’d tried to shield me from it.

I knew I was lucky in that I’d always had the choice to make my own path. It was this choice I was now extending to Riley.

But my brother wouldn’t understand.

He couldn’t.

So, I raised my eyes and offered a playful grin. “You weren’t cock-blocking me on purpose, then?”

Malachy smiled slightly in return. “Maybe a little. I could feel it, you know? The bond aching to connect you two and pulsing stronger with each day. It’s enough to make anyone sick.”

I rubbed my chest. “She’s perfect.”

“But you still won’t claim her?” His tone was no longer teasing.

“I can’t.” I sighed, squatting down next to him by the fire. “She isn’t ready yet.”

“No one is ever ready to answer Earth’s call.” Malachy picked up a stick from the ground and broke it in half. “I’m sorry I can’t figure out a way to give you both more time.”

“You’re an idiot,” I growled. “And you’re not alone with this anymore.”

Malachy went to argue, but I held up my hand.

“Kieran has a theory and you should hear it out. If Riley presents with the rune mark after our mating, it’d make sense the third woman is tied to us in some way too. Even if Riley and I don’t end up mating, you can still meet Willow. What harm could it do to see?”

“Harm?” Malachy blew out a heated breath. “I don’t think you know how much harm can be done. And a human woman? No offense to Riley, but this isn’t a life most dragons could handle.”

“No one is expecting any human to take this position.” I won’t allow it. I clenched

my jaw just thinking about Riley being forced into Earth's service. "But how long has it been since any of our species found a fated mate? And now of all times. If the rune had never appeared on Ember's neck, it'd still be too connected to be coincidence."

Malachy tossed broken bits of stick into the fire. "I don't want to watch anyone else burn. Let this burden die with me."

We sat there in silence, staring at the flames.

I didn't have an answer for him.

Telling him he had to suck it up and fight harder, knowing he'd been fighting longer than the rest of us, seemed hollow and wrong.

He'd never been able to make his own decisions before. How could I stay here and demand he follow this path when I was doing all I could to give Riley her freedom to choose?

At the end of the day, he was right.

And we'd both seen enough to know we were tired of suffering.

I rested my arms on my knees. "Someone hurt Riley. Her ex-boyfriend."

Malachy looked at me from the corner of his eye. "Why the fuck are you still sitting here?"

"I'd learned his name moments before you flew off with your feathers in a fluff." I shrugged with one shoulder. "You didn't give me enough time to hunt him down."

"I could use a hunting trip." Malachy nodded.

I smirked as I stretched out my hands. “Bring his pelt back to your cave and pin it on the wall? This place could use a little color.”

“Maybe you should knit me something.” Malachy rolled his eyes.

“Nope. You chose the cave; you don’t get comfort.” I climbed to my feet, watching as the flames danced higher, pulling the magic of the world into my fingertips.

“You’re going to do this now?” Malachy rested back against the stone wall and closed his eyes. “Wake me when you’re done.”

“Yes, oh King Guardian Royal Highness.” I shook off my annoyance as I cracked my knuckles, letting the strength of my protective nature flow through me.

I wanted to hurry and hunt a scumbag human down so I could get back to my beautiful mate.

But first, I had an annoying older brother who needed my wards for protection, since he decided to live in a cave like some feral beast.

Riley

On the Road Again...

Lucan's helmet was heavy on my head and my nerves thrummed in tune with the engine humming between my legs. The wind chilled through the leather jacket I'd borrowed. I couldn't help but miss Lucan's warm arms around me.

He hadn't returned at all last night.

I'd laid awake for the first time in weeks, letting my anxious thoughts consume me.

I couldn't wait much longer.

Every second I didn't act gave Drew that much more time to come up with a plan to hurt me—to hurt my friends.

This was a mistake.

I knew it.

It felt like every cheesy horror movie where you're screaming at the girl to stop running up the stairs when the serial killer breaks into the house.

Unlike the movies, this was real life.

And Drew was really capable of hurting someone. I'd rather it was me. I couldn't live

with myself if he went after Ember or Willow.

Revulsion twisted my stomach.

This was my fault. I'd brought him into our lives. Led him to believe we had a future together. All for what? Because I was too scared to leave?

I had to handle this.

It was the only way I could reclaim the part of me that Drew had taken bit by bit over the years. I couldn't wait around hoping for Lucan or anyone else to help solve my problems.

I was old enough to take care of myself.

And I needed to get Drew far away from everyone I loved while I figured out how to end this for good.

Through the miles and miles of empty desert, I tried to come up with a plan that didn't involve me going back to Portland with Drew. He wasn't leaving empty-handed.

He knows about the cabin...

He'd probably want that more.

I chewed the inside of my cheek raw as I eased off the throttle, turning left down the abandoned back country roads.

Thankfully Lucan's cell booster on the motorcycle worked with the GPS maps on my phone, or I would've been lost hours ago.

Dragons are resourceful.

Kieran wouldn't let Ember get hurt, but what about Willow? It was only her and Harper there living at the cabin.

I should call for backup.

But I had to go alone.

Drew would make good on his threats if I didn't.

I knew him. The minute he sensed something wrong, he'd disappear. And that was worse.

The thought of him angry and out there somewhere waiting to get his revenge—of always looking over my shoulder and watching for his next move—made my throat close up.

I refused to live walking on eggshells again.

It was better to face this head-on.

The road split with one lane veering right towards Christmas. I drove just past it. The hotel was five miles up ahead. I still didn't have a solid plan. Drew was waiting, probably angry I was taking so long. He'd be frustrated. I didn't have an excuse.

I slowed to a stop as my nerves got the best of me. My breaths came short. Lightheaded, I removed the helmet to suck in some fresh air.

Maybe I'm too old for this.

It'd be so easy to turn around and go hide somewhere. To let someone else handle my problems and take the reins. Twenty years later and I still wished I could call my parents to ask them what the right answer was.

“You’re not trusting your instincts...”

It was Lucan’s voice in my head that came to me in that moment and instinctually, I knew he was right.

I’d almost forgotten how fast my heart could beat, but I willed it to slow down. That numbness I used to sink into was still there, waiting at the edge of my consciousness like an old friend, but I purposefully made myself feel what was in this moment.

The sun on my skin. The wind in my hair. The strength of my muscles as they tightened and relaxed. Tears filled my eyes and I let them glide down my face, drying in the desert breeze.

I was strong enough to handle this.

I wouldn’t cower to that asshole anymore.

And I should at least let someone know where to find me.

“Willow is going to be so upset that I didn’t change my number.” I laughed to myself as I took another deep breath, letting life fill my lungs. I dug through my purse for my phone.

Ember was the one I needed, though. She came with fire at her call. I didn’t want to bother her, but I knew she’d kill me if something happened and I didn’t give her a heads up.

The lock screen showed a missed text.

Drew: Tick, tock. I'm tired of waiting.

I bypassed his text message, careful not to open it so it didn't show as read, and sent a quick text to Ember letting her know where I was if anything went wrong.

Lucan hadn't brought his phone when he flew after Malachy and I hadn't missed any calls from him, so he probably still wasn't home.

But I messaged him anyway.

Riley: I'm in love with you. Not sure if that's the mate bond speaking, but I trust myself again. Thanks for believing I could. I'm glad you kidnapped me. Also, don't be mad. But I have to do this.

Another text came through as I hit send and I saw the preview.

Drew: Time's almost up.

I dropped my phone to the ground and slid the helmet back over my head.

Reversing, I backed up over the phone and then drove away, leaving the broken fragments of glass glittering on the black pavement under the hot desert sun.

?

"Look at you." Drew whistled. His leering gaze perused me from head to toe.

It wasn't the first time I'd wanted to hide when he looked at me, but it was the first time I felt clearheaded disgust as I wondered what I ever saw in this man.

He sat on a green plastic lawn chair outside the front door of Room 23, wearing that stupid short brim fedora to cover his receding hairline. His scruffy face was covered in stubble to hide his lacking chin.

Designer ripped jeans he got from the thrift store matched his faded flannel shirt that stretched over his pot belly.

No one told him he was too old to keep trying the ‘hipster’ look. Not that he’d ever been able to pull it off, anyway.

I squinted, hoping to see a brief glimpse of why I’d found him attractive when we first met. He pushed himself out of the chair and walked to stand beside his faded brown Buick with confidence, but the man had nothing on Lucan’s easy swagger.

“I’m here. What do you want?” I glanced around the parking lot, which was empty except for the Buick, getting a sense of where here was.

The shades were drawn tight on the office and the closed sign sat in the window despite the vacancy sign hanging on the billboard.

It felt like a ghost town.

To prove my point, a tumbleweed blew past.

No one to hear me scream.

I straightened my chin as Drew crossed his arms, leaning against his car.

“You didn’t respond to my texts today.” He frowned, making his shit-brown eyes look sad. “I was worried about you.”

“I dropped my phone somewhere on the highway.” I shrugged, feeling confident that I wouldn’t have the ‘tell’ he said I did when I tried to lie.

I knew better than to bring my phone around him. How many times had he demanded to scroll through mine yet I never got the password to his?

So many red flags. How had I been so blind?

“That’s too bad.” Drew stood there relaxing against the car. My skin prickled with warning. He was holding back and acting casual. Why?

My brain started trying to rationalize.

Maybe I was making a big deal out of nothing. I’d been so dramatic crushing my phone. It’s not like he was going to steal my bag and demand to look at my texts.

Right?

“Motorcycles are dangerous.” Drew’s frown deepened as he looked past my shoulder to the bike. “Whose is that anyways?”

Ah, he’s trying to get me to let my guard down.

“Just a friend’s.” I crossed my arms, mimicking his stance. “Want to tell me what I’m doing here? You said you had some of my stuff.”

“Must be some friend to loan you his bike.” Drew’s face changed as he grinned. I knew that smile. It was fake. I think. “We need to talk. I’ll get you your stuff in a minute. Come on inside so we don’t bother anyone else.”

“I’d rather not.” I stood my ground. “There’s no one here to listen.”

Drew looked around as if only just noticing that.

“Still, it’s weird to yell at you across the parking lot.” He kicked off from his car and went back to the plastic lawn chair, patting the second one’s seat. “We can sit outside if that makes you more comfortable.”

None of this makes me comfortable.

“Just hurry up and say your piece.” I didn’t want to move away from Lucan’s bike.

“Don’t be like that, babe.” Drew relaxed in the chair. “We used to have great conversations. Now you don’t want to talk to me anymore.”

No, I don’t. I reached into my purse hanging at my side and wrapped my hand around the pocket knife. The weight of it in my fist helped me feel steady.

“You have five minutes until I leave. Speak.”

“What’s the hurry? It’s not like the world is ending today.” Drew crossed one ankle over his knee.

He looked so calm. Here I was tense and sweating, full of nerves and acting crazy as I stood alone in the parking lot. He gave me a sad smile like he knew what I was thinking.

Pissed off, I marched over to the second chair and dragged it a few feet away before taking a seat.

“Was that so hard?” he asked, still smiling.

“Four minutes left. Start talking.” I flinched, realizing who I was speaking to this

way. Twice now I'd been direct and he hadn't corrected me. Not even a single jaw tick.

I was so confused.

Am I losing my mind?

Had he changed or was this some sort of trick?

Drew sighed. "Portland is crazy since you left. I told you they were going to shut it down. The military came rolling up the freeway in tanks, going door to door and enacting a curfew. You know Jimmy and Wilson who own the Airstream at the trailer park? They tried locking up the fence to keep the government out, but they just bulldozed through."

I stared at Drew, wondering why the hell he was telling me all this. Like we were two old friends discussing the weather—or I guess the apocalypse.

"I hope they're okay..." I said slowly.

Really, I liked Jim and Will.

It was Drew I didn't care for anymore.

"They're all right." He waved it off. "But I had to get out of there before they started locking us all up in FEMA camps."

And there he is.

"Right, the FEMA camps." I nodded, trying not to laugh. He and his friends had all these conspiracies about the government, but they didn't know the half of it. I don't

think anyone did.

There are literal dragons out there.

I glanced at the sky, feeling a sense of peace wash over me.

And I'm in love with one.

Drew kept talking without noticing my distraction, "But you've got your setup out here. I should've known how smart you always were."

I stared at him, waiting for the point. This was right out of his standard playbook, buttering me up with compliments before laying the request on thick.

"You're not coming to Ember's cabin."

Drew waved me away like he'd done all my concerns. "I know you don't want me there now, but I bet you don't have great security. I'm not trying to scare you. It's just that things are going south, fast. You'll want more manpower protecting you and the girls."

"More manpower?" I smirked, thinking of how big dragons could get.

There it is. A vein throbbed in his temple as he wiped sweat from his brow. It was quick enough to miss if you weren't looking for it.

Drew turned up the charm on his smile. "Let's be real, Riley. You're no match for a full-grown man. I can protect you out here."

My blood ran cold. "Are you kidding? Why would I trust you as a man not to hurt me? You're the one I need protection from," I whispered the last sentence, shocked

that I'd said it to his face.

"I already told you I'm sorry for that," Drew shook his head condescendingly like he was speaking with a child, "but that does show you I'm a man who can stand up for himself and those he loves. I'm not afraid of a fight."

"You're out of your fucking mind." I stood.

Drew rubbed his temples. "There you go again, yelling and getting all worked up for nothing. It's hard for anyone to control their temper when you scream in their face."

I hadn't screamed.

Did I scream?

I'd raised my voice. He was right.

"Sit down." Drew sighed.

"No." I shook my head, turning to leave. "This was a mistake."

"I didn't say you could go yet." Drew's anger leaked out.

I bit back a cruel laugh as I started walking across the parking lot. This was all some sort of sick—

Pain seared through my scalp, bringing tears to my eyes as Drew grabbed a fistful of my hair.

Not again.

I tried to wrench myself free, twisting to the side as his arm locked around my neck and squeezed.

My eyes bulged as I threw my elbow back, making him grunt and loosen his hold.

Something sharp bit into my chest.

I glanced down to see the needle poking out of my skin as his arm wrapped around my neck again.

“That’s it,” the monster whispered as I slumped forward. “It’s time for you to relax. No need to get so worked up. I’m here now. I forgive you. Everything is going to be okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Bad News Travels Fast

“There.” I stretched my arms above my head, easing the tension in my muscles as I admired my handiwork. It’d taken all night and most of the morning, but I’d finished it up.

It’s done. Let’s go.

In a minute. It’d been a few years since I cast something new and the pride I felt was welcome despite the whirling anxiety of my dragon urging me to leave.

I always felt lighter after I created a ward.

I’d just started guardian training with my brother when we found out about my skills and I’d had plenty of time to practice over the last few centuries.

Natural ward magic was rare in the paranormal world, though spells did exist that could hold protective boundaries for a time. My magic held strong until I chose to remove it, creating a barrier over an intended space that no one wishing harm could enter.

Simpler patterns like the one over my nest could keep everyone out. I’d crafted that one especially for me, only letting my brother in without permission, and altering it slightly for Riley to come and go as she pleased.

This ward, like the one I'd created over the lodge where Malachy used to reside before his barbaric breakdown, took more effort because it needed to judge the intent of each visitor. I had to create a failsafe for a change of heart after entry. Frustrating, really. Even magic had issues predicting the future.

The pattern of wards intertwined in knots wasn't visible to most eyes, but I could see it clear as day. The web reached across the treetops and extended down the mountain, touching the sky and soil to form a protective dome for my idiot brother here in his cave.

Malachy had gone hunting after his nap and returned just as I finished the last threads of the ward.

I glared at him as my dragon paced restlessly. "Do you want to explain why you moved out of the lodge?"

When I thought of all the work I'd done there going to waste, it needled my beast further.

We need to go.

"It's too quiet in that big house." Malachy sat on his haunches as he threaded his kill over a stick.

Since when do dragons eat squirrel? My beast huffed in irritation.

I headed to the mouth of the cave. "You could've invited guests. Had a party or something."

It'd been at least forty years since any of us gathered, but who was counting?

Malachy gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I’m not much fun anymore.”

I stopped walking when he let out a stream of fire from his mouth to char the rodent on the stick.

Leave him to his meal. We have better places to be.

I ignored my instincts as I watched my brother bite into the grizzled meat. “Have the tributes stopped coming?”

Malachy snorted another laugh as he chewed. “I haven’t seen a tribute in half a century. The MacAlisters paid their respects, though.”

Goddess.

Had we truly fallen this far?

Since the beginning of the era of dragons, a guardian had always served Earth. As society changed and evolved, the supernatural beings never forgot the sacrifice that guardians made.

Different species paid homage in different ways, coming to bestow gifts and paying tribute to the guardian throughout the cycles of the year.

Around two centuries ago, when we realized our species was dying out and no new dragon fated mate pairs were being found anywhere in the world, Malachy had begun to lose his strength.

In his prime, they said he was the strongest guardian we’d seen in thousands of years. But over the last century, he’d gotten weaker as all guardians did when it was time to pass on the role.

And it was about the time we truly realized that the prophecy signaled us as the end.

Dealing with that was a hard enough blow, but to think the rest of the supernatural world had turned their back on him too...

I stared at my brother crouched over the fire as if seeing him for the first time.

Poor Malachy.

He'll be fine. We need to get back to Riley.

A buzzing sound caught my attention.

Malachy's brow furrowed as he looked to the darkened corner of the cave near the picked-clean bones.

I kicked aside a pile of leaves at the cave entrance, seeing the power cord running along there leading to where Malachy was charging his phone.

"Guess you couldn't go full cave dragon." I chuckled, patting my bare legs out of habit.

In my haste to follow him, I hadn't brought my travel bag or my cell phone.

It's time to go. My dragon roared.

Malachy picked up his phone. "Why is Kieran calling me?"

A chilling breeze whipped through the cave.

My mouth went dry and my hands clenched to fists as I immediately began to call the

shadows.

“Answer it,” I barked out harshly.

Fool. You left her alone.

The pounding of blood filled my ears.

A deep knowing settled in my bones as they shifted, rearranging to that of my dragon while Malachy listened to Kieran’s panicked voice come from over the distance in a way magic couldn’t replicate.

I didn’t need my advanced hearing to know something had happened to my mate.

My wings unfurled as I stepped out of the cave and my vision tunneled red as I jumped off the mountainside, finishing the shift to dragon mid-air while I beat my wings hard to gain altitude.

“Tell him I’m coming,” I roared to my brother as I took off toward the tug of the unsealed bond in my chest, leaving a burning trail of smoke in my wake and flying faster than I ever had before.

Riley

Ouch

I stared at the soap-scum yellow and chipped porcelain tile that was well past its use-by date while the haze of drugs cleared from my mind. There was a small mark on my chest where he'd pierced it with the needle. I hoped that was the worst of the damage.

You're not dead yet.

I sucked in a slow breath to calm my racing heart before I did something stupid like scream and alert him I was awake. Slowly, I flexed my hands and feet.

He hadn't tied me up.

I rolled my head to the side, testing my range of mobility. The pulsing throb in the back of my scalp intensified as I rubbed it against the hard bathtub.

He must've dragged me by my hair.

It wasn't the first time Drew had used that particular move. There was a reason I'd started wearing it short. I hated trying to work out the knots.

As quietly as I could, I pushed myself up onto my elbows.

I was in a cramped bathroom, lying in the bathtub, next to a toilet with stains on the

seat. A vinyl shower curtain hung from one of those cheap aluminum tension rods above me. To the left was a bathroom vanity with cigarette burns on the counter bolted to the wall. A small window—not big enough to push even Harper through—was cracked open a bit near the ceiling.

At least I'm in here alone.

I patted my hands up and down my body, checking for injuries as the fog continued to clear.

My clothes were still on. Nothing was sliced open or broken. I was a little uncomfortable, but I'd live.

A silver lining.

Look at you, practicing gratitude.

I continued to slowly sit up, listening for sounds from the other room. The window had a metal screen on it. But if I could climb on the counter, maybe I could call for—

The bathroom door swung open.

"I was wondering when you'd wake up." Drew unbuttoned his pants as he came into the small room.

I pushed myself back against the tub, feeling my heart beat faster as I looked around for a weapon. "You drugged me."

"The way I see it, we're even." He unzipped his fly and started peeing all over the toilet seat. His hairy butt peeked out from under the waistband of his jeans.

I shuddered.

What did I ever see in him?

Nothing now. I didn't know how I'd fallen into his clutches in the first place. I was smart. Pretty-ish. Not weak. But maybe it didn't matter who or what I was—even the best of us could be trapped in a nightmare if we weren't careful where we went to sleep.

“Are you all right?” He shook himself dry before tucking back into his pants. “Did you want to rinse off or something?”

The fake concern in his voice made me sick.

“You. Drugged. Me,” I spat through clenched teeth as I slowly climbed to my feet.

“You drugged me first.” The world swayed a little as Drew put his hands in the air. “And you were the one screaming, out of control. I figured it'd help you calm down a bit so we could finish our little talk.”

“Are you crazy?” I asked in a rush.

For so long, I wondered if I was the crazy one, but if I'd just listened to my gut, I'd have known the truth.

“Crazy?” He tsked. “Come on now. You're the one who rode in on a random guy's motorcycle like some Harley Davidson slut.”

Random guy? A laugh bubbled in my chest.

If only Drew knew...

Hope fluttered in my stomach.

Lucan.

I had to survive this for him.

“And you really dropped your phone on the road?” Drew was still talking. “It’s a good thing you made it to me. The desert isn’t a safe place for women to be alone.”

I glanced at the door, knowing my purse was out there somewhere. He must’ve gone through it. That meant he had my knife.

At least I had the foresight to dump my phone before he could get into it and read my texts. It was probably the only reason we were still here talking instead of on the road.

I should’ve expected this, though. Should’ve stayed one step ahead.

In your defense, where’d he even get drugs?

On second thought, I didn’t want to know.

But I needed to keep him talking for a minute until my head completely cleared and I could think my way out of this.

“What exactly did you see happening after you shot me full of drugs?”

“Quit being dramatic.” Drew rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t that much. Sheila takes twice the amount and she’s skinnier than you.”

Sheila...

You know what?

I also didn't care to know.

"Fine." I forced myself to smile. "What do you want to happen now?"

"I told you." He reached forward and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "We can help each other out."

Somehow, I didn't recoil from his touch. The numbness must've been seeping in again, wrapping me in her embrace.

"There are other places you can go," I said, keeping my expression blank. "Your friends had a plan, didn't they?"

Wrong thing to say!

I watched the anger roll across his face in slow motion, wishing I could swallow back my words. Something happened. The flash of disgust in his eyes said he partially blamed me.

But it wasn't my fault.

It was never my fault.

I knew that now.

"I know what I said," Drew spit, making me flinch. "The investors didn't commit. Everyone got cold feet."

Lies! I wanted to scream.

“Oh, you poor dear,” I said instead.

It was so damn hard to not call him out.

After all the years of conspiracy talk—the bunker they planned to build and the land they were going to buy—it was always just that... talk.

He never had a real plan.

Not like Lucan, who had an answer for everything; a quiet sort of strength that wasn't showy. He handled what needed to be handled and took care of whatever needed to be done.

I trusted him to be true to his word.

Unlike Drew.

How did I ever compare the two of them?

Lucan was so far out of Drew's league. Maybe he was out of mine too. But I knew I didn't deserve this sniveling weasel crowding me in a cheap hotel bathroom.

“It's okay.” Drew's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, acting brave. “You know I'll always take care of things. It's better this way without all of them dragging us down.”

I felt like I was watching my life play out on a movie screen, seeing it from a bird's eye view. This song and dance we'd done a hundred times before.

I hadn't realized how fake it all was.

But I knew how to act the part, how not to rile up a delusional patient. “That must’ve been hard.” I kept my eyes trained on his face but let my gaze drift to the window again.

“So hard.” He nodded. “You know I was the one who gave them intel and coordinated all our plans. Then when the tanks came into town, everyone just bailed.”

“Screw them.” I gave a playful eye roll so I could look up at the shower curtain.

“Exactly.” Drew snapped his fingers, pulling my attention back. “It always was just me and you anyway. I’m glad I made it here. Now, you know I can help with security. I brought cameras with me to set up at the cabin.”

“Oh wow, you thought of everything.” I glanced at our reflection in the mirror firmly affixed to the wall.

“Of course I did.” He liked to hear himself talk. “We’ll need some sort of perimeter to protect against anyone who wants to attack. That’s where I come in.”

I bit down on my bottom lip, pretending to think as a plan started to take shape. “How will the cameras work? We don’t have power.”

“I knew you wouldn’t have thought about electricity.” His smug smile made my stomach twist. “Don’t worry, babe. I brought solar panels. We’ll get you all hooked up.”

My smile was so fake it hurt. “I’ll have to talk to Ember, but I broke my phone. Maybe we can both head over there and ask what she thinks.”

Drew puffed out his deflated chest. “I knew you’d come around.”

“You make a good argument.” I nodded. “I’m going to get out of the tub now, if that’s okay.”

“Oh, yeah. Yes. Come on out.” He took a step back. “Sorry about putting you in there. It seemed like the safest place to keep you propped up so you didn’t choke. You know how much I worry about you.”

He held out his hand, wearing the same apologetic grin I’d seen a hundred times before—usually, while I was nursing a bruised arm or brushing the knots from my hair after it’d gotten tangled on his fist.

“I sure do.” I blew out a steadying breath, making sure I was as clearheaded as I could be and giving him my left hand while I stepped onto the tub ledge.

“You’ll see.” Drew started pulling me towards him. That calculating gleam shone in his eyes despite his playful tone, “I’ll make you regret ever wanting to leave me.”

“Ha.” I laughed.

His eyes widened as I yanked my hand free.

“Ha. Ha.” I grabbed the shower curtain tension rod from overhead.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” I screamed as I shoved it against his jugular, pushing him backward with all my strength.

Drew’s hands flew into the air.

We slammed against the tiled wall.

I pinned him there with the bar against his throat.

He smacked at me.

I held tighter, gritting my teeth and ignoring the pain of his hits.

I was so much stronger than I used to be. My muscles were trained and strengthened from weeks of testing Lucan's patience.

Drew's fat belly shuddered between us. His unshaven face bulged purple and red as he tried, and failed, to get his feet straight underneath him.

I pressed tighter as his arms weakened and the fight started to drain out.

"Not so tough anymore," I cried.

My rage boiled over, filling the small bathroom. It was thick enough to drown us both.

"But you never were strong," I continued to scream. "You were the weak one. Pathetic. What kind of a little bitch hurts someone smaller than them?"

He went limp and still I held onto the bar.

Tears streamed down my face. "I'm strong. You're nothing. And you won't hurt me again."

My arms started to shake from holding up his weight. I dropped the bar, taking a step back as his heavy body slumped to the floor.

Spit ran down his chin.

I wiped the tears from my face.

Oh, shit. What did I do?

I knew I should check his pulse and make sure he wasn't dead.

Or maybe make sure that he is...

Shaking my head, I took a step back. And then another. My heart was pounding and my hands were shaking. I needed—

“Riley!” The bellowed roar preceded the sound of an explosion.

I stepped out of the bathroom to a blast of heat and flying splinters of drywall and doorframe.

Shadows seemed to race toward me, causing a cooling breeze that pushed the debris away and created a cocoon of safety in the storm that was his anger, reacting to mine.

Lucan!

Every part of my body relaxed upon seeing him marching through the ruins of the hotel room. Rage swirled in the shadows that danced around him, but compassion for me burned in his turquoise eyes.

“Are you hurt?” And that was his first question.

Not what was I doing here or why did I leave.

It took everything in me not to sag into his arms as he crossed the room in two long strides, closing the distance between us and gripping me by the shoulders.

I shook my head in answer to his question.

I couldn't speak.

My throat burned from screaming and I was still in shock about what I'd done.

Lucan gathered my hands in his and pressed them against his chest, nodding as if he didn't need to hear my words to know.

His lips brushed against my forehead as he whispered, "Wait outside."

I let his strength take this one and my feet obeyed, carrying me to what was left of the door.

"There she is! Riley!" Ember screamed as she hopped out of the Bronco. Willow was right beside her. The two of them left the vehicle doors open in the parking lot as they raced toward me.

The ground shook when Kieran's dragon landed on the road behind them.

An angry roar came from the hotel room.

I kept moving forward in a numb daze.

"Are you all right?" Ember cried.

Willow pulled me to her chest. "What happened? Why didn't you call?"

Some of their worry seeped through the numbness and I forced another smile, patting their arms as I found my voice again. "So... I didn't get around to changing my number and then I sort of broke my phone."

"This isn't your fault," Willow said in her motherly tone that left no room for

argument. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for him coming here.”

“I don’t.” When I stepped away from their loving embrace, I let them see the truth in my eyes. “I didn’t deserve this. I never did. And hopefully, I won’t ever have to deal with it again.”

“Wait, where are you going? Come with us to the Bronco. We’ll go to the cabin where it’s safe.” Ember reached out to keep me in the friend huddle.

Willow put her hand on Ember’s shoulder, holding her steady as I started to back up. “Give her a minute. Riley needs some time alone.”

I gave Willow a real smile, hoping she’d see my gratitude for everything they’d done, before I turned and walked away.

Lucan

Indigestion

Kieran returned from whatever gloryhole he'd dropped the bastard's car into. The owner of the hotel was nowhere to be found, but once I'd cleared all trace of the waste of human male ever setting foot in this place, I put a call into the paranormal authority division.

We waited for over an hour for the helicopter to arrive. Dion—our tiger shifter liaison in the division—looked rough as he jumped out of the bird in full black camo fatigues.

“The local human authorities have their hands full managing the breakdown, so they won't start an investigation all the way out here. As far as I'm concerned, this never happened,” he spoke to Kieran.

That was fine by me. I didn't much like dealing with the government these days.

“But I would like to know about these rumors involving the runes and a human mate,” Dion said.

Kieran looked at me.

I stepped away.

“We'll tell you more when we learn more,” my cousin said.

They taped off the destroyed room and then the helicopter flew into the air.

It wasn't enough—not the cover-up job—but the suffering of the human waste before he met his well-deserved end. If I could go back in time and make it worse for him, I would.

“Will she be okay?” Kieran came to stand beside me as I stood in the setting desert sun staring at the jagged rock formation in the distance.

My Riley was a tiny figure as she scaled the outcropping.

Careful...

“She'll be fine.”

“You still haven't claimed her,” Kieran spoke in that calming tone of his that could stop dragon clans from tearing out each other's throats. “Not that I'm rushing you, but if our theory is correct—”

“Why haven't you forced Malachy to come in?” I changed the subject. With all this theoretical nonsense, it was the guardian who really mattered.

Wasn't it?

“No one forces Malachy to do anything.” Kieran gave a bitter laugh.

The desert wind blew in the silence that followed.

Feminine whispers drifted to us on the breeze from where Ember and Willow sat talking on the hood of the Bronco.

After a few beats, Kieran sighed. “I don’t want to get his hopes up if this isn’t the answer.”

“And these scrolls of yours say that Riley is the answer?” I knew they didn’t, but I wanted to remind him that he had no claim to my mate.

“The scrolls don’t tell us anything.” Kieran glanced back at his female. I recognized that lovestruck look in his eyes. “They’re the answer. I feel it in my bones. But we need more information to understand why.”

“Riley is not your test subject.” I turned away from my cousin.

Watch it... I breathed slowly through my nose, trying to contain the protective nature of my beast as Riley slid down the rock face a foot, gripping a bush to steady herself.

“I know that,” Kieran said. “But she is a part of something bigger than us.”

“I won’t rush her.”

“Even if the fate of the world lies in her hands?” Kieran asked softly so as not to rile my beast.

“Especially not then.” I looked at him from the corner of my eye. “Earth can burn for all I care. As long as my Riley enjoys the warmth of the flames.”

I saw the fear flash in his eyes.

Sacrilege is what they’d say.

I waited for Earth to voice her disapproval, ready to fly at a moment’s notice if anything happened to my mate.

All was quiet and still.

Kieran clasped my shoulder and gave it a gentle shake. “You know, I’ve missed our conversations. If this is all that comes from it, I’m glad we’re speaking again.”

Old age has turned him soft . I chuckled to myself.

No. It was a pretty girl that did that.

“It’s good to visit with you again, cousin.” I winced as Riley fell to her butt, then felt pride as she stood, brushing off her backside.

“Make sure to come around more. We’ll have a dinner.” Kieran released my shoulder. “But first, go be with your mate before she gives us all a heart attack.”

?

My dragon wings tucked into my side as the shadows dispersed. I pulled on the pair of pants I’d dropped from my talons before landing. My skin was dragon-scale thick, but goat head thorns sucked and I preferred to keep them out of more delicate places.

I perched on the ledge of a boulder, extending my hand.

Sweaty, chest-heaving, and beautiful, Riley looked at my hand before grasping it and pulling herself up to the peak.

“I’m surprised you let me get all the way up here alone,” she huffed, but there was no real anger in her tone.

I sat down on the boulder and let my feet hang off the side, looking out over the world as the sun set on the mountains behind us, and waited for Riley to catch her

breath.

“You’re capable of doing things without me,” I spoke softly, letting the wind carry my words.

She heard them anyway.

Her words came back to me just as soft and a little broken, “Did I kill him?”

My throat tightened at the sound of her fear. I didn’t care what anyone said. If you had half a heart, it always cracked a bit when you took another life.

“No,” I said. “But I did when I ate him.”

“You...” her little gag made me chuckle, “ate him?”

“My dragon did.” I leaned closer so our shoulders brushed as the wind picked up her hair and blew it around. There was a lump on her scalp.

I tightened my fists, staying steady.

I should’ve taken smaller bites.

“I told Ember that dragons eat people.” Her fingers brushed against my hand.

I relaxed my fist as her fingers laced through mine, feeling relief at being able to hold her hand at such lofty heights.

“How did he taste?” she asked.

“Nasty.” I shivered. “We don’t make a habit of eating humans. Especially the bitter

ones. I'll have heartburn for weeks."

The way Riley smiled filled my chest with warmth. Her face was more vibrant and alive than the setting sun that cast her in an ethereal glow.

"This is so strange." She shook her head. "I never imagined I'd end up here."

"I'll say," I teased. "I didn't take you for a free climber."

She laughed—a real laugh—as she moved closer to whisper in my ear. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I nodded.

"I'm afraid of heights."

"Then why did you..." My voice trailed off as she leaned forward to peer over the edge of the cliff.

Her heart rate increased, but she seemed to enjoy the view. "I spent the last few years being told what to do and judged for everything I did. No more."

"No more," I echoed, still holding her hand.

"I'm serious." She turned to face me. "I don't want to be in a cage ever again."

"Never again." I nodded, knowing I'd give her whatever she wanted, even if that meant I had to one day let her go.

Not yet—and especially not until she was safely on flat ground—and not until I'd exhausted all other options to get her to fall in love with me.

“Good. Now can you take me home?” she asked.

“Home?”

Does she mean....

Riley rested her head on my shoulder. “Dobby is probably pissed at me for leaving him alone like that.”

She meant home!

Our home. Our nest.

Not back with her friends or to the cabin. Her home with me. My heart soared as my dragon roared.

Riley sighed as she stared at our conjoined hands.

I caught her chin and lifted her face, looking down into her beautiful eyes. “I’ll take you home, but first, do you trust me?”

“With my life,” she said and that truth was worth any battle I’d fought. It made every scar worth it.

“Good.” I stood up and moved her safely back a distance as the shadows gathered to me, growing solid as they formed my dragon. “Then let’s see you jump.”

The smile that lit up her face was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen as I backed up into the air, stretching out my wings. “Three, two...”

Riley inhaled a few quick breaths and then let out a warrior’s scream as she took off

running.

And my ferocious little mate was laughing as she leaped into the sky.

Riley

Mine

I was flying and then falling into Lucan's powerful arms. We crashed naked into the safety and softness of our bed. The full moon shone through the gauzy curtains of the open window, illuminating his perfect face. But it was the intensity of his gaze that stole my breath away.

I loved the way he looked at me.

Once upon a time, I'd thought that line was so cliché, but that was because I hadn't been worshipped properly before.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, growling some strange words under his breath as his callused fingers delicately probed the lump at the back of my head.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Dragon speak." His lips lingered at my temple as he held his large body over mine so we were molded together but none of his weight crushed me.

"It means that his death was too quick." Lucan pressed another kiss to the side of my face, working his way to my neck.

I shivered, instinctually turning my head to give him better access. "Let's not talk about that now."

“I’ll keep it in my native tongue.” He whispered against my throat, tasting the pulse there.

“What else can you do with that tongue?” I arched against him.

His chuckle awoke an aching need in me.

“I’ll show you.” He gave a teasing nip to my clavicle, right where Ember’s mark was, and licked the pain away.

He stilled when he realized where he’d placed a love bite and I froze under the sudden sharpness of his teeth.

“Do it,” I urged, breathless.

“Not yet.” His lips were soft as he continued to kiss his way down.

I sat up against the bedframe and pushed him away. “I’m not going to break if you bite me.”

Lucan balanced on his hands, planking so we were eye to eye. “I didn’t say you would.”

He had me trapped underneath him, but I didn’t feel caged. It boldened me.

I moved forward so our faces were inches away. “You’re treating me like I will.”

His eyebrow raised. A question to my challenge.

“And how would you like to be treated?”

“Definitely not like some porcelain doll,” I said. “I want you to bite me and fuck me, hard.”

His pupils dilated at my words and it felt awfully good to know I could rile his beast. My pulse quickened, but it was a good kind of fear.

The kind that recognized how powerful I was.

I dragged my nails up over his shoulders, watching as his breath caught and his muscles quivered under my touch.

Every other part of him held still, being patient.

I laced my hands around the back of his neck and pulled myself forward to whisper into his ear, “Unless you don’t want to claim me.”

A growl rumbled in his chest.

I turned and bit down onto the side of his throat.

“Goddess, Riley.” Lucan moaned as he turned us both, adjusting so I was sitting on his lap. “Do you want this?”

He fisted his cock between us before rocking my already wet core against his length.

I sucked onto the bite mark I’d left, releasing his neck with a pop. “I want everything you can give.”

I leaned back to look at my handiwork. I wanted him bruised and marked and covered in reminders of me. My nails dug into his shoulders as I rocked my core along the outside of his ribbed shaft.

Oh. I could come like this.

“Everything I can give?” Lucan thrust gently, still letting me set the pace.

“Everything.” I reached between us and grabbed his dick, thumbing the bead of precum off the tip.

Lucan’s hungry eyes followed as I raised my hand to my lips and sucked his taste off my thumb.

An explosion of salty-sweet filled my mouth.

I groaned as he caught my wrists.

“You’ll tell me if it’s too much.” His voice was raspy with lust.

I nodded, smiling as excitement from his words coursed through me.

“This isn’t a game, Riley.” He regained control and lifted me so we were both sitting on our knees. “I need to trust that you’ll speak up for yourself.”

Bossy Lucan was so damn hot.

The shiver that raced along my skin had me arching forward, seeking his warmth again. “I swear I’ll tell you to stop if it’s too much.”

“Good.” His praise made me blush as he pressed a kiss to my forehead, resting gentle hands on my hips.

But that wasn’t what I wanted, I needed—

“I know what you need,” he growled.

Lucan’s pupils were slitted and his eyes burned as he captured my chin, crushing my lips in a beautiful, almost painful kiss that left me gasping when he pulled away.

“Turn around and crawl that sexy ass to the top of the bed.”

I’d never felt more bold as I did obeying his command. As slowly as I could, making sure to draw out the tease, I moved to where he said.

More than once, I had to bite down on my smile at hearing the feral growl behind me.

When I got to the pillows, the bed dipped under Lucan’s weight.

Then his hands were on my thighs, stroking and running along the length of my back and down again, spreading my legs wider.

“Look how pretty and wet this perfect pussy is for me,” he praised with a growly purr.

Heat scorched my skin at his words.

His hand dipped between my legs and slid forward to pinch my clit, rolling it between his fingers to soothe the sharpness and eliciting just enough pleasure mixed with pain that I cried out.

“More.”

“You want more?” He wrapped his other hand around my chest, drawing my breast into his massive palm and brushing his thumb over my sensitive nipple. “Tell me, do you still want it rough?”

My body answered for me.

Slick gathered between my thighs as I arched my back, pressing myself harder into his hands.

“Use your words.” His laughter rumbled against me as he pressed a kiss to my shoulder.

“Yes.” I pushed myself up, gripping the headboard so I could move his hand deeper where I wanted it. “Harder. Please.”

“As you wish.” He slipped a digit inside and then another, scissoring his fingers as he pinched my nipple between his finger and thumb, giving it a delicious tug.

“Lucan, I...” I panted as he moved his hand to my other nipple, giving similar attention to my clit. “I need you.”

I was so wet. So ready. So right there. I just...

I gasped as he pulled his hand away, lining the tip of his dick right where it needed to be.

“This is what you want.” He thrust to the first ridge.

“Exactly this,” I moaned as I sank down, meeting his next thrust.

He pushed past the first ridge, stretching me wider as I adjusted my legs, and then he let me work myself up and down as I relaxed into it.

I broke the second ridge on my own, screaming out in pleasure as he filled me deeper.

“That’s it,” Lucan coaxed as he threaded his fingers through the base of my hair.

I froze.

Lucan stilled inside me.

“Words, Riley,” he commanded, not moving an inch even as I felt our hearts pounding through our conjoined sex.

“My hair,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

He can’t take this moment. He has no power over me.

I was stronger than my demons.

“Your beautiful hair,” Lucan said, encouraging me to finish that sentence.

He didn’t pull hard enough to aggravate my injury. In fact, the way he touched me was almost massaging and felt like a leash straight to my sex. He could control where my head went and I trusted him to move it right.

“It’s just...” My voice trailed off as Lucan gently turned my head to the side, exposing my neck.

My breath came quicker as he kissed a spot below my ear. Need gathered deep in my core, burning me from the inside out when he dragged his teeth down the sensitive skin.

“What about your hair?” he whispered against my shoulder.

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes.

Happy tears, filled with so much joy at reclaiming this piece of my body.

Lucan wouldn't hurt me. He'd make it feel so good. Kiss away all the pain.

I closed my eyes as I rocked against him. "I love the way you touch my hair. I love how you touch every part of me."

"That's good." Lucan thrust his hips forward as he moved his other hand back to my breasts. "Because I plan on touching you everywhere."

"Swear it," I begged on a breathless cry as he increased his pace.

"On a dragon's honor." He moved his hand to my clit, working it faster as he slammed into me. "Now tell me what else you like."

"The way you fuck me," I gasped as my legs trembled and he held me upright. "The way you love me."

He groaned as I opened wider—impossibly wide—and I felt the third ridge stretch every part of my insides, touching places I didn't know could be touched.

"And I love that you're mine." I cried out as I grabbed the headboard, breathing through the feelings that hit me everywhere.

It was so much. So deep. So good.

"Yours," Lucan grunted his agreement as he thrust in deeper somehow, making my body spasm around him.

"And I'm yours," I swore, knowing I was ruined for life. No one else would be able to make me feel this way. This full. This taken care of.

“You were always mine.” Lucan increased his thrusts now that he’d fit in completely and the orgasm I’d been holding back built around us both. “Come for me.”

That third ridge stretched even further as Lucan pounded me over the edge.

I screamed his name as I crashed boneless, stars bursting into flames.

His teeth sank into my neck and fire burned through my veins, heightening every sensation and matching the burn of his cock between my legs as it dragged out my orgasm, rolling it over and over again.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore without combusting, a comforting warmth settled deep into my bones as Lucan gathered me to his chest, being careful of where we were still connected.

“I’ve fought for you all my life,” he whispered as his seed warmed inside me and something deep, almost primal, settled between us both.

I felt the call of it in my soul, begging to be acknowledged, and the sense of no longer being alone lit up a dark corner in my mind.

Lucan laced his fingers through mine. “I didn’t know it then, but this was what I wanted. What I was willing to live and die for.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” I nodded as I clung to his arms, tears streaming down my face as I whispered, “I fought for you, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Threats and Promises

Dobby purred in the space between our legs as Riley slept with her head on my chest.

We'd been wrapped up in the mating frenzy for days and she was exhausted. She'd mustered up enough energy for one more round in the middle of the night, requesting the trick I could do with my tongue.

My tongue you mean. My dragon chuckled, still high on the mating pheromones.

I was satiated in a way beyond my wildest dreams, but reality threatened to force inside of my protective wards upon waking.

I resisted the urge to probe the tender flesh of Riley's scalp, feeling it again to reassure myself that my venom had healed what that bastard did, before softly pushing the hair back to expose her neck.

I hadn't thought of my mother often, but in the quiet of the early pre-dawn, I had a memory of her. As with all things in time, her voice had faded and her face was forever frozen in the image I'd sharpened through my own mind. Photographs couldn't capture her kind strength.

She'd worried about me training with Malachy.

I hadn't come home to visit in a few days and I'd lost some meat on my bones.

Nothing compared to my brother, though. But she'd already resigned herself to raising a guardian and did her best by us both.

I remembered her scolding me for staying by his side when I didn't have to. Not many guardians had a sibling willing to sacrifice so much. She didn't see my ward skills as I did—my gift from Earth to help the guardian—and thought I should use them to make my own way in the world.

It was because of her that I always knew I had the choice to leave, but I always stayed close. Even when I traveled the world, finding use for my dragon's size and strength, I was one call away from my brother should he need me.

Knowing I'd protected him with my wards was enough to ease my conscience when I could no longer tolerate his bullshit some days and had to take a break.

Centuries later, it was still hard to fully explain why I stayed by my brother's side when it wasn't my cross to bear. I didn't feel the same religious loyalty to sacrifice everything to Earth.

But I think it was because I could see Malachy's suffering like no one else could. Despite the parties and tributes and love bestowed upon him, I saw the light slowly fading from his eyes.

We'd fought and gone periods without speaking, but I still couldn't abandon him completely. When we learned he'd be the last guardian of our kind, I'd built this nest close enough to be of service until the end.

Holding Riley in my arms was the first time I seriously contemplated leaving it all behind.

She was all I ever needed.

This purpose filled me deeper than any other I'd found. I hadn't realized that throughout the centuries of throwing myself into battles not mine to fight, I'd been searching for this. Something that was mine alone to love and protect.

Dread made itself known as it gathered in my chest and I scarcely breathed as I brushed my fingers over the scars of my claiming mark, right under the tattooed rune that had appeared on her neck.

Strength forged by flame.

My Riley. My warrior.

Kieran had assumed correctly.

She was a piece to Earth's riddle. A pawn in the game of life and death I'd spent my whole life playing.

"I will find a way to destroy you if she is harmed," I swore as I stared out the window to my garden and the gray waking Earth beyond.

The house trembled in response. Not a large enough earthquake to worry, but enough to let me know of her power and that she'd heard me, returning the threat.

And it woke Riley.

"What time is it?" She yawned, clasping her hand over mine against her neck.

"Still early." I shook my head at Earth's antics as I gathered the blanket around my mate. "Go back to sleep."

"How much longer until we leave for Ember's place?" She snuggled onto her spot on

my chest.

“Not for hours.” I kissed the top of her head.

“I was dreaming that I had to wear a fancy red dress for our ceremony.” She mumbled, “Can we please not do that?”

I chuckled, listening to the bond where words failed her as sleep dragged her back to its embrace.

Riley didn’t want a fancy ceremony or any fuss at all. If it wasn’t for her friends, we’d elope to Vegas. I smiled picturing one of the dragon elders performing a bonding rite while wearing an Elvis suit.

It was already a struggle for me to balance giving her what she wanted and what I thought she deserved. But, like Malachy, Riley needed to make her own decisions.

I could only hope I didn’t fail her when it came time to support them.

I’ll die first.

“Do you really think Willow is Malachy’s mate?” Her question was so soft I almost missed it.

“I don’t know,” I whispered so as not to startle her. “I’d like to think there will be some happiness for them both in this life. But I don’t pretend to know the future. Sleep now. We’ll see how this all plays out soon.”

Riley

Sticky Situations

“I’m back!” I skipped up the front porch steps to the cabin, feeling lighter than I had in years. It’d been so long since I had this excitement of coming ‘home’ to people who loved me.

“Aunt Riley!” Harper shrieked as she opened the door. Her skinny arms wrapped around my waist.

“You’re huge now.” I hugged her back. “Did you grow some more?”

“Maybe.” Harper giggled as she dragged me inside. “Come on, it’s time for breakfast. Mom made pancakes.”

“I hope you’re hungry.” Willow turned from the kitchen, carrying a plate of sausage. She froze when she saw me. “Riley, you look... amazing.”

I felt amazing, but my smile started to falter when I really took Willow in. She’d hollowed out a bit in her face and there were bags under her eyes.

We’d talked a bunch over the past few weeks. I hadn’t noticed the subtle change over the phone.

“I’m starving!” Harper climbed onto the chair. “Can we eat now?”

I hugged Willow hard as I looked at the stack of pancakes in the middle of the table. It was tall enough to feed an army. Empty plates set for six sat waiting.

By the way Harper dug into the food, I could tell they'd been waiting a while.

I pulled back and looked Willow in the eyes. "Where's Ember?"

"I thought she'd be here for breakfast, but maybe there was a miscommunication somewhere." Willow shrugged, pretending it didn't bother her.

I knew her better than that.

"Ugh. I hate those." I pulled out a chair. "And they always seem to happen at the dumbest times. Like why as grown adults can't we talk to each other before causing unnecessary drama? I should go find her."

"They probably got caught up...." Willow looked at Harper and put quotation fingers in the air, "Studying."

"Auntie Em and Kieran are always studying," Harper explained. "Like all the time. They do it everywhere too. In the kitchen and at the table and in the living room."

"Geez, what are you showing this kid?" I laughed at Willow's mortified expression.

The sound of heavy boots on the front porch had my heart skipping a beat. Lucan stayed back to change into human skin and clothes, then insisted on carrying our luggage over.

Dobby had remained at home. He'd be all right for a few days and preferred not to travel anyway.

Plus, he was our excuse to leave early.

“Kieran and Ember can have fun studying without us.” I winked at Harper as I piled breakfast onto plates for both me and Lucan. “We get to eat their pancakes.”

?

“Did Ember and Kieran ever come up with an explanation for these tattoos?” I looped my arm through Willow’s as we walked side by side through the cave.

Lucan led the way through the darkness, carrying a torch that smelled of sulfur and burned brighter than a flashlight. I liked the view from back here.

Harper kept pace beside him, swinging a basket of baked goods from her arm that Miss Agatha sent us down here with.

I’d be lying if I didn’t say it was a little spooky.

But I was sleeping with a dragon, so I wasn’t too afraid of things that went bump in the dark.

“They’re still not sure yet. We’re supposed to know more tonight.” Willow was tense. “Harper, careful please.”

The little girl started to skip ahead and tumbled over a rock.

“I’ve got her.” Lucan’s deep voice echoed down the cave tunnels as he scooped Harper off the ground. She belly laughed when he set her on his shoulders, walking in almost a squat so her head didn’t touch the ceiling of the cave.

“He’s good with kids,” Willow whispered, nudging me with her hip.

I couldn't help but smile.

Before now, I wasn't sure if I wanted kids. With Lucan, it was something to think about. I knew my biological clock was ticking. But my mom had me at thirty-seven despite being a 'geriatric pregnancy' so I knew I still had time to decide.

"I think I need a year or two more to... study," I teased Willow as the cave opened up.

Lucan set Harper on her feet.

She reached out and held to his hand.

The two of them walked along in front of us.

My ovaries decided to weep and beg.

Later, I promised them.

A cavern loomed up ahead lit up with more of these magic dragon fire torches.

"You're here!" Ember's shriek was followed by the roar of a dragon.

I almost pissed my pants as my grip tightened on Willow. "What was that?"

"Oh that's just Dahlia," Ember said as she pulled me from Willow and wrapped me in a hug.

Harper wiggled free from Lucan's grasp and raced to an old... dragon-man.

His legs were thick and scaly, thighs as big as tree trunks, and his massive tail swept

along the floor. But his eyes were kind as he lowered to Harper.

“That’s Bemouth,” Willow whispered.

“Can I feed her today?” Harper held up the basket to the old beast. “I’ve got poppy seed muffins and jerky.”

“I think she’d like that.” Humor rumbled in the old man’s tone. “Let’s go say hello.”

I watched in a fascinated sort of confusion as Harper walked forward and a silver dragon foot with a chain attached moved out of the darkened recesses of the cave.

“Don’t freak out.” Willow squeezed my hand. “It’s a whole thing.”

A silver snout lowered to the ground nuzzling Bemouth before very gently sniffing the basket Harper held up.

“The scary ancient dragon really loves kids. She goes soft for Harper every time,” Willow whispered in my ear.

I swallowed hard, nodding.

Not exactly what I’d been expecting to see today, but as long as everyone was happy, we were good.

I let go of Willow and went with Ember to the stone desk in the corner where Kieran and Lucan were talking in hushed tones.

I didn’t need to touch the bond to know he was worried about me.

“Can I see it?” Kieran turned his attention my way.

I stood next to Lucan and leaned against his side, hoping to ground him with my presence as I bared my neck. “Care to tell me what it means yet?”

Kieran motioned to the runes on the cave wall behind him. “First born of fire, strength forged of flame, when a dragon’s heart dies...” He took a deep breath, turning back to face us, “Life begins again.”

“Sounds like a riddle,” I said.

Lucan growled. “It is.”

“I still think we’re translating it wrong,” Ember’s excitement spilled over as she started showing us what she’d written. “What if this line compared to this other rune of dragon speak meant ‘life recycles itself.’ So, not something new, but old and reborn?”

“Then it wouldn’t rhyme,” Willow pointed out.

“Should it even rhyme at all?” I laughed, but my gaze was still focused on the runes above their heads.

Lucan caught me staring. “What?” he asked through our mental link.

“It’s just that...” If I looked at it from the other angle... “Aren’t these tattooed onto Malachy, too?”

Kieran snapped his gaze to me. “What did you say?”

“Doesn’t he have these tattoos on his side?” I looked at Lucan, wondering if I was wrong.

My mate dragged his hand over his face.

“She’s met Malachy?” Kieran asked.

“The three tattoos have always appeared on the next chosen guardian at birth,” Lucan answered me before addressing his cousin, “Malachy got injured and he came to me. The MacAlisters attacked him. When I fought off Shawn, I sensed dark magic.”

“So he’ll visit you, but won’t come when I call.” Kieran’s bitter tone went away as Ember rested her hand on his shoulder. “You’re right. No, it’s good he came to you for help.”

“And he is coming,” Lucan looked Kieran in the eye. “He’ll be here tomorrow unless Earth calls. He swore it to me.”

“Too late for tonight, of course.” Kieran shook his head. “But better late than never.”

“Late for what?” I asked.

Lucan sighed as he wrapped me in his comforting embrace. “The witches convene under the full moon tonight.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:30 am

Lucan

Practical Magic

“These witches... Are they the real deal?” Riley stayed close as we walked the worn path up the hill to where the burnt sage and salt circle marked the magic gathering.

Her dose of fear was healthy and justified.

Witches scared the hell out of me, too.

I’d come across more than I cared to admit on various battlefields. Supernaturals from different species and ethnicities fought alongside their local populace where they saw fit.

I still had a bone to pick with one particular sorcerer in the Helmand Province.

The cheating coward hid behind those kids.

“They’re very real.” I held Riley’s hand as we approached the bonfire, walking behind Kieran and Ember with Willow bringing up the rear while the path widened.

The glow of the full moon shone down on the thirteen women, all dressed in flowing skirts of various colors and all barefoot on the dewy grass. The youngest looked maybe sixteen.

The oldest?

Don't even try to guess.

She seemed to be the head priestess, judging by her aura and the moon-streaked silver in her long black hair. I also could've sworn I recognized her from somewhere, long enough ago that my memory failed me now.

"Ward Weaver." She grinned at me with a mouth of clean, straight teeth strong enough to chomp bone.

"Witch." I bowed my respect, keeping Riley behind me.

Riley spoke through our mating link. "Ward Weaver? You know what... The knitting kind of makes sense."

I kept my face stoic despite wanting to laugh, not showing weakness in front of these women who probably had a recipe for dragon scale or ball sack.

"You can call me Morgana." The witch was still in good humor as she turned to Riley. "And you must be his mate."

Be ready. I stiffened.

Riley gave a short wave. "Yep. That's me."

"And you didn't bring your familiar with you?" Morgana frowned as she looked to the ground by Riley's feet.

What does she mean?

"Never mind." Morgana waved her hand.

A gust of wind seemed to follow, feeding the bonfire flames and illuminating all our faces in the orangish glow. The other witches stood quietly in a circle, keeping vigil.

“Come here, child,” she called to Riley. “Let us see your mark.”

Riley’s pulse increased as she clung to my hand.

“It’s fine,” Ember whispered as she motioned for her to step forward. “They’re only trying to help.”

I growled as Riley’s fingers slipped from mine.

“Trust us, cousin.” Kieran looked my way. “Not everything is a fight.”

Speak for yourself.

Riley swept her hair to the side, exposing her neck as she walked to the witch.

“If she lays one hand on her...” I grumbled to Kieran.

Morgana smiled in my direction, raising her fingers in the air and wiggling them dramatically, not actually touching Riley’s neck.

My fists clenched at my sides.

The old witch winked at me before stepping back into her coven’s circle.

“It’s a pretty mark,” she said, “but I don’t claim to understand dragon runes.”

Kieran hissed through his teeth.

Now who wants to fight?

“You told us you had an idea of this new addition to the prophecy.” He stepped forward, careful not to break the circle.

“Well, I have an idea .” Morgana rolled her eyes. “I wanted to see if I had any proof first.”

“And do you have your proof?” Riley asked.

The witch gave her a smile before glancing at me over my mate’s shoulder. “What say you, Ward Weaver? Did you notice the magic in their blood?”

I looked at Riley and Ember, feeling as though I’d failed some test. But I wasn’t a warlock.

I could sense strong elements of aggression and create protective wards to keep it out. I’d never studied magic further than what I could naturally produce. There was no need to.

Morgana seemed to take pity on me. “Don’t worry, Ward Weaver. The traces of magic aren’t strong. About as faint as the imprint you still carry of a recent memory. Black magic, perhaps?”

Witchcraft!

My eyes shot to her face. “How did you know?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, motioning to her long skirts and hair.

Right.

“Did the MacAlisters come to you for aid?” I’d wanted to ask about this if given the opportunity, but I planned to be less aggressive.

Oops.

“No, but I’ll have to touch you to see the memory of what you saw.” She arched an eyebrow. “If I have your consent, that is.”

Sighing, I stepped forward and held out my hand.

“It’ll be okay.” Riley smiled encouragingly.

A brush of the witch’s bony fingers and a slight dizziness overtook my beast. It was gone in an instant.

Morgana turned and spit on the ground. “Definitely black magic. They call that residual effect ‘power drunk.’ It’s a leftover from shared spells in a gathered group of like minds discussing harm.”

“Can you trace the spell caster?” I asked.

“All I know is that it isn’t anyone I know.” Morgana brushed off her hands as if trying to clean them from the memory. “But since it’s dark magic, I’d assume it comes from one of your enemies. Who have you angered recently?”

I glanced at Kieran.

He looked back to me.

“I don’t keep names.” I shrugged.

“Then I wish you luck in solving that riddle,” Morgana said.

“Did you plan to help us solve any riddle tonight?” I kept my tone even despite my patience wearing thin.

Riley gasped as she glared at me. “Can you not piss off the scary magic lady?”

“I like her.” Morgana smiled.

She hears us.

Shit.

“And where is the third?” Morgana peered into the night. “Ah, the royal one. Come here.”

“Me?” Willow stepped from the shadows. She’d been silently watchful this whole time and now the light from the fire cast her in a golden glow.

“We’re still not sure if she’s his fated mate,” Kieran hurried to explain.

“And where is our esteemed guardian?” The witch turned her face to the sky.

She was older than I realized if she paid tribute to the guardian. The respect for Malachy was evident in her tone.

I let my gaze drift over the younger witches. If this wasn’t the answer and they survived the coming change, would any of them remember the sacrifice my family made?

“He couldn’t make it tonight, but we’ll see in the morning.” Kieran didn’t actually

believe Malachy would come.

I can't say I blamed him, but I still had hope.

Morgana tutted and returned her attention to Willow. "Can I see your hands?"

"Go on." Riley moved beside her, offering courage as Willow held out her arms.

Morgana clasped Willow's hands in her hands, muttering as the flames danced higher. The other witches picked up the chant and began to sway under the moonlight.

Unease rolled from Riley to me through our bond. I stepped closer, ready to intervene at her request. Even Kieran moved toward us, spurred by Ember's heated command.

Morgana smiled as she released Willow's hands. "It's good to meet you, sister."

She leaned forward to whisper in Willow's ear, speaking in a magic tone so low that not even a dragon could hear.

Riley pulled Willow to her side as Morgana returned to her circle.

I hated the scent of her fear.

"If the theatrics don't stop, we're leaving," I told Kieran.

Morgana cackled as the flames danced higher, rising to the sky.

I winced, forgetting she could somehow understand our silent communication with each other.

The other witches started to twirl slowly, stepping in a simple sort of dance.

Morgana stood still as she stared at me. “There are stories of a return of feminine energy.”

“Earth is feminine,” I said. “She’s never left.”

Morgana waved my confusion away. “You and I both know how ridiculous all these stories can be.”

She winked at Willow before turning to Kieran, “What I do know is that Mother Earth couldn’t have picked better vessels to tell her new version. An ancient magic whispers through these three and their souls have agreed to meet on this plane and time for a specific purpose.”

I gathered Riley to my side. As did Kieran with Ember. Both women reached for Willow’s hands and we stood conjoined like that on the hill under the full moon with the witch’s words lingering in the air.

That was not what I wanted to hear.

And I could sense Riley’s confusion, but I resisted offering her any more assurances through our link. I didn’t want the witch to hear what I was thinking. I needed time to process it myself.

“We’re magic?” Riley broke the tense silence. Skepticism laced her tone.

“A dusting.” Morgana danced her fingers. “But you should’ve known it’d take at least a little magic to be able to mate a dragon.”

“Yeah...” Riley looked at her friends and they all nodded. “That actually makes

sense.”

“Earth always provides,” the witch said solemnly.

As if called upon, the ground trembled at our feet.

Always with the dramatics.

Morgana raised her hands to the sky. “The hour grows late.”

We all stood there, staring at her.

“That means you can go now,” Morgana groaned. “Unless you want to dance with us, Ward Weaver.”

“He’s good,” Riley growled.

I stifled a laugh as she pushed me a step back.

“What?” Riley said. “Doesn’t she seem obsessed with you?”

Morgana’s witchy laughter followed us as we turned away. “You can dance with us too, Warrior Mate.”

“Oh, no. We’re fine.” Riley picked up the pace, dragging me to the trail.

The witches’ laughter and catcalls followed us down the hill as the flames from the bonfire crackled higher into the night.

“Are they always that... riddled?” Riley regained her composure as we picked our way along the path.

Not that I minded her little show of jealousy.

My dragon was quite pleased with it.

“Usually they’re worse.” I chuckled.

We headed to the edge of the wards surrounding their cast circle. Kieran and I wouldn’t be able to shift to our dragon form until we crossed the boundary.

It wasn’t the first time I wondered if I had the ability to rearrange their wards with mine, but I didn’t want to make enemies of witches while I tested the theory out.

Riley skipped ahead a little faster.

“What now?” I held to her hand.

“Nothing.” She turned, batting her eyelashes as the moon lit up her beautiful face. “It’s just that I’m magic.”

You sure are. My dragon grinned.

I was anxious to get her away from here and safely back to Kieran—er, Ember’s—territory. It wasn’t as safe as our nest, but I could shift to my true form there at will.

Riley stopped in the clearing, looking over my shoulder to where Willow walked slowly behind us. I’d carried the two of them here in my talons because unlike Kieran, I wasn’t reckless and wouldn’t be caught dead wearing a saddle.

“I hope Morgana is right,” Riley told me. “Willow deserves someone, too.” Sadness drifted through our bond as my mate watched her friend walk alone on the moonlit

path.

Riley

Fingers Crossed

“It’s both of us,” I whispered, sitting on the front porch next to Ember as we sipped our morning cups of coffee. “We abandoned her.”

“I’ve been right over there and we have dinner at least once a week...” Ember’s voice trailed off as she rocked in the old wooden chair. Her eyes were on Kieran’s house across the yard, but her brow furrowed in thought. “Crap. You’re right. I haven’t been paying attention.”

I knew it was neither of our faults—we’d each been so caught up in our own lives—but Willow and Harper had been left alone for the most part.

It killed me to think that.

Willow was the caring one who always mothered Ember and me both. She sacrificed herself to make sure we had everything we needed.

If anyone deserved to find their fated mate, it was her.

I kept my fingers literally and metaphorically crossed that Malachy would show up, they’d be an instant match, we’d fix the apocalypse somehow, and all live happily ever after.

Hey? A girl could dream.

Stranger things had happened anyway.

“She might not want us around soon,” Ember laughed as she sipped her coffee.

“Keep your voice down,” I whispered. “You know she can hear everything.”

A loud sound behind us, like a chair moving across the wood floor in the cabin, preceded the door opening.

“Are we almost ready?” Willow poked her head out. Her eyes were glossy and wide. She hadn’t slept a wink.

And I knew she’d heard us.

Double crap.

I set down the last of my coffee and stood. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much as I should’ve and that you were left here alone.”

Willow smiled. “It makes me happy that you both found your special dragon men and you’re in love. Please don’t worry about me.”

“Well, we do.” Ember drained the rest of her cup. “And I’m sorry too. Bros before hoes. Magic dragon dick made me forget that for a minute.”

Willow stepped outside, closing the door softly behind her. “Shh. I think Harper is waking up.”

Ember cringed. “My bad. But seriously, we’re here for you.”

“Yeah,” I echoed. “Whatever you need. I know everyone always says that, but we mean it. You aren’t living this life alone. We’re all together on this ride.”

“Apparently we’re soul sisters or whatever according to some ancient witches,” Ember pointed out.

Did I ever think a sentence like that would sound perfectly rational describing my life? No.

But it explained a lot.

“I believe them,” I said.

Ember nodded. “Me too.”

“Me three.” Willow’s smile was genuine this time.

“What did Morgana say to you, anyway?” I asked the question that’d been burning me up since last night.

“She said my story isn’t written yet and history doesn’t have to repeat itself.” Willow shrugged. “That I can change the ending.”

“Cryptic.” I shivered.

“It’s cliché if you ask me,” Ember said. “Why did they have to be so mysterious?”

“Because it’s fun?” Willow stilled, looking to the closed door and hearing something beyond our standard hearing. “Harper is definitely up.”

“I’ll get her.” Ember gathered our mugs. “We’ve got to head out soon anyway. Big day today. Are you ready?”

Willow pulled the sleeves of her sweater over her hands. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“That’s the spirit.” Ember laughed as she went into the cabin.

Willow stepped beside me and we stood there watching the sunrise over the mountains in the distance, casting a golden glow over the valley and drying dew on the browned grass.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

Willow blew out a heavy breath. “It’s just... I envy you two. We didn’t know about all this dragon and prophecy and fated mate stuff when you met your guys. Now it feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders. What if this doesn’t work out and I’m not what they expect? Or... What if it does? I can’t bring a man into my life right now with Harper and everything.”

“Hey. It’s okay.” I wrapped my arms around her, trying to silence the thought spiral in her head. “If there is a chance you can find what Ember and I have, then I hope like hell this happens for you. The details will work themselves out. But if it doesn’t happen, then it won’t matter. We’ll still be here with you anyway.”

“It’s the three of us against the world.” Ember pushed the door open with a sleepy Harper rubbing her eyes and holding onto Ember’s hand.

The girl looked up, blinking. “There’s four of us.”

“Look at that, she can count,” Ember gushed.

“That’s right, baby.” Willow laughed. “Four of us. Always. Girls stick together.”

A roar came from the sky.

Green and blue scales shimmered in the rising sun as a majestic dragon flew over the valley.

We stepped off the porch for a better view. I caught sight of Lucan and Kieran exiting the kitchen door across the yard. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach when my mate smiled at me.

“Lucan!” Harper broke free from Ember and raced across the yard.

“So much for girls sticking together,” Ember muttered.

“She can’t help it. He’s irresistible.” I winked, knowing Lucan could see and hear me despite the distance. He caught Harper in his arms.

“You keep looking at me like that and I’ll put a hatchling in your belly.” Lucan’s voice rumbled in my mind.

I was still smiling as Willow’s hand gripped mine.

Her touch was cold as ice and her gaze was fixated on the dragon who circled overhead.

“He’s here,” she whispered.

I nudged her forward. “Should we go meet him?”

“I’d like to do it alone. Keep an eye on Harper for me,” Willow said, squeezing my hand and releasing it as she stepped off the porch into the golden morning.

Ember sighed dreamily as she came up beside me. “This is so romantic. I can’t wait to see what happens next.”

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