



Training my Human (The Dragocracy Chronicles #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: So it turns out dragons are real.

I never suspected the lava rock I threw into the firepit was actually an egg. I'm blown away when it hatches to reveal a reptile with a voracious appetite. Cute little bugger, until it learns to talk.

The bossy critter thinks he can order me around. Claims he's a dragon. Says when he grows strong enough, he wants to rule the world. I say go ahead. He can't do any worse than our current politicians.

However, his plans for planetary domination have hit a slight snag. Seems my little fella—who grumbles that I'm not honoring him properly—is wanted by the government. Or so the goons that show up on my property claim. I have my doubts as to their identities. Even if they're telling the truth, I'm not about to hand over my new pet, but how's a woman who inks tattoos for a living supposed to keep a dragon safe? The local pet shop owner—hunky, plaid-wearing Maddox—has a few ideas, but my little dragon isn't keen on running.

Can I keep my dragon out of the clutches of those who'd steal him for personal gain? And if we do have to flee, will Maddox come too? I need all the help I can get with figuring out life with the lizard.

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Humans. Bah. They've gotten uppity since my maternal progenitor conceived my egg. It will take much training before the female I've commandeered is suitable for service.

So much for her to learn, starting with proper meals. She tried to feed me bugs as if I were a simple lizard! Then she dared to abandon me so she could work—incentive for me to build my hoard so she can devote her time fully to me. I've allowed her distraction with the male, but only because he will serve me too, and sooner than he thinks, since my enemies are already closing in.

But they'll learn a dragon, even one newly hatched, is a force to be reckoned with, and if you mess with those I've claimed, you will face my wrath!

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:42 pm

Chapter One

A rumble shook the building and wobbled my seat just as I began delicately shading a tattoo. The jostling dragged the ink-filled tip across the flesh in a dark, unsightly line, making me silently curse.

How the fuck was I supposed to fix an error of that extent? The dark mark couldn't be camouflaged, since it stretched across the cheek of the portrait being tattooed on Bruno's arm.

I should probably worry about that later since the building was still shaking, leading Leo, my boss, to holler, "Everyone outside."

Probably a good idea. Our old, retrofitted shop hadn't been built to withstand tremors of that magnitude.

"Earthquake or gas explosion?" I questioned as everyone in the shop suddenly booked it for the door.

A valid question. The last time the Earth moved under me wasn't because the guy I was banging at the time was any good but because some idiot without a license to operate heavy machinery struck a utility pipe while doing construction.

Leo pursed his lips as he waited for our clients to stop fighting over who would exit first. "You forgot the third possibility."

I hadn't. I had purposely chosen to not mention giant tunnelling worms. That was my

boss's obsession, not mine.

My client, Bruno, won the battle at the door and skedaddled first, followed by Marie—another regular—who didn't seem to notice or care she'd emerged topless. Then again, someone who wanted tattoos on her breasts intended to show them off.

Outside the shop, people filled the streets as they evacuated businesses and homes before any collapsed. Many faces wore looks of fear, but some held curiosity. A cacophony filled the air comprised of the rattling structures, rocking cars, and heavily vibrating signs. Underlying that was another sound that kind of reminded me of a train roaring by. It caused the same booming effect, only we had no rails nearby.

The purple-haired Kalypso, who answered our phones and acted as our receptionist, held out her arms and slightly bent her knees, squealing, "Ride the wave! Whoo!"

An avid surfer, I never understood why she chose to settle in Terrace, British Columbia where the closest place to toss down a board required a more than twenty-hour drive to Tofino.

"Those idiots in parliament finally started a war. We've been bombed!" someone yelled a few paces from me while pointing across the way.

A glance in the indicated direction showed a billowing cloud of black smoke in the distance.

Leo leaned close to murmur, "That's not a bomb. The Tseax Cone erupted."

My brow furrowed. "Can't be. They've been saying for ages that volcano was dead."

"Guess they were wrong."

My boss might have figured it out first, but it didn't take long before others realized what happened and panic ignited.

It started with one person screaming, "We're going to die. Run for your lives."

Then another yodeled, "The end is nigh."

In seconds, the stampede commenced.

Having never been one to sheepishly follow the herd, I shifted so my back pressed against the tattoo shop. It seemed safer than getting tangled in the mob moving in a dense wave on the street. I'd been to concerts where that kind of thing ended up badly—a.k.a. trampled. I preferred to not get trod upon. At least the ground had stopped shaking. However, the ominous dark cloud in the distance grew and spread.

A nicotine addict, Leo pulled out a cigarette—the home-rolled kind with a little something green added to the tobacco—and took a long pull before drawling, "Damn. Never thought I'd see Tseax erupt."

"Me either." I frowned. "I thought it was supposed to be dormant." I'd lived in the area my whole life and while the local Nisga'a tribes told stories about the last time Tseax erupted a few hundred years ago, it had been considered a rare thing unlikely to happen again.

"Mother nature loves to fuck with know-it-all scientists," Leo stated, puffing away.

The lack of shaking didn't improve the hysteria level infesting people. Cars revved and tires screeched as they tried to speed away only to have to scream to a stop because people were jaywalking on the road. The chaotic desperation caused instant gridlock.

“Doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere soon,” I stated while glancing at Leo.

“Nope.” He offered me a drag from his medicinal cigarette.

Why not? I took a long pull and exhaled before saying, “Think we need to worry?”

“Depends on how bad the eruption is and how far it spreads. Given we’re sixty clicks away, ash clouds are probably of more concern than a lava flow.”

“I thought magma could roll at, like, speeds of up to thirty kilometers an hour?”

“In the right conditions and usually because the volcano is steep. Tseax ain’t that tall.”

“But still managed to wipe out a few Nisga’a tribes that last time,” I reminded.

“Yeah, the lava reached the river where they had their villages, but it took a few days. They say the high death toll most likely came from the fumes poisoning the air.” Leo pursed his lips as he took another drag. “Chances are anyone within fifty or more clicks will have to vacate their homes until the lava specialists figure out what’s going on.”

My lips pinched as I watched the dark smudge in the sky spreading. “Fuck me. I guess I’m not going home tonight.” I lived about thirty kilometers outside Terrace, in a trailer inherited from my grandmother. Nothing fancy, and I rather liked my remote spot and lack of neighbors. But that plot of land would likely be within the quarantined radius.

“You can bunk at my place if you need to. You know I got the space,” Leo offered. He lived in the opposite direction, about twenty or so minutes outside of the city. My head-to-toe inked boss might look like he should be living in a cramped shithole

apartment in the bad part of town, but Leo came from money. His inherited home was a ranch situated on a few hundred acres. Not that he personally farmed. He paid people to harvest his fruit trees and rented out his barns and land for grazing. But the best part? My paranoid boss had the most insane security system in place to keep his shit secure.

“Might be we’re worrying for nothing.”

Saying it aloud jinxed it. My phone began blaring along with everyone else’s in the vicinity. The emergency alert launched quicker than expected and advised anyone receiving the message to evacuate. It went on to list all the places that might be in the path of the coming ash cloud—and yeah, my home was smack dab in there. The warning text also had words like calm, orderly, don’t panic. Might as well have been fuel, given what ignited in its aftermath.

If I thought people were frenzied before, they doubled, tripled, quadrupled down. People randomly began wailing. A few hit their knees and prayed. Those caught in unmoving cars honked and when that didn’t move traffic thought getting out to yell, pound hoods, and shake fists would work. We also heard glass smashing and a glance showed the window of the jewelry shop broken and someone slipping inside. Why was it calamities immediately brought out the looters?

Needless to say, despite the alert advising us to leave, Leo and I took our time while the rabidly worried sorted themselves out. Along with Kalypso, we went inside the shop and shut down all the machines before grabbing everything that would fit into the back of Leo’s Suburban, which ended up being a shit ton, given the massive space. Kalypso rescued our collection of cacti, loading them into her Volkswagen beetle. Whereas my vintage Yamaha Virago 750, with its saddlebags, carried our albums of designs and past artwork.

When the streets unclogged, and with the cloud creeping closer, we vacated the shop

and the city of Terrace, driving in a line behind Leo, who had to maneuver in a few spots as people who ran out of gas or encountered engine trouble abandoned their cars. Despite feeling like a bit of an ass, we ignored those trying to wave us down. I'd seen apocalypse movies. I knew what might happen. A good Samaritan would stop, offer some aid, and find themselves stranded when their vehicle got stolen.

Luckily, the evacuation zone remained just short of Leo's ranch. With more than ten bedrooms, it had more than enough space for me, Kalypso, and a few of Leo's friends.

While the Tseax Cone stopped spewing after one day, it took a bit longer before Terrace and the environs were considered safe for return.

I'm not ashamed to admit I spent that week mostly drunk and high. Being a bit of an end-of-times nut, Leo actually kept a ridiculously large stash of booze and dope along with food. Quality shit, I might add. Good times were had, but the fun eventually ended and I couldn't help a bit of dread as I wondered at the state of my home.

Upon seeing it, my first thought was it could have been worse. White and gray powder did cover some parts of the property, the wind having blown it into drifts, and it kicked up in puffs when I tracked through. I wore a bandanna over my mouth and nose to avoid breathing any of the dust. Sure, the news claimed those with healthy respiratory systems would likely suffer no ill effect, but I took no chances. My lungs might be tainted by nicotine and Mary Jane, but even I had a line with my health that I didn't cross. Call me weird. I was okay with it.

No lava reached my place. However, a surprising number of lava rocks had bombed the property. The worst damage appeared to be on the roof of my trailer, where the biggest volcanic missile landed. It left a huge dent, but luckily did not pierce it. Inside my trailer, only a fine layer of dust had penetrated and I got to work scrubbing everything down and bagging the clothing and bedding that I'd have to wash. At least

I didn't need to rely on a laundromat. My lean-to held an ancient, gold-colored washer and dryer which made a god-awful racket when run, but unlike today's newer models, they could take a beating and keep on working. I ran a rinse cycle on it first to make sure it was actually clean before I started a load.

The outside didn't require me to do much because an hour after I arrived, the rain came. It drenched the area for the next two days and cleansed the land. Or as my grandma would have said, That fucker God is having a piss . She didn't hold religion in high esteem and called it a bunch of kooky nonsense.

Me? I identified as agnostic. I remained open to belief but wanted proof. Old books written a zillion years ago and old men in fancy robes didn't convince me.

After the week of partying, I enjoyed the time alone, although I did also itch to get back to work. While Terrace had been cleared for people to return, the tattoo shop hadn't yet reopened. Leo hired some cleaners to come in and thoroughly sterilize the place. Last thing he wanted was a lawsuit because someone claimed they got an infection. We'd be busy when we reopened though. Our website had been bombarded with requests for new ink, many of them volcano themed. I'd be using this time off to create some designs for clients to choose from. The drone footage of Tseax proved inspiring. The cone showed rivulets of magma flowing erratically in a patchwork down its sides.

When the rain finally relented, I exited my spotless trailer and began tidying my yard. And by tidy, I meant gathering all the rocks that landed in it, from pebble-sized to fist. I tossed them all into my firepit. I saved the one on the roof for last since I had to climb and I really didn't like heights. Hated them so much I debated leaving it there, but I knew that lava stones tended to be porous and with all the rain soaking it, might get heavy enough to actually crack the top of my trailer. Last thing I needed was a leak.

So I put on my big girl panties—thongs for the curious, or as granny called them, ass flossers—and clutched that ladder tight as I climbed. I didn't look anywhere but at my hands as I crawled to the massive dent that held the largest stone of all. Unlike the other jagged chunks, this one, while rough on the outside, was oval-shaped and too big to easily carry down so I tossed it.

To my surprise, it didn't crack. I placed it in the firepit with the others and then grimaced. It stood out due to its size. To break it up, I grabbed my hatchet and used the blunt end to hammer at it. A few pieces of stone flaked off, but the thing remained whole for the most part. Maybe a few fires would soften it up enough it would split apart.

Over the next few weeks, I worked my ass off and came home exhausted. Meaning I did little but slump into a chair with a cold brew. Given the nice summer evenings, I spent my wind down time outside by the firepit, which I used to make dinner instead of my stove because the air conditioner worked like shit and I wasn't about to make the trailer any hotter. I kept my meals simple. Weenies on a skewer. Burgers on a grill. Steak. Steak. And more steak. I did so love my meat.

And so did the creature that stole food off my plate!

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Chapter Two

Let me back up a second.

There I sat, comfortably ensconced in an Adirondack—which for the unknowing is the most comfortable outdoor chair you can have—with a big, toasty fire going, hot enough the big lava rock that sat in the middle of the pit glowed a bright orange.

I'd treated myself to a nice fatty ribeye, which I'd seasoned and threaded onto a skewer and held in the crackling flames. I like my meat singed on the outside, the outer fat crispy but the inside red and juicy. When I had it just the way I liked it, I stood and slapped it on a plate just as something in the fire went crack and loud hissing ensued.

I whirled with my plate still in hand, and sure enough, the big rock had finally split into chunks. It must have had moisture trapped inside given the steam that erupted.

Cool.

I plopped back in my chair, plate balanced on my knees, and grabbed my can of Coors from the cupholder. As I swigged, the thief struck. A clawed paw reached out and snagged my steak.

I blinked. Steak was still gone. Not cool. I'd been looking forward to eating it.

My annoyance vanished as I saw what stole it. A lizard the size of a kitten sat on the edge of the fire pit, which made its theft of the steak—bigger than it was—even more

comical.

Until it scarfed down that entire hunk of meat.

I mean, like how? The steak had to weigh as much, if not more, than the little reptile. Yet its jaw essentially unhinged and nom, nom, bye-bye dinner.

It belched more loudly than expected, given its diminutive size. I almost laughed at its suddenly very rounded belly.

The lizard then proceeded to speak, or so my beer-addled brain insisted, chattering in a steady stream that made no sense, but almost resembled a language.

“Slow down, little fella,” I crooned, kind of fascinated. British Columbia had its share of reptilian wildlife, but despite being born and raised in this area, I’d never seen a creature like this who seemed unafraid of fire. I worried about its perch so close to the flames. Despite it stealing my dinner, I’d hate to see the little fella barbequed.

It continued to harangue me in its chirping lizard voice while waving its paws. Or was it claws? I couldn’t tell you the proper term, but it was cute.

It patted its belly and my eyes widened. That I understood. “Sorry, that was my entire dinner. There’s no more.” I pointed to my plate and shook my head. Again, I blamed the booze for thinking I was conversing with the lizard. Or maybe I’d accidentally tossed something on the fire and was currently tripping, as in gone on a spiritual, hallucinogenic journey. Granny used to indulge in those. Usually naked. Good thing we didn’t have neighbors.

“Speaking of dinner, some of us are still hungry. Guess I’ll have to see what’s in the fridge.”

Not much. The grocery stores had been double tapped, first with having to toss a bunch of stuff in case of contamination, and then again when their stock got wiped out by people panic buying. It reminded me of the toilet paper shortage during the Covid lockdowns.

I'd lucked out on the steak only because I knew a farmer. In exchange for meat and eggs, I kept a running credit for Bart so he could get his dream tattoo. Currently, he had his left arm inked to look like a Nisga'a totem. We'd be doing his right arm next, which meant lots more steaks for me.

As I rose from my seat, I chugged my beer and crushed the can before tossing it in the recycling bin I kept by the trailer door. I entered my cramped home and sighed. I already knew my fridge only held a hunk of molding cheese and a potato growing eyes. At least the freezer had ice cream. Wouldn't be the first time I did dessert for dinner—or breakfast.

I snared the half-eaten quart along with a spoon and collapsed on the plaid-covered bench that some would generously call a couch. I wasn't one of those people. I could have retrofitted the trailer like some folks did, tearing out the built-in furniture to replace it with the real thing, but I'd been saving my money and effort because I wanted to build myself a real home. A place without wheels that didn't rock in strong winds, made of something other than aluminum and vinyl. Granny used to scoff at my dream, saying she preferred the freedom to live wherever she wanted, never realizing the irony in having spent her entire life in one spot.

Scratch.

I glanced at the door with a frown.

Scri-t-t-ch.

The odd noise came again and my curious ass, which obviously never learned any lessons from horror movies, went to check it out. I opened to find Mr. Lizard on the threshold. It hopped right on in and scouted the place as if it belonged.

“Well, hello again. Making yourself at home, are we?”

The reptile waddled about, sniffing and craning, peering at everything. I could have shooed it out, but with my mellow buzz, it seemed like a bunch of effort for a harmless creature. Besides, it was kind of entertaining.

As I sucked ice cream off my spoon, I studied it. The grayish leathery skin and its sinuous tail that swished. It had two nubs along its back and when it bent over to sniff under my stove, dangly bits that marked it a boy. And before anyone comments, I thought reptiles kept their dicks and balls tucked. Maybe this little fella preferred airing his out.

I finished my ice cream and rose to put the empty container in the garbage when the little critter whipped around and cocked its head. A forked tongue flicked, and it jabbered.

“I don’t understand,” I stated with a shrug.

I swear to fuck, it looked annoyed. It pointed at me. No wait, the ice cream carton.

“You wanna taste, little fella?” If it wanted to lick it clean, go ahead. I just hoped it wasn’t lactose intolerant. Cleaning up lizard diarrhea didn’t exactly scream fun.

The lizard cautiously stuck its head in the carton and must have liked what he tasted because next thing I knew his whole body disappeared, and the carton rolled around on the floor as the little fella went to town.

Entertaining but not enough to keep me awake. A yawn cracked my jaw and I stretched. “Bedtime for me. I’ve got a full back tattoo to do tomorrow.” In other words, a full freaking day hunched over with intense focus. I needed my rest. My pillow called and I answered, falling asleep quickly, waking only when my alarm went off.

However, rather than roll out of bed, I lay still, for my new friend lay snuggled against me, his tail wrapped around his body. And was it me, or did he seem bigger? Probably needed to shit out that massive steak.

Little fella protested when I shifted him to get out of bed, making a growling, protesting noise.

“Calm down. You can stay there if you want, but some of us need to work and pay the bills,” I grumbled.

My dumb ass then proceeded to tuck my blanket around it. Dumb because who left a wild animal in their home while they went to work? I’d probably return to everything chewed to shit and lizard poop and pee stinking up the place, but call me a softie, I didn’t have the heart to toss him outside.

I made myself coffee and slathered butter on an everything bagel—stale since I’d forgotten I had it in the breadbox. Since I had two, I also toasted an extra for the little fella and left it on a plate on the floor because I just knew he’d be hungry when he got up. I also put down some paper towels by the door. Could you piddle pad train a lizard? Guess we’d see.

With my goggles over my eyes and wearing my leather pants, jacket, and shit kickers, I headed into work on my motorcycle, my platinum hair streaming. No, I didn’t wear a helmet. Yes, that was against the law. Did I care? Not really. I had a friend who survived a motorcycle accident because he wore a lid. Ended up a quadriplegic. I

admired his resiliency in dealing with his disability even as I knew I'd lack the same fortitude. Hence why I took chances.

The road had more traffic than usual heading away from the city. Despite the evacuation and trauma of the nearby exploding volcano, Terrace had never been busier. Crazy ass folks came in from all over, wanting to see the lava rivulets up close. It led to more walk-ins at our shop than normal, which ended up being good for me since my appointment had to cancel, changing his mind about wanting his girlfriend's face on his back since he caught her cheating with his sister. Sounded like a Jerry Springer special to me.

When I got a break in people wanting on-the-spot mini tattoos memorializing their visit—most opting for volcanoes, with one client having me make the spewing rocks into hearts—I popped out to run an errand. If Little Fella was going to be sticking around, I should probably invest in some lizard-appropriate food. Didn't they eat like insects and stuff? Sure, it scarfed down a steak and loved ice cream, but that likely was not healthy. Not to mention, I couldn't afford to feed it thirty dollar steaks every day. Given its carnivorous proclivity, I wondered what kind of lizard I'd found. An internet search of local wildlife didn't show anything resembling my little fella.

Luckily for me, the pet store up the street, Leaping Lizards, specialized in reptiles. I walked in and wrinkled my nose. The place stank of animal, most likely because of the many glass aquariums featuring a variety of scaly critters. I browsed the many available species: geckos, bearded dragons, snakes. None looked like my friend at home.

“Can I help you?”

The deep voice had me whirling and looking up. Way up. A barrel-chested giant with arms possibly as wide as my waist stood behind me, wearing plaid and jeans. A bearded lumberjack with a nametag that said Maddox.

“Hey, there. So weird thing, I found a lizard at my place and was looking for something to feed him.”

He arched a brow. “Chances are it can feed itself. The lizards in these parts aren’t domesticable.”

“Yeah, well tell that to the little fella that insisted on coming inside my trailer and snuggled me all night long.”

That claim brought a frown to the ruggedly handsome face. It should be noted I had a thing for big, burly dudes, not that I’d dated any in a while. My last boyfriend, a biker I’d met while tattooing him, turned out to be a dick who stole all the cash from my cookie jar and fled town when the cops came looking for him about some stolen catalytic converters. What could I say, I knew how to pick them.

“Do you know what species you found?”

I shook my head. “Nah, and Google’s not being too helpful in that regard either. And before you ask, I forgot to take a pic, but he’s about this big,” I held out my hands. “Grayish skin. Lumpy back, talkative and bossy.”

“Lizards don’t talk.”

“Not in words,” I scoffed. “But definitely making noise at me. Anyhow, I’m here because I need some food and shit.”

“Kind of hard to figure out its diet without knowing the species.” Maddox pursed his lips. “But I can probably set you up with some generic stuff. Given the description, it’s most likely a Northern Alligator Lizard. They tend to like insects and stuff. Do you have a terrarium?”

I snorted. “No, and I’d rather not cage it.”

“Then you run the risk of it escaping.”

The reply had me shrugging. “Which would be its choice. I’m not even sure it will be there when I get back.”

He gave me an odd look. “Exactly where do you live that lizards can come and go?”

“I’ve got a trailer outside of town. Used to belong to my granny. While it’s fairly cozy, I know for a fact it’s got holes because the mice somehow keep finding a way in.” And this despite the many traps I’d set over the years.

“In that case, there’s a strong chance it will be gone by the time you get home. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone domesticating a NAL.” He shortened the name.

“Assuming it is, what do you suggest I feed it?” I left out any mention of the steak and ice cream Little Fella scarfed down. Maddox already seemed appalled enough as it was. No need for him to lose his eyebrows completely in disbelief.

“Let me get you a few things.” The big man moved confidently around the store, and I leaned against a display watching because I just couldn’t make it fit. He looked like he should be chopping wood or fixing cars, not working in a pet store. Heck, with that ass and the biceps bulging his shirt, he would have looked good as a fireman or a stripper.

Maddox dumped an armful of shit on the counter by the register. He pointed and named each item. “Dried crickets, although I do have live ones if you find your lizard not happy about them being dead. Canned worms. They’re a little juicier so you might want to feed them to it on a towel or something washable. We’ve got some powdered vitamin to make sure it doesn’t get mineral deficient. You’ll want to make

sure it's got access to water as well. Do you need a dish?"

My lips curved as I said, "Pretty sure I've got enough empty margarine containers to figure something out." Grandma didn't believe in buying plastic receptacles but rather reused the ones she got with things like sour cream, yoghurt, and other dairy products. When one cracked or melted in the microwave, she recycled it and pulled out the next. By the time she died, she'd collected so many I had to purge but kept up the practice. After all, I'd already paid for the container, why not use it?

"This should get you started. If the lizard sticks around, pop back with a picture and we'll confirm its species. Maybe talk you into some live insects," he said with a naughty grin.

"Like fuck. I am not having some grasshoppers and stuff loose in my trailer. Bad enough I've got ants each summer."

As Maddox rang up my purchases, he glanced at me. "I've seen you around. You work nearby?"

"Yeah, down the street. I am an artist at Holy Inkredible."

"The tattoo place. Neat name. I hear you do good work."

"Only the best," I boasted. "You got any ink?"

He shook his head. "Nah. You?"

Guess he couldn't tell given I wore long sleeves and pants. "A few." I downplayed the number. Some dudes got weird about girls being tatted up.

"You do them yourself?"

“No. It’s not easy to work on your own skin. Leo does mine. And I do his.”

“Leo is...”

“My boss.” Although, I had to wonder why he asked. Fishing to see if I was single, perhaps? Hell, yeah. I wouldn’t mind taking Maddox for a ride.

“That will be forty-three seventy-nine. Cash or credit?”

“Cash.” I handed over two twenties and a ten and shoved the change in my pocket.

He paper-bagged my purchase and handed it to me. “Here you go. I’m Maddox, by the way. Or Mad, as my friends call me.”

“Are you an angry man?” I teased.

His grin flashed bright and panty-wetting. “Only if you abuse an animal or steal food from my plate.”

“I’m with you on both. I’m Pip.” I didn’t mention the fact it was short for Philippa—which I hated with a fucking passion. Mom named me after my deadbeat dad, a man who left before I was born but eventually returned, not to become a father. Oh no. He convinced my mom to abandon me at the age of three and run away with him. She didn’t even hesitate. Granny raised me and I thanked fuck for that fact. Last I heard, my parents were down in South America grifting. I only knew because my mother called to beg for some dough. No hello how are you , just straight up I’m broke, can you send me some cash ? I doubted I’d hear from her again since I told her she could take her demand and shove it up her twat. She called me ungrateful. I told her she could kiss my ass after I took a dump. Needless to say, that conversation ended abruptly.

“Nice to meet you, Pip. Good luck with your lizard.”

It would have been funny, only he meant it quite seriously. “Thanks, Mad.” Yeah, I used the nickname because it was cute.

I spent another two hours working, mostly doing up sketches and setting up appointments before heading home. When I entered the trailer, I half expected Little Fella to be gone, but the moment I opened the door, he stood on the couch and chirped at me.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you’re probably hungry. Look. I got you some yummys.” I grimaced at the smell and sight of the bugs as I put them on a plate on the floor.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one less than impressed. Little Fella took one sniff and gagged. Wait, could lizards gag?

“I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t eat it either. I brought home some sausage to cook up on the firepit. Wanna try some of that?”

Little Fella did. He scarfed down a whole fat wiener and then eyed the other half of mine. Where the fuck was he putting it? He also greatly enjoyed the marshmallows I roasted. I ate three. He, well, he ate the rest when I wasn’t looking. Apparently, I didn’t cook them fast enough so he got into the bag and next thing I knew—gone.

When we went inside, I stepped over the clean paper towel—which made me wonder if Little Fella had left me a surprise somewhere—and flipped on the television in the bedroom. My one of only three free channels had Jurassic Park playing, which Little Fella seemed to greatly enjoy. He sat on my lap and didn’t turn his gaze once from the screen.

Once more, we slept together, and when I rose the next day, he remained in my bed.

Since he'd enjoyed the bagel I'd left the day before, I made him another—from a fresh pack I'd bought—and refilled his water dish—a.k.a. repurposed margarine tub. I also turned on the TV in my living area and left it running since it had fascinated him so much.

I went to work, debated popping by to see Maddox, realized I had no reason since I'd forgotten to take a pic, and with no plausible excuse to swing by—because I wasn't buying more bugs—ended up just going home.

Being low on supplies, I hit the grocery store for more stuff and bought enough my saddlebags bulged. Little Fella would be eating like a prince tonight as I'd grabbed us a rotisserie chicken and some cupcakes—that would likely have most of their icing plastered to the container. Wanna bet my little lizard would love licking it off?

With my arms laden with my purchases, I struggled to open the door. It swung open and I smiled at Little Fella perched on the couch, watching television. He craned his head to eye me and rather than the nonsensical chirping of before said quite distinctly if with an accent, “Woman, I'm hungry. Feed me.”

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Chapter Three

Yeah, so I dropped my groceries and my jaw on the floor. No way had Little Fella spoken to me in actual English.

“Clumsy,” he hissed, proving me wrong as he scampered down and scurried over for a sniff.

“Um. Did you just talk?”

“Yes. Did your ears stop working? I’ve been waiting all day. Where’s my food?” Little Fella nosed at my hemp shopping bags, reusable and durable, although granny used to complain using hemp to make fabric seemed a waste. Never mind my explanation that hemp lacked enough THC to get you high.

“I, uh, um. I think I need to sit down.” My ass hit the floor beside my groceries and Little Fella shook his head at me.

“Now is not the time to sit. I told you, I’m hungry.”

“I’ve got a brain aneurism,” I muttered. Had to be, because lizards did not harangue in slightly accented English.

“Don’t you dare die. Not only have I not given permission, but it would also delay my feeding.” Little Fella sat on his haunches and crossed his arms.

I blinked. “Only I would hallucinate a bossy, talking lizard.” Granny would be proud.

She'd often claimed to have some of her best conversations with inanimate objects—usually while on a vision quest—a.k.a. high as a newt.

“This is not your imagination. I could always speak, you simply could not understand. The language passed down to me no longer exists, it would seem. Your television proved handy in that respect. I've learned a great many things since you abandoned me.”

“I went to work,” I grumbled. “And are you claiming you learned to speak English in one day by watching TV?”

“Yes, along with a smattering of French. Now, if you are done with stupid questions, feed me.”

“You sound like Audrey II ordering Seymour around,” I muttered as I gathered myself and the grocery bags from the floor.

“Who is Audrey II? Is this their territory?” Little Fella hissed.

“Audrey II was a singing plant in a movie,” I explained as I unknotted the bags and pulled out my purchases.

“You would insult me by comparing me to vegetation!” For a tiny-sized critter, he sounded hugely indignant.

“Someone's hangry,” I stated as I opened the packaging of the rotisserie chicken. The smell of it wafted as I began tearing off chunks.

“You were gone a long time,” Little Fella complained.

“I had to work. You know, to make money so I can afford to feed your ass,” I

complained.

“Ah yes. As I learned today, your society is monetary based. Once I build up my hoard?—”

I interrupted, “Hoard, as in treasure?”

“As if there’s any other kind.”

My laughter erupted loud and bright as I brought a plate down to this level. “Gods, the way you talk, it’s as if you think you’re a dragon.” Weren’t they the only creatures obsessed with collecting riches?

“Not think; I am a dragon.”

It took me a second to grasp his seriousness. Must be a joke. I laughed again. “That’s funny.”

“I am not amused,” Little Fellow stated.

“Come on,” I argued. “Look at you. You’re the size of a kitten, have no wings, and dragons aren’t real.”

“I beg your pardon, we do exist. As to my size and lack of aerial limbs, what do you expect? I am newly hatched.”

“From where?”

“The egg you warmed in your firepit.”

“Wait, you came out of the rock?”

“Egg,” he corrected. “Which some might mistake for stone. It’s part of our camouflage from predators.”

“Eggs can be cracked. I tried hammering at that rock and it wouldn’t break.”

“Because it’s made to withstand abuse. How else would it survive when our maternal progenitor drops it in a volcano for maturing?” he pointed out.

“Let’s wind up a second. Your mom dropped you in a volcano?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we need heat to hatch.”

“There’s heat and then there’s magma, which kills everything.”

“Everything but dragons,” was his tart reply.

“Hold on a second, are you claiming the rocks spewed by volcanoes are eggs?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he huffed. “I was the only fledgling in that particular site.”

“Implying there are more eggs in other volcanoes.”

“Not implying. There are. My maternal progenitor likely spawned and spread a couple.”

“How would you know?”

“Because maternal progenitors usually produce clutches of two or more.”

“You know, the proper word for the person who brought you into this world is mother,” I pointed out.

“Mother is a human term,” he said sneeringly. “Dragons don’t require a caretaker.”

“Says the dragon who keeps demanding I feed it.”

“Because that is what a servant does.”

A matter-of-fact statement that had me staring. “Excuse me?”

He spoke slowly as if I were dumb. “Humans have always been the servants of dragons. You feed us. Care for our scales. Tidy the hoard. You know, servant tasks.”

“Sounds more like dragons were human pets,” I muttered.

The way Little Fella puffed his chest in indignation almost made me laugh. “I am not your pet. You belong to me.”

“And if I say no?”

“You can’t.”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

“Listen here, Little Fella —”

“That is not my name.”

“Well, excuse me. What’s your name then?” I replied tartly.

“I have not yet chosen one befitting my stature. Until I do, you may address me as Your Grace. That is, after all, the courtesy extended to royals.”

“Yeah, a royal pain in my ass,” I mumbled, not low enough for him to miss.

“Servant, your insolence is intolerable!”

“So is your bossy attitude. And for the record, my name is Pip. Now if you don’t mind, I have better things to do than argue with a small lizard with delusions of grandeur.”

“There is nothing more important than me.”

“I can think of plenty of things that are, starting with eating my dinner.”

Little Fella eyed his plate of chicken. “We shall continue your education after we dine.”

And by dine he meant scarf down his chicken then proceeded to eyeball mine. I didn’t share but did offer what remained of the rotisserie bird. Little Fella ate it, bones and all.

As for the cupcakes I’d brought as a treat, I got one of the six. He ate the rest and licked the plastic clean. His full belly didn’t improve his bossy mood.

“I require rest after my repast. Carry me to my chamber.”

“Carry yourself. I’m going for a shower.” I also needed a moment to think. If I wasn’t currently suffering from hallucinations, then I had a strange dilemma on my hands. Namely, what the fuck should I do with a talking lizard?

Some folks would have seen an opportunity to make a quick buck. The people who would pay big money to own Little Fella would make it so I could build my dream house and only work if I wanted. However, I couldn’t see myself selling him. For one, it felt a little wee bit too much like slavery and I knew granny would disapprove, not to mention my native roots—even if down to something one sixteenth—balked at the idea.

It occurred to me that I should check and see if I was indeed crazy. Namely, discover if my lizard—with delusions of dragon—would talk to someone other than me. Assuming there was even a lizard. Could be a figment of my imagination. An imaginary friend I didn’t need. It would be simple enough to ask Leo to pop out and, without saying anything, see if he noticed or mentioned my new housemate.

But while I adored Leo, I worried because my boss did like collecting weird and rare shit. He had a basement full of bones—dinosaur, he claimed. Illegal to own, but that didn’t stop him from purchasing them. A talking lizard that claimed it was a dragon? Leo might like me, but I worried his obsession might prove stronger than our friendship.

Who else could I ask?

Kalypso, lovely girl, had a big mouth. She’d never keep the secret.

And that left... no one, really. I didn’t make friends easily or often. Like my granny, I didn’t mind being alone.

Most of the time.

For a second, my mind flashed to the burly pet shop owner. Maddox. What would he think? He knew about lizards, but mine might be a bit much for even him to handle.

So what was a girl to do?

Apparently crawl into bed with her arrogant new pet. Although Little Fella kindly shifted from the middle to let me get under the covers before draping himself over me. Had he gotten bigger? Sure felt heavier. No real surprise given how much he ate.

I woke the next morning to a hungry lizard. He downed a package of frozen waffles, a whole grapefruit—which he declared nasty and forbade me from buying again—and discovered coffee. Not a good idea. I left my caffeinated Little Fella bitching to me about my duties, my disrespect, and the lack of adequate consumables.

On the way to work, I had time to wonder a few things. One, how was Little Fella so damned smart if he just hatched? No way did he learn English from watching television for one day. Two, how did he know his mother dumped his egg in the volcano? He'd not even been born. Which led to three, he called himself dragon. How would he know what the fuck he was? Was it because of something he'd seen on television? And finally, four, could it be that Little Fella started out as an ordinary reptile and—like some tortoises in a sewer—got exposed to radiation or something, which is how he got so smart and talkative? That would be cool.

Assuming he existed outside my imagination, of course. I still had my doubts.

At the shop, my concentration sucked, which, in my line of work, wasn't ideal. Sure, I inked and it looked good, but Leo noticed it lacked my usual flair.

"Something wrong?" he asked after I finished a butterfly on some lady's shoulder.

"Sorry. I think I'm tired." And then, because I couldn't admit the real reason why, I

offered a partial lie. “I’ve got a new pet keeping me up at night.”

“Oh. I thought you didn’t like cats and dogs.”

“I don’t hate them, I’m just not around enough for them to be happy,” I countered.

“So what did you get then?”

I gave the truth minus some details. “Lizard.”

Leo’s brows shot up. “Interesting choice. From that place down the street?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t blame you,” Kalypso interjected, showing she’d been listening. “The owner is a hunk. If I wasn’t scared of scaly critters, I’d get one, too, just to have an excuse to visit him in his store.”

“Maddox owns it?” I asked.

“Ooh, first name basis,” Kalypso teased.

“It’s on his name tag,” I muttered.

“And you noticed. Even better, now you have an excuse to keep going back.” The smirk on her face annoyed because I’d actually thought of that.

“I doubt I’ll have to return. My Little Fella ain’t into the bugs and stuff he sells.”

“Veggie eater? Boring. I’ve always preferred the carnivorous type,” Leo stated.

Thankfully the conversation ended as the shop bell dinged announcing someone had entered.

During my next lull, despite having planned to visit the pet store—ahem, Maddox—I didn't, mostly because I didn't need Kalypso teasing me. Instead, I spent my break smoking a cigarette and thinking of questions to ask Little Fella when I got home. To soften the interrogation, I snared two large extra pepperoni pizzas as a bribe.

Pulling into my place, it took only a moment to unstrap them from the small rack over my rear fender.

"I'm home," I chirped as I entered my trailer, only to immediately frown. Little Fella wasn't there to greet me. For a second, I felt disappointment. Either he'd left, or I'd indeed imagined him.

I dropped the pizza on the counter and decided to change before eating. My bedroom stank and the culprit lay in my bed. Little Fella had curled up on my pillow and didn't look good. His scales were paler than that morning and he appeared to be sweating.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

No reply. I poked him and almost hissed at the heat of him. Running a fever and unconscious.

I panicked. What to do? Take him to a vet? Did they even see lizards?

Before I could think twice, I dialed the only person I knew who might know how to help.

"Leaping Lizards, how can I help you?" asked Maddox in that sexy, deep voice.

“Help! I think my lizard is dying.”

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Chapter Four

Maddox, to his credit, didn't hang up on me. He remained calm as he asked questions.

"What's wrong?"

"He's lying in bed and won't wake up."

"Could be he's simply tired."

I almost snapped, Tired from doing what? But I kept my cool. This guy did know more about reptiles than me. "I don't think he's sleeping. Not to mention, he always wants to eat when I get home. He's also paler than before and his skin looks weird."

"Sounds like he might be shedding."

"Shedding what?" I screeched.

"His skin. It's something lizards do."

"He's not dying?" I couldn't help but sound hopeful while remaining dubious.

"I didn't say that. Could be something else entirely. Can you bring him by the store?"

"I don't know. Would he be okay travelling in a saddlebag?" And then, because that sounded weird, I added, "I ride a motorcycle.:

“Yeah, that might not be ideal. Tell you what, I was about to close up shop. Why don’t I grab a few things and pop over? I’ve got some experience with sick reptiles and might be able to help.”

“Would you really?” I didn’t hide my relief at his offer.

“Where do you live?”

I had an address but most navigation systems struggled with it. It was why I had deliveries sent to my work. I ended up explaining it to Maddox using visual landmarks, finishing up with, “...when you see the big gnarly tree, you’re like a hundred feet from my driveway.”

“Got it. See you in a bit.”

I spent that bit outside pacing rather than standing over Little Fella worrying. How had I become attached in such a short time? Please don’t tell me I’d made him sick feeding him non-lizard stuff. Could it be because he’d yet to poop or pee? The paper towel I’d lain on the floor remained pristine. Could a lizard die of constipation?

It took an eternity of thirty-four minutes for Maddox to arrive, driving a pickup truck almost as old as my bike. In good shape, though. No rusted spots or dents. I especially admired the big push bar on the front. Once you got outside the city, the wildlife would—and did—cross the road with no regard to vehicles. I’d only ever had to swerve once to avoid a moose, but it scared the shit out of me.

Maddox got out of his truck, carrying a bag. “Okay, where’s our ailing lizard?”

“In my bed.”

He arched a brow. “You sleep with him?”

Apparently not something people did. I shrugged. “He likes to snuggle.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll pee on your mattress?”

Since Maddox looked at me, waiting for an answer, I muttered, “If he does, I can wash it. Although, speaking of doing number ones and twos, I don’t know if he’s done any since he decided to start living with me.”

“It’s more likely you haven’t found his defecating spot. Let’s see the patient.”

I led Maddox into my trailer, which felt like a shoebox with the big man filling the space. His head almost touched the ceiling.

We entered my bedroom—which sounded grander than the reality. It was a cramped space at the back end of the trailer with a mattress surrounded by walls on three sides. I stood by the head of my bed, wringing my hands, while Maddox leaned over to eye Little Fella.

“Hmm.”

“Well?” I queried trying to hold in my worry. How had I gotten attached so damned quick?

“Well, for one thing, this is not a Northern Alligator Lizard.”

“Do you know what he is?” I asked a tad nervously. If he said dragon, I’d probably shit myself.

“No.” He glanced at me. “You said you found him?”

I nodded. “More like he found me. We met out by the fire.”

“Strange. Most animals have a natural instinct to avoid flames,” he murmured as he ran his fingers over Little Fella. My lizard didn’t move, but he did still breathe, judging by the slight flare of his nostrils. “While I don’t recognize the breed, he is of the reptile family. Given his size, most likely full grown, or close to.”

I just about choked because if little fellow were to be believed, he’d just been born which meant he’d only started to grow. Looking at him now, I could see the difference in size since he’d first appeared. He’d gone from kitten to small cat in only days.

“You’re sure he’s not a baby?” I queried.

“Canada doesn’t get large reptiles. That is, assuming he’s native and not something that escaped from someone’s tank at home.” Maddox palpated Little Fella and frowned. “He’s hot.”

“Is a fever bad?”

“It’s unusual,” he replied slowly. “Reptiles are usually ectothermic, meaning their body doesn’t regulate their temperature, the environment does. But I see nothing here that could be heating him.”

“He usually runs warm,” I supplied, remembering our snuggling. “But not this hot.”

“Could be because he’s shedding. See, there’s a spot that’s peeling.” He showed me a tear in the skin. “However, these bumps on his back are odd, as is the fact his genitalia are outside his body.”

I kept my mouth clamped at the bumps observation because, if Little Fella could be believed, they were where his supposed wings would sprout.

“Is it normal for him to be passed out this hard?”

Maddox rolled his big shoulders. “Hard to tell, not knowing the species. Could be he’s gone into some kind of hibernation mode.”

Then, because I liked to ask dumb questions, I threw him the weirdest one of all. “Are there any species of lizards that talk? You know, like a parrot.”

A booming laugh emerged from Maddox.

My nose wrinkled. “So that would be a no?”

“Definitely not,” he chuckled. “Lizards at best hiss and chirp. Don’t tell me yours has been conversing?”

I most definitely wouldn’t admit that, although I did feel some relief that Maddox could actually see him. At least Little Fella existed. “Just something some chick said in a TikTok video,” I lamely stated to deflect away from my question. “How long will this shedding thing last?”

“Again, not knowing the species, hard to tell for sure. Just like I don’t know if the fever and this hard of a sleep are normal. He was fine this morning?”

My head bobbed. “Yup. Ate a shit ton before giving me shit for leaving for work.” The admission slipped out before I could stop myself, but Maddox nodded.

“Pets hate it when you leave them for the day. I used to have a dog that would cry for like five minutes if I left for even an hour.”

“What should I do with him? Is there anything that helps?”

“Having some rough surfaces for him to rub against once he wakes. Humidity also helps some. You could try giving him a warm bath. Do resist the urge to try and peel the skin off yourself though, at least until the outer layer really starts sloughing off.” Maddox paused. “While I don’t want you to panic, if he’s still unresponsive in the morning, you might want to visit a vet.”

“Are there any around here that can handle a lizard?”

“Not without driving a fair distance,” Maddox admitted. “And even then, there’s not always much they can do. Sorry.”

“Ain’t your fault,” I muttered. “Stupid bugger.”

“I know it’s hard when someone you love, even a pet, is ailing.”

I snorted. “Until a few days ago, I’d never even met him and now it’s like my life revolves around his imperious ass.” Oops, once more I spoke a little too frankly.

Maddox saw nothing wrong though. “Yeah, they’re demanding, but the love you get in return is worth it.”

“You have a pet?” I asked.

“A cat,” he admitted. “She’s usually at the shop with me when I’m working, but she doesn’t like strangers and tends to nap in the back.”

“What, no lizard of your own?”

His lips quirked. “Princess likes being an only pet. She tolerates the ones in the store only because she knows they don’t come home.”

“You called your cat Princess?” I couldn’t help but sound scoffing.

“If you met her, you’d understand. You’re not the only one with a pet that thinks they rule your life.” His lips twisted ruefully.

“I really appreciate you driving out here,” I stated. “How much do I owe you for the house call?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. It was no problem at all. But I should get heading. Princess is likely clawing up my place, seeing as how she hasn’t gotten her evening snuggle yet.”

I’ll admit, I had a hard time picturing this burly guy catering to a cat. At the same time, I’d bet it was cute as fuck.

I walked him out to his truck. “Thanks again. Really appreciate this.”

“Wish I could have done more, but shedding is not something that can’t be hurried. Hope he’s back to himself soon.”

“Me too.”

Maddox paused before climbing in his truck. “I don’t suppose I could interest you in coffee or a dinner once your pet’s recovered?”

I blinked. “As in, a date?” I blurted.

His lips curved. “Yeah. Assuming you’re single, of course.”

“Single and yeah, I’d like that.” Tingles suddenly coursed through me, not something I’d had happen in a long while.

“How about tomorrow night? That is, if your lizard is doing better. There’s that Italian place close to our work, or if you like, that new taco joint.”

“I don’t know if I should be gone all day for work and then dinner.” I chewed my lips as I glanced back at the trailer.

“What if I grabbed us some takeout and brought it here?”

“Really?” At his nod, I smiled. “I get off around six. Meet me here for seven?”

“Sounds good. What should I grab? Tacos or pasta?”

“Surprise me. I’ll have wine and beer to match either.”

“It’s a date. See you tomorrow, Pip.”

Heck yeah, he would.

That was assuming I wasn’t mourning the passing of Little Fella. I spent the night snuggled with his overheating body. Weird, yes, but anyone who said anything could fuck right off.

By the morning, Little Fella remained the same, if slightly cooler. His skin showed more tearing—I swear he’d grown again overnight—and he’d stopped sweating. His breathing was also much better.

Still, I worried and ended up calling in sick so I could keep an eye on him.

He didn’t wake, but when I used an eye dropper to put some beef broth in his mouth, he did swallow. A good sign, I hoped.

By the time seven rolled around, I'd showered, dressed in my most ass-molding jeans and a snug t-shirt that showed off my tits, and brushed my platinum hair smooth. My mane was borderline white, and natural, too, unlike what most people assumed. I started out with the ebony locks of my ancestors, but as I aged, streaks of silver appeared, which traumatized my teenage ass at the time. At twenty-five, I stopped trying to dye it and embraced it. At thirty-three, I rocked the hair and got a laugh when a new lover realized the drapes matched the carpet.

Hearing the rumble of Maddox's truck, I checked on Little Fella, who'd been moved to a laundry basket lined in towels. I wanted the bed free, just in case.

I headed outside to greet Maddox, who arrived bearing a Mexican feast, way more than two people could eat: nine tacos—evenly split between beef, pork, and chicken—salsa and tortilla chips, rice and beans, a couple empanadas, and churros for dessert. When I teased, Maddox explained he wanted to ensure he got my favorites.

He could have shown up with Taco Bell and I'd have been fine. I wasn't a picky girl when it came to food.

Before we ate, he asked to see Little Fella and declared he looked much better, which eased my mind. We sat by my firepit to eat, tossing back some Coors Light, talking, mostly about work. He wanted to know how I got into tattooing. It was because I liked art but selling paintings could be hit and miss moneywise, especially for artists just starting out. However, a talented inker? My growing build fund showed the lucrativeness in drawing on people with what was essentially permanent marker. As for Maddox, he got into the pet store business because he hated the large chain stores and liked lizards. He owned the building that held his shop and lived in the apartment over it.

"I don't make a shit ton of dough," he admitted. "But I enjoy the work. Much better than being stuck in an office."

“I can’t picture you at a desk,” I teased.

“And yet I used to work at the bank.” He grimaced. “My mom convinced me to get a finance degree because I was good at math. I hated it.”

“No fucking way,” I exhaled in shock. “You?—”

Whatever I might have said got interrupted by a loud banging at my trailer door followed by a bellow. “Woman, where are you? I’m hungry.”

Maddox whirled and frowned. “I didn’t know you had someone living with you.”

“Not someone,” I muttered as I rose and went to the door. I opened it to see Little Fella, bits of skin hanging off him, waiting impatiently.

“Then wh?—”

Maddox didn’t finish his sentence as Little Fella eyed my burly guest up and down before saying, “He’ll do as my second servant.”

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Chapter Five

Poor Maddox. His brain must have almost exploded at hearing Little Fella talk, and his bugging eyes were in danger of popping right out.

I cleared my throat and said, “So remember how I asked about talking lizards?”

“Lizard!” my Little Fella screeched. “Are you being deliberately obtuse, woman? We discussed the fact I am much grander than that.”

“He can talk.”

While Maddox digested his disbelief, I crouched in front of Little Fella. “Yes. Yes, you’re much more than a simple lizard. How could I forget? Blame the fact you had me worried. How are you feeling?”

“Famished. Where’s my food, woman?”

“I have a name, remember,” I admonished. “And there’s such a thing as being polite rather than demanding. You should try it. May I have something to eat, please.” I never thought I’d be the type who’d try and enforce manners, but then again, I’d not met a bossy reptile before.

“I thought servants were supposed to obey without quibble,” Little Fella grumbled.

“I am not your maid. Or your cook. At best we’re roommates, and only because you didn’t give me a choice,” I reminded.

Little Fella lifted his chin. “You should be honored I’ve selected you as my caretaker.”

I rolled my eyes. “Where’s the honor? I get to work all day, then hit the grocery store to feed your hungry ass. On my dime, I might add, only to come home to shrill demands?—”

“I am not shrill!” Little Fella squeaked.

“He’s not repeating things like a parrot,” Maddox murmured. “He’s actually talking.”

“Of course, I am, you large dolt. Exactly who are you? Why are you here?” Little Fella eyed my date suspiciously.

“This is Maddox,” I said for introduction. “He owns the pet store where I got those supplies.”

“The dead bug seller.” I didn’t know a lizard could curl its lip in disdain.

“Not his fault he didn’t realize you wouldn’t enjoy them. And you should be nice. When you wouldn’t wake up last night, he drove out to check on you.”

“I was fine,” was Little Fella’s short reply.

“I know that now, but I worried when you wouldn’t wake up.”

To my surprise, Little Fella’s face softened. “Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. Molting is something I will do several times until I achieve my proper size.”

“Which is how big?” I asked.

“Remember the dinosaur movie we watched?” This time he smiled for sure as he added, “If fed right, bigger.”

I cringed. “That will cause some issues.”

Little Fella misunderstood. “Your home will obviously not be adequate for much longer. But fear not. I shall find us a new place to live with ample space for my growing needs.”

“Who says I’m going to live with you? And the issue I was referring to had more to do with keeping you hidden from public scrutiny.”

“First, servitude is for life, so yes, you will be accompanying me where I go. Second, the home I select will have adequate safeguards from the knights and hunters that would try and slay me for a prize.”

Maddox interrupted at this point. “How is it possible you can talk? Where did you come from? Is this some kind of joke?”

Little Fella eyed him and sighed. “Did you not explain anything to the male before recruiting him to be in my service?”

Uh-oh. “First off, I did not recruit him. Maddox is here to visit me, not you. And second, exactly how am I supposed to tell someone, ‘Hey, I found a talking lizard who claims he’s actually a dragon’?” I’d be placed on a seventy-two hour involuntarily hold at the psych ward.”

“Dragon!” Maddox caught the word and gaped.

“Yes, dragon,” Little Fella snapped. “Try and keep up.”

I felt bad for the man and offered a recap that included the truth in all its insanity. “After the volcano erupted, I found this big stone and tossed it in my firepit. Little Fella here?—”

“Stop calling me that!”

“I will when you choose a name,” I growled right back. “Now don’t interrupt for a second while I explain to Maddox.”

“Bah. While you do that, I’m going to eat. I smell something interesting.” With that, Little Fella waddled to the fire pit and the leftover Mexican food. I wished I’d eaten one more churro because I highly doubted he’d leave any.

A stunned Maddox watched him and murmured, “I’m dreaming, aren’t I?”

“Nope. As I was saying, the volcano spewed a rock onto my roof, I put it in my firepit, and poof, he ”—I pointed—“appeared. Stole the steak right off my plate. Ate the whole thing, which was impressive, because he was smaller than you see now.”

“I thought you found him days ago.” Maddox glanced at me.

“I did. He’s probably a third bigger than when we met. He eats way more than I do and gets quite testy when I’m late with his meals.”

“I wouldn’t have to be irate if you did your job,” Little Fella hollered before dumping the container of refried beans in his mouth.

“How is it possible he talks if he was just born?” Maddox asked.

“A day in front of the television. Don’t ask me how he learned so quick. All I know is, I came home and he wouldn’t shut up. I did find out a few things, such as his egg

was dropped in the volcano by his mother?—"

"I told you, we dragons don't use that term."

"Stop interrupting," I yelled back.

"Insolence," muttered Little Fella.

"He's a dragon." Maddox stared at him with a frown.

"So he claims. Says that, along with increasing his girth, he's supposed to have wings, too."

"Another molting or two and you'll see." Little Fella finished the savory part of our meal and discovered the churros. And by discover, I mean he took one bite and the rest vanished.

"This is a lot to take in," Maddox stated.

"I know. I'm sorry. If it helps, I honestly thought I might have been imagining things until you heard him too."

Maddox rubbed a hand over his jaw. "What are you going to do with him?"

"She will serve me as I need," Little Fella declared before flopping on the heated stones ringing my fire.

My lips pursed. "He seems to think I'm going to be his personal maid."

"He's not shy, is he?" Maddox observed.

“Not one bit. Bossy, too.”

“You do realize if word gets out about him, you’ll have trouble.”

“Then you best not speak of me in taverns, lest the hunters find out I am here,” Little Fella chimed in, showing he was still listening.

“I won’t say a word,” Maddox promised. “However, it just takes the wrong person seeing or hearing him and you’ll have more than just the curious on your doorstep. I wouldn’t be surprised if the government swoops in to confiscate him.”

“Assuming he’s not first kidnapped and sold to some rich person who’s always wanted a pet dragon,” I added, because that had been my first thought. “I honestly don’t know what to do.”

“Once again, you will serve me, and my new male servant shall protect me until such a time as I can do so myself,” Little Fella stated matter-of-factly.

“Hold on a second, what do you mean protect?” Maddox questioned.

Little Fella rolled from his warm perch to waddle close. “It is customary for dragons to have a retinue made up of humans. Some as servants to tend to my needs, and others as guards to protect my wellbeing from ne’er-do-wells. As the latter, you shall have to outfit yourself in armor and acquire some weapons. From what I’ve observed of current fighting methods, you’ll need some firearms.”

“Listen here, bud, I am not shooting people,” Maddox declared.

“If guns aren’t your preferred choice of weaponry, then, by all means, use a sword, but my understanding of guns is that their projectiles can travel great distances.”

Seeing Maddox overwhelmed, I chose to step in and divert the conversation. “How is it you know so much stuff? I mean, I can kind of wrap my head around you learning English by watching television, but you know all kinds of other things, things about dragons that you shouldn’t. Like the thing about them having a retinue or how many sheds before your wings will pop out.”

“We are hatched with the knowledge of our maternal progenitor.”

My eyes widened. “You have your mom’s memories?”

“No. Personal incidences and interactions are not passed down, but anything they learned is. Language, customs and culture, the facts of our biology. It is all there for us to access.”

“Genetic memories,” Maddox murmured. “I know there’s been some studies on certain species that seem to indicate it’s possible, but not to this extent.”

“That is because dragons are much more evolved than the rest of the beasts in this world.” Little Fella puffed his chest. “Now, after such a fine meal, I must evacuate and rest.” With that, he waddled to the trailer door and waited for me to open it.

But I had a question. “Exactly where are you planning to shit? Because I’m telling you right now, I am not cleaning up after you.”

Little Fella eyed me with annoyance. “I am not an untrained animal. I use a chamber pot of course.”

“Chamber pot being?”

“That thing you call a toilet. Now, open the door, woman.”

Without hesitation, I let him inside only to silently curse.

Fuck me. He had me trained as his butler already. I returned to the fire and a stunned-looking Maddox, who remained standing and staring at the trailer.

“Holy shit,” the man exhaled. “Never thought I’d meet a talking lizard.”

“Don’t you mean dragon?”

“No fucking way.”

“Is what I said.” I inclined my head towards the fire. “Time for another beer?”

“Might need more than one,” Maddox muttered as he flopped back in his seat. “This is some insane stuff.”

“You don’t say,” I replied, handing him a bottle from the cooler filled with ice.

“Do you really think he’s a dragon?”

“Who knows?” I took a swig and swallowed before adding, “Doesn’t seem so far-fetched when you consider everything else. I mean, he literally hatched in fire.”

“What are you going to do? A dragon, heck even a talking whatever he might be, is a huge deal. There’s no way you’ll be able to keep him if folks find out.”

“I’m aware,” I replied with a grimace. “It’s only been a few days, and I’ll be honest, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Like I said before, I was worried I hallucinated the whole thing.”

“At least your property is remote. You’ll have a chance to keep him under wraps for a

while but if he gets to be dinosaur-sized..." Maddox shook his head. "You won't be able to hide him."

"Or feed him." I snorted. "Already he eats twice as much as me."

"He ate everything. Meat. Vegetables. Grains."

"Anything but bugs," I said with a laugh. "You should have seen his reaction when I brought those crickets and stuff home. He looked utterly disgusted."

"He certainly inherited a commanding manner. And here I thought Princess was arrogant. What do you think he meant when he said he'd find you a new home?"

"I don't know. That's the first he's mentioned it. I am not moving into a cave, though." Because wasn't that where dragons usually laired?

"Do you think there are more eggs lying around?"

"Little Fella claims his mother would have only placed one per volcano. Something about not sharing territory."

"And that would have been how long ago?" Maddox asked.

A frown creased my brow. "I don't know. Never thought to ask."

"Why would he declare me his protector? We just met."

"Well, you do look like the type of guy who can hold his own in a fight."

Maddox's lips pursed. "Fair point. I am pretty good with my fists. Had no choice but to learn because a guy my size tends to draw the wrong kind of attention and

assumptions, especially in bars once other dudes have had too many beers. But a slugfest with a drunk is a lot different than what your little bud seemed to be suggesting. I'm not going to jail for your pet. No offense."

"None taken, and I'm with you. While I'd like to keep him out of nefarious hands and labs, if the white coats show up at my door and demand I hand him over, I won't really have a choice."

We talked a bit more about Little Fella before Maddox rose and stretched. "I should go. Princess will be freaking I missed her ten o'clock feeding."

"Seems like you're already a servant," I joked.

"I am." He paused. "Despite the oddity of the evening, I really had fun. Do it again?"

Wait, he'd not been scared off by my talking mini dragon? "I'd like that."

"How about I cook for you at my place tomorrow?"

I glanced at the trailer. "If I don't come home from work, he's liable to eat everything that's not glued or hammered down."

"He's welcome to join us."

"In that case, I'll grab him after work."

"Which is a big round trip for you. How about instead I swing by late afternoon and pick up your Little Fella."

"What about your shop?"

“I’ve got to come out this way anyhow to grab a delivery at a ranch. My part-timer, Suzy, will be watching the store while I’m out.”

A part of me wondered if I could trust Maddox. At the same time, it was kind of too late now, since he knew my secret. Given the dragon was already out of the bag, I could see only one possible reply to his offer. “What time’s dinner?”

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Chapter Six

“Why must you leave?” I asked again as the female servant prepared our morning meal.

“Because I have to make money if I’m going to be able to buy enough to satisfy your growing appetite,” Pip grumbled.

A reminder that I needed to begin work on my hoard. My core memories had my kind usually confiscating it from undeserving humans. However, this time period made it slightly more difficult to ascertain what to take. This era used paper for money as well as plastic cards and something called electronic fund transfers for purchases—payment methods that had no tangible value, at least for me.

Gold and jewels apparently remained highly valued, but I’d yet to glean where I could find a sizeable amount to begin my treasury. I also needed to find somewhere to relocate before I began hoarding. The trailer of my human lacked the proper space and amenities for someone of my stature.

“So, there’s going to be a change in our usual schedule,” Pip stated as she bent down to place a plate in front of me that held a stack of pancakes drizzled in butter and syrup. “I’m having dinner at Maddox’s after work.”

“What?” I roared. “I did not give you permission. Nor do you have time to gallivant as that is my mealtime.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” she admonished. The nerve. “Maddox will be swinging by

here to bring you over to his place so you can eat with us.”

A somewhat mollifying reply. “Transport wouldn’t be necessary if he lived here.” Although where we’d put the large man remained to be seen. Perhaps on the ground outside the trailer door so he could prevent intrusion?

“I’m not moving Maddox in,” she squeaked, her cheeks turning pink.

“It would be more practical. How else can he properly protect me?” I pointed out. Annoying how often I had to do that, seeing as how my human seemed incapable of intuiting these things on her own.

“Maddox isn’t a bodyguard.”

“Obviously, or he’d be here,” I retorted.

“Listen, Little Fella —”

I cut her off. “Enough of that ridiculous appellation.”

“If you don’t like it then give me something to call you,” she insisted.

“I did. I’ll accept Your Grace, Your Eminence, even Your Majesty works.”

“Not happening,” was her flat reply.

“Humans and their insistence on names,” I huffed. “It is not a simple thing to choose one. It must convey strength. Strike fear in the heart.”

“What was your mother’s name?” Pip refused to call her by the proper title.

“I don’t know. While my maternal progenitor most likely had one, that is considered a personal memory and thus not passed down.”

“Would it help if I told you some dragon names I know?”

“Perhaps.” A lie. I wanted a name that didn’t come with prior association or comparison with my kind.

“There’s Toothless, Puff, Pete, Mushu, Smaug, Drako, Eragon.” She listed off some ridiculous titles.

I waved my paw at her. “None of those convey greatness.”

“How about some ancient rulers?” she suggested. “Like Genghis Khan, Mussolini, Cesar, or Ramses.”

The latter called to me. “Who was this Ramses?”

“Famous Egyptian Pharaoh known for his military success and for building some of the most epic architecture, some of which remains standing today.”

“Is this Ramses a common name?”

“Not in Canada.”

“Meaning it is in use elsewhere.” Annoying. I’d rather liked the sound of it.

“If you want a name no one uses, then might I suggest fabricating one?”

“A name no one has ever heard won’t do.” It required work to establish until it became synonymous with greatness and respect.

“You want something no one uses but will make people quake in fear, then maybe you should try using one of the many demon ones listed in the bible.”

“I am not a demon.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she muttered. “Now listen, I’ve got to get to work. I left you a bag of Cheetos and cookies by the couch for a snack. Be good.”

As if she could tell me what to do!

Pip left and I devoured my pancakes, but still felt slightly peckish. I thought of eating my snacks, but then I would have to wait all day for more sustenance. I could probably open the refrigerator or cupboards for more but already knew they didn’t hold much. My first order of business once I did relocate to a grandeur space would be to have a fully stocked larder. Maybe two. Or three... After all, I was a growing dragon.

Rather than dwell on my already rumbling belly, I went and scrubbed off more dead skin in her bathroom sink. An inadequate bath that I’d already almost outgrown. The revealed scales already appeared much darker, indicating I would most likely end up ebony in shade.

With my molting done for this cycle, I returned to my servant’s main living area where the television displayed a movie featuring a lot of females crying and being shrill. Annoying. I poked at the remote, my claws pressing the button to change the channel. There weren’t many options. The children’s show, Sesame Street , played. While made for human younglings, it proved informative. It taught me the alphabet, numbers, and some of the social morals expected today. Not that those applied to me, but it helped me better understand my human. Although Pip had much to learn if she thought I needed manners. Dragons didn’t ask. They demanded.

My attention wandered as I tired of watching the screen. The fictional stories were only barely indicative of the real world. While the many shows offered a variety of names, those belonged to people and a dragon deserved better.

It made me mull over Pip's suggestion that I choose one assigned to a demon. That would certainly provide me with a name that humans wouldn't dare mock and would immediately imply strength and ruthlessness. But how to find those appellations?

My human owned few books, and of those, most were about tattooing, a strange art that involved permanently marking flesh with designs. I didn't understand why anyone would do it, however, apparently people paid my human to do so. She did have a few books with interesting knowledge. One featured images of the flora and fauna of Canada. Another displayed tribal markings from around the world and their significance. However, it was the tome claiming to be the most comprehensive collection of occult symbols that drew my eye.

My reading skills weren't up to par—yet—however, I could muddle through enough to understand and learn as I forced myself to read the words. There was an entire section devoted to demonology, and as I flipped through, I found the name I would be known by.

My servant would be pleased, not that I cared.

I spent the time remaining before my chauffeur arrived watching the news channel, baffled by the items they found newsworthy. Who cared if an elderly person went missing? They most likely did their family a favor. A car crashed. And? Accidents happened. As for this thing called an election? Rulers should govern for life. If they did poorly, then the people could remove their head as incentive for the next.

Hearing a vehicle crunching gravel, I popped from the couch and waited by the door. I remained too short of stature to be able to open it on my own. A frustrating thing

that I would soon outgrow.

The portal to outside opened and my burly male human poked his face in, only to recoil as I said, “You better have brought me a snack.” Because the delicious Cheetos and cookies were long gone.

“Um. I think I’ve got something in the truck. How do you feel about beef jerky?”

I loved it, as it turned out. My human placed me in the back of the vehicle, as was proper. A dignitary never sat beside their chauffeur. Despite the caution to remain hidden, I did peek out the window, observing the roads and other signs of modern civilization. Much different in person than on the television.

As for the city we entered? Impressive. It held a staggering number of buildings, cars, and people. It also smelled bad. I’d have to ensure the home I acquired remained far from civilization to avoid the stench.

“Tuck down. We don’t want anyone seeing and reporting you,” Maddox cautioned.

I listened but only because I remained too small to defend myself and I didn’t know yet if I could count on my human to do so. He’d seemed reluctant and acted as if he had a choice in the matter.

He didn’t. He’d been chosen, and until I released him from my service, he belonged to me.

The building he brought me to appeared more impressive than Pip’s until the male stated, “This is my store, Leaping Lizards.”

The ground level held his shop, making my protector a merchant. Surprising, given his stature, though his shopkeeper status explained his lack of enthusiasm for

becoming my knight. But he'd been chosen, so he'd have to learn.

Despite the fact half the building was for his business, the second floor, containing his home, did have a spaciousness to it that I approved of—until I smelled the feline.

A feline that dared to rise from a chair and hiss at me!

The nerve.

I hissed right back, which led to the male chiding us both. “Be nice. We’re all friends here.”

Not really. That cat looked more like a hairy snack to me. However, I let it live since I smelled yummier things cooking.

I'd save the feline for dessert.

“Make yourself at home,” my male offered.

As if I wouldn't.

“Pip says you like watching television. I've got the sports channel on now but can change it if you like.”

Sports? I didn't mind the displays of athleticism, especially since the male brought over more snacks. This time a platter of cheese and fruit. Not enough, I should add.

Maddox left to fetch me a drink. When he returned, he eyed the empty plate and muttered, “Guess you're not sharing.”

“If you expected some, you should have served more. Speaking of which, I'm still

hungry.” Really, how many times did they have to be told a growing dragon needed a lot of food?

“Good thing dinner is pretty much ready. We’ll eat once Pip gets here.”

It took an eternity despite the clock saying she arrived twelve minutes later.

A doorbell rang and Maddox answered the door, letting Pip inside. The pair exchanged hellos and completely ignored me and my rumbling belly.

Unacceptable. I wasted away while they flirted. “About time you got here, woman. I’m hungry.”

To which the insolent wench smirked and said, “I’m happy to see you, too, Little Fella.”

Which gave me the opening I needed to announce, “No more shall you denigrate me. I have chosen my name. From here on in, I shall be known as the mighty Abaddon.”

Did they fall to their knees in veneration? Cheer my stupendous choice of name?

Nope. Pip said, “Awesome,” and Maddox added, “Dinner’s ready.”

I might have been more annoyed but for the fact the food was really good.

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Chapter Seven

When Maddox offered me dinner at his place, I kind of expected something store-bought and reheated, or simple like steaks on a BBQ. Instead, he'd made a crockpot roast with some kind of red wine gravy, roasted potatoes, and carrots. He did admit to buying the crusty loaf of bread. I forgave him because this was above and beyond what I could manage.

Little Fella—excuse me, Abaddon—must have approved because he ate everything on his plate, plus a second and third.

Maddox eyed him in astonishment and whispered, “Where does he put it?”

“I don't know, but he seems to consume his body weight plus some,” I confided.

“Damn. When he gets bigger, you're going to need more than your motorcycle to carry the groceries.”

The remark caused me to grimace. “I hadn't actually thought that far ahead. I mean, a few days ago he was the size of a kitten, now he's a cat.”

Abaddon stopped slurping the gravy to give me an evil eye. “Would you stop the comparison to felines? Bad enough I must dine in the company of one.”

My dragon didn't like cats. Hilarious. Especially since Princess must have sensed it because she sat on a chair directly across from Abaddon and stared at him the entire time.

Beautiful cat, but not what I'd expected. I'll admit, when Maddox mentioned owning a cat, I'd assumed that it would be some kind of domestic breed that looked like it fought rats in the alley. But no, he had a long hair Himalayan kitty with bright blue eyes, a snub nose, and fur of pure white. A fluffball with four legs, essentially, who suddenly decided she wanted onto my lap.

Maddox's brows rose seeing his Princess purring and rubbing against my scratching fingers. "That's a first. She doesn't usually like strangers."

"Bah, she's doing it to antagonize me," grumbled Abaddon. "Wretched creatures."

"How would you know?" I countered. "This is your first time meeting one."

"Cats, dogs, and rats are known to be annoying pests."

"Are there any animals you do like?" I asked, still petting Princess.

"Cows are delicious, as are sheep, goats, camels, horses, and crocodiles."

"I can see you saying that about beef, because you did steal my steak, but I know for a fact you haven't eaten any camel, horse, or croc."

"I just know," Abaddon stated.

"What if your tastes are different from this ancestral memory you have? Could be you hate goat," I argued.

"Is this a suggestion to put cat on the menu to see if I change my mind?" His gaze narrowed on Princess who ignored him. Judging by his flared nostrils, that annoyed.

"No eating the cat," Maddox stated sternly. "No pets at all, actually. People would get

very upset, and by people, I mean me.”

“Humans. Always ruining everything,” grouched Abaddon.

“I have something better to chew on than fur. Have you had an ice cream sundae yet?” Maddox asked as he placed the first dessert in front of me, a work of sugary art replete with banana, whipped cream, drizzled caramel, and a cherry on top.

“Dude...” I exhaled. “This looks decadently delicious.”

“It’s my second favorite dessert,” he admitted.

“Second?” I queried with an arched brow. “What’s the first?”

“Sitting across from me driving me wild.”

I suddenly needed a fan.

“Where’s mine?” complained Abaddon, ruining the moment.

“Give me a second to get it ready,” Maddox grumbled.

Ready after he’d made his own, that was. My date wisely gave Abaddon the rest of the ice cream tub with a few bananas and cherries tossed in along with the last of the whipped topping. Ever seen a baby dragon with a frothy mustache? Not as cute as you’d think, especially when his forked black tongue emerged to swipe it.

After dinner we adjourned to Maddox’s living room, me with a glass of wine that had me feeling mellow and wondering how I’d get home. Then again, I’d bet Maddox had a big, comfy bed.

Princess chose to perch on her throne—a chair with a fat pink cushion embroidered with her name.

I might have raised my brow at it and a ruddy-cheeked Maddox admitted, “I didn’t buy it. My mom did. Said Princess needed it.”

“You’re close to your mom.”

“Yeah. She’s awesome. Raised me on her own after Dad died. Worked two jobs to support us.”

“She lives nearby?”

“Yeah, although she’s away at the moment. She won the lottery last year and it was sizeable enough she could quit her job and go on a six-month cruise.”

“I didn’t think anyone ever won those big jackpots.”

“Me either, until she did. She deserved it though. What about your parents?” he asked, only to quickly add, “Sorry, didn’t mean to piss you off.”

Damn my face for being expressive. “It’s not you, it’s them. Let’s just say a child wasn’t what either of my parents wanted. Granny raised me in the trailer. I slept on the pull-out couch until she passed.” It took me months before I could enter her bedroom. Even more months before I finally stripped the room and made it my own. “She was my rock and made me who I am.”

“You must miss her.”

“I do.” I sighed. “She died a few years ago. Drunk driver.” I’d been a wreck for weeks afterwards. A good thing the dude also died or I might have been in prison for

getting revenge.

“Didn’t mean to kill the mood so let’s change the subject. I did some research on dragons today.”

“And?”

He grimaced. “Came up mostly empty-handed. While there is much folklore of dragons existing, there is little information about how they came into being, how to care for their young, or anything much more than what we’ve seen in movies and books.”

I glanced at Abaddon. “Exactly how long was your egg in that volcano? Do you know?”

“Long,” Abaddon admitted as he prowled the space, poking his nose into everything. “Longer than I should have been. I felt at least two eruptions before the one that dislodged me.”

“How come you weren’t born during those events?” Maddox questioned.

“I am unsure, but given the need for intense heat for curing, I can only assume my maternal progenitor accidentally placed me in a crevice that the magma did not reach. Even after my expulsion it was only by luck that I hatched.”

“Because I put you in the firepit,” I murmured. “What would have happened if I hadn’t?”

“Nothing. I would have remained caught in my shell, unable to be born.”

“Glad she found you, little buddy,” Maddox declared.

“Must you call me little?” Abaddon complained.

“You are, compared to me.”

“Not for long...” My dragon hopped on the couch and gave the cat a smug look as he nestled in my lap. Guess I should enjoy it while he remained small.

“I’m curious, what does a dragon do? Like what is your goal or purpose in life?” Maddox sat across from me on a chair.

Too shy to share the couch? Being a gentleman?

“We collect treasure for our hoard. Eat. Claim an area as our own. Take humans into our service. And then protect it all from other dragons, or those who would try and encroach.”

“What if there are no other dragons?” I asked.

“Then as I get bigger, my territory will expand until I eventually rule the world.”

Abaddon said it so nonchalantly it took me a second before I burst out laughing.

“Oh, man, that’s funny,” I chortled.

I received a disdainful glare in reply. “Dragons are the apex predators of this world.”

Blame the wine for my truthful and slippery tongue. “And yet you’re the only one left.”

“Because we are hunted,” Abaddon hissed. “Greedy humans want our treasure.”

“A treasure you stole from them,” I pointed out.

“Then they should have guarded it better,” he spat back.

Maddox interjected himself. “How about before embarking on a mission to rule the world, we figure out a plan to ensure you can remain free instead of in captivity?”

“I will not be caged.” Abaddon tossed his head.

“You won’t have a choice if people find out about you. Rare creatures don’t get to live in the wild,” I pointed out.

“I do not like this modern world,” Abaddon stated before scooting into a corner of the couch and tucking his head in a sulk.

I grimaced as I eyed Maddox. He topped up my wine and said, “Wanna go up on my rooftop patio and look at the stars?”

“Hell yeah,” I agreed before realizing I had to use a ladder to get there.

Maddox nicely carried my wine so I could use both hands to climb and I needed them as it turned out because a glance below showed him staring intently at my ass. And when he got caught? I finally understood the expression “panty-wetting grin.”

We exited onto a roof with a slight slope for rain and melting snow but standing proved easy as there was a level platform surrounded by a glass rail with some chairs and a barbeque.

“This is cool,” I said, glancing around.

“Thanks. I missed having a yard or patio to hang out on, so I built this to have a place

to get out and just breathe.” He set my wine glass on a table before hopping down the ladder to return with his glass and the bottle.

I seated myself and stared at the twinkling lights in the sky. As he took the spot beside me, I said, “Sorry Abaddon’s such an ass.”

“It’s fine. He’s still learning how things work. Gotta remember he was only born a few days ago, so he’s still adjusting.”

“There’s adjusting and delusional. You heard him. He wants to become some evil dragon overlord.”

“I don’t know if I’d say evil. Kind of depends how he does it.”

“People aren’t going to suddenly agree to let him rule over us.”

“Don’t be so sure. I’ll bet plenty of folks tired of our divisive politics might jump at the chance for something different.”

“I hardly think the LARP-ers of the world number enough to convince everyone else to accept a dragon as their ruler,” was my dry retort.

His lips quirked. “Don’t be so sure. There’s a number of ladies who love dragons, too.”

“Assuming he really is one.”

“Even if Abaddon isn’t, he’s definitely unique.”

“That he is.” I sipped my wine, and remarked, “I should stop after this glass if I’m going to drive home.”

“I’ve got a guest bedroom if you need it.”

The offer had me eyeing him. “Seriously? Not going to even try to get me into your bed?”

“It wouldn’t be very gentlemanly to take advantage of you while you’re tipsy and we barely know each other.”

My snort was very unladylike. “One, I’d need a lot more wine before I wasn’t capable of making a decision. And two, what if I want you to seduce me?” I feared I might have been too bold. Some guys didn’t like it when women made the first move.

“I’d say, why are you sitting over there when my lap is getting cold?”

My lips curved as I rose. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I lowered myself onto his thighs, one arm draped around his neck, the other still holding my wine. His arm curled around my waist and his breath brushed my earlobe as he spoke. “You’re a very unique and interesting woman, Pip.”

“I know. But you wouldn’t be the first guy to say that and then hide the fact we’re dating from his friends and family.”

“What? I’d never do that,” he exclaimed. “I meant it in a good way. You’re bold. Speak your mind. Fearless.”

“How would you know I’m not scared of stuff?”

“Not too many women would have seen a wild lizard and decided to cuddle it in bed.”

“Never had a pet growing up,” I admitted. “Granny said the trailer was already too small for the pair of us.”

“Whereas I always had something. A hamster when I was real young. Then a dog named Ruff. A few budgies. And finally, Princess.”

“I have to ask how you ended up with her because she is not what I pictured you having.”

“I found her. Or should I say, she chose me. I’d gone to the animal shelter to adopt a dog. Only this kitten escaped its cage and ran for me. Literally climbed my leg and sat on my shoulder. Refused to budge. Dug in her claws so tight she drew blood.”

“And you decided to adopt her?”

“How could I not when she started purring? Anyhow, I guess you could say it was love at first sight. Princess wouldn’t leave me and so I paid a fortune to take her home.”

“I thought the animal shelter had reasonable prices for their strays.”

“Not on a purebred rescued from a kitten mill. She was the only one of her litter to survive. Apparently, the home they took her from was a cesspool.”

Hearing his story, I couldn’t help but murmur, “You’re a big softie.”

“For some things, yeah.”

“What would you do about Abaddon in my position?”

“I know the animal nuts would scream that you have to hand him over so he can be

properly studied and taken care of. But me? I'd keep him."

"I want to, but you've seen my place. It's a shoebox."

"Yeah, you might need to upgrade your living space. And quick, too, from the sounds of it."

"I've been wanting to build. I mean, I already own the land, but only have a fraction saved to get started."

"Bank won't give you a loan?"

"I'd rather not have that stress," I admitted. "Granny always called them bottom feeders and advised me to pay cash for as much as possible."

"Paying for a house with cash isn't really feasible."

"I know." My nose wrinkled. "Old habit and maybe just a tiny fear of committing to something so big and expensive."

"I feel that. Buying this place was a leap of faith. Luckily, it's been panning out so far."

"A good thing, or we wouldn't have met," I murmured, turning in his lap to face him.

His hand rose to brush a strand of hair from my face. "That would have been a tragedy."

"Oh, why?"

"Because then I wouldn't be doing this."

He leaned in and kissed me, a soft press of lips that still managed to ignite my libido. My mouth slid over his, teasing and tasting. My fingers raked the hair at the back of his head as I held him close. He gripped my thigh, squeezing it, making me tingle. I shifted on his lap so I straddled him, wanting to press my core against the hard bulge at his groin. The friction even with the clothes between us stole my breath.

Who knows what might have happened if we'd been interrupted by yowling and crashing through the open roof hatch.

We descended the ladder to find a mess caused by my dragon.

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Chapter Eight

I stared in horror at the destruction. “What the fuck?”

The living room had gone from tidy to looking as if a tornado had ripped through. The coffee table was tipped over, along with everything on it. Cushions from the couch lay strewn all over the floor.

Abaddon pointed. “She started it.”

She being the cat currently perched atop a bookcase, hissing down at my pet.

“Princess! Are you okay?” Maddox strode for her, his expression and body tight with concern.

The cat yowled and leaped for him, apparently something she’d done before since Maddox easily caught her and held her close.

“Don’t let her fool you,” Abaddon insisted. “She’s evil.”

“Enough,” I barked. “We’re leaving. Now.”

That grabbed Maddox’s attention. “Princess is fine. No need to go.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, there is. I’m sorry. This is your and Princess’ home. She shouldn’t have to defend herself from someone who should know better.” I glared at Abaddon.

A mulish expression on his face went with his crossed arms. “She purposely goaded me.”

“I don’t give a fuck. A dragon should be above such pettiness,” I scolded. “Let’s go.”

Maddox shook his head. “Are you sure you want to drive? The offer of the spare room is still available.”

And worry all night that Abaddon might slip out and eat his cat? No thanks. Besides, my annoyance at Abaddon managed to sober me.

“It was only a few glasses. I’ll be fine.”

He grabbed his keys and tried to hand them to me. “Take my truck. It will be easier for you to carry Abaddon.”

“No need. We’ll make do on my bike. Thank you for dinner. I’ll replace anything that’s broken, of course. Just let me know what I owe.”

“Pip—” Maddox appeared torn but I remained resolute.

“Good night, Mad.”

I scooped up Abaddon and went trotting down the stairs, rigid with anger. A nice evening ruined by a bratty lizard.

My brisk stride to the tattoo shop where I’d left my bike took only minutes, during which Abaddon remained silent. We encountered no one. Then again, what would anyone say? I’m sure a woman carrying a lizard isn’t the weirdest thing to have walked these sidewalks.

Only when I unstrapped the saddlebag flap did Abaddon protest. “You can’t expect me to travel in that!”

“You will, and you will be quiet about it,” I snapped. “There’s nowhere else for you to sit.”

“It’s undignified.”

“Then I guess you should have thought of that before being an asshole to the cat.”

“The feline started it,” grumbled Abaddon as he reluctantly settled in the saddlebag where he fit for the moment.

“The cat did not grab things and throw them,” I retorted as I gunned my engine, and we set off.

“What else could I do when it climbed where I couldn’t reach it?” Abaddon complained loud enough for me to hear over the noise of the motor.

“Ever thought of leaving it alone?” I huffed with a raised voice. The rumble of my motorcycle was loud, but my annoyance was even greater.

“Do nothing after it taunted me? The shame,” grumbled my pet.

“Even if the cat goaded you, you should have known better. Behaved better. Had some control. You know, for someone who claims he’s some majestic dragon, you acted like a petulant child.”

“I’m sorry.”

The apology was so faint I almost missed it. It also surprised me. Did Abaddon feel

actual contrition, or was this more about disappointing me? Either way, the chiding had to be done. He might have some grandiose idea about dragons and how they supposedly treated people—and beloved pets—but that didn't mean I had to tolerate it.

We stopped for a red light, the last until the long stretch home, and with no one around, I flipped back the cover on the bag. “Are you actually sorry?”

A woebegone Abaddon nodded. “You are correct. I allowed a lesser creature to goad me. I shall strive to rise above the next time.”

“Assuming there is one.” While Maddox had claimed I didn't have to go, and that everything was fine, a part of me couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if we'd not heard the ruckus. Would Abaddon have harmed Princess? What if he lied to me now and we returned and he did do something? Maddox would be devastated, with reason.

“I shall make it up to my protector.”

“I doubt he'll want either of us near him now.” I'd seen his face when he saw his cat threatened. The usually mellow man had turned hard in that moment. Sexy as fuck, I should add. But he shouldn't have been put in that position in his own home. All because I had a naughty dragon with no manners.

“The male will not abandon us.”

“Says you.” The light changed and I gunned the bike, the fresh air doing much to clear my mind.

Even Abaddon enjoyed it. “Whee.” He poked his head out of the bag. Like a dog, he angled his face to catch the wind.

The childlike enjoyment softened my anger. I slowed the bike to a stop and said, “Get between my legs.”

“Really?” He wasted no time scrabbling from the saddlebag to the crevice between my thighs, his body short enough he didn’t impede my arms and ability to steer.

We took off, just a woman and her dragon riding a steel horse into the night. The empty road was wide and beckoning. I was almost tempted to keep on driving. Just keep going ...

To where?

Everything I owned was in the trailer. My life, my friends, my job were in Terrace. Sure I had the funds to roam for a little while, but did I really want to dip into my nest egg because of a bad date?

It wasn’t like I loved Maddox.

Not yet.

We’d only shared a kiss and nothing more.

Only because we’d been interrupted.

I barely knew him, so why did I mourn his loss already?

Because for just a moment, I’d felt as if I’d found my person. Someone I could see myself dating. Someone who didn’t just crank my sexual motor but engaged my mind. Bah. Look at me acting like a girl.

My evening might have ended unpleasantly, but that was no excuse to run. I wasn’t

my mother. I could face uncomfortable situations—even those not of my making.

I veered into my driveway abruptly, and Abaddon jostled, digging his claws into my thighs as he steadied himself.

I parked the bike and set Abaddon on the ground before striding to the trailer door to open it and let him inside. But I didn't follow.

He turned to me. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

My mouth opened to say no. I wanted to get drunk by the fire and wallow.

Only he looked at me with big eyes, the contrition real.

I hesitated and he suddenly flung himself at my leg and hugged it with his paws. "I'm sorry, Pip. Don't be angry. I'll do better."

"I know you will," I murmured as I bent to pick him up, his small size reminding me that despite his ability to speak, he remained a baby. Babies needed to be taught, even those that thought they knew it all. Abaddon might have some genetic memories, but those applied to a time that no longer existed. It was up to me to explain how things worked. To show him right from wrong. To set the example. Because, truth be told, while Abaddon drove me slightly nuts, I was fond of him.

"Want to share a bag of popcorn while we watch a movie?" I asked. Tomorrow was Sunday, my day off, so we could stay up late.

"Yes." He wiggled in my arms but settled down once the movie started—me with half a bag of popcorn, and him with a full one plus the other half of mine.

We watched *The Land Before Time*, a kid's movie, but then again, Abaddon was

one. Maybe the story of the little dinosaur that had a strong theme centering around family and friends and helping one another out despite differences would have an effect.

If it did, it got lost behind Abaddon jumping up and down with excitement every time Sharptooth appeared in the movie. Yes, he cheered on the T-Rex.

Sigh. In better news, he simmered down and appeared somber when Little Foot's mom got chomped.

We went to bed and snuggled. Nice, but not as nice as Maddox's bed would have been. No point in dwelling on what wouldn't happen.

The next morning, I woke around nine to bright sunshine and a hungry dragon. I made a stack of toast and laid out some paper towels on the floor so he could learn to slather his own peanut butter and jelly. His claws could grip the butter knife, and while sloppy at first, he managed to get most of the spread on the bread.

And when he ran out of toast? He started scooping it from the jar and stuffing it in his maw.

Guess I'd be visiting the grocery store. Again.

I'd just cleaned up the messy paper when I heard several vehicles pulling in. Unusual. I rarely got company.

I glanced at Abaddon and mouthed, "Hide."

While people could own lizards, mine being of a non-local variety could cause issue. Not to mention, I didn't trust my Little Fella to keep his trap shut.

He scurried off to the bathroom and I opened the front door to find a pair of red-jacketed RCMP officers—the shortened term for Royal Canadian Mounted Police—on my doorstep.

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Chapter Nine

“Can I help you?” I politely asked, wondering why these officers would be outside my door. While I might be a tattooed girl with a filthy mouth and indigenous heritage, I obeyed most laws. I didn’t murder or steal, but I did like to speed. However, I doubted that brought them knocking.

“Hello, ma’am. Pardon our calling so early. We’re here to advise you that there is a health department order decreeing that any debris spewed by the volcano found on your premises needs to be handed over immediately.”

I blinked. “Er, what? Why the fuck would the health department give a damn about rocks?” My mouth spoke before I could stop it.

“There is concern about possible toxicity in the stones recently emitted by the volcano. As such, the health department created a task force whose job is to collect all samples and remove them for your safety.”

I glanced beyond the chunky officer’s shoulder and noticed people in hazmat suits in my yard, poking around. Two of them were bent over the fire pit.

My stomach tightened as I immediately wondered if they were looking for Abaddon’s egg. Wouldn’t matter if they were, since his emergence had shattered his shell into tiny little chunks.

“Wow. I never knew lava rocks could be dangerous.” I clutched my hands to my chest and opened my eyes wide.

“This is just a precautionary measure, ma’am. Do you have any of the debris inside your home?”

“Goodness no. My place is too tiny for me to be storing rocks,” I scoffed. Then, because they were already poking, I admitted, “I did find a few and threw them into my firepit which I’ve been burning. Will the smoke I inhaled harm me?”

“Most likely not, but you might want to schedule a physical with your family physician just to be sure.”

“Oh, I will.” Not actually, but I pretended to play along.

“While we’re here, have you seen any strange animals lurking around?” the officer asked.

“I see all kinds of creatures seeing as how I live in the boonies,” I admitted with a laugh.

“This wouldn’t be your usual run-of-the-mill wildlife. It may have looked like a lizard. A local man had one escape from a tank and is eager for its return.”

My blood ran cold because he obviously lied. The RCMP wouldn’t be going door to door looking for a regular pet reptile. They sought Abaddon because he was special, but no way would I hand him over. I’d seen enough movies to know what awaited Abaddon if the government managed to capture him. “You’re looking for a lizard? I haven’t seen one. Is it dangerous?”

“We would recommend caution. If you do see it, you can call this number.” He handed over a white card with a number embossed on it and nothing else. Stranger and stranger. Shouldn’t it have a name and the logo of the agency on it?

“What’s this lizard look like?”

“Four legs. Tail. Scales.”

“That’s a pretty generic description.” Once more my tongue ran away before I could stop it.

The officer shrugged. “The owner didn’t have a picture but figured we’d ask since we’re already doing the rounds.”

“I will keep an eye out,” I promised, keeping my hands clasped to ensure he didn’t see them shaking.

“If you could stay inside while we look around and gather any stray chunks. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Not long being an hour of them hunting.

I watched them through the curtain with my coffee cup in hand. The RCMP officers stood smoking by their truck while the hazmat suit wearers literally performed a perimeter sweep, walking in a line, their heads swiveling to and fro. The pair from the firepit lugged off two sealed cases, taking everything in the pit, including the ash.

When they left, the tension in my body only barely eased. I called out to Abaddon. “It’s safe to come out now.”

“Humans are strange. Collecting lava rocks,” Abaddon huffed as he waddled into view.

“It’s more than strange because I’ve never heard of such a thing happening.” I’d done my research on volcanoes since the eruption. While some of the emitted gases could

be poisonous, the rocks were benign.

I know what my granny would have said. They were looking for the dragon egg. I tended to agree.

“A good thing I hatched before they came around,” Abaddon pointed out.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Did you hear them asking if I’d seen a lizard?”

“Yesss,” he hissed. “The hunters already seek me.”

“But how would they know to look for you? You said it yourself, you were in that volcano a long time. There’s no way they could have known you’d emerge in the eruption.”

“I don’t know how they’d be aware of my birth.” Little Fella shrugged. “But can we discuss this later? I am starving.”

“You just ate a whole loaf of bread plus all the peanut butter and jam.”

“My tummy is rumbling.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course it is.”

I chose to do something quick and easy, handing him an entire box of Raisin Bran which he declared boring. I promised to buy him something better when I went shopping. At this rate, I might have to pay an exorbitant fee to get a large grocery order delivered. I couldn’t keep popping out shopping every other day, soon to be daily.

I’d deal with the grocery issue later. First, I wanted to search the internet to see what I

could find out about the RCMP and those guys in the hazmat suits. Something that strange had to be documented somewhere. The regular news outlets had no mention of it—no surprise. I ended up finding posts about it on X and Reddit.

Anyone else have govnt SOBS demand to come on your property and search for lava rocks? I told them they could kick some and to come back with a warrant.

Are the rocks from the eruption dangerous? I just had the three I found confiscated.

And then on Facebook marketplace, of all places, I found an ad seeking to buy any rocks larger than six inches from the recent Tseax spewing.

Why were they being collected? The search for stones combined with the supposed lizard on the loose story really sounded as if someone knew a dragon had hatched. I glanced at Abaddon, watching *The Simpsons*, sitting with a rounded belly, and getting bigger by the day. How long could I keep his presence a secret, especially if people did actively pursue him? I didn't want to see him locked away in some government lab. Abaddon hadn't done anything wrong.

Yet.

I couldn't help but remember the dragons in the movie *Reign of Fire* who burned the world and hunted humanity. I could only hope my chunky lizard wouldn't do anything so evil.

The paranoia the RCMP incurred prevented me from leaving the trailer at all. Instead, I dug through all my cupboards to keep Abaddon fed. I kept the curtains shut and potatoed myself on the couch with my laptop, going down some internet rabbit holes as I tried to find answers.

A rumble of an engine midafternoon had me suddenly jerking upright. That sounded

like?—

“About time he came to report for duty,” Abaddon grumbled, sliding off the couch. “He better have brought snacks.”

I eyed my outfit. Disreputable didn’t even start to cover it. A threadbare tank top, short cotton shorts, my hair in a messy bun. Did I have time to throw on the robe I’d worn this morning to greet the cops?

Knock. Knock.

Nope.

Sigh.

Not that my looks probably mattered after last night. Although, I did wonder why Maddox had come by.

Before I could fling open the door, Abaddon leapt up and grabbed the handle, yanking it down.

My brow arched. He had gotten bigger if he could reach. Smart, too, using his body weight to activate the lever.

A plaid-wearing Maddox—who looked delicious in his snug jeans—stood outside holding flowers in one hand and a giant watermelon in the other.

To my surprise, Abaddon bowed his head and said, “I would like to express my regret for my behavior the previous evening. It was unbecoming of someone of my stature.”

My jaw dropped.

“Already forgiven, bud.”

“Excellent.”

Maddox turned his attention from the dragon to me and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey. What are you doing here?” I sounded terse, mostly because I wasn’t sure how to act. Maddox didn’t seem angry.

“I thought I’d check in on you and Abaddon, and I wanted to apologize for how things ended last night. I should have known better than to leave Princess alone with Abaddon. She’s not good with other animals.”

“Ha. Told you she taunted me,” my dragon huffed.

“And you fell for it,” I chided in reminder.

“Next time, we’ll make sure to keep them in separate rooms,” Maddox stated.

“Next time?” I blurted without thinking.

“That is, unless my cooking sucked and you’d rather I never attempt it again.” Before I could reply he thrust the flowers at me. “These are for you. And this”—he crouched and held out the watermelon—“is for our dragon friend.”

“Ooh.” Abaddon dug his claws in the melon and to my surprise had the strength to hold it up, if awkwardly, given its size.

“Um, you can’t eat that in here.” I could just imagine the mess. But then I remembered my morning visitors. “Fuck, he can’t go outside either.”

“Why not?” Maddox asked.

“The RCMP were by this morning with some dudes in head-to-toe protective gear.”

“What for?”

“Collecting lava rocks. Oh, and I was told to keep an eye out for an escaped pet lizard.”

Both our gazes went to Abaddon who sniffed and licked the outer watermelon rind.

“Do they know about him?” Maddox murmured.

“You tell me. I couldn’t find any reason why they’d be after the volcano’s rocks, and the lizard story seemed just a little too pat. Then again, it’s not as if they’d come out and admit they were looking for a dragon. I take it they didn’t swing by your shop?”

Maddox shook his head. “No.”

“Odd,” I muttered. “You’d think they’d have questioned the one shop that sells reptile supplies.”

Abaddon began gnawing on the green shell and I had a nightmarish vision of my future mopping watermelon juice from my floor.

“Guess I should have brought him a different treat.” Maddox pursed his lips.

“Not your fault. I’m just a little leery of letting him outside now.” It then hit me where he could eat it with minimal damage. “Abaddon, mind eating that thing in the shower where I can sluice away the mess after?”

The dragon paused his lovemaking of the melon for a second to eye me. “As if I’d leave anything behind.”

“Watermelons can be messy, so please, if you don’t mind.”

He uttered a forbearing sigh. “If I must.”

“Want me to carry it for you?” Maddox offered.

“Mine!” hissed the dragon as he waddled to the tight bathroom.

One problem averted. I slumped onto the settee and buried my face in the flowers. Their sweet scent soothed.

Maddox perched beside me and the scent of him proved even more tantalizing than the blooms. “Do you think they’ll be back?”

“Who knows. They took all the rocks I’d dumped in the fire pit, including the shell pieces.”

“Think they’ll recognize what they are?”

“To look at them, they appear to be rocks. But who knows what they might discover if they analyze them more deeply.”

“Given how far the volcano spread its debris and how many rocks they’ll be collecting, it could take a while.”

“Or not,” was my morose reply. “The question is, do I wait to see if they figure out Abaddon hatched or flee ahead of their attempt to take him?”

“To go where?” he asked. “It’s not like you can hop a plane with him.”

“And he barely fit in my saddle bag last night,” I commented. “Guess I could use my savings to buy a car.”

“But again, to go where? He’s going to get bigger. You’d need a place with space but few eyes, which kind of already describes where you live.”

“Except for the fact the cops know I’m here. I might have to get off the beaten path. Go off into the wilderness, maybe, and become a mountain woman. There are enough untamed forests around we could probably disappear.” Not ideal, but at the same time I couldn’t see myself handing over my Little Fella.

“Becoming a hermit is a bit extreme and would make us dating hard.”

My heart stopped and I glanced at him. “I can’t believe you’d still want to, seeing as how my life has become a tad complicated.”

“Yes, you have a dragon problem and possibly might be on the government’s radar, but what can I say? I’m curious to see all your tattoos.” His gaze went to my thigh and the ink on it that stretched upward and under the hem of my shorts to my hip.

My blood heated and my voice emerged husky. “Why Mad, are you trying to seduce me?”

“I would if I didn’t think we’d get interrupted in the next five minutes.”

I chuckled. “As if he’ll take that long.”

Sure enough, out came the dragon, his belly distended. A burp escaped Abaddon. “That was most excellent, my protector. You are forgiven for having a most foul

feline in your possession.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“As to the dilemma about my being discovered, fear not, woman. Once my wings sprout, the hunting humans will not be able to catch me. Should they come again, I shall fly off out of their reach.”

“Need I remind you that you don’t have wings,” I pointed out.

“Yet,” Abaddon stated. “Shouldn’t be long now.”

“Let’s say for the sake of argument you get them, how are you going to fly off if you’re stuck inside and they’re blocking the door?”

“My protector will keep them occupied whilst I slip away.”

“Maddox doesn’t live here, so you can’t count on him to distract them,” I reminded. “Not to mention they’ll have drones.”

“Those spying machines are no match for a dragon,” he scoffed.

I wish I had Abaddon’s confidence. “Let’s say you do manage to give them the slip, where would you go?”

Before Abaddon could reply, Maddox snapped his fingers. “We need a safe house, or in this case, safe cave where he can flee if something happens. Between the Hazelton Mountains to the east and the Kitimat Range to the west, we should be able to find a place for Abaddon to go where he won’t be found.”

I mulled over the suggestion. “Those areas are ripe with wildlife, meaning if he can

hunt, he wouldn't go hungry."

"Hunt?" My dragon perked his ears.

"There's lakes and rivers and creeks, so plenty of fish. There are small critters like squirrels and rabbits as well. You'd have to be careful of bears, though. There's grizzly, black, and kermode bears in this area as well as moose, which can be vicious."

Did my dragon take the warning to heart? Nope. He licked his lips and hummed. "Yum."

"Don't let your large appetite lead you into tangling with something bigger and meaner than you." I wagged my finger.

"Might be a bit late in the day for us to go trekking," Maddox remarked. "And we'll want to bring some supplies to leave in whatever den we find for Abaddon. If you've got time tomorrow, though, I can get Suzy to come in and cover for me."

"I can't tomorrow morning, but I'm free in the afternoon, say around one-ish?"

He smiled. "Then it's a hiking date. I'll head out now while the stores are still open and grab some things."

"Are you sure? I could go."

He raised a brow. "I doubt you could pack a sleeping bag, water bottles, and enough snacks for our friend on that bike, although I'd like to see you try."

My lips twisted. "Good point. Let me know how much the bill is, though. I'm paying."

“Or, how about you buy me dinner?”

“More like a few by the sounds of it.” Then so he wouldn’t think I was complaining, I smiled and added, “Hope you like steak.”

“I’d be a beef-ivore if I didn’t like carbs so much,” he admitted.

“I like everything!” Abaddon declared.

“I’ll walk you to your truck,” I stated, wanting a moment alone without a dragon interjecting every two seconds.

As we walked the few yards to his parked vehicle I murmured, “I was surprised to see you. I thought for sure you’d be pissed.”

“I was in the moment, but more mad at myself. I know Princess can be a diva about her space. I am also aware she’s not a lizard lover, hence why she’s not allowed around the cages in the shop. I shouldn’t have left her alone with Abaddon. In my defense, I wanted to kiss you and didn’t know how to accomplish that with our pets watching.”

The admission had me both flushing and laughing. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’ve wanted to kiss you since we first met. You have very nice lips.”

Those lips curved. “If it helps, I’ve wanted to do more than that.”

“Now she tells me,” he complained.

“You don’t have to go shopping. You could stay.”

“I could, but then Princess would probably piss on my pillow, and since I doubt I can get Suzy to stay the whole day, we’d have nothing for his dragon highness. Not to mention, your bed is a tad small for the three of us and what I’d like to do with you.”

I snorted. “Damned pets.”

“Yeah, good thing we love them or we’d kill them.” He dragged me close, his hands starting at my waist and slipping to my ass. “But despite all the reasons I have to go, a part of me wants to say fuck it and seduce you right here on the hood of my truck.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed.” According to my very roused libido, I would actually be very interested.

“I am. I want to seduce you in a bed where I can properly explore every inch and where you won’t need a tetanus shot because there’s a bit of rust coming through the paint again.”

I outright laughed. “Keep making excuses.”

His hands squeezed my cheeks. “Stop tempting me or I will turn into a randy teenage boy who fumbles and botches our first time together.”

“You’re a very interesting man, Mads,” I murmured against his lips.

“Says the woman with a dragon,” was his reply before he kissed me. Kissed me long and hard, but even better, those hands on my ass—the ass barely covered by my tiny shorts—pushed up the fabric and cupped the bare cheeks.

Mmm.

I hummed against his mouth and he responded with his tongue. A fierce duel ensued

with much licking and sliding and sucking. But we didn't just kiss. I explored those broad shoulders and his hands... well they delved between my legs, my shorts no hindrance to his questing fingers.

When he penetrated me with a digit, I gasped into his mouth and my hips jerked.

He turned me so that he spooned me from behind, his lips teasing the shell of my ear as his hand worked me, two of his fingers dipping while his thumb somehow managed to rub my clit.

I moaned. I writhed. I enjoyed myself riding his hand and to my surprise came quickly, my pussy clenching his fingers.

As my climax eased and my body relaxed, I murmured, "Damn, Mad. Wasn't expecting that."

"Think of it as an appetizer to keep you going until the real deal," he whispered in my ear.

"Or we could have that meal right now?" I whirled in his arms, tilted my lips for a kiss.

"If I don't leave now, I'll never make it to the store in time. But trust me, it will happen soon. Real soon," he growled, grabbing my hand and placing it on the bulge pushing the groin area of his jeans.

I couldn't wait.

Chapter Ten

After Maddox left, I wondered where and how we'd manage to be alone for some sexy times because the moment I walked back in the trailer, Abaddon harangued me, "Why were you gone so long? I've been waiting forever."

But even his bitching couldn't ruin my good mood. The lightness lasted throughout the next morning and increased as I got closer and closer to seeing Maddox again.

Leo remarked on my eagerness to leave work. "What's gotten into you? I've never seen you in such a rush to get home before."

Since I wasn't ready to divulge my plans, or my burgeoning relationship with Maddox, I lied. "I've got a handyman coming to look at the damage to my trailer from the volcano."

"I thought it emerged unscathed."

"It did, but there's a huge dent on the roof that I'm worried about with winter coming."

"When are you going to build that house?" Leo knew of my plans.

"Soon. I'll be shopping designs and contractors before the fall most likely, so we can start in the spring." Assuming I hadn't relocated by then.

"See you tomorrow."

“Bye-a.” I fled and drove a little too fast to get home, arriving well before my planned meeting time with Maddox.

Since our tryst the day before, I’d had time to not only relive it—to my panty’s detriment—I’d also decided no matter what, I was paying back the favor either with my mouth on his cock, or his dick in my pussy. It didn’t seem fair I’d gotten pleasure and he went home blue balled.

Not today.

By the time Maddox arrived—early, I should add—I’d fed Abaddon, found an old knapsack to stuff him into until we at least got into the forest, changed into some hiking gear—old worn jeans, shit-kicker boots, and a henley—and changed my underwear into something sexy—and dry.

Maddox looked yummy as always in his snug denim and a red plaid shirt. He exited his truck, carrying a loaded backpack and a grin.

“Hey, sexy. Ready to go on a nature walk?”

“Hell yeah I am. Give me a second to grab my bag.” I entered the trailer to find Abaddon sulking.

“I don’t see why I have to be stuffed away,” he complained.

“Because we don’t know if anyone’s watching.” I’d not seen signs of spying but I remained leery since the visit of the RCMP. “Best we don’t take chances. I’ll let you out soon as we’re in the forest. Just so you know, we’ll be going east of the trailer and entering the woods by that really big pine.”

“Whatever,” he moped, crawling into the bag.

I exited with my heavy—and grumbly—bag and joined Maddox.

“Ready?”

I nodded. We set off at a brisk pace, just two people going for a hike. Although, I did wonder what anyone watching would think when we returned with his bulging pack empty. Here was hoping I didn’t have spying eyes on my property.

The forest in early fall always delighted. From the crisp scents to the colors, it dazzled the senses. It also reminded me how long it had been since I’d taken the time to literally smell and touch nature. I’d been so caught up in work that I’d forgotten how relaxing it could be.

Until a shrill voice interrupted. “I smell wood. Can I get out now?”

I glanced at Maddox. “What do you think?” The forest surrounded us and I heard and saw nothing out of place.

“Probably safe enough.”

I knelt and placed the knapsack on the ground, freeing Abaddon who emerged with a grumpy mien.

“Toted around like a baby. The shame.”

“For your safety. So suck it up, dragoncup.”

“And she calls me bossy,” he muttered, scampering ahead.

Maddox and I kept him in sight as we followed. “How far do we have to go, do you think?”

“I looked at some 3D maps of the area. If we keep heading west, we should hit some mountainous terrain within an hour so long as we keep this pace.”

“That’s not too bad.” I glanced at him with his heavier load. “Need me to carry some of that stuff?”

He snorted. “Yeah, no. That’s man’s work.”

“Ah, misogyny alive and well,” I stated.

“More like my mom raised me with the understanding that as long as my arms and legs work, no woman should ever have to carry anything other than her purse.”

“Your mom taught you that?” I squeaked. “My granny was the opposite. She always insisted I do everything myself. Claimed I couldn’t count on a man to do it. In her defense, my granddad was a lazy drunk.”

“I’m surprised your grandmother kept him around, seeing as how very strong-willed and independent, based on the stories you’ve told of her.”

“She was, but only because of what he put her through. She grew up being told she had to marry and depend on a man. Given her own father abused her, she latched on to the first fellow that gave her a way out. Only he turned out to be a dick. At least she benefited in the end. Turned out the logging company he worked for had life insurance for all their workers. She used that money to buy the land and trailer. She raised my mom there, and later on me. She said when he died, she’d never felt so relieved. Or free.”

“That sucks. I don’t remember my dad much, but from what Mom said, he did good by us.”

“No need to feel sorry for me. I had Granny and she made sure I had everything I needed, including ensuring I wouldn’t grow up thinking I had to cater to anyone. She encouraged me to be my own person.”

“I wish I could have met her.”

“Me too. She’d have liked you.”

The conversation remained steady as we walked, me learning how he sucked at math in school and then ironically ended up owning a business. “Good thing for the QuickBooks program or my taxes would be a nightmare.” I told him about my first tattoo given to a friend in high school in their kitchen using less than hygienic methods. Luckily that friend didn’t get any kind of blood poisoning and years later when I ran into him and saw the faded shit still staining his arm, I redid his tattoo into something epic for free.

It should be known, while I’d dated and been in a few relationships, I’d never really had deep conversations with those men. We met—usually while drinking in a bar—fucked, partied, but most weren’t interested in me as a person, just a hole to stick their dick in. The difference with Maddox proved staggering. He actually listened to me. Didn’t turn everything I said into some kind of sexual innuendo yet made his interest in me clear. Lacing his fingers through mine as we walked. Occasionally bumping his hip into mine and giving me a small smile.

I liked it.

A lot.

We had to stop handholding when we reached the foothills of the mountain. We’d been hiking for just over an hour and while I did worry about us getting lost since we followed no trail, Maddox didn’t seem concerned. Then again, Mr. Boy Scout had

brought a compass and every so often he stopped and held out his phone to mark a pin. Smart. I'd not even thought to bring breadcrumbs to drop.

It was Abaddon who found the cave, and a good thing because we'd have never spotted it. With his small and nimble size, along with his claws, he could climb and cling to the rocks and go places we couldn't.

He disappeared from sight. I paused, one foot on a boulder, eyeing the terrain.

"Did you see where he went?" I asked Maddox.

"Somewhere over in that rocky overhang. I'm sure he's fine."

Make that triumphant. He suddenly reappeared, clambering down quickly and chortled. "I found a place. Bigger than our current home."

"Where?"

He pointed to the overhang. "There's a ledge and a crack. You won't fit"—said to Maddox—"but Pip could. Inside is a cave, a big one, and two tunnels. I smell water in one of them."

It sounded ideal but for one thing. "How will we get these supplies up there?"

Maddox had a solution for that. He knelt and put his pack on the ground and pulled out a coil of rope. "I'm going to need you to find a spot to loop this rope around so that I can pull one end while the other is tied around your stuff. Something like this." He draped the rope over his arm and mimed tugging it.

Abaddon rolled his eyes. "Why not say you want to create a simple pulley system?"

“Uh, because I keep forgetting you’re smart.”

“Understandable. Greatness like me isn’t common. I think I know where to loop it. Give me a moment.”

Abaddon grabbed his end of the rope and went scurrying off, holding it with his tail, of all things. This time I could track his progress as he climbed, not easily since his dark scales blended with the rocks. The rope unspooled, Maddox ensuring it remained slack to make it easier for the dragon.

When he disappeared from sight, and the rope kept unravelling, I worried if there’d be enough.

“Hold on, I’m coming down,” Abaddon hollered before suddenly appearing at the edge of the overhang, rope in hand.

And dived.

My heart stopped but Maddox understood what Abaddon was doing. Maddox held his end of the rope and released it bit by bit, slowly lowering the dragon who grinned at us. For the unknowing, dragon smiles don’t give you a warm fuzzy feeling, more like that chill you get when a lion shows its teeth and licks his chops because he’d like you for dinner.

“I think I shall want to keep this rope when we’re done transporting the goods,” Abaddon stated.

“Was already planning to leave it here,” Maddox stated. “Give me a second to tie up the stuff and then I’ll send you up with it.”

Maddox unpacked his bulging knapsack which I’d assumed mostly contained the

sleeping bag, only it turned out to be a lot of nonperishable food: trail bars, bags of nuts, and beef jerky. The sleeping bag was the compact kind still in its vacuum sealed package. Mad pulled out a tarp as well and used it to bundle the items before tying it to the rope. Then he glanced at Abaddon. “Okay. Ready to go back up?”

Abaddon jumped atop the package and held on as Maddox pulled the rope on the other end of their makeshift pulley. Up went the dragon with his stash. Once my Little Fella reached the ledge, he jumped off and heaved the bulging tarp after him.

“Back in a few,” he shouted down.

“While he does that, drop a pin on a map so you can find this place easily,” Maddox advised.

A good idea if I ever wanted to reach this location again. The moment I had it done, Maddox dragged me to spoon against him, his chin resting on my head. “That dragon of yours is really remarkable,”

“And he knows it,” I grumbled good naturedly. “Do you think this is far enough if anyone comes looking?”

“Not if they’re determined. As part of the emergency prep, we should talk to Abaddon about not entering the forest in the east if he has to leave the trailer, but going west first and then circling back to throw them off track.”

“That’s a good idea, as was the whole finding him a cave to hide.”

“You do know this is only a temporary measure. If he is being hunted, then?—”

“I’ll have to take him far from here.” A morose admission and the reason for my dejection stood leaning against me.

“Here’s hoping we’re overreacting and it doesn’t come to that.”

A thought hit me. “Your idea about him circling back is good, but what if they bring dogs to sniff out his trail? I mean, they might not, but I know sometimes law enforcement uses them for manhunts and missing people.”

“Good point. Having seen him climb, I’d say doing the same with trees would be a cinch. If he were to enter the woods and take to the higher branches, with his light weight he could travel overhead and avoid leaving his scent anywhere on the ground.”

“We’ll have to tell him when he returns.”

“Speaking of return, feeling brave enough to do dinner again at my place?”

A dinner that would lead to his bed. I was in, but for one thing. “Yes, but I can’t stay the night. I don’t want to leave Abaddon for that long.”

“Bring him.”

“After what happened last time?”

“This time, we’ll make sure they’re separated. The guest room has a television, its own half bath, and we can pile enough snacks he won’t have to go anywhere.”

“You’ve thought about this.”

He turned me in his arms. “Nothing but. So what do you say?”

“I say, can we skip dinner and go straight for dessert?” A whisper against lips.

We were still kissing when a disgusted dragon said, “Enough eating of each other’s faces. I’m getting hungry.”

Maddox had kept something for just such a situation. Once he’d lowered Abaddon and coiled the rope to hide in a tree hollow, he handed the dragon a bag of gummy bears. He then crouched and began grabbing fallen leaves to stuff in his bag.

At my arched brow, he explained. “So it looks just as big on our return.”

Well damn. My paranoia was contagious.

The conversation flowed as we returned to my place with Abaddon excited to be out and about—like the child he was. Hard to remember sometimes that while he might have hatched with some knowledge, in truth, everything he encountered, every experience, was new and exciting.

Just before the edge of the woods, without having to be told, he turned to me and sighed. “Back into the bag.”

“Only for a little bit, until we get you inside,” I murmured.

“I look forward to the day I can go about freely,” Abaddon grumbled.

I didn’t mention the fact that day would most likely never come. The world would never allow a dragon to roam free, not unless something changed drastically.

Once at the trailer, Abaddon declared himself too tired to go out but insisted I still have dinner with Maddox.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I might be back late.”

“I have food and I’m tired. My next molting is almost upon me.”

“Do you need me to do anything for you?”

“Stop fussing over me, woman,” Abaddon grumbled.

I went for dinner, and it went well. The sex, even better. The only part I hated? Leaving to go home, but despite Abaddon insisting he’d be fine, I didn’t want him to feel abandoned.

Hence why the next night Maddox came over with a surprise. Not for me. My dragon.

He handed Maddox a small kid’s knapsack.

“For me?” Abaddon eyed it with curiosity.

“It’s a bugout bag in case you need to run. Look inside.”

My dragon pulled out the items. A pay-as-you-go phone which Maddox explained had mine and his number preprogrammed. A paper map in case the cave was compromised with some locations marked with Xs to give Abaddon other places to flee, a few snacks of course, and a flashlight because, “Nothing worse than being stuck in the dark.”

“Thank you.” My little dragon hugged Maddox and my heart melted.

Even tatted girls could find things like that super cute. Don’t think that meant I wanted kids, though. I’d long ago sworn off the whole motherhood thing. I wondered if that would be a deal breaker for Maddox.

Maddox slept over that night, my bed a tight squeeze, but we managed, me draped

atop Maddox and Abaddon splayed partially over us both.

We spent that week flipping back and forth between places, although I always returned home to the trailer at night. While some of my anxiety had eased, I remained alert.

I never saw anything in the news about the lava rocks or the missing lizard. Never spotted anyone suspicious around my place.

Still, every day when I left for work, I gave Abaddon the same warning. “Don’t go outside, and if you hear someone, hide.”

Ten days after the RCMP visit, I went in to work as usual. Put in a grocery delivery order via the app and tried to not cringe at the total. Headed home, wanting a shower before Maddox arrived.

Ten minutes out from my place the sight of smoke caught my attention. It rose in a dark plume that stank the closer I got to my property.

Even before I turned into my driveway, anguish filled me. I stared in shocked disbelief at my trailer, now a smoldering ruin.

My home and dragon were gone.

Chapter Eleven

Once more my human left me to my own devices. This work thing of hers was really getting in the way of her duties for me. I could have used her nimble fingers to scratch my scales. My second molting hit more rapidly than expected. Then again, I'd been eating copiously and had already tripled my size since hatching—which led to grumbling by my human when I nestled in her lap.

The skin on my body had begun to split and flake. Lethargy filled my limbs and the fever simmered. I wanted nothing more than to sleep, however, I couldn't let myself. I had to remain vigilant for a foreboding filled me. An impending sense that something was amiss.

I blamed my humans and their paranoia. It had been more than a week since those people had shown up to collect the rocks and had mentioned a lost lizard. While Pip was convinced they spoke of me, I doubted it. No one could have predicted my birth. Part of the reason maternal progenitors scattered their clutch was to preclude anyone from finding us before we could defend ourselves. While I might speak confidently about our superiority, my inherited knowledge did warn of the danger our mere existence placed us in.

Humans had always hunted us. Some even enslaved us. A rare few worshipped us, bringing livestock for feeding, virgin sacrifices, and treasures to pad the hoard. However, that happened long ago and that world, those cultures, had long since vanished along with the veneration once held for my kind. Part of my plan involved bringing back that adoration tempered with respect. A respect earned most likely by eating a few people and destroying cities that might defy me.

Those kinds of actions would require me to mature to a dominating size, accumulate enough wealth to impress, and a gather bevy of loyal subjects to cater to the small matters beneath my attention. Servants who would be more committed to the honor bestowed upon them than my current pair, who kept leaving me alone to attend their other duties. As if anything could be considered more important than me!

I rubbed myself against the scratching post Maddox built for me to use to help slough the skin. He'd yet to impress me as a protector—although we'd not yet faced a threat—but he did well when it came to other things like bringing large loads of food, and the cave he'd suggested we find had been well outfitted should I ever need to escape. We'd returned several times with Maddox insisting I lead the way to ensure I knew the path. As if I would forget. I also hoped to never have need for it, fleeing being cowardly and all. Still, until I matured a bit more, it didn't hurt to have an alternative to capture or death.

The television remained turned off, the repetitive inanity of the actors boring. I'd read the few books available and hungered for more knowledge. Pip had promised to give me lessons on using her laptop once she realized my claws could tap the keys like fingers. I looked forward to discovering for myself what this Google thing could teach.

While dragons were known to be collectors and fierce predators, we also liked to learn. Or at least, I did. My kind did have individual strengths and interests, not that I remembered what any of those were. Inherited knowledge sometimes sucked without the more personal memories that might have better guided me.

A rumble of an engine roused me. Not the right cadence for Pip's bike or Maddox's truck.

A stranger!

Pip's instructions rang in my ears. Whatever you do, don't let anyone see you. I don't usually get visitors, but sometimes people get lost or you get something weird and random like those RCMP officers showing up. If you hear someone, hide.

Hide. The shame. Not to mention, my curiosity demanded to know who dared enter my territory.

Yes, mine. While Pip might have originally owned this plot of land, as my servant, what was hers was now mine.

I crept onto the counter with the sink, knowing the horizontal blind in the window hid my movement while the slits between the slats did offer me a narrow view.

A large, black vehicle and a smaller white one parked next to the trailer. From them spilled people: a man with graying temples dressed in a dark suit, a woman in blue pants and a matching blazer wearing glasses. I found myself most intrigued by the last four in the group who'd been outfitted in shiny gray suits that included helmets. The latter carried odd-looking guns.

But most concerning of all? From the large vehicle they pulled a cage!

It would seem Pip might not have been overly paranoid after all.

"Our surveillance has indicated it's in the trailer." The man in the suit spoke.

The woman pointed. "Spread out and surround it. We don't want it escaping through a window."

"What of the roof or floor, ma'am?" A tinny-sounding question from the tallest helmet wearer.

“This model of trailer doesn’t have any egresses other than the door or windows.”

“Assuming it wasn’t modified,” the tinman said.

“Then you’d better pay attention,” snapped Graytemples. “And don’t miss when you shoot those tranquilizers. These creatures can be dangerous when cornered.”

“We don’t need another incident like the one in South America,” the woman added.

The more they spoke, the more I found myself concerned. They appeared to have come prepared, but then again, so was I. I slid down and stuck my arms through the straps of the bugout bag Maddox left for me then eyed the floor. Contrary to this woman’s knowledge, there was a hatch leading to a makeshift storage box under the trailer. Pip showed it to me, saying “ If you can’t run, then hide and be quiet until they leave.”

I moved the carpet covering the hatch and hooked the hole with a claw and flipped it open. Quickly, I slid into the dark and cramped space. Pip had cleared most of the items from it, leaving me enough room to crouch. While I couldn’t replace the small rug, the hatch blended seamlessly into the mosaic floor once closed.

Bang. The door to the trailer broke as the strangers bullied their way in and footsteps thumped overhead.

“Search the trailer. Given our specimen isn’t very old, it might still be small enough to fit in a canister or cookie jar. Be vigilant and thorough,” the woman ordered.

A set of steps moved away, but the woman remained, judging by the slight creak right overhead. Cupboards open and closed. Things were moved, and not with care.

“Find anything?” Graytemples entered the trailer.

“Not yet, but it has to be around. See the scratching post in the corner? Looks like it’s going through a molting.”

“Seems late for a first one. Subject Vermillion only took five days,” Graytemples stated and I almost gasped. Could it be I wasn’t the only dragon currently alive?

“You’re assuming that’s its first shed,” the woman cautioned.

“You think it might be on its second one already? I guess it’s possible if it hatched soon as the volcano blew, but the fragments we recovered from the firepit seem to indicate it happened more recently.”

“Could be this one matured in the shell for longer and is going through the phases faster,” the woman opined.

“I haven’t found anything,” reported another tinny-sounding male.

“You haven’t been searching long enough,” barked Graytemples.

“There aren’t many places to look,” argued the other. “This place is tiny.”

“Search again!”

Thump. Thump.

“Are you sure our eyes in the sky didn’t accidentally miss it leaving the trailer?” the woman asked.

“Only the owner exited. She left on her bike and there’s been no movement since, but the drone’s last pass overhead captured a heat signature.”

“And where is that drone now?”

“Getting recharged. A new one should be in the air shortly. Soon as it passes overhead, we’ll know where it’s hiding.”

I felt a chill go through me despite the fever. Would the drone’s sensors be able to detect me under the floor?

“Well, well,” Graytemples muttered.

“What?” the woman exclaimed.

Only the man didn’t reply. The deep silence didn’t bode well. I began to shake, not from fear, but because my fever suddenly increased tenfold, causing my muscles to spasm. Not now. I couldn’t afford to be incapacitated with danger literally inches away.

When the hatch opened, the sudden bright light made me shut my eyes.

“I found it!” screeched the woman. “Where’s the tranq gun?”

“I don’t think we need to worry. Look at it. Shaking and sweating in the grips of its morph. It can’t do shit right now,” Graytemples claimed as he reached down to grab me.

While I might not be feeling my best, I resented the claim. However, their foolish belief gave me an advantage. Let them think me incapacitated.

The man reached into the cubby and lifted me from the hole, the grip rough and only further adding fuel to my agitation.

The woman clapped her hands. “Goodness, look at the size of it already. We found it just in time.”

“It’s wearing a backpack.” Graytemples tugged at it.

“Remove it and get it into the cage.”

I didn’t dare move as they took my bugout bag. Let them bring me outside where I wouldn’t be trapped when I made my escape.

The door to the trailer opened and fresh air hit my face. The moment Graytemples headed down the steps and hit level ground, I acted. I whipped my head to the side and bit. Couldn’t have said what I clamped on to but Graytemples screamed and dropped me to the ground.

“It was faking sleep. Shoot it!” screamed the woman.

I hissed in her direction. Before I could lunge and give her a well-deserved chomp, one of the tinmen emerged from the trailer while aiming his gun. He fired and I dove to the side, the missile narrowly avoiding me.

Noise from behind made me whirl to see another man in a shiny suit coming for me.

Surrounded by the enemy!

Panic filled me.

Rage too.

Add in my fever and the fact I’d not yet had my afternoon snack and I exploded.

Quite literally.

The skin on my back split as I bristled. My throat and belly tingled as heat built.

As the second tinman went to press his trigger, I opened my mouth and breathed. Not just air, though. Flames jetted forth.

“It’s a fire-breather,” the woman squealed in panic, stumbling away from me.

“Get behind Calvin. His suit is fireproof,” Graytemples ordered.

Well, that explained the gray shiny apparel and helmets. The tinmen, not fearing my heated defense, advanced on me. One of them even dared to fire! I quickly huffed and the tranquilizing dart hit the ground in a melting mess.

Before another missile could be aimed, I ran towards the man in the tin suit standing between me and the forest.

“Catch him!” screamed the annoying woman.

The tinman dropped into a crouch and opened his arms wide as if to hug me. Despite the protective suit, I blew flames in the direction of the helmet. The male’s instinct made him recoil, letting me scurry past.

“You idiot. His fire can’t hurt you. Don’t let him get away!” The woman continued to screech as I raced for the forest.

As my clawed feet dug into the dirt, I strained and grunted.

Pop.

Through the rips on my back, my wings emerged and unfurled, just in time as two tinmen converged from the left and right. I leapt, my coiled legs springing me into the air. The moist membranes along my spine snapped open and caught an air current, however, frantic flapping didn't give me much height, just enough to glide several feet before my clawed toes touched the ground. I bounced upward again in time to miss another dart.

The forest lay straight ahead. I raced for it, zigzagging and springing into the air, making myself a difficult target.

Once I made it past the first thin line of trees, I did as Maddox advised. Grabbed hold of a tree trunk and climbed as quickly as I could. I darted across the first solid branch before soaring to the next.

The strangers, intent on capture, followed below. I could hear them muttering and cursing. Searching but not finding.

Until Graytemples said the dreaded words, "The drone's overhead. I'll have its position in a second."

Damned machine.

"It's in the trees!" Graytemples hollered.

I growled, annoyed, and chose to climb higher. High enough my head popped from the canopy and I found myself staring at the hovering drone.

My throat and belly tickled again. The fire spewed too fast for the machine's operator to react, scorching the metal and plastic, sending it crashing to the ground.

Now try and find me.

I didn't waste time racing from the area lest they launch another drone. Maddox's advice rang in my head. Don't head direct. Try and make sure you lose any followers.

Following that counsel meant it took a lot more time to reach my cave, but in good news, I appeared to have lost the hunters.

Just in time. The moment I entered my hidey hole, I collapsed. The exertion of the change was too much. A vulnerability I could ill afford but couldn't stop. I only hoped I didn't wake inside a cage.

If I woke at all.

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Chapter Twelve

I put the kickstand on my bike down and dismounted so I could properly stare in shock at the charred remains of my home.

Everything I owned, gone. My keepsakes. My clothes. My pictures. Everything of Granny.

But worse...

What happened to Abaddon?

He'd been inside when I left. Had he escaped?

My first instinct urged me to race for his hiding spot and see if he was there. I didn't, though, because common sense slapped me.

For one... someone had put out the fire. I could see the remnants of powder as if a chemical had been deployed, as well as the mud that formed from having copious amounts of water sprayed on the site of my trailer.

Second, the number of ruts in the ground seemed excessive. Several vehicles had been there. Now you might say, duh, firetrucks would leave marks. Except, who would have called it in? Why weren't they still here? Obviously, the place was occupied. Firefighters didn't simply hose down a fire and leave right away. Someone should have been there. Someone should have notified me. After all, my contact information could be easily accessed by simply looking up my address in the

municipal registry.

Third, I spotted a red tuft on a capsule with a needle on the end. A tranquilizing dart.

As all those observations coalesced into one giant uh-oh, I heard engines. A quick pivot and I could see the vehicles screaming into my place, unmarked black SUVs with dark tinted windows that disgorged several people, none of them in government uniforms but obviously meaning business.

I almost ran. Might have if I'd not spotted movement in the trees as more of these strangers emerged from the forest, some wearing shiny-looking hazmat-type suits, others holding the leashes of dogs that strained in my direction.

Well, shit.

What I'd feared had come to pass. The government had come for me, but had they gotten Abaddon?

Killed him?

A man in a suit with a bandage covering the lower part of his jaw strutted toward me with an angry look in his eyes. "Ms. Smith?"

"Yeah." No point in denying it. "Who are you? What's going on? What happened to my home?"

Rather than answer my questions he replied with one of his own. "Where is the dragon?"

At the word dragon I turned to ice as it confirmed why these people invaded my property, but in awesome news... They didn't have my Little Fella.

“Excuse me, did you say dragon?” I snickered.

“This is no laughing matter, Ms. Smith. We know you are in possession of a recently hatched dragon. We need to locate it immediately for the safety of everyone.”

“Dude, I don’t know what you’re smoking but you really should share. Dragons aren’t real.” I could lie like a pro.

The man’s lips pinched. “Lying isn’t in your best interests, Ms. Smith. You might have looked upon it as a cute pet, however, I assure you dragons are highly intelligent and also incredibly dangerous creatures. It is imperative we contain it before it has a chance to grow and threaten the human population.”

“Sorry, bud, can’t help you, but I do wish you luck in finding your imaginary dragon.” I doubted blowing him off and denying everything would accomplish much, but I had to try.

“The shell of the beast was found in the remains of your firepit, indicating it hatched. Drone surveillance picked up its heat signature inside your home, and before you deny that as well, I’m going to add their presence is quite distinctive from other mammals.”

“Dude, I don’t know who you are or what you think you saw, but I’m telling you right now, there was no dragon in my trailer. Sounds to me like you spotted the raccoon that’s been living under it for years.”

“Don’t lie. We found it hidden under your floor,” the man huffed.

“Did you just admit to going inside my place without a warrant? Smells like an unlawful entry lawsuit to me.” A lame comeback but I’d watched enough police procedurals that it slipped out naturally.

“No warrant is needed when a national threat requires securing.”

“Pretty sure that’s not true,” I tartly replied.

The man turned even ruddier, the red bright in contrast to his white bandage. “You need to start cooperating. Harboring a protected species is a crime.”

I snorted. “How can something that doesn’t exist be a protected species?”

“I’m done arguing with you. Perhaps you’ll be more forthcoming in an interrogation room.” The man signaled and some dudes in black fatigues approached, hands on their holsters.

Well, shit. Guess I was about to be arrested.

Only... “Hold on a second. Who are you? Where is your badge giving you this so-called authority to act like a dick on my land?”

“My name isn’t important.”

“Hell, yeah, it is because I’m going to need it when I file a grievance for harassment.”

“You’re assuming you’ll be released and allowed to talk.” The man offered me a tight smile. “But that’s not how things work with our agency. No one will even know we’ve taken you into custody.”

My blood went from running cold to solid ice. “You can’t do that. I have rights.”

“Your rights don’t mean shit to the people I work for.” The man jerked his head and snapped, “Take her into custody.”

The man turned from me and his goons went to grab me when a new player entered the fiasco.

Maddox.

He spun into my driveway in a cloud of dust and emerged from his truck, holding his phone outstretched. “Excuse me, what’s going on here?” he asked as he strode in my direction.

The prick in the suit barked, “This is official business. Return to your vehicle and depart immediately.”

“I don’t think so, seeing as how you’re trying to put hands on my girlfriend.”

Girlfriend? I mean, it made sense given the time we’d been spending together, but hearing it kind of made it official.

“Ms. Smith is wanted for questioning.”

“Oh really?” Maddox kept his camera pointed at the man in the suit. “Questioning about what? Who do you work for? I don’t see any badges and no official uniforms. So, not the RCMP or local cops.”

“This doesn’t concern you,” the man barked. “We have authorization from the government to conduct an investigation.”

“Which department? Because I’m pretty sure none of them are allowed to use armed goons to harass citizens. Or do you think you can get away with it because she’s of indigenous background?”

Ooh. He pulled the native card. Not something I ever did because at one sixteenth, I

barely ranked and looked nothing like my ancestors.

“Ms. Smith is in serious trouble under the Protected Species Act. If you don’t wish to be charged with abetting her, then you would do well to depart this instant.”

Seeing an opening, I shouted loud enough for the video, “This asshole is accusing me of hiding a dragon in my trailer.”

To his credit, Maddox reacted as a normal person who’d never met a dragon would. He arched a brow and laughed. “Fuck off. No way. Dragons aren’t real.”

“That’s what I said. But Mr. Believes-In-Imaginary-Animals is trying to strong-arm me into confessing I had one in my trailer.”

“A dragon?” Maddox’s mirth deepened. “Holy fuck. Are you being pranked?”

“This is no joking matter, sir,” the suit grumbled.

“Come on, man. A dragon? Couldn’t you have come up with a better excuse to kidnap my girlfriend?”

The suit’s face tightened. “We aren’t kidnapping her, simply taking her in for questioning.”

“And I’m going to ask again, by who’s authority? Come on, one of you must have a badge? Something official?” Maddox wagged his phone. “Maybe you could flash a warrant for the live stream? I’m sure the audience would like to see it.”

“No warrants. He said he didn’t need one,” I offered. “And I’m pretty sure this prick and his goons burned down my trailer, looking for the non-existent dragon.”

My actor of a boyfriend shook his head. “Damn. I’m smelling a huge settlement.”

“She committed a crime and as such must answer for it. This is a matter of national security and given you’re impeding it, you’ll now also be taken into custody. Arrest them both.” The suit doubled down.

“Touch me or Pip and you’ll regret it.” Maddox’s expression turned hard. “Now for the last time, I want to know who you work for and what authority you think you have to come onto Pip’s property and threaten her.” Maddox took a second to glance at his phone and smiled. “Well, what do you know? We have an audience that includes a Nisga’a tribal lawyer who says any attempt to arrest my girlfriend will result in them suing.”

“Probably my uncle, Mathew,” I chimed in. He loved litigating perceived bias cases and quite often settled out of court.

The man in the suit couldn’t have looked more constipated if he tried. “You are interfering in a serious security matter. People’s lives are in danger.”

“Really? Why don’t you explain to those watching how Pip constitutes a threat?”

“I’m afraid that information is classified,” was the stiff reply.

“Bullshit, he’s just afraid to say it aloud. He’s accusing me of having a dragon!” I repeated in case those watching had missed me saying it earlier.

“Is that true? Are you accusing her of having a fictional animal in her possession?”

I waited for Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass to admit it on video.

He clamped his lips shut and glared. I wonder if he would have replied if his phone

hadn't suddenly buzzed. He pulled it out, looked at the screen, and scowled mightily before tucking it away.

"Guess this is your lucky day, Ms. Smith. You're free to go." The suit glanced at his goons. "Everyone, back to headquarters."

I almost fist pumped in celebration, but I restrained myself. Barely.

The goons began piling back into vehicles but Mr. Not-Too-Happy narrowed his gaze on me and said in a low mutter meant only for my ears, "You might think you've won, but in the end, we will acquire the dragon. And if it happens to die in the process, you'll only have yourself to blame."

A threat that chilled, but that assumed they would find Abaddon. Like fuck. Even if I had to flee to the most remote spot on Earth, I'd ensure this asshole never laid eyes or hands on my Little Fella.

The vehicles departed along with all the personnel and dogs on my premises.

Tension eased out of my body only to be replaced by the shakes. Holy fuck. I'd come literally seconds away from getting bundled off and never seen again.

Maddock pocketed his phone and strode for me. "You okay, babe?"

I wanted to lie but as I eyed the ruin of my home, I sniffled and said, "No." I'd lost everything.

He put his arm around me, dragging me into his solid strength. "I'm sorry, Pip. I know that trailer held a lot of sentimental value."

"And my bed," I wailed. A dumb thing to cry about, and yet, anyone who had a

mattress and pillow broken in just right understood.

“We’ll buy you a new one.”

“What’s the point? I have nowhere to put it. I have no home. No insurance. Nothing. What am I supposed to do?”

He didn’t hesitate to say, “You’ll stay with me.”

A reply that almost managed to make me happy. Only... “That will work temporarily for me, but what about Abaddon?”

“Princess will adjust.”

“I’m not talking about your cat but the fact he’ll be hard to smuggle inside, seeing as how your place will probably be surveilled. Plus, there’s the fact at the rate he’s growing, we’ll run out of room before too long.”

“What else can we do?”

I liked the use of we.

My brain whirled. “We need a place with space for Abaddon to grow but that also offers privacy from prying eyes, and security to counter any goons that try to return to finish what they began.”

“Sounds like you want a fortress. Might be kind of hard to find one on our budget.” A light joke and yet his statement triggered the answer.

I knew someone with a property that had tons of acreage, seclusion, and a paranoia about ‘the man’ that led to them having the latest in protective measures.

My boss, Leo. As to his obsession with strange and rare things? I could only hope my boss valued our friendship more than the idea of owning a dragon.

Chapter Thirteen

Despite having a mental lightbulb, I didn't immediately call my boss and ask for a place to stay. My first concern? How to get to Abaddon and check on him without anyone knowing. That asshole in a suit had made it clear they'd been watching my place with drones. The reminder led my gaze to the empty sky, dark already. Twilight fell early this time of year. Didn't drones have blinking lights? Even if they didn't, surely I'd hear the whir of the motor and propellers?

"What are you looking for?" Maddox asked.

"Spying eyes. The asshole who tried to arrest me admitted to using drones to watch my place."

A low whistle blew past Maddox's lips. "Shit. Guess we were right to be cautious."

"Not cautious enough, apparently. Good thing you arrived before they carted me away," I stated as I moved to my trailer, wondering if anything had survived.

"When you texted me you'd finished early, I closed up the shop, which is how I happened to be following a pair of cars into your place. Soon as I saw the clusterfuck of vehicles, I got my camera recording."

"I can't believe you live streamed that."

"Actually, I lied about that," he admitted with a sheepish smile. "I was videotaping but only to have evidence in case we needed it. But I figured the dude might panic if

he thought people were watching.”

“It was genius,” I replied. “Especially when you mentioned a lawyer commented.”

“I’m just glad it worked. Who were those guys? The asshole seemed pretty keen on not giving us his name.”

“Beats me. The suit claimed to be from some government agency and accused me of breaking protected species laws, but he never showed a badge. He knows about Abaddon. Kept insisting I hand him over.”

Maddox’s gaze went to the trailer. “Did the little guy…” He didn’t say the dreaded D word and I hurried to reassure him.

“Abaddon’s alive, from what the guy said. He wanted to know where to find him. Looks like he slipped their attempt to nab him. I hope.” I couldn’t help but wring my hands. Poor Little Fella must be so scared.

“Much as you’re tempted, you know we can’t rush off to check,” Maddox stated. “They might be watching.”

“I’m aware.” I sighed. “What should we do? We can’t abandon him.”

“We won’t. The good news is there are other ways of reaching his hiding spot. We just have to ensure we’re not followed once we leave to fetch him.”

“That’s why you wanted all those location pins,” I murmured. Maddox must have known we might not be able to take our usual direct route.

“Yup. We’ll get to this hidey hole from a different direction, but we’ll have to be careful. Chances are if that dude has connections—and I’m thinking he does—then

he'll be monitoring the movement of my truck and your bike."

"Good luck with that. I don't have a nav system they can hack." My old bike lacked the electronics of the newer models.

"Won't need one if they put trackers on our vehicles. Depending on his resources, he might even be able to ping our phones to keep tabs on us."

I grimaced. "Guess we'll need to rent or borrow something off their radar and leave the cells behind." I glanced at him. "For a pet shop owner, you're awfully savvy about this kind of stuff."

"I was big on watching Bond movies and other types of spy stuff growing up." His lips quirked. "Spent a few years wanting to be a special agent just so I could play with the gadgets."

"Can't blame you for that." My eyes drifted to my bike. I'd brought home some precooked ribs for Abaddon, the tray of them still stuffed in my saddle bags. "He's probably so hungry."

"I'm sure he'll be fine for a few hours."

I glanced at him. "You think we can get to him tonight?"

"Not we. I'll go while you stay in my apartment?—"

"Whoa. You're leaving me behind?"

"Hear me out. If they're watching my place, they'll notice if we both go. Seeing as how you're their main person of interest, leaving you at my place makes the most sense."

“How?”

“Because while I’m gone, you’ll make yourself visible by doing random stuff. Pop out to buy something from the store. Hang out a window to have a smoke. Maybe pretend you’re talking to me while you’re doing it.”

It might just work but for one thing. “If they’re watching, won’t they notice you leaving?”

“Nope. I’ve got a way to leave without being seen,” he said with a wink. “Now let’s get you home so Princess can comfort you.”

“I think a dram of whiskey might do me better,” I muttered as I got on my bike.

But once more, Maddox proved correct. There was something soothing about the fluffball puddled in my lap, purring and kneading my thighs. It did help to relax me—or maybe it was the whiskey. Or the fact Maddox seemed bound and determined to not only stand by me, despite my troubles, but also Abaddon.

The moment we got to his place, he began getting ready to retrieve my Little Fella. While I wanted to be there to rescue my poor baby dragon, his idea probably gave us the best shot at doing so undetected.

Hence, when Maddox left via some secret tunnel in his basement—a leftover from some less-than-savory business dealing days—I held Princess in my arms and stared out the window. I even remembered to pretend to turn my head and talk as if someone were with me.

I hoped anyone watching choked on their stakeout donuts.

Chapter Fourteen

The cave lacked the comforts of home.

Sure, the trailer hadn't been palatial, or large or luxurious, but I'd felt comfortable in it. Secure. Warm.

The blanket Maddox included in my supplies was wrapped around me snug enough, and yet I shivered. Blame the fever. Or perhaps trepidation was more the cause.

The hunters had found me.

Almost captured me.

I didn't doubt their nefarious intentions, but I'd proven wiler than them, despite fighting off the lethargy of the molting. A fatigue that caught up to me and led to me sleeping well past twilight.

By now, Pip would have returned home. Did those miscreants lie in wait for my human servant? I would be most vexed if they harmed her. Yet, while my belly now rumbled with flame, I lacked the size and strength to do anything to protect her. I'd barely escaped myself. If I hadn't somehow sped up my transformation to the next level of my evolution, I'd be in a cage—or worse.

One thing that did please me? Of all the gifts a dragon could expect, I'd gotten the classic fire breathing. My inherited knowledge informed it was one of five possibilities—the others being acid, wind, lightning, or water, which sometimes

emerged as ice.

As for my newly unfettered wings? They lay folded along my spine, still dewy from emergence. It would take a bit of time before the membrane toughened and the tendons strengthened enough to give me true flight. Once that occurred, I'd have to practice, which might prove difficult. Already I knew there would be no returning to the trailer. My enemies would be watching.

Thankfully, Maddox's plan to have a rendezvous point that acted as a safe cave proved smart. When Pip discovered me missing, she would know where to join me.

If the malefactors didn't get their hands on her first.

The passage of time proved interminable as I waited. No television to bore me. No books to feed my mind. Nothing but my thoughts and rumbling belly. The snacks beckoned, but I'd already eaten a bag of beef jerky and a chocolate bar. With limited food supplies, I needed to ration, a horrible thing for a growing dragon.

If I didn't feel so weak after the events of the day, I might have dared to hunt. I'd smelled many warm-blooded yummys on my flight to the cave. It would be exciting to track and capture my own meals and eat fresh. Humans had a tendency to cook everything through and through, except for steak. For some reason, slightly singed on both sides was acceptable to them.

What I wouldn't do for a steak right now...

I needed to turn my mind away from food. It only made my hunger more pronounced.

I let my mind mull over something Graytemples and the woman had said. Something about an incident in South America and the allusion they'd captured a dragon. Had they hatched from my same clutch, or did they belong to a rival? Did it matter? In this

world overrun with humans, dragons might want to think about banding together, lest we be wiped out. I wondered how I could find these other dragons. Had all of them been taken captive, or did some live free?

So many questions and no way of getting answers. The annoyance of it led to me eating another bag of jerky. Then a bag of sour gummies. I slaked my thirst in the puddle that existed down one of the narrow passages, fed by the drips of stalactites above.

The fever passed as I waited, my body returning to a more normal temperature, though still hotter than that of a human, and hotter than before now that I had fire in my belly. A fire that simmered in the back of my throat and wanted nothing more than to spew as my keen hearing caught noise coming from below.

Had my enemies found me?

My tension eased at a whispered, “Abaddon? You up there?”

My protector had come! The elation filling me might be unseemly for one of my elevated stature, yet I couldn’t help it. If Maddox lived, then surely Pip did, too.

I crept from the cave and glanced down to see the large man wearing the darkest of clothes. He’d even smeared his face to match, giving him the ability to blend with the shadows, but my discerning gaze spotted him.

I leaned over the ledge and called out. “I’m here.”

“Are you injured?” he asked.

“No.”

“Thank fuck. We were worried about you, bud. What happened?”

Rather than reply, I had my own query. “Where’s Pip?” For I neither saw nor scented her.

“She’s at my place making sure any spies don’t realize I’ve come to fetch you.”

“She is safe?” My relief was because I wouldn’t have to train another servant and nothing else. Dragons didn’t form attachments to humans.

“For now, but I don’t want to leave her alone for too long. I’ve already been gone almost three hours.”

“It doesn’t take that long to hike to the cave,” I pointed out.

“It does when you first have to sneak out of your building, drive somewhere no one will think to look, and hike in the dark with a GPS-created map that keeps losing a signal.”

He’d done all that for me?

“Your effort is acknowledged, if expected as part of your job.”

Maddox snorted. “Surprised you haven’t fired me, seeing as how I wasn’t there when you almost got nabbed.”

“I expect you to be more vigilant in the future.” I magnanimously forgave his transgression.

“We going to stand around chatting all night or do you want to come with me and see Pip?”

“I thought you mentioned spies.”

“That’s not certain. We just assumed the thugs who tried to take Pip into custody might be watching her in the hopes we’ll lead them to you.”

“You suspect that but left her alone?” I huffed.

“I know it’s not ideal, bud, but I didn’t have a choice if I was going to get you out of these woods.”

“Where are we going?”

“For tonight, my place.”

“That is being watched?” I screeched. Was he stupid?

“I have a way to get us inside unseen, and it’s only temporary. Pip’s trailer’s gone, so she’s going to talk to her boss about living in a barn on his property. Apparently, it’s got a mini apartment that used to be used by the guy who took care of the horses. Better yet, her boss is a big security nut. Fenced property that is electrified with cameras all over. Security guards. And he even has his own drones to prevent anyone from looking in.”

“A barn?” I was stuck on the fact they planned to place me in a home meant for dumb animals.

“Would you prefer to remain in the cave?” Maddox snapped.

“No, but you couldn’t find anything better than a barn?” I complained.

“You know, we have an expression: Beggars can’t be choosers.”

An apt phrase that stung because truly, what choice did I have?

“If it helps, I can console you with leftover pizza and ribs from dinner. Plus, if you’re still hungry after that, I have a tub of ice cream.”

Mmm, I did so enjoy that cold, delicious stuff. “I guess if I’m still feeling peckish afterwards, there is that cat...” I slyly reminded him.

“I know you’re fucking with me, but it’s still not funny,” grumbled the big man. “Now, are you coming down or what?”

“So grouchy,” I exclaimed as I began the descent.

“It’s been a tough few hours,” Maddox admitted. “Sorry if I’m terse. I’m worried about Pip.”

It was only as I reached him, the faintest sliver of moonlight illuminating me, that he noticed the change. “Bud, you’ve got wings!”

“I do,” I proudly stated, letting them flutter. “But they’re not yet ready for flight.”

“Still very cool. You feeling okay to walk or do you need me to carry you?”

My pride had me initially footing it on my own, but as my strength quickly lagged, without asking my protector placed me atop his shoulders, and I curled myself around his neck and shoulders and let him be my beast of burden.

“Feel like telling me what happened?” he asked as he trekked rapidly through the woods.

“Hunters showed up at the trailer and tried to put me in a cage.”

“Let me guess, one of them was an asshole in a suit?”

“Yes. He came with a woman and some men in what I believe are called hazmat suits.”

“Hunh. The group that showed up to harass Pip were in black combat fatigues. And no woman. Just the dick.”

“She might have suffered injury when I spewed my flame.”

Maddox stumbled. “When you what?”

“Along with my wings, my ability revealed itself. I am a fire-breathing dragon.”

“Well, shit. I wasn’t expecting that.” He paused. “Guess that explains the trailer burning down.”

A touch of chagrin did fill me at hearing that. “An accident. The flame burst from me suddenly when I was threatened. I only meant harm to those trying to kidnap me. Pip must be upset.”

“She is, but she was more worried about you.”

The warm feeling within made me think the fever returned.

“We should go assuage her concern,” I announced grandly. “Onward, my long-legged protector.”

It took Maddox longer to reach his borrowed vehicle than it would have taken flying, but once he started driving, he did so above the posted limits—with me hiding ignobly in the back under a blanket.

The entry to his domicile involved parking in an alley and me being stuffed in a duffel bag through which I could only hear. Our subterfuge also involved a convoluted route that took us through a laundromat, identifiable by the smell of detergent, followed by entry into a basement where he allowed me to emerge. I watched as he slid aside a shelving unit to reveal a locked door for which he had the key.

He glanced at me. “The previous owners of my shop and the building right next to it used to run a moonshine operation. They had this door put in so they could skedaddle if the cops showed.”

A secret passage. I heartily approved.

Passing through the opening led us to the next basement filled with neatly stacked boxes.

“We’re under my shop,” Maddox said in a low voice. “I’m gonna pop upstairs to make sure the coast is clear. Wait for my signal and then follow.”

I appreciated his caution even as I champed with impatience. What if Pip had been accosted during Maddox’s absence?

At the low whistle signal, I scampered up the steps and found myself in another storage room with Maddox standing by another door. “Interior stairs to the apartment. Head on up, bud.”

My eagerness had everything to do with my coming meal, and yet when I entered the apartment—having mastered doorknobs—did I head for the fridge?

Nope. I threw myself on Pip and wrapped myself around her.

And to anyone claiming I had tears in my eyes, I say it was allergies to the cat dander,
because dragons don't cry.

Chapter Fifteen

I hugged my dragon tight, and my voice choked as I murmured, “Thank fuck you’re safe.”

“As if they could outsmart me,” Abaddon huffed. “Although, apologies for the destruction of your home.”

“You set it on fire?” I asked.

“Accidentally. I meant to roast the people trying to capture me.”

At the word roast, I froze. “Roast how? What happened?”

Maddox answered. “Seems bud here can breathe flames.”

“And I have wings,” Abaddon proudly announced.

I’d been so caught up in hugging my dragon that I’d not noticed the new appendages lying flat against his back.

“So you do,” I murmured. “Look at you, growing up.”

“I’m hungry,” he declared—kind of predictably.

“Pizza’s in the fridge, bud. Let me know if you need a hand getting it,” Maddox offered.

“I can do it.” Abaddon wiggled free and headed for the fridge. A fridge that Princess suddenly decided she needed to sit on top of, glaring.

Maddox shut his apartment door. “Sorry it took so long. Even after I borrowed Gary’s car, I took a bit of a circuitous route to ensure no one followed.”

Gary being the owner of the laundromat next door. He was out of town and had left the keys to his business with Maddox so he could keep an eye on things and help Gary’s brother if he locked himself out—apparently a common occurrence. Gary had also given Maddox his car keys because said brother didn’t have a license anymore but kept trying to drive.

“At least you made it back safe. No one saw you?”

He rolled those big shoulders. “Don’t think so. Guess we’ll know for sure if anyone tries to kick in the door. Which reminds me. Hey, bud, now that you have wings, if you need a quick escape, head for the roof. Even if you can’t fully fly yet, I assume you can coast from this building to the next.”

“I can,” Abaddon mumbled through a mouthful of pizza. He sat on a stool eating, a perfect little gentle-dragon. So far, he appeared to be ignoring Princess and the little miss didn’t like it. She’d exchanged her spot on the fridge for a perch on the counter right across from the island where she continued to stare with her hackles up.

“Anything happen while I was gone?” Maddox asked, cracking open a beer.

“Fuck all. As suggested, I hung out in the window a few times and puffed. Sorry for the skunky joint smell. A cigarette wasn’t going to cut it for my nerves.”

Maddox chuckled. “I could have used one of those. And don’t worry about the odor. I’ve done that a time or two myself when it’s too cold to go up to the roof for a drag.

Did you talk to your boss about borrowing his barn or have you changed your mind about staying here with me?"

The pleasure at his offer didn't change the fact that his place wouldn't accommodate the rapidly growing Abaddon for long.

"Once Leo heard about the fire, he immediately offered me the barn for as long as I need it. He'll bring the keys to the shop tomorrow and give me a code to get through the gate."

"Did you tell him about your pet?" Maddox slewed a glance to Abaddon.

"No. The fewer people who know about him the better. My plan is to smuggle him in and keep him hidden."

"For how long?"

"Until I figure out a better place to go," I admitted with a sigh. "And that's where I'm stuck. Where can I go with a dragon that people won't notice?"

"If those hacks hadn't raided your place, I actually thought you had the perfect spot," Maddox stated. "Close to the woods, very little traffic."

"Even if those fucks forgot my address, there's nowhere to stay anymore." I was bummed. People could spout bullshit all they wanted about memories living in our hearts and minds, it didn't replace granny's hand-stitched quilt made of t-shirts I outgrew, or the photo album she'd kept of me growing up, or my favorite pair of leather pants that made my ass look amazing.

"Do you think that ass and his goons were really from the government?" Maddox asked as he dropped onto the couch and patted his lap.

Feminism be damned. I plopped onto those corded thighs for a cuddle. “I have to wonder. I mean, you’d think if they were official, they’d have been flashing badges to get me to obey. And then there’s the fact someone told him to leave. Seems to me the only reason to do that would be because they had no business being there in the first place and wanted to avoid discovery.”

“If they’re not government, then who?”

“Whoever it is must have deep pockets because that many hired thugs can’t have been cheap.”

“I am not the first dragon they’d discovered,” Abaddon announced before dragoning down another slice.

“Hold up. How do you know that?” I asked.

Abaddon swallowed before replying. “They said something about an incident on the southern continent, and they knew quite a bit about hatchlings. Such as the molting and whatnot. They also came prepared, wearing fireproof suits and bearing tranquilizer guns.”

I mulled over that information. “Do you think they found one of the other eggs your mother dumped?”

“My progenitor’s or another’s. It doesn’t matter. They are aware of our existence and, I would surmise by their actions, are actively seeking us out.”

“But how did they even know the Tseax Cone had a dragon? Or do these guys just roam around the world collecting big lava rocks each time a volcano erupts?” Maddox questioned.

“That seems expensive,” I opined. “There’s dozens of them around the world.”

“More like hundreds,” Abaddon corrected.

“Why would they even want to find dragons?” I questioned.

“Because we are apex creatures of immense nobility, of course,” Abaddon stated matter-of-factly.

I held in a smile. “Indeed. I should have thought of that.” But meanwhile, my mind whirled to other possibilities ranging from overeager scientists salivating to get their hands on a mythical creature, to billionaires who liked to collect rare things. Then there was the war machine that constantly sought new weapons to intimidate enemies.

Maddox nuzzled my ear. “Might be time for bed.”

“Fuck yeah, it is.” It had been a long day, and I was eager for some stress relief—a.k.a. sex.

Only that ended up foiled because Abaddon pushed away from the empty pizza box and said, “A fine idea, my protector. I am exhausted.” But did my Little Fella head for the spare room?

Nope. He of course chose the master, meaning no hot nookie for me because my cock-blocking dragon snuggled between us in bed. The jerk slept blissfully despite the cat perched at the foot, glaring.

Maddox eyed me over Abaddon’s head and mouthed, “Worse than kids, eh?”

I almost burst out laughing. Sure, my day didn’t end on an orgasmic note, but

considering what had occurred, things turned out okay. Even better, I had Maddox.

I fell asleep smiling, and when I woke in the morning—without anyone pounding on the door or trying to SWAT their way in—I began to feel hopeful. Perhaps those assholes would leave me alone.

But as Granny always said, There's two things you can always count on. Needing to take a dump right after you shower and need to go somewhere, and those fucking government types meddling in things that ain't their business.

Except Maddox had raised a good point. What if they weren't officially sanctioned? Probably the worst-case scenario, because it would mean they wouldn't be bound by rules.

Then again, neither was I.

Chapter Sixteen

Maddox left his apartment to open his shop while I was still sipping my coffee. He wanted things to appear business as normal for anyone who might be watching. If anyone watched. I'd been randomly peeking out the window as I puttered around his place, wasting time since the tattoo shop didn't open as early. Not once did I spot anything untoward, but then again, would I really notice someone good at spying?

After my shower, I made breakfast for Abaddon, his second, seeing as how he'd also eaten with Maddox. Me, I barely nibbled my piece of toast, but it didn't go to waste with my dragon-can. He even licked the plate clean of crumbs before I slid it into the dishwasher.

For some reason, Princess had taken to stalking Abaddon, a slinking shadow who slyly watched from behind the corner of the couch or peeked around the edge of the kitchen island. To his credit, Abaddon ignored her, but that didn't mean I trusted the pair of them alone. When it came time for me to head over to the shop, I grabbed the kitty who purred as I scratched behind her ears.

"You're leaving me? Again?" Abaddon pouted.

"I need to grab the keys for the barn from Leo. I won't be gone too long. You'll be fine. Maddox is right downstairs." As would be Princess, as I planned to drop her off on my way out. "The door to the rooftop is open just in case you need a quick exit."

"I can't believe you're making us live in a barn. Why can't we stay here?" he grumbled.

“I’ve told you why.” Apart from Abaddon’s growing size and my fear he’d do something to the cat, I didn’t want to bring more trouble down on Maddox. If the man in the suit came after me and my dragon again, I’d prefer Maddox not get swept up in the mess.

“How can my protector do his duty if he’s not around?”

“Don’t worry. I’m fairly certain we’ll still be seeing a lot of him.” I hoped. Things had been going well thus far, but I kept waiting for the straw that broke the burly pet shop keeper’s back. “Be good while I’m gone and try to not eat everything.”

“No promises,” muttered my Little Fella as I left.

I popped Princess into her queenly bed in the storage room before heading into the shop. Maddox smiled upon seeing me.

“Taking off?”

“Yeah. Leo texted. He’s got the keys so I’m going to grab them and then hit a store for a few things.” Like underwear. I had some stuff stashed at Maddox’s place but not enough to constitute a wardrobe.

“Sounds good. See you in a few.” A casual goodbye, unlike the kiss he bestowed upon me.

My toes curled and I wanted nothing more than to drag him into the back and have my way with him. Hmm. On second thought...

A good thing we could be quick seeing as how the bell on the shop door dinged just as we finished. Mads quickly tucked and buttoned before heading out to deal with the customer.

After fixing my mussed hair, I also sauntered out, my step brisk as I walked to work. I entered to find my boss leaning on the counter, chatting with Kalypso.

Upon seeing me, her mouth rounded and she exclaimed, “Oh, Pip, I am so sorry about your place. You okay?”

“Yeah. Luckily, I wasn’t there when it happened.”

“Were you able to save anything?”

I shook my head.

“It was a shit thing to happen. Especially since you had that new pet,” Leo stated.

His comment startled me for a second until I remembered I’d told them a half-truth about me acquiring a lizard to explain my visit to the pet store. “Guess I wasn’t meant to be a reptile mommy.”

“Any idea what started the fire?” Kalypso asked. Morbid yes, but let’s be honest, people couldn’t help but be curious when tragedy struck others.

“No idea, but I was having problems with a plug in the kitchen. Guess I shouldn’t have fucked around getting it fixed.”

“Well, at least we’ve got an epic boss. I’m kind of jealous you get to stay in the barn. Place is a hundred times nicer and bigger than my shithole.” Kalypso’s nose wrinkled.

“It’s only temporarily, until I figure out what to do next.”

“I think this was a sign you need to start building,” Leo declared.

“The sign could have been a little less destructive,” was my wry reply. “Building from scratch will take months, and winter is coming.”

“Actually, you could get it done quick if you went with a prebuilt home. I have a friend sitting on a ready-to-go house in his warehouse because the buyer couldn’t come up with the final payment. Given he got to keep the deposit and needs it gone, I could probably get him to swing you a deal.”

“Really?” For a second, excitement filled me, until I remembered Abaddon. I couldn’t take him back to my property, not until I could be sure those goons would leave us alone.

“I’ll make a phone call and see what my friend can do.”

I chewed the tip of my thumb. “I probably don’t have enough to pay for a house in cash.”

“Cash?” Leo snorted. “What you need is called a bank loan. Before you say anything, I know your granny would hate it, but in this case, it’s the right thing to do if you want a roof over your head before the snow starts flying.”

“You think they could really install it that fast?”

“Like I said, the house is already made. Just needs a concrete pad and some utilities run, then boom. Drop it on top and hook it up. Instant home.” He made it sound so easy and I had to at least pretend I wasn’t planning on permanently relocating.

“Talk to your friend and let me know what he says.”

“Will do, but even if he can’t help until spring, you know the barn is yours as long as you need it.”

“Thanks, Leo.” I really did have the best boss.

And the best boyfriend.

When I returned from some essential shopping, Maddox told me he needed to pop out for about an hour and asked if I would mind the shop. Easy enough to sit on the stool behind the counter and ring up purchases, although the person who wanted live crickets got told to come back because like hell would I be wrangling bugs.

My temporary gig as a pet store clerk ended when Maddox’s part-time employee, Suzy—a plump woman with a big smile—showed up. I headed back to the apartment with Princess in tow to find my dragon reading on the couch—with a bag of Doritos.

I happened to be looking out the window when Maddox returned and parked out front with a motorcycle trailer hooked to his truck.

“You didn’t have to rent a trailer. I would have been driving over by myself,” I exclaimed when he joined me inside the apartment.

“As if I’d let you move in alone, and besides, you need my truck seeing as how little bud is too big for your saddlebags now.”

Duh. I’d completely forgotten the bugger had grown again. Good thing one of us was using their head. Actually, in Maddox’s case, he used two. Snicker.

“While I was out, I also grabbed some groceries.”

“You and Leo must share a brain,” I said with a laugh. “Apparently, he had the fridge and pantry fully stocked as well.”

“Well, considering a certain someone’s appetite, you’ll need it.” We both eyed

Abaddon, now the size of a medium dog, who'd moved on from the chips and was eating directly from a box of Honeycombs while Princess sat on a stool, tail swishing.

"How are we getting him into the truck without being seen?" I asked.

"I've got a duffel bag that's roomy enough for him."

"Oh, he's going to bitch about that."

"Wouldn't be the first or last time." Maddox chuckled.

But to our surprise, Abaddon willingly entered the zippered luggage with a bag of beef jerky and cookies.

The ride to Leo's estate took about twenty minutes, the first ten minutes spent craning backwards to see if we were followed.

"You can stop giving yourself a neck cramp. We're clear," Maddox murmured softly.
"I've been keeping an eye on traffic."

I leaned back in the seat and sighed. "Being paranoid is exhausting."

"Well, if you're boss's security is as good as you say then you should be able to relax."

I snorted. "Doubtful. If Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass shows up again flashing an actual warrant, I'm fucked. Leo might be a rebel about the machine, but even he avoids trouble with the law. As he should. I don't want him having any issues because of me."

"I think if that asshole were legit, he'd have had all his paperwork in order when he

descended on your place. More likely we're dealing with some fringe group that thought they could bully you into giving them what they wanted."

"A fringe group?" I repeated with a chortle. "Like, what, you think they belonged to the Society of Dragon Collectors?"

"You laugh, but I wouldn't be too surprised if one existed. I mean, there are other examples of odd sects like the Templar Knights or the Illuminati."

Could he have a point? "Guess if some such cult did exist, they'd know the basics about dragons. I just wish I knew what they planned to do with Abaddon. It would be one thing if they wanted him so they could worship and serve him, but another if they wanted to dissect or use him nefariously. I wonder what happened to the other dragon Abaddon heard them referring to?"

"Assuming they already have one, they've obviously not done anything public with it yet. I haven't seen anything about fire-breathing dragons in the news or on social media," Maddox pointed out.

"Not all of us breathe fire," came a muffled reply from the back.

I craned despite not being able to see my Little Fella amidst the grocery bags. "What else can dragons do?"

"Lightning. Acid. Water. Wind."

"Hot damn. A water dragon would be cool for my garden when we get summer droughts." Yeah, I said it on purpose and Abaddon fell for it.

"Water dragons are the weakest," Abaddon squeaked.

“Doesn’t water put out fire?”

“Water douses, but fire burns. Water won’t tumble castles or do more than soak a person, whereas fire can destroy entire towns.”

“Speaking of burning down shit, no fire inside the barn! We need that place to live,” I admonished.

“I’m not stupid or careless,” Abaddon muttered.

“Just putting down some ground rules.” Then to soften my order, added, “I can’t wait for you to roast me some marshmallows.”

“They shall be golden perfection,” Abaddon boasted.

When we arrived at Leo’s ranch, a sprawling few hundred acres of fields and forest, Maddox whistled. “Does that fence run the whole length of it?”

The metal barrier with rods spaced barely far enough to stick an arm through rose ten feet with the top of it barbed. Bolted to it at intervals were signs. No Trespassing. Private Property. Under Surveillance.

“Yup, the whole way around. Leo said his grandad had it erected because of a fight with another rancher. Something about cattle rustling.”

“Must have cost a fortune.”

“Leo’s family made a lot of money back in the day.” And Leo continued the tradition despite not being a rancher. Turned out renting land could also be lucrative—and less work.

“You have a code to get in?” Maddox stopped his truck by the front gate and opened his window so he could use the keypad.

I recited the alphanumeric string and he punched it in. The gate whirred and shifted on its mechanized track, giving us entry. The long driveway went for a quarter kilometer before reaching the house, but we turned left at the first fork and followed it for a click before reaching a large barn surrounded by paddocks.

Maddox whistled at the sight of the building. “You know, when you said barn, my mind immediately went to big, red, wooden shed.”

“As if Leo would own something so outdated.” The structure before us gleamed, the metal roof and siding immaculate, broken only by windows and doors. A small door for people and massive double for the horses. Currently, the barn held no animals. When Franco, the groom employed to handle the care and training of the horses, died, Leo chose to sell off his stallion and three mares rather than replace the man.

“Take in the duffel while I snag the groceries. Wouldn’t want the ice cream and fudge bars melt,” Maddox stated, sliding out of the truck.

As I hefted the zippered bag, I glanced around and noted a camera mounted to the barn facing the driveway. A blinking red light indicated it was recording. I’d have to ask Leo about turning it off. While I craved the security of the perimeter, I didn’t want Abaddon to have to hide all the time while we stayed here. A growing dragon needed fresh air. But what excuse could I use with my boss? I’d have to think of something plausible.

I entered the building and spotted another camera monitoring the line of stalls. Dammit. I’d have to warn Abaddon to not leave the loft apartment until I had those recording devices handled. However, before I called Leo to ask a favor, I’d get my dragon and myself settled.

The duffel bumped my leg as I climbed the spiraling steps to the second level. At the top, I unlocked the door and entered a spacious, open concept living space with massive windows overlooking the pastures. A great view of the open space. Wouldn't be easy for anyone to sneak up from that direction.

"Can I get out now?" Abaddon asked.

"Give me a second to check the place out." Did Leo have surveillance even inside the private apartment? I perused all the walls and ceiling before relaxing enough to say, "It's safe to come out, but don't be plastering yourself in the window until I know if this area gets any traffic."

Abaddon emerged cautiously and sniffed as he waddled around the space before flopping on a shag rug in front of a cold fireplace and declaring, "This is acceptable."

I snorted. "Glad you like it since it's our home until we figure out our next move."

"Our next move should be to vanquish the hunters."

"Oh, just that?" I queried. "Easy peasy."

"What's easy?" Maddox asked as he entered laden with bags.

"Little Fella thinks we just need to eliminate the goons looking for him and all will be good."

"Why do all that work when you can just go after whoever is paying them?" Maddox asked, heaving the bags onto the large island.

"That's assuming it's a single person giving them orders and not the government."

“The more I think about it, the more I get the impression we’re dealing with a private player. This is Canada, after all. Our government takes forever to get anything done and usually only starts after years of pointless studies.”

My lips quirked. “Good point.”

“I’m hungry,” Abaddon stated. “Do I smell watermelon?”

“Yup.” Maddox pulled it from a cloth bag and my dragon moved so quick, I expected to see sparks.

“Gimme!” He held up his hands for it.

“Excuse me?” I huffed, hands planted on my hips.

“May I have it, please?” groused Abaddon.

“Here you go, bud.”

“Mine,” Abaddon hummed, hugging the giant melon to his body.

“You know the rule,” I stated, pointing in the direction of the bathroom that I knew held a large glass stall.

“I’m not a child,” pouted my young dragon as he toted his watermelon away.

“Then don’t sulk like one,” I shouted.

Maddox snickered. “How long before he enters the dragon teen years and gives you the middle claw or stomps to his room and slams the door?”

A sigh escaped me. “Soon. Too soon.” This rapid growth proved challenging as Abaddon changed daily.

“This is a pretty sweet place,” Maddox remarked as I helped him put away the groceries—which involved some serious Tetris skills seeing as how Leo had already filled the fridge and cupboards.

“Used to be where Franco lived so he could be close to the horses.”

“What happened to them? I noticed the stalls were empty.”

“When Franco died, Leo couldn’t find anyone he really liked and since he wasn’t a rider he thought it simpler to sell them off. The horses were left over from his mother.”

“Do all his employees live this well?”

“Just the ones he likes,” I joked.

“Did you see all the cameras? I spotted one on the barn, another inside, plus another pair on a swivel covering the pastures.”

“I noticed.” My lips twisted. “I never realized before how many he had set up. Do you think Leo will find it odd if I ask him to disconnect a few?”

“Seems like a normal request for privacy, but you know him better than me.”

“Ooh, the privacy angle is a great excuse. I’ll tell him I can’t exactly have outdoor sex if I think his security guys are watching,” I mused aloud.

“Open air nookie? I’m in even if I have to take a hammer to the cameras,” Maddox

drawled with a wink.

He always found a way of making me feel sexy as hell.

“In good news, I didn’t spot any cameras inside.”

“It would have been weird if you had. One would expect to not be watched when relaxing in their off time.”

“Speaking of relaxing, if we toss Abaddon that bag of sticky toffee, we might be able to get five minutes to ourselves.”

“And what would those five minutes involve?” he purred.

“Bedroom tour, and a testing of the mattress. That is, if you’re up for it.”

He grabbed my hand and placed it on his groin. “For you, always ready.”

Indeed, his erection swelled the front of his jeans and despite our quickie that morning, I was ready to go again.

“You toss Little Fella the candy while I go strip.” I left him and strode to the bedroom, it and the bathroom being the only enclosed rooms. The bed, a king-sized thing on a platform, faced a window that would greet the morning sun. Gross for a girl who liked to sleep in.

A press of a button brought down the shutters. Last thing I needed was for someone passing by to glance up and see me bouncing on Mads cock.

My clothes hit the floor just as my lover entered, but rather than toss me on the bed, my back ended up pressed against the floor to ceiling glass window, my legs around

his hips, his cock buried to the hilt.

Without any kind of discernible effort, he held me aloft, bouncing me to drive his shaft deeper. Our lips meshed in a passionate, panting kiss as we quickly raced for the edge of the orgasmic cliff.

Most guys had to put a ton of work in to getting me primed. Maddox just had to exist. Like, seriously, everything about the man turned me on. His looks. Smile. Personality. That deep voice. The way he made me feel...

I clutched at his shoulders as my body tightened and leapt into climax. A rolling wave of pleasure consumed me. A good thing Maddox held on to me because I would have slipped to the floor in a boneless puddle otherwise.

When we'd both finished, Maddox stood there just holding me tight. I might not be a conventional girly girl, but that didn't stop me from basking in the protection he afforded me in that moment. Granny might have raised me to only rely on myself, but I began to understand and even appreciate how nice it could be to have someone to lean on.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I sighed. "Our time is up."

A remark that made Maddox chuckle. "Just like a child."

An apt comparison seeing as how my almost cock-blocking dragon apparently needed me that instant to show him how to turn on the television. The apartment came with an eighty-inch flat screen with cable and Abaddon seemed excited at the chance to watch something other than the free channels I used to get at my place.

Maddox spent a few hours with us, checking out the amenities inside and outside. He spotted a total of four outdoor cameras. In good news, the interior one watching the stalls seemed to be inactive given it lacked the red light of the others. It made sense. Why bother monitoring an empty barn? Just in case, though, I had Maddox put a piece of tape over the lens. It would be nice for Abaddon to have a place he could play.

Or, as he stiffly informed me, Dragons don't play. We hone our skills.

By skills, he meant flying. He began his practice that night after dinner while I sat perched on a tall stool. I watched as Abaddon climbed and balanced atop a stall door. He would then leap, extending his aerial arms and flapping hard only to sink.

"Are you sure dragons can fly?" I asked after his fifth attempt.

"Yes. However, it takes time to strengthen the wings. Hence why I must keep exercising until they can hold my weight."

"Guess we should have practiced before dinner," I teased. Maddox had left late afternoon, meaning the giant lasagna I found in the freezer and cooked resulted in one little piece for me while my dragon ate the rest.

"I must ingest large amounts of food if I'm to grow big and strong."

"Fair enough. What about the fire thing? Do you need anything special to fuel it?"

Abaddon shook his head. "My body converts what it requires to create the flame. Speaking of which, I will need a location to practice my fire breathing."

That demand arched my brow. "Yeah, that might not be possible. It might be hard to explain to Leo why his property is singed, not to mention, I'm not toting around an

extinguisher so we don't burn the ranch down.”

“How else will I learn if I don't practice?”

“I get what you're saying, but fire will draw notice. We're supposed to be in hiding, remember?”

A mulish expression tightened Abaddon's features. “If I am to avoid incidences such as what happened at your home, then I must hone my skill.”

The valid point had me saying, “I'll see what I can wrangle.”

A promise I already knew would be hard to keep. We couldn't start a fire inside the apartment and the pastures outdoors also wouldn't work, and not just because of the cameras. The dry fall weather would make this entire area too quick to ignite. Inside the barn? While it had concrete floors, the wooden stalls made it less than feasible. To be honest, I couldn't think of a single place he could safely play with fire.

Luckily, that was the only time Abaddon brought it up. We spent the next week enjoying the new place inside and out since Leo showed me how I could control the cameras around the barn from the computer setup in an office nook in the loft. He didn't even ask why I wanted them shut off. That meant once Abaddon managed to start coasting the length of the barn with his wings, he could test his flight outside.

I'll admit, I had a stupid grin on my face the first time we went out—after dark to ensure no one saw—and he ran and leaped, his wings extending and catching an air current. He flew, up and away, circling and dipping, exclaiming in joy.

My baby dragon was growing up.

I didn't spend the entire week catering to my dragon, despite his demand I revolve

my life around him. I went back to work after the second day there and, once I gave him lessons on using the internet, got Abaddon to agree to stay inside the apartment while I was gone. It kept him busy, although I could have done without some of the conspiracy dragon-holes he went down, such as the one claiming lizard people existed. He seemed especially interested in the history of the planet but bummed when he realized I'd spoken the truth about dragons. Despite his existence, humanity now considered them to be a myth.

Every evening, when I returned from work, he'd greet me at the door—usually with a hug—before he demanded I feed him. Maddox joined us for most of those meals. He didn't seem to mind driving out, although he didn't sleep over at first because of Princess. It was Abaddon who told his protector after we'd been there almost a week, “You have my permission to bring that irritating feline that you might spend the night.”

A gracious invitation that had me eyeing Little Fella and saying, “No eating her, right?”

“As if I'd ruin my palate when I have such a plentiful larder.” Not exactly a no, but the best I'd probably get.

To my surprise, after the second overnight visit, Princess stopped hissing at and stalking Abaddon. It might have had to do with the fact my dragon shared some of his treats. Apparently, Princess liked the smelly sardines Abaddon couldn't get enough of. The turning point came when I emerged from the shower—with Maddox who'd joined me in the spacious stall—and found the cat splayed in front of Abaddon, getting her belly scratched by his claws.

I just about fell over in shock whereas Maddox snorted. “Well, would you look at that?”

When Princess heard her owner, she scrambled fast as her furry legs could move, trying to pretend she'd not been caught. Whereas Little Fella gave us an aloof toss of his head. "It is said that one should keep their enemies close."

No one broke it to the dragon that he and Princess, despite their rough start, weren't enemies. Let them keep pretending. At least I no longer worried as much about him eating the cat.

The only time we scrambled and hid Abaddon was when Leo would pop by for visits. Given the open plan of the apartment, soon as we heard a knock, Abaddon would scoot into the bedroom where he'd nestle in the walk-in closet with the tablet Maddox bought him.

As one week turned into two, I almost managed to forget what happened at my trailer. Even met with the guy selling the prebuilt home.

I almost let down my guard.

But all my worry came screaming back when Abaddon woke one morning and complained of a sore spot.

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Chapter Seventeen

“Show me where it hurts,” I asked Abaddon, who kept turning in circles as if that would allow him to see the spot that bothered him.

He’d recently entered another molting stage, but, unlike the previous two, he barely ran a fever and remained alert. Then again, he’d been getting great sleep.

We both had.

Every night without fail, around eleven o’clock, my eyes would get too heavy and I’d barely manage to crawl into bed before passing out, sleeping right through until morning. Weird, because usually I only slept that deep after a big spliff and a few drinks. Then again, I’d never had such a comfortable bed to sleep in, and climate control. How nice to not wake up shivering because of an overnight frost or sweating because my trailer did nothing to stop heat or humidity.

Abaddon came to stand in front of me, a sturdy dragon who still fit in my lap, but I didn’t figure we had more than a few more months left before he got too big.

“Where is the ouchy spot?” I asked, eyeing his patchy scales. Part of his skin had flaked and showed his new layer of dark scales.

“It’s above my tail.”

I crouched down for a peek and noticed a small wound. “Looks like you scraped off a chunk of flesh when you were scrubbing your loose skin,” I remarked.

“I most certainly did not,” was his indignant reply.

“Your booboo says otherwise.”

“And how would I have done that when I can’t reach?” he argued.

“I don’t know.” I leaned closer and frowned at the missing section that formed a perfect circle.

“I was attacked in my sleep,” he announced. “Call my protector. Tell him he is to relocate here permanently to guard my rest.”

“Whoa, there, you can’t just tell Maddox he’s moving in.”

“Why not? He spends most nights here,” Abaddon reminded me.

True, still... “For one, you can’t order him to vacate his home because you hurt yourself. Two, he has a business to run. And third, we haven’t been dating long enough for us to be shacking up permanently.” I’ll admit, the third had more to do with me balking. I’d never lived with a guy before. This thing with Maddox where we spent every day at least partially together was the closest I’d ever gotten.

“Someone cut me in my sleep,” Abaddon insisted.

“Pretty sure you would have woken up if someone took a knife to you.”

“Not if I were drugged. Ever since we moved into this place, I’ve slumbered deeply and without interruption.”

“Sounds like a good thing,” I said even as I began to wonder about the fact that we both became comatose every night.

“Are you not listening? Someone attacked me. Perhaps it was that miscreant with the cage.”

“Don’t be paranoid. If that asshole knew you were here, he wouldn’t be sneaking in at night to cut a chunk from your back. You’d be in a lab somewhere, most likely being studied and dissected.” Something about trying to debunk Abaddon’s wild theory sent my mind racing, though. Could it be possible?

No, and I should not let Little Fella’s paranoia spread. Only, I couldn’t shake his claim. It made no sense. If the man in the suit knew we were here, he’d simply take Abaddon. However, that perfectly round wound, similar to those taken during biopsies, bothered me.

I would have picked Maddox’s brain about it, only he hadn’t been able to come over as he had an emergency plumbing issue in the shop. There had to be a logical explanation, the most likely being Abaddon had injured himself and didn’t realize it. However, to assuage Little Fella’s fear, that night I turned on both the camera inside the barn and those outside. I should have been doing that from the start when we went to bed. After all, I only worried about them recording when Abaddon wandered around.

The next morning, after another full eight hours of sleep—despite the several glasses of water I downed—after I emptied my painfully full bladder, I quickly scanned the footage taken overnight. Nothing. Nada. Not even a mouse scurrying by.

I told Abaddon but he remained mulish. “Something is amiss. We need to go.”

“Go where? We have nowhere else to hide that would be this well-protected.”

“It is not well-protected if someone can cut me in my sleep,” he insisted.

“Do you have any new boobos this morning?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean we are safe. We have to leave.”

“Not we. Me. I’m going to work.”

“You can’t depart now! I need you.” He clung to my leg, leading me to sigh.

“I’ve already taken too much time off, and I have appointments. You’ll be fine. The skylight is open if you hear anything and need to make a quick escape.”

Abaddon glared. “You are a most vexing servant.”

“Love you too,” I sang as I left, however, Abaddon’s worry proved contagious. I texted him throughout the morning and felt only slightly relieved each time Little Fella replied on his tablet.

Maddox noticed my unease when he came by to bring me some lunch—a submarine sandwich with steak, mushrooms, cheese, and barbecue sauce.

“What’s wrong?”

“Little Fella’s trying to convince me someone came by the other night and took a sample from him.”

“Why would he think that?”

“He had a wound above his tail that he insists he didn’t do.”

“I hear a but.”

“It was kind of odd. The spot is a perfect circle.”

“Odd, but not unheard of if he ripped a scale.”

“You’ve seen that before?”

“Sometimes the lizards rub a little too enthusiastically. Injuries can happen. But the real question is, what do you think?” Maddox took a huge bite of his sandwich and waited for my reply.

I shrugged. “I think the fact we haven’t seen or heard from that asshole in the suit has Abaddon imagining problems that don’t exist.”

“I could do a stakeout in the barn to ease his mind,” Maddox offered.

“Seems like a waste of a sleepover,” I grumbled. I missed him the nights he spent at home. “Besides, I turned on the cameras before bed. Nobody came by.”

“Show him the footage.”

“I already did,” I said. “It didn’t help.”

“I’ve got a new employee starting today at four, so I can leave earlier than usual. I’ll head over and check out the area for signs anyone other than us has been around.”

“Going to look for cigarette butts and coffee cups?” I joked.

“You forgot tire tracks.” He winked. “Think of me poking around as showing the Little Fella we’re not mocking his fear. We’d probably be nervous, too, if we were mythical creatures.”

Put that way, I guess I should be more understanding.

When I arrived at the barn on my bike, Maddox's truck was already parked. I entered the loft and immediately spotted Abaddon sitting on the shag carpet, dragging a piece of string for Princess, who raced after it.

He glanced at me. "You're late."

"Sorry. My last client wanted a little something extra added to his tattoo." Wait, why did I apologize?

"You are forgiven this time, only because my protector showed up earlier than usual." With that, my dragon turned back to the cat.

I turned towards the kitchen where Maddox, with a welcoming smile, stood with a dish towel over his shoulder. "Hey, babe. Supper's in the oven. Should be ready in half an hour. Made that dish you like with the chicken, rice, and garlic."

Fuck, I loved that man.

I froze as the thought hit me.

"Everything okay?" Maddox asked with a creased brow.

No. I'd never had the L word pop into my head before. It terrified.

"I'm fine. Just a long day. Let me get changed and I'll be right out." While I took the time to remind myself it was too soon for love, I swapped my leather pants and t-shirt for a tracksuit. Sometimes a girl just wanted comfy cozy for lounging in and even better, Mads didn't care what I wore.

I emerged to find him on the floor, wrestling with the dragon.

“I’ve got you now, you giant lug,” Abaddon squealed, wrapped around his neck, legs locked around the ankles.

“Oh, yeah? We’ll see about that.” Mads tickled the underside of Little Fella’s foot. You’d think a creature that went barefoot all the time would scoff.

My big and ferocious dragon giggled and squealed, “No. No more. Argh,” before slipping around into Maddox’s arms to be cradled.

So cute.

“Pip’s back. Should we tickle her?” Maddox asked in a loud whisper.

“Only if he wants me to get him healthy snacks and no more chips and cookies,” I warned, wagging a finger.

“My servant lacks a sense of playfulness,” Abaddon confided.

Not true. I just didn’t know how to amuse a dragon. Or anyone of a young age. I’d grown up an only child who’d only begun socializing in kindergarten—and poorly, at that. Granny raised me like a mini adult so I had little in common with other kids.

“Pip’s got a lot of things on her plate.” Maddox came to my defense.

“If her plate is too full, I will eat it.”

Mads opened his mouth to explain and I shook my head. “Thanks, Little Fella. Appreciate it.”

“As if I’d let food go to waste,” he scoffed as he hopped from Maddox’s arms. “I’m going to the washroom to make room for the meal.”

Because we all needed to know he was taking a shit.

“Good thing he’s cute,” I muttered. “Did he show you his wound?”

Maddox nodded. “Yeah, and it’s not a full scale like I thought it might be, but rather a neatly excised section.”

“Excised, as in cut?”

He hesitated before nodding.

“Don’t tell me you also think someone came in during the night and cut him.”

“He mentioned you’ve both been sleeping very deeply which led me to realize the same happens to me when I stay over. Usually, I wake once or twice, roll over and go back to sleep, but when I spend the night, I’m out hard until morning.”

“Sounds like you’re implying we’re being drugged.”

Those big shoulders lifted and dropped. “I don’t know. However, bud raised a few points that bear looking into.”

“The video footage showed nothing.”

“Last night. You’ve only recorded one night’s worth and not the one he got injured.”

“True, but I spoke to Leo. Told him I thought someone was skulking around the barn and asked if his security had caught anything. He’s got a team of four guys on at

night, plus cameras, motion sensors, and he keeps track of everyone who goes in and out. Nada. The ranch is secure.”

“Assuming he’s telling the truth.”

“Why would Leo lie?”

“Can I see the videos you took?”

“Why? There’s nothing there.”

“I want to check the angles and make sure they’re properly aligned as well as figure out the gaps where we might want to add more.”

“More cameras?” I narrowed my gaze at Maddox. “You think there’s some truth to Abaddon’s accusation.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be cautious. And it will set his mind at ease.”

“I guess. Hold on, let me boot up the computer.” I sat down and logged in before dragging open the overnight videos. I ran them at their fastest rate while Maddox eyed them over my shoulder.

“Hold on. Can you rewind that slightly for me and play it slower?”

“Why?”

“Thought I saw something.”

I used the mouse to slide the play bar to the left and then let the clip run.

“There!” Maddox exclaimed.

“There what? I don’t see anything.” The screen showed the empty barn and the entrance to the loft. No movement. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Rewind it again and watch the time stamp.”

My brow furrowed as I once more used the curser to drag the play point back. As it scrolled at only five times the normal speed, I saw it.

To be sure, I rewound and didn’t blink as it ran.

A low whistle emanated from me. “Well, shit.” The video showed a jump in the recording that went from one oh one am until one forty-three. “It’s missing a segment,” I murmured.

“Seems like the recording halted.”

“I wonder if the outdoor cameras have the same glitch.” Two of the cameras did but their time stamps were slightly different, beginning a few minutes before the interior glitch and ending three minutes after. The timing was just about right if someone had disabled it before approaching the barn and restarted it once they left.

I glanced at Maddox. “That offer to do a stake out still open?”

Chapter Eighteen

Maddox gave me a toe-curling kiss before taking a blanket and pillow to sleep in the barn. Me, I sat upstairs watching television with Abaddon—who happily ate my share of the popcorn that Maddox brought. Along with the microwavable kernels, fresh from the store, Mads also supplied dinner from a local rib joint that included stuffed baked potatoes, coleslaw, a six-pack of beer, and a two-liter bottle of Fresca for Abaddon. Call it being overly cautious, but it wouldn't hurt to eat things we knew hadn't been tampered with.

Eleven came and barely even a yawn. At midnight, I went to bed and lay staring at the slanted ceiling. Eventually, I fell asleep to my first restless night. I kept waking up, frantic, until I felt Abaddon's solid weight draped across me.

I roused well before dawn and was on my second coffee when Maddox joined us.

He took one look at me and said, "Looks like we both slept like shit."

"Ya think?" I drawled, sipping my chest-hair-strength coffee.

"Should you be drinking that? I thought we were avoiding stuff in the barn in case it's been contaminated." He indicated my mug of java.

"At this point, I'd welcome a nap. More seriously, though, I don't think it's the food putting us to sleep. While tossing and turning, it occurred to me that we never eat the same thing every night. Not to mention, Abaddon sometimes eats a gazillion times his body weight, so how could someone put a sleeping agent in our food without

causing harm?”

Maddox pursed his lips. “Good point.”

“How did your night watch go?” I asked as I turned to the coffee maker to get him a cup.

“As far as I can tell, no one entered the barn.” He’d laid a noisy trap across the doors, cans that would have rattled if knocked over. “Have you checked the outside footage?”

I nodded as I handed him a steaming mug. “No time skips.”

To which Abaddon replied, “They must be aware that we’re wise to their tricks.”

“How?”

Before my paranoid dragon could reply, Maddox had a theory. “If they can tap into the camera feed to turn it off, then they could have seen me.”

Not exactly a reassuring answer, which caused me to grimace. “Meaning your stakeout last night might have been a waste of time.”

“Not really. We’ll just have to be wlier the next time.”

“Wlier how?”

Maddox had some ideas, and we implemented them over the next few days. He took an Uber to the ranch after dark and walked from the gate to the barn so his truck wouldn’t be seen and no one would know he’d come. We continued to only eat food freshly purchased from a restaurant or store. The door to the loft gained its own set of

noisy dishes that would fall over the moment someone tried to swing open the door. We even disconnected the cameras one night so no one could spy at all.

To no avail.

No one visited and Abaddon didn't incur any new injuries, and all of our noisy traps remained untouched—except for the night Princess knocked over the stack in the barn, startling Maddox awake.

After a week, I finally had to tell Abaddon, “I think we might have overreacted.”

“You would ignore the evidence?”

“What evidence? An injury that could have been because of your molting?” I stated as I put our dinner cutlery in the dishwasher.

“And the video that stops?” Little Fella reminded.

“I happened to mention it to Leo today, and he informed me that the cameras recently underwent maintenance and went offline to update some software.”

My dragon didn't seem convinced. “My enemies are lulling you into a false sense of security.”

I slammed the dishwasher shut and started the cycle. “Or you're letting your fear of capture color your perception.”

Not a reply he appreciated. “I'm going to practice flying in the barn.” He went to the computer desk and used his claws to tap a few keys, no longer needing me to turn off cameras or open doors. My growing dragon learned new skills at an insane rate.

I slumped on a kitchen stool, tired after a stressful week of waiting for something to happen. Maddox wouldn't be swinging by tonight as he had an early shipment in the morning. You'd think I'd be happy to have some alone time, given he'd been around every single day.

Nope. I missed him terribly.

A still-grumpy Abaddon joined me around ten.

"How was the flying?" I asked.

"Better. I managed to do eight laps of the barn before I tired," he proudly stated.

"Damn. Look at you. Getting so strong."

His chest puffed. "This is only the beginning. Eventually I'll have the stamina and size to bring you on flights with me."

My jaw dropped. Me? Riding a dragon?

Fuck, that would be cool.

Abaddon yawned, his jaw dropping open wide enough to eat a cat—which made me thankful they'd become friends.

"Seems like we're both tired." Most likely because of our shitty week of restless slumber. "Shall we hit the sack early?"

"Let me place the trap first," Abaddon said.

I saw no harm and even helped him create the tower of cans that would be knocked

over if anyone opened the door. That night we both fell asleep, deeply and soundly. So deep, we never heard the stacked cans toppling.

The next morning, I eyed the scattered mess on the floor. No Princess to blame. It definitely wasn't me. Might have been a rodent, although I'd seen no sign of any. Abaddon remained abed and I wondered if perhaps he'd done it given my statement the previous night.

I picked up the mess before heading over to the computer to pull up the previous night's footage. I got a pop-up message.

Unavailable.

No matter how I tried to access it, none of the camera feeds would load. I fired a text to Leo. Are the cameras doing maintenance again?

His reply arrived not long after. Network glitch. Apparently, my IT guy forgot to offload the files and the server ran out of space to store recent security videos. Should be fixed later today. After which I'm firing his ass!

Plausible, but suspicious, too. Little Fella wandered from the bedroom and grabbed a box of dry cereal which he then proceeded to eat in front of the television. The weatherman waved his arms around as satellite predictions played behind him showing an approaching snowstorm. Only October and way too early for the white stuff, but tell that to Mother Nature, who was about to blast us.

Now you might wonder what a motorcycle-riding gal did when the weather turned to shit. It depended. Rain? I had gear to keep me dry. Cold? I wore layers. But snow? That shit always kept me home, hence I fired off a text to my boss.

Snow in the forecast. Think I'm gonna stay put today.

Blinking dots appeared as he typed back. I can give you a ride. You've got the final touches on Bruno's tat today and I know he's leaving soon to visit family out east so he'll want it done before he goes. We'll leave the shop early though so we don't get screwed on the roads.

Fuck. I'd forgotten about Bruno. At least I had a ride. The Suburban could easily handle a storm.

I'll meet you at the house in twenty, I texted back . Enough time for me to change and make sure Little Fella had enough food for the day before I rode my bike over and parked it.

"Don't leave." Abaddon didn't turn his head but knew I readied to go.

"I won't be gone more than a few hours. I'll grab some pizzas for us on the way home." Although how I'd explain to Leo why I needed four for just me would be interesting.

"Stay. I have an ominous feeling."

I crouched by his side. "I know you hate it when I go to work, but given the favor Leo is doing us, I can't screw him over by refusing to do my job."

"You wouldn't need a job if I had a hoard."

"I look forward to the day I can retire on your dime, but until then, I've got to make money to feed you or we'll be stuck dining on ramen noodles and lentils."

"I like the noodles."

"You'd hate them quick if you had to eat them multiple times a day. Now give me a

hug.”

We’d taken to doing embraces on the regular. Weird, I know. I mean, who intentionally squished a dragon? Me, apparently. I squeezed the sturdy body tight and murmured, “I’ll be home before you know it.”

“With pizza?”

“Yes, pizza.”

“Meat lovers?”

“Yes.” I’d learned my lesson the one time I came home with a veggie-only pie.

I headed out wearing a few layers, because only an idiot didn’t leave the house prepared for the weather when the meteorologists were crowing this hard about it. Yes, I’d be ensconced in a luxury SUV with heating, but sometimes vehicles broke down, or required digging out of snowbanks, or tires changed. Better to peel layers than freeze.

I rode my bike down the road to the main driveway and up to the house. The Suburban idled out front. I parked and headed for the passenger seat, sliding in to Leo’s upbeat, “Morning, Pip.”

“Hey, boss. Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem. How’s things at the barn?” he asked as he put the truck in gear.

“Good.”

“And the boyfriend?”

For some reason my cheeks heated. “Also good.”

“Seems like a nice guy.”

Leo had met him when Maddox popped by to do lunch with me but they’d not really had a chance to socialize. “He’s great. I’ll talk to him about a night we can have you over for dinner. I’ll have him make his crazy ass yummy chicken parmesan.”

“I look forward to it.”

We spent the rest of the drive discussing upcoming clients and the possibility of attending an ink convention in Vegas. I pretended as if I’d actually be there, when in reality I had no intention of going. Abaddon couldn’t be left alone for that length of time.

Bruno came in for his appointment and I went to work, intent on the art, so focused on my task I didn’t realize the storm hit earlier than expected until Bruno was leaving and I looked outside.

“Oh shit.” Thick snowflakes swirled, a brisk wind whipping around the fluffy stuff.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got my winter tires and four-wheel drive,” Leo boasted.

Only slightly reassuring.

“Where’s Kalypso?” I asked, noticing her usual spot was empty. When I got into the tattoo zone, I phased out everything else around me.

“Gone an hour ago. She didn’t want to disturb you and left the second the first snowflake fell.”

Smart. She didn't have far to go but I knew for a fact her car did not like winter conditions.

"We can leave now if you want," Leo offered.

"Actually, Maddox already said he'd give me a lift home. He's closing shop early because of the storm." I'd no sooner finished speaking when the lights went out. Not just in our shop. A glance through the window showed the whole street had gone dark, making this a power failure and not a blown electrical switch.

"I really should get a generator installed," Leo grumbled as he headed for the washroom to turn on a tap to make sure the pipes didn't freeze. This wasn't our first rodeo with a power failure during subzero temps.

As I began putting on my layers to join Maddox up the street, my phone beeped.

Sorry, babe. Doesn't look like I'll be able to leave anytime soon. According to the hydro outage map, shop might be out of juice until tomorrow. I'm gonna have to stick around and keep an eye on the genny.

Having chatted with him about the pet store business, I knew this had happened in the past where he'd had to monitor his generator to ensure the heat lamps kept running for the lizards. While I would have loved to hang out with him, keeping his other lizard warm, I couldn't leave Abaddon alone in this storm. Although, I doubted my dragon would be too happy when I arrived without the promised pizza. I couldn't exactly grab any with the power out up and down the street.

It's okay. Leo offered me a ride. I'll text you when I get home.

K. Be careful. Luv u.

I blinked, but there it was. The L word. And he'd said it first.

Leo returned, grumbling. "We'd better not be out of power for days like the last time."

"Guess it will depend on the storm," I murmured, recovering from my shock as warmth spread through me. I debated firing back a text saying Love you too , but hesitated. What if he thought I only said it because he had?

"You ready to head out so I can lock up?" Leo asked.

"Yeah, but change of plans. Turns out I'll be riding with you, after all. Maddox is stuck at the shop until the power's back on."

"That sucks. Will he be okay?"

"He's got a genny but he's got to keep an eye on it and his lizards."

"Speaking of a generator, the barn doesn't have one. I kept meaning to get it installed but then Frank died and well..." Leo shrugged. "If you lose power, you can stay at the house, which does have one."

A great offer but for one thing. I couldn't leave my dragon alone nor could I bring him to Leo's place.

"I'm sure it will be fine. The barn has a fireplace to keep me warm. It will be like when Granny fired up our little woodstove." Which heated the front of the trailer like crazy and had me sweating on the couch.

"Well, if it happens and you change your mind, give me a ding and I'll grab you."

“As if I’d make you drive and risk an accident.”

“Who said anything about driving the truck? I’ve got a new Polaris in the garage that I’ve been itching to try out.”

Ooh, a snowmobile. I hadn’t ridden one of those in years. The old Artic Cat I used to have died and I never replaced it.

We chatted about sledding during the drive, a perilous thing as the snow fell thick and furious. The wind made matters worse, whipping it across the road, forcing Leo at times to slow to a crawl as we lost sight of the road.

While early afternoon, the storm made it seem as if night had already fallen. The bright headlights made almost no difference. What usually took twenty minutes instead became a journey of almost an hour. When the ranch gates came into view, relief filled me until I noticed them gaping wide.

“What’s going on? Why’s the gate open?” I asked.

“Power must have gone out. When that happens, a safety feature opens the gate to ensure we can exit. There’s a built-in battery that stores just enough power to run the mechanism.”

I frowned. “I thought you had a generator.”

“I do, but it only runs the house. Didn’t see any point in extending it any further.”

The snow lay thick on the ground, but I could see ruts where vehicles had passed. “Guess you’re going to get to try out your new sled when you run me over to the barn,” I stated as Leo crept up the driveway, but he didn’t take the fork for the barn but rather headed for the house.

“As mentioned earlier, there’s no backup power for the barn. You’ll be more comfortable at my place.”

Me yes, but what of Abaddon? I couldn’t leave him alone in this frigid storm but how to turn down the offer without sounding nuts? “Appreciated, but I’ll be fine. I’ve weathered worse.”

“You’re worried about the dragon.”

At his statement, I went rigid. “Excuse me?”

Leo sighed. “You know, I’d really hoped you’d tell me about him yourself. I thought we were friends.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” A lie spoken through stiff lips.

“You don’t have to pretend, Pip. I know about the dragon that hatched after Tseax erupted. Which was a surprise, I’ll admit. I mean, we suspected there was an egg in the cone. When we managed to get the volcano to activate, we expected to see the critter shortly thereafter, only it didn’t appear. Hence why we started searching to see if the egg got expelled. What a task hunting for all the rocks that hurtled out of it. My team collected every sample they could find and even questioned people to see if they’d sighted a lizard. Imagine my shock when you told me you’d acquired one as a pet. Right away I knew it had to be the dragon.”

My mind digested everything Leo said and pieces began falling into place, leading to a shocking conclusion. “You sent those assholes to my trailer.”

Leo pulled up in front of his house and put the truck in park before replying. “Yes, and I do apologize for their less-than-amicable manner. Kyle and Brittany are kind of intense about their work.”

“What work? What the fuck is going on Leo?”

My boss, my friend, a guy I’d known for years, turned and smiled. “I’ll explain everything inside. You know, I’ve been dying to talk to you about this. I’m so glad we can finally be truthful. It’s been torture holding in my questions. Even harder waiting to finally meet the hatchling in person, although he’s not really a baby anymore, is he? They grow so fast.”

With every revelation that spilled from Leo’s mouth—a man I thought I could trust—my panic grew.

I have to get to Abaddon.

I grabbed at the door handle, wanting to get away from Leo. Oh the irony that I’d brought Abaddon into the grasp of the very man who sought to capture him.

The door didn’t budge. A glance at Leo showed his hand resting on the master control switch.

“Unlock this door,” I demanded.

“In a moment. You really shouldn’t be running off in this storm. You might lose your way and freeze to death. We can’t have that. I need you, Pip. Your dragon does, too. He appears very attached to you.”

“You leave Abaddon alone,” I growled.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. His existence is much too important, but at least now you don’t have to hide him anymore. I’d hoped to have more time to prepare his new quarters but the storm forced my hand. Fear not, the accommodations I had built should be adequate for the moment. Oh, and before you worry, a team was dispatched

to fetch the dragon as soon as the power went out. Dragons don't like the cold, you know. Especially the fire breathers."

He knew so much and every word out of his mouth only served to chill me further.

"Don't you dare hurt him."

"Never!" Leo huffed. "On the contrary, the dragon shall be treated like a king. The habitat I had designed offers plenty of space for a growing dragon and his servant. You'll be glad to know I had my construction crew add some amenities for you. After seeing your bond, it became obvious we should keep you together."

"You're going to make us prisoners." A dull realization.

"Temporarily. It's only until you both realize that I, and those I partner with, have your best interests at heart. We want dragons to return. To flourish."

Somehow, I doubted that, hence why I suddenly lunged and head-butted Leo, blinking back tears at the sharp pain as I scrabbled for the switch to unlock the doors.

Click. I pulled away from Leo and quickly exited the truck into the blizzard, immediately stung by the cold and snow. However, the extreme weather wasn't what foiled my plan to flee.

That would be the guys in snow gear who suddenly appeared and sent my consciousness spiraling into darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

Once more I was abandoned by my servant. She didn't seem to take the peril hunting me seriously. In her defense, we had spent a week without intrusion. My enemies must have discovered our wily measures meant to expose their subterfuge. Must have realized they couldn't get past my protector. It didn't come as any real surprise that the one night he did not stand guard they sent me and my servant into a deep sleep.

Despite Pip trying to hide it, I noticed the toppled cans by the door, the clatter of which should have woken us. The triggered warning system wasn't the only evidence of intrusion. I'd also been tampered with, poked in my sleep.

Even without that subtle pinprick between my toes, I would have known. The enemy's scent lingered, a smell that I hadn't realized didn't belong until we went days without it. The proof of peril mounted, but did my servant listen and remain with me where she belonged?

No. She left to go to work, a reminder that I really needed to start building my hoard. With wealth to support us, Pip would lack an excuse to leave me every day. With wealth, I could build myself a fortress. With riches, I could buy more of those delicious, crunchy snacks she called Cheetos.

After Pip's departure, I kept myself ready. The skylight was closed, but unlatched, the remote to open it within reach. I also pulled out the new bugout bag Maddox outfitted me with, one adjusted so I could strap it to my front and not impede my wings. It held a few snacks and a phone. When he gave it to me, my protector had said, "Any trouble, you call me right away, and I will come."

But how long would that take? He should be with me at all times! Again, something that could only be achieved by collecting treasures to support my retinue.

The television played in the background as I stalked the length of the loft. A woman on the screen kept warning of a snowstorm, using ridiculous words like snowbomb, snowtrastrophe, snowmaggedon, and more. How fascinating the way the purveyors of news liked to sensationalize everything. Pip claimed they did it for something called views and clicks, a concept I still struggled to understand. Why wouldn't people prefer the unvarnished truth?

When I became Dragon Overlord—the title currently ranking as my favorite—I would emit a decree that only the facts would be allowed in news broadcasts. I would also ban social media because from what I'd browsed, it seemed to be a never-ending argument between humans about who was more righteous.

Late morning and two bags of chips and a jar of pickles later, the dark sky finally began producing the promised inclement weather. White specks began to fall.

Snow.

While I'd never personally experienced it, my memories advised me the flakes were crystalized water and cold. Yuck.

As a dragon of fire, I preferred warmth. Not that lower temperatures would harm me, but it would be unpleasant, and if exposed long enough to frigid temperatures, my body might put me in a state of hibernation. Not that I planned to leave the warm apartment. I waited for Pip and the promised pizza. It better have lots of cheese.

The snow fell heavily, and darkness arrived early as the clouds and the swirling flakes stole the natural daylight. An ominous-looking day that matched my mood.

I couldn't shake the impending sense of wrongness. Of danger. While usually my enemy came at night, despite it being very early in the afternoon, a foreboding sense insisted they were near.

Ding. A message arrived on my tablet from Pip.

On my way but sorry, no pizza. All the places around lost power.

What? No yummy, cheesy, saucy goodness? Disappointing. I consoled myself by microwaving some burritos. Delicious things. And the machine that could heat them in minutes? My favorite invention of this time period thus far.

When the lights flickered, and then went out, I grabbed the bugout bag by my side and settled it in place. With the electricity gone, the warmth dissipated quicker than I liked. The things Pip called baseboard heaters ceased their function. I sat by the window, wrapped in a warm blanket, and stared outward, my tension tightening. Where was Pip? It had been more than thirty minutes since she sent the message announcing her return. The weather must be delaying her transport.

I kept watch. The reward for my vigilance was that I spotted two beams of light piercing the falling snow, heading for the barn. Pip, or someone else? The motorcycle had only one headlight and she'd explained to me that morning before leaving to catch a ride with her employer that she couldn't ride it in the snow.

The truck that stopped close to the barn doors disgorged people in silvery suits. At last, my enemy made their move while I remained awake.

As they trudged through the snow to the door, I launched myself upward and clung to one of the beams crisscrossing the peaked ceiling. I perched and could almost hear Pip laughing the first time I'd done so. "You look like a gargoyle," she'd said.

A rude comparison, as it turned out. Not knowing the word gargoyle, I'd sought out images and been less than impressed by the hideous beasts lacking any kind of majesty. The only admirable thing about them? Their stealthy ability to blend in with their surroundings. Kind of like I did now. With the lights out, I vanished in the shadows and remained statue still.

I heard the muffled thump of boots coming up the stairs. Heard the scratch and click of a key being used.

A key! How did they have one? Had Pip had been taken captive and robbed?

I counted the number of silver suits who entered. Four. A respectable number to send for one of my greatness. They held flashlights which they shone around the room as they spoke amongst each other.

"I don't see it," a male voice said, sounding echoey as he spoke behind a helmet.

It? How insulting.

"Probably hiding," replied one with a deeper timber.

More like lying in wait.

"Pity we couldn't trigger the sleeping gas before the power went out. It would have been easy pickings. Are we sure these tranquilizers will still penetrate its skin?" queried a female with a reedy lilt that I recognized. She'd been one of those who invaded the trailer.

"Boss says they will. Just like these suits should protect us from fire," said the Echoey Man.

“Should?” The female didn’t sound enthused.

“Don’t be a pussy, Kaitlyn,” Deep Timber rebuked.

“Fuck you, Ed,” Kaitlyn snapped right back. “I’m only here because Malone is getting its room ready in case you fuck up again.”

“Well, excuse us. It’s not every day you come face to face with an actual dragon,” drawled Echoey Man.

“Hence the briefing beforehand to warn you,” Kaitlyn pointed out.

“It’s one thing to be told, another thing to see,” Echoey Man argued. “Considering you’ve had access to it for over a week, I don’t see why we’re in a rush to grab it now.”

“Because the cold will kill it,” Kaitlyn snapped. “That’s why we can’t wait for the power to come back. Trust me, if we had another choice, we wouldn’t be here. The boss had hoped to have more time to finish its prison.”

Prison? I almost fell off my perch.

“For fuck’s sake, can we argue about this later? Let’s find the lizard, tranq it, cage it, and get out of here. I’ve got a bottle of whiskey with my name on it and a new season of The Boys to stream,” stated the third male who’d been quiet until this point.

Lizard indeed. Just for that I wanted to swoop down and show them what happened to those who insulted dragons.

“Spread out,” Kaitlyn barked. “Ed, you check the bedroom. Nelson, bathroom. Travis, start with the kitchen. When you spot the creature, holler. If it spits fire,

remember, the suits are flameproof. I don't want a repeat of the panic we saw the last time."

Oh, they should panic. My first fire-breathing attempt had been puny and weak, however, the inferno within had been simmering since. Even without practice, these miscreants were in for a surprise, assuming they found me. None had yet looked up. Would they leave if they couldn't find me?

While the tin suits spread out, the one named Kaitlyn remained by the door, guarding it. She held her gun in front of her in a slightly shaky hand. Someone had lost their cockiness of before. I must have frightened her at our last encounter. Not enough, though, seeing as she came after me again. Some people never learned—usually because they died.

I almost got bored waiting as they searched and searched again. Opening cupboards, the fridge, even tearing out the couch cushions as if I could conceal myself under them.

Echoey Man stated it first. "It's not here."

"It's here, Travis. You just haven't found it," Kaitlyn insisted. "According to our surveillance, it was sitting in the window when the power went out."

They'd been spying! I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Maybe it left," Ed, a.k.a. Deep Timber, opined.

"To go where?" Kaitlyn asked. "It's too cold outside for it to survive."

"Does it know that?" asked the third guy, who had to be Nelson.

“Yes, it knows.”

“Well, it’s not here,” Travis reiterated. “I’m going downstairs to see if Benny and Dylan saw anything.”

“Should we go with him?” Nelson asked.

“No. It’s here. I’d stake my job on it.” As Kaitlin spoke, she shone her light upward, tracing it along the beams.

Since I’d be discovered anyway, I made my move and dove, my maneuver revealing me and causing Kaitlyn to scream, “It’s overhead. Shoot it!”

“Where?” Ed hollered.

A good question since Kaitlyn’s bouncing flashlight beam failed to track my wily flight.

Before anyone could even think of darting me, I opened my mouth and breathed right in Ed’s helmeted face. I then banked my swoop and flapped to rise again, just in time, as something singed past my wing.

“Argh. Argh,” Ed screamed, batting at his face.

Kaitlyn started out saying, “You’re fine. The flames will die out,” only to be interrupted by Nelson. “Holy fuck, his face shield is melting.”

Which led to really intense screaming for a few seconds until my fire destroyed Ed’s jaw. He crumpled to the floor.

One down. Five more to go.

Two of whom suddenly chose to flee. Kaitlyn and Nelson bolted through the apartment door so fast they forgot to shut it. Now I could have basked in my victory at having chased them off, but... Pip was coming and I didn't want them hurting her.

Besides, now I knew their suits couldn't stop my flame. Silly humans, thinking they could counter dragon's breath. They'd been fooled by the weakness of my first attempt. But I'd grown stronger since then. Strong enough to handle my enemies.

I flapped my way to the open door and exited, too quickly and rashly as it turned out. But luck was on my side as the fired dart narrowly missed me.

Nelson was waiting for me in the stairwell. He aimed and fired again.

I simply breathed.

The dart melted but Nelson threw himself down the stairs to avoid the flames now licking the walls and treads of the stairwell.

The warmth felt nice as I floated down. I could hear shouting as my enemies panicked, a noise that abruptly ceased as Travis yelled, "Shut up you morons, unless you want it to barbeque you."

Mmm. Barbeque. Roasted meat dripping with fat and juices. Would Pip be angry if I toasted one for a snack? Most likely. Humans could be weird about dragons eating their kind.

Knowing they lay in wait, I gripped a pipe running along the ceiling rather than dropping to the floor.

Pft. Pft. Two darts went flying past harmlessly.

“Where is it?” A whisper that might as well have been a shout.

“We need some real light,” Kaitlyn grumbled. “These flashlights are useless.”

Not really. It let me track their locations. However, she did have a point. Their beams didn’t extend far enough to dispel the shadows cloaking me.

“Maybe it went back upstairs,” said a new voice. One of the two who’d remained below.

“You wanna go check?” A sarcastic reply from Travis.

“We can’t stand around here all day,” huffed Kaitlyn. “Benny, go and see if it’s still in the stairwell.”

“Like fuck,” Benny exclaimed in a nasally tone. “I heard what it did to Ed. You lied. These suits aren’t fireproof.”

“They are, but only to a certain degree,” Kaitlyn murmured.

“I didn’t sign on to get roasted,” Benny exclaimed. “Catch the fucker yourself.”

“You signed a contract,” Kaitlyn stated.

“Sue me, then. I’d love to tell the world what you and Malone are up to,” snapped Benny.

“Given this new development, let me message Malone and see what he wants us to do. Keep an eye out for the dragon. I should only be a moment.”

I heard steps as Kaitlyn moved away, leaving the males, one of which was shaking

hard enough his flashlight wobbled.

My next target.

I launched myself and opened my mouth wide, huffing flame before even actually seeing the enemy. My aim proved true, mostly. I missed the head but my fire hit the tall male in the chest.

And burned.

He ran screaming through the open door into the blizzard.

Two down. Four to go.

“There he is!” Nelson shouted and fired. Luckily for me, his shaking hands ruined his shot and the missile missed.

I didn’t.

Nelson didn’t even have time to scream. His flaming body hit the floor and crackled nicely, filling the space with heat and light.

Light enough for Travis to aim in my direction with a steadier hand.

I channeled Neo from that movie Matrix I’d recently watched with Pip, bending my body so that the dart flew past. When I stood upright again, I noticed Travis clicking his empty weapon.

“Please don’t hurt me,” he pled, dropping it to the floor.

Begging for mercy when he wouldn’t have shown me any?

He obviously didn't know anything about dragons.

He joined his burning pyre of a friend.

And that left only one male—or would have if he'd not fled the barn into the storm. Would he return? Given his cowardice, I thought not.

But what of the female who'd gone to contact her superior? Would she return or had she finally fled as well?

In case she proved too stupid to grasp the futility of her endeavor, I waited in the barn, which grew warmer by the moment as the barbecuing bodies spread their crackling heat. Flames licked the wooden stalls and walls. A river of it rippled along the ceiling. So pretty. All those dancing red, orange, and yellow flames with thick bands of blue rimmed in white in the center.

Perched amidst my fiery art, my patience paid off. Kaitlyn, sans helmet, peeked inside.

I opened my mouth, a ball of fire forming and she quickly exclaimed, "We have Philippa Smith in custody."

The claim made me pause. They'd captured my Pip? Utterly unacceptable. A dragon's servants were sacrosanct.

"You would dare accost one of my retinue?" I lifted my chin and narrowed my gaze. "You will release her at once."

My demand, for some reason, eased the tension in Kaitlyn's body. "I'm afraid that's not possible. However, perhaps we could do a trade. You agree to come with me and in exchange, we'll let her go."

Did she take me for a fool? I could hear the lie. Would have probably smelled it if she didn't wear a tin suit.

"This is not a negotiation," my firm reply.

"Actually, it is." She paused. "You really can talk."

"You don't say." I'd been working on my sarcasm.

"I mean, I knew you would be able to, but you're the first dragon I've managed to converse with."

For some reason, the statement brought to mind the thing she'd said at the trailer. "Oh, did you not speak with the one in South America?"

"No. Perhaps if we had, the mission might have ended differently."

The finality of her tone led me to blurt, "You killed the dragon."

"Not on purpose. We found it not long after it hatched, but it panicked when we tried to catch it and ran off a cliff. Without wings... Well, it fell like a rock and must have sunk like one since we dragged the river but never recovered its body."

Not knowing this dragon didn't lessen my sorrow to hear of its death. "Why are you trying to capture us?"

"To study," she quickly replied. "We don't want to hurt you. On the contrary. We're dedicated to learning everything about you so that we can properly introduce you to the world and have you accepted."

Did she really think I wouldn't hear the lie? "And you thought that attacking me and

taking my servant prisoner would convey that?"

"We didn't realize you'd be so coherent so quick. We thought we'd have to wait until you matured more before you could grasp our intent. While we do have some knowledge of your kind, it's not complete. It's why you should come with me, that you might teach us."

"Come with you?" I would have curled my lip in disdain if I had one. "I won't be your prisoner."

"More like honored guest." Kaitlyn spread her hands. "You should see what Leo's been preparing. He had a special habitat designed for you. You'll love it. It's big. Bigger than this barn. With aerial perches and a pond that will be filled with fish for you to hunt. Hammocks for napping. Even a hunting area that will be kept stocked with animals."

"Sounds like a luxurious prison," my dryly delivered retort.

"Oh, no. It's meant to be a safe place to protect you from those who would see the dragons eradicated again."

More lies. I couldn't have said where my certainty came from only I knew she didn't speak the whole truth. "Where is Pip?"

"Leo has her. She won't come to harm so long as you cooperate."

"So you claim. How do I know you speak the truth? This could be a ploy."

Kaitlyn bit her lower lip. "You want proof."

"I only have your word and I'm afraid that isn't enough."

“Hold on a second,” she muttered, fumbling with her phone. She turned away from me and talked in a low tone. With the crackling fire, I only got bits and pieces.

“...wants proof you have Ms. Smith... we tried that and failed...Okay. Will do.”

Kaitlyn ended her call and faced me. “Malone is going to video call me so you can see Ms. Smith.” She no sooner finished telling me this than her phone rang. She tapped the screen and turned it to face me.

There was my Pip. Bound to a chair, looking very, very angry.

“Abaddon are you okay?” my Pip exclaimed upon seeing me.

“I am fine. Have those miscreants harmed you?”

“Not really, but they’ve taken me prisoner.” Pip grimaced.

A male face interjected itself, filling the screen. “As you can see, we have Ms. Smith in our custody. Should you wish her to remain unharmed, you will surrender yourself immediately.” This Malone person seemed to think he could dictate to me.

Apparently, he’d yet to grasp dragons obeyed no one.

“Don’t do it,” Pip yelled. “Fly away. Far away. Don’t let these fuckers get their hands on you.”

“Shut up!” The camera view might have jostled to show the floor, but I heard the slap as Malone dared to hit my Pip.

Before I could control my emotions, I hollered, “Don’t hurt her!”

A snarling Malone's face once more took over the screen. "If you want the woman unharmed, then you will immediately turn yourself in. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I understood very well. I ducked my head. "I'll be along shortly."

"Good. Don't keep me waiting."

The video call ended.

"Well, that was productive." Kaitlyn had regained some of her composure and cockiness. "Glad to see you making the right choice." She tucked the phone away and waved at the open door. "If you'll come with me. The truck is just outside."

"You really didn't do your due diligence on dragons," I stated, staring at her intently. "We do not surrender, nor do we negotiate."

"But you just said?—"

"I said I'd be seeing Malone soon. I never claimed I'd be going as your prisoner."

"I don't see as you have a choice. You don't know where Malone has Ms. Smith, not to mention the barn is on fire and the storm is in full swing outside. You need me."

"That's where you're wrong. Because for one, while I don't enjoy it, I can handle the cold, and second, this fire can't harm me." How ridiculous to even think something spewed from my body would.

"If you kill me, you'll never find Ms. Smith." A panicked attempt to sway me.

"Do you really think I can't locate someone bound to me or that I would stand idly by while you abuse someone important to me?"

“I’m not the one who did it.” Kaitlyn began backing away.

“You are aligned with my adversaries, therefore you are my enemy.”

Kaitlyn whirled, thinking she could run.

She couldn’t.

My flames engulfed her and without the helmet, she never had that few extra seconds as it melted to scream.

Good, because I’d heard enough from her.

A glance outside showed the storm in full swing. Gross. It would be so nice to stay in the burning barn, but I couldn’t because Pip needed me.

I’m coming Pip. And those who stood in my way would perish.

Chapter Twenty

I regained consciousness with a throbbing head and found myself tied to a chair. Not my first time for either, to be honest. However, it should be noted that the dude who thought it would be funny to tie up my drunken ass and stick his dick in my face when I woke ended up needing stitches. The cops, when he called them screaming that I'd tried to amputate his dick with my teeth, showed him little sympathy when they realized what he'd done. Last I heard, Johnny had a gig on Only Fans where he called himself Almost Bobbitt.

But back to my situation: Leo's betrayal. He was the reason I found myself in this dilemma. My boss had been behind the goons sent to my place. He knew about dragons.

Wanted Abaddon and seemed willing to go to great lengths to steal my Little Fella.

Fuck.

It burned that I'd had no clue, and it annoyed that I'd blithely accepted his invitation to stay in the barn when he was technically responsible for my being homeless. It also pissed me off to no end to realize he'd been watching me this entire time. Spying on my dragon. Plotting to take him captive. What did he plan to do with my Little Fella?

Speaking of the devil, Leo sauntered into his office, a room I'd been inside a few times before, although not as a prisoner.

"Oh, good, you're awake. When I told Malone to have his crew take you into

custody, I didn't expect them to be so vigorous about it."

"Vigorous?" I snapped. "They punched me in the head."

"Which I've given them shit for."

I'd do more than that if I saw those goons again. "Untie me," I growled, struggling against the zip ties that wouldn't loosen from around my wrists.

"Not until I know you can be reasonable."

My brow arched. "That will never happen."

"I know you're angry right now?—"

"Angry doesn't even come close." Hurt. Disappointed. Murderous...

Leo raked fingers through his hair as he paced. "I'll admit, things did not play out as planned. I'd hoped by having you nearby that you would introduce me to your dragon, whereupon we could have built a bond and?—"

I cut him off. "Where is Abaddon? What have you done to him?" Before I got knocked out, Leo had said something about sending people to fetch him.

"Before you freak, I don't plan to hurt him. As we speak, I have a team retrieving him from the barn." Leo clasped his hands together and rocked on his heels with excitement. "Soon I'll get to meet him in person."

"I wouldn't count on that. Abaddon won't let himself be captured."

"There's nowhere for him to go in this storm, and even if he tried, the tracker we

implanted will quickly find him.”

Every word out of his mouth only made things worse. “Abaddon was right. Someone did fuck with him.” My gaze narrowed as I recalled how deeply we’d slumbered. “How did you drug us so we wouldn’t wake during your visits?”

“Not easily. We initially thought of putting the sleeping solution in your food, but given how often he eats, and the fact you don’t always eat the same thing together, we had to come up with a different plan. We had the sprinkler system in the loft drained of water and filled with an odorless sleeping gas. We simply had to activate it remotely and once it took effect, Malone and his team would go in and take measurements and samples.”

“Who’s Malone?”

“Dr. Malone is a renowned cryptozoologist specializing in dragons.”

I snickered. “Wow, he must get mocked at parties.”

“Not in the circles we run in. You see, it’s long been known dragons are real.”

“Known by who?” I retorted.

“The U?um-gal Abarakkum. Which translated is essentially the Dragon Stewards. An ancient sect who used to care for the mighty beasts before they were eradicated.”

“And you’re a member?”

Leo nodded. “As was my father before him. He introduced me to the group. For the longest time, the stewards have been seeking out unhatched eggs but not having much luck. The dragon females tended to scatter their clutches to increase the odds of

viability. However, finding those eggs proved difficult. Too many volcanoes, you see.”

“Yet you claimed you knew Tseax had one.”

Leo’s bright smile made my fist itch. “Only because of a stunning breakthrough. About a decade ago, in the remote Peruvian Andes mountains, we discovered the home and hoard of a female dragon. Long dead, unfortunately. No flesh remained and her bones were brittle with age. You’ve seen them in my collection in the basement.”

“You said those belonged to dinosaurs!” I accused.

“Because I couldn’t exactly tell you the truth and quite frankly, they do have much in common. Anyhow, this dragon hoard contained dozens of scrolls written by its servant. It took years before we could properly translate them. The parchment was understandably fragile, the ink used faded, and then the language not something you can pop into Google Translate. But after much care, attention, and research, we did it. We managed to decipher a few of the parchments, including one that listed the locations of a clutch that contained seven eggs.”

The pain in my wrists from the tight plastic was the only reason I didn’t suspect I was hallucinating what sounded like the plot of a fantasy novel. “You have a map to the eggs.”

“Not exactly. Keep in mind, back then people and dragons didn’t have the same means as we do to create accurate maps. What we got instead were general descriptions such as ‘over the mighty sea, past an island and mountains, the spreading forest parts for the cone that rises.’”

“You figured out the Tseax from that?” I didn’t hide my skepticism.

“Actually, Tseax was one of several cones we were watching.”

“Didn’t you claim you caused it to explode?”

“I did.” Leo looked gleeful. “It occurred to me that I might die of old age, waiting for a volcano to erupt and hatch a dragon. So I had Malone work on a way to activate it. Don’t ask me to explain how he did it. I’m just the money man in all this. What luck the first one that exploded bore fruit.”

“Why are you talking to her about our work?” The sharp bark came from the man who entered. The same suit that I’d met at my trailer who tried to falsely arrest me.

Leo cleared his throat. “Pip, this is Dr. Malone.”

My gaze narrowed. “I’ve already met the asshole.”

“To think, a mighty dragon took an uncouth, trailer trash female as his servant.” Malone tsked.

“Better trailer trash than a jerk off who thinks it’s okay to drug people and experiment on them while they sleep,” I retorted. “Although, I’m a little confused. Seeing how you tried to kidnap Abaddon from my place, why didn’t you take him while we were unconscious?”

“I wanted to,” Malone grumbled. “Leo wanted us to wait.”

“The habitat I’m building wasn’t ready yet.” Leo sounded almost apologetic. “Besides, we were fascinated by the way the dragon interacted with you. What an intelligent creature. We learned so much watching.”

Nausea hit me as I realized not only had I been drugged and vulnerable, but I’d been

spied on too! Watched while I dressed or walked around in my underwear and nothing else. When I took a shit. When Maddox and I fucked.

Leo must have read my expression because he shook his head. “We had no interest in you, Pip. Only the dragon.”

“Did it ever occur to you to talk to me about this? We’re supposed to be friends. But no, instead of saying, ‘Hey, listen, I know you’ve got a dragon and guess what, I’m totally interested,’ you went straight to trying to forcibly nab him. Then you put us in a glass house like we were some exhibit there for your amusement.”

“I’ve already said I didn’t handle this well but I promise to make up for it.” Leo waved his hands as if it were of little matter. “Once the dragon is secured in his new habitat, he’ll see the benefit. As much food as he needs. People to care for him around the clock.”

I interrupted. “I doubt Abaddon will see it that way.

“Which is where you come in. You can explain we mean him no harm. That his best chance at survival is with us.”

I snorted. “All that spying and you obviously didn’t learn much about Abaddon.”

Malone’s phone beeped. “It’s Kaitlyn. I’ll return in a moment.”

The asshole stepped out of the office and I stared at Leo. “I thought we were friends.”

“We still are. Once you and Abaddon are settled in, you’ll see. Things will work out. You’ll both come to understand that I am determined to help the dragon thrive. Perhaps he can help us find some of the other eggs so he isn’t alone. A female would be nice. Did you know that, unlike humans, dragons, even those born of the same

mother or fertilized by the same father, have completely different genetics?”

“And?”

“And it means that they can procreate without issue, unlike human siblings. Malone thinks it’s because the birth rate is so low that this was nature’s way of improving their viability.”

My nose still wrinkled because ew, brother sister sex.

Malone stalked back in. “The dragon’s killed most of the team.”

If I could have, I would have fist pumped at the news.

“Oh dear.” Leo finally lost his jubilant smile.

“This is your fault,” Malone accused Leo. “If you’d let me take him down earlier before the storm took out the power, we’d have been able to scoop up his sleeping ass and relocate him without any casualties.”

“The dome wasn’t ready,” Leo muttered.

“Ready or not, it’s time to stop fucking around. I told Kaitlyn to warn the creature to cooperate or we’ll harm his servant.” Malone jerked his head in my direction.

I had to wonder if the threat would work. Abaddon seemed fond of me, but at the same time, he could be arrogant. And let’s be honest, he most likely valued his life much more than mine.

Malone glanced at his phone and sighed. “The dragon is demanding proof we have her in custody.”

“I’ve got this.” Leo whipped out his cell and started a FaceTime call featuring me front and center.

When the screen loaded, I almost gaped at the flames eating the interior of the barn. Sitting there amidst the inferno—looking majorly pissed—was my Little Fella.

I did what any good pet owner—and friend—would do. Told him to escape and got slapped for it. Coppery blood ended up in my mouth because my lip split on my tooth. The pain didn’t bother me as much as Abaddon’s agreement.

He was turning himself in to save me.

Aw. He did like me.

Despite Abaddon’s capitulation, Malone made a phone call and barked out orders. “Tell the team to get suited up ASAP. The creature’s on its way. I want everyone equipped with a canister of sleeping gas, which means masks on. While the creature has agreed to hand itself over, it might try and fight at the last minute.”

As Malone stalked off, preparing for the drag-ageddon, Leo crouched by me. “Don’t look so worried. Malone’s not going to hurt him.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” I muttered.

“I’m afraid he still sees dragons as vicious monsters and not the intelligent, thinking beings that they are. But I do.”

“You forget, Abaddon is still pretty much a baby, or would that be teenager in dragon weeks? He might not react the way you expect.”

“Then help me. Help us. Explain to him we don’t wish him any harm.”

“You want me to lie.” A flat reply.

“I see you’re not ready yet to change your way of thinking. I’ll let you ponder it while I go and check the last-minute preparations for the habitat. I am hoping the crate of Cheetos I ordered arrived. I’ve noticed how fond he seems to be of them.”

The casual way he dropped that—a not-subtle-at-all admission of the spying—pissed me off. Leo left, giddy with excitement, while I stewed. Worried about Abaddon. Frustrated at the situation.

If only I could set myself free, maybe I could do something.

Being a big movie buff, I knew of one trick that people tied to chairs tended to do, but it would hurt. I grimaced before attempting to rock the seat. Sturdy fucker wouldn’t even wobble, which made me doubt falling over would snap it into pieces. The next thing folks did was find something sharp to slice their restraints. A glance at the desk in front of me showed a smooth, glossy surface. Leo didn’t use his office for much more than show.

A clatter of boots and people shouting indicated something was happening. The next few moments seemed to involve those outside the office scattering as it soon grew quiet. Too quiet. What was going on?

A distant scream that cut off abruptly made me stiffen. Sounded like Abaddon might have arrived, but apparently not to meekly turn himself in.

My lips curved. “That’s my Little Fella.”

Crash. The sudden noise made me frown, especially seeing as it was followed by the noise of a revving motor. Had someone crashed into the house?

I got my answer when the door to the office was flung open and in stalked Maddox, my big, beautiful boyfriend.

“Pip, thank fuck you’re okay,” he exclaimed.

“Hey, babe. I’d give you a hello kiss but I’m kind of tied up.”

His expression turned rigid as he took in my state. A pocketknife emerged as he knelt behind me. “Give me a second to get these ties off you,” he muttered tightly as he began to saw at my wrists.

“What are you doing here? I thought you needed to keep an eye on your shop?”

“Turns out Suzy was out of power, too, and since she lives only a block away, offered to mind the genny and the store so I could run out and check on you. While en route, Abaddon texted me to say you were in trouble.”

“I’m in trouble? He’s the one in real danger,” I exclaimed. “Leo was behind those attempts to kidnap Abaddon. He sent that fucker in the suit, who goes by the name Malone, and those goons to my trailer. Turns out, Abaddon was right. They were spying on us at the barn as well as drugging us at night to take samples from Abaddon.”

“Those fuckers!” Maddox swore.

“Now they’re planning to stick Abaddon in some kind of cage to study him. We have to get him away from here.”

“Don’t worry about bud. He’s holding his own outside and making those thugs regret their life choices.”

The plastic tie fell from my wrists and I pulled my arms forward as I stood to rub the sore spot. “He’s in danger. Malone’s got his goons armed with sleeping gas.”

“Those cannisters they tried throwing?” Maddox chuckled. “Yeah, between the blizzard conditions blowing the shit away and Abaddon using them as target practice, that ain’t working out so well for them.”

As if to prove that point, shouting erupted, followed by a drawn-out, gurgling shriek.

My brows raised. “Guess Malone wasn’t exaggerating when he said Abaddon was killing his goons.”

“Bud is pissed. His text to me was: Since you’re not here to do your job, I shall have to go myself to save Pip from her evil employer and his minions. ”

For some reason that made me chuckle. “Sounds like my Little Fella. Although, I’m not sure I approve of his murderous retaliation.”

“You’d prefer they captured him?”

“No, but let’s see if we can wrangle him and get out of here before he does something we can’t hide.”

As we exited the office together, I noticed the front door caved in by Maddox’s truck, the engine sputtering, the front wheels still spinning. Swirling through the gaps, snow entered the house, bringing a chill.

I uttered a low whistle. “Damn, that’s going to take some work to buff out.”

“Just a little,” Maddox quipped. “Shall we go give bud a hand?”

The sudden brightness as flames jetted made me think that going out the front door might not be the best idea. I thought of the layout, the ranch-style home offering many exits, but we had to be careful. Malone and his goons were out there hunting my Little Fella. I wouldn't want to get darted—or roasted—by accident.

“Let's try popping out via the French doors in the living room so we can figure out what's going on instead of diving right into the action.” I dragged Maddox left into a room that could have fit my trailer several times over. It held a few leather couches, the biggest television available to buy, and an eclectic display of art on the walls that had me pausing suddenly as I really looked at it.

“What's wrong?” Maddox asked.

“It was in front of me the entire time.” I pointed. “Leo's obsession with dragons.”

Previously I'd assumed the many paintings displaying fantastical landscapes were just because Leo thought them cool, but I realized now that each and every one displayed a dragon of some sort, whether as a tiny speck in the sky or wrapped around a pile of treasure. Add in his admission that his dinosaur bones were in actuality dragon ones, and I couldn't believe I'd never realized Leo's fixation. Then again, even if I had noticed I'd have played it off because dragons weren't supposed to exist.

Opening the French doors let in a blast of cold air and snow that had my teeth chattering. I still had on my jacket, albeit unzipped, and my boots, but hadn't worn a hat or gloves on the ride over so my hands immediately got cold.

The dark and blustery storm made it impossible to see much. The arctic whistle of the wind was eerie, especially when you added the shouted, “Where is it? I lost it?” immediately followed by a shrieked, “Oh fuck! Argh...” The tapering scream came from the same direction as the sudden orange glow.

Another goon turned to charcoal.

I probably should have felt some kind of chagrin. After all, these people hadn't signed on with Leo to die. However, what else could my dragon do? Let himself be captured? Any animal threatened would fight back. And humans were no different. I know I would totally love to give Leo a bitch slap or two or three. As for Malone... if I ran into him again, I might find out if I had it in me to kill.

"What should we do?" Maddox asked.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "Abaddon, where are you?" I called for my Little Fella, wanting him to know I'd escaped.

No reply.

"Hey bud, I'm with Pip. Can you hear us?" Maddox added his voice.

The pair of us took turns calling for the dragon. We were noticed, just not by who we wanted.

A guy in bulky snow gear that included some kind of apocalypse mask appeared suddenly in front of us and aimed his tranquilizing gun at us. "Well, well. If you ain't the chick that's been hiding the dragon. Hands up, both of you," the guy barked.

"You don't want to hurt us," Maddox stated, lifting his hands. "You've seen how the dragon reacts to threats."

"Yeah, but I've also seen how he dotes on this bitch. He won't dare roast me if I'm holding on to you." The guy lunged for me, and Maddox stepped forward to intercept, his fist flashing out and hitting the fellow in the jaw. Given the goon stood slightly larger than my boyfriend, it didn't knock him down, but Maddox was just

getting started.

The boys traded blows as I stood there shivering. Turns out I should have been more aware of my surroundings because I never heard the person who snuck up behind me and wrapped an arm around my throat.

I got dragged against another dude who shouted, “I’ve got your girlfriend. Stand down or I will snap her neck.”

Maddox slowly stood and straddled the guy he’d pummeled to the ground and scowled. “Let her go and walk away.”

“Like fuck. Farris had the right idea. I saw in the videos how much that lizard likes the woman. She’s my ticket out of here.”

“You want to leave, then go. But I’d strongly suggest you do so without Pip if you’d like to live to see tomorrow.”

“I’ll let her go once I’m clear of the dragon.” The guy tightened the arm around my neck enough I could barely breathe.

It should be noted, I’d been in this situation before and almost died. Again, one of my bad choices in boyfriends. The last time, I’d stomped on his instep before elbowing him in the gut. This fellow, while smaller than my ex, wore some heavy-duty winter boots and a thick parka, making that method of escape less than feasible. But after the choking incident with my ex, I’d taken some self-defense classes and had specifically asked the instructor how to deal with this situation if it ever happened again.

It had been a few years, but I still remembered the steps. I parted my feet and bent my knees slightly. I already had a grip on his choking arm and I kept it firm as I abruptly leaned forward. The rapid movement set the thug slightly off balance and as I felt his

weight on my back, I flipped him, breaking his hold on me.

The goon hit the ground and before he could recover, something swooped from the snowy sky and spat a hot stream of fire. The brightness of the blast had me blinking. Disbelief had me gaping. Shock kept me silent as I watched my first body burn alive.

Damn.

The heavy weight that settled on my shoulder helped snap me back to the moment.

“Abaddon,” I exclaimed happily.

“Hello, Pip. I’m here to rescue you,” my Little Fella announced.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” I asked.

“Bah. The enemy is much too slow and stupid for someone of my greatness. Today’s warriors are not of the same caliber as those who hunted my ancestors.”

He must be fine for his arrogance remained intact.

“Good to see you, bud,” Maddox stated.

“About time you showed,” my dragon replied. “Now, duck.”

Rather than ask why, Maddox swiftly crouched and more flame jetted from Abaddon, this time striking the goon who’d been about to strike Maddox from behind.

Hard to feel bad for the idiot who saw what happened to his buddy and still thought, Hey, let me do something stupid that will get me killed.

The warmth of the two roasting bodies plus Abaddon did much to ease the chill of my body, however, sticking around didn't seem like a good idea. Who knew how many more of Malone's thugs lurked or what evil tricks the doctor might attempt next.

"Time we blew this joint. I know where Leo keeps the keys to his cars and stuff. Let's grab a set and run while we can."

That seemed like the best course of action, but wouldn't you know it, my dragon disagreed.

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Chapter Twenty-One

“Run?” I repeated, aghast at the very idea. “I will not run while my enemies live. They must be handled.”

Pip chewed her bottom lip. “I understand you’re worried they’ll keep coming after you?—”

“Do you think they’ll stop?” I asked point blank.

“No,” was her soft reply. “But I can’t exactly say, hey, murder my boss and friend, even if he is a lying scumbag.”

“He’s a threat.”

“I’ll agree, Malone is. But Leo’s more like a little kid wanting to meet his hero, and he’s got information,” Pip stated. “He knew you were in that cone. Claims he’s translated some scroll left behind by a dragon’s servant that has the locations of other eggs.”

“Then I shall make him hand over his knowledge before he dies.” Because while a dragon tended to rule their territory alone, it was much more fun to become wealthy and powerful if you had someone to envy it.

“Abaddon—”

“You needn’t come on this hunt, Pip. I shall handle it.” A magnanimous offer on my

part.

“You don’t even know where he’s gone.”

“I will find him,” I promised. With that, I launched myself from her shoulder and headed into the house. It would contain the scent of the one I sought.

Pip and Maddox followed, the latter actually arguing my case. “...got a point. Even if we leave, it’s obvious Leo knows too much about Abaddon.”

“I’m aware,” she grumbled. “Between the videos and samples, he could expose my Little Fella, but you’re asking me to agree to murder.”

“I’m not crazy about it either. I like your boss, but it turns out he wasn’t the man we thought. Who’s more important at this point, Abaddon or Leo?” Maddox asked as if the answer weren’t already obvious.

But Pip still had to argue. “What if we had Leo erase everything? Then he’d just be the crazy guy who believes in dragons.”

“Who’s to say he wouldn’t pretend to delete it all only to keep some of it on a hidden server?”

As they bantered, I scented the interior of the place but found myself stymied by myriad smells. Traversing from room to room, I couldn’t pinpoint which belonged to this Leo.

I interrupted my servants. “Where is this Leo’s bed chamber?”

For a second, I thought Pip wouldn’t reply. Then she pointed. “Down the hall to the left, double doors at the end of it.”

I set off in the direction indicated, and upon entering that room, the scent of my enemy filled my senses. Now I could track him. I returned to the main area before asking, “Where was the last location you saw him?”

“His office.” Once more Pip pointed out a direction and I stepped into a room where I smelled Pip, then my prey. From there, I followed the strongest lingering trace of it while my servants shadowed my steps.

No one accosted us, most likely because I’d handled the bulk of the army set against me outdoors. I’d flamed five and knew several had fled in a vehicle with one exclaiming, “I didn’t sign up for this shit.” Rather than chase them, I’d kept to my initial mission of saving Pip.

My target’s scent ended at a locked metal door.

“Open it,” I demanded.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. It uses biometrics and not a key,” Pip stated when the screen beside the portal flashed the message: Facial features not recognized.

“Guess we’re not getting inside,” Maddox stated with a shrug.

He gave up too easily. As if I’d let a door stand between me and victory.

“You might wish to move away,” I suggested as I stepped close to the door and placed my mouth against it. The metal wouldn’t catch fire, but intense heat would melt it. I huffed, concentrating my fire into a narrow spot. Once the metal began to soften, I moved my head in a widening circle motion while pushing at it, creating an opening large enough for me to fit through.

I entered and Pip cried out, “Wait, you can’t go alone.”

“I will return shortly.”

Beyond the door, an elevator awaited and beside it was a descending staircase. I chose the latter as Pip exclaimed, “Bloody hell, the edges are too hot for me to go through.”

Good. I didn’t want her coming to harm. This was my battle and given her softness in regard to my enemy, his demise was not something she needed to see.

The staircase plunged quite a fair distance, not that I climbed each step. I floated down, a silent wraith of vengeance.

At the bottom, I found myself in a room with many computers and screens but of more interest was the large window overlooking a strange place with perches set at varying heights. A giant pond for bathing. A home almost fit for a dragon but for the fact it had been built to be a prison.

My prison.

The nerve.

Through the window I could see a man prying open a crate. Was this Leo? His scent had passed through here recently, entering the domed room through a door that had been left ajar.

Quietly, I stepped in and a few paces from the man spoke. “If it isn’t my enemy.”

The male whirled and his jaw dropped. “Oh. Wow. You’re here. Hi.”

He showed no fear. Unacceptable.

“I said I was coming.” Warned them even and yet did they flee? No, hence why they faced my wrath.

The man smiled. “And here Malone thought you might give Kaitlyn a hard time.”

“Kaitlyn is dead.”

“Oh.” Leo finally looked a touch nervous. He jerked his hand toward the crate. “I got you some Cheetos.”

“I shall enjoy eating them once you are dead.”

The male lifted his hands in a pleading gesture. “I’m not going to harm you. No need to kill me.”

“Liar. You sent hunters after me,” I hissed.

“Not to hurt, though. I just wanted to bring you here where it’s safe. See”—he swept a hand—“all of this built just for you.”

“Another lie as this construction is older than I am.”

“Well, yes, I started it a few years ago. Once I found that scroll with the locations of some eggs, knew it would only be a matter of time before we found a dragon.”

“You want to imprison me.”

“To keep you safe. To learn from you. To?—”

“Use me,” I exclaimed. “Unacceptable. And for that reason, you shall die.” My mouth opened wide and I let him see the building fire at the back of my throat.

Leo gulped before hitting his knees to plead. “Don’t kill me. I can help you. I have money.”

Rather than barbecue him, I growled, “How much money?”

“A lot.”

“I cannot be bribed. Once you are dead, I will simply take your wealth.”

“It’s not the kind of money you can touch,” Pip exclaimed as she entered the habitat. She’d managed to follow me, although she’d lost her coat and parts of her hair had been singed in the process. As she approached, she kept talking. “Leo’s wealth is locked in stocks and bitcoin and some overseas bank accounts. If he dies, his entire estate will go into probate and will be divvied up and given to whomever he designated in his will.”

Many words that amounted to one thing. “I can’t just take it?”

Pip shook her head. “Afraid not, Little Fella. Killing him won’t accomplish anything.”

“I wouldn’t be sure of that,” I grumbled. “I demand satisfaction for his temerity.”

“What you need is a guarantee he won’t spill your secrets.” Pip glanced at Leo. “Where have you stored the videos and samples of Abaddon?”

“Everything is on my servers or in the lab just beyond the computer room.” Leo pointed towards the glass window.

“If we destroy that, he won’t have proof,” Pip explained. “And if we keep him alive, we can have him set up a bank account for us with a ton of money so we can get a

fresh start.”

“You wish me to let my enemy go free?” It emerged rather incredulously.

“I’m not your enemy,” the enemy dared retort.

“Silence!” I barked. To kill or not to kill? A dilemma that led to an idea forming in my head. I knew of a fitting punishment for the man who thought he could cage me.

“Very well. You shall live?—”

“Thank you,” Leo gushed.

“In the prison you had designed for me. After all, didn’t you claim it was luxurious?” I glanced around at the vast space. It actually was quite nice.

“You’re going to lock me up?” Leo asked faintly.

“Is that a problem?” I hissed. “After all, you seemed to be quite determined to do so to me.”

“No. No. It’s fine. But people might notice if I don’t show up to my shop and stuff.”

Pip helped me counter his feeble attempt to avoid punishment. “Not really. I’ll just tell Kalypso you’re off on one of your travelling jaunts. Add in the occasional video conference call and no one will notice you’re technically missing.”

“But—”

Pip shook her head. “I don’t see that you have a choice, Leo. It’s either accept Abaddon’s deal or die.”

My muzzle twitched in a version of a dragon smile as I added, “Be grateful I’m so merciful. Perhaps if you show yourself to be a good prisoner, I will reward you with moments where you can bask in my greatness. After all, you did all this to get to know me better.” It wouldn’t be awful to have someone who actually appreciated my greatness, unlike Pip who yelled when I didn’t flush.

“You’ll visit me?” Leo’s smile returned, if tremulously.

“Perhaps, but only if you please me. So think long and hard about how you will comport yourself going forward and what you can do to aid me in building my prestige and hoard. In time, if you prove yourself loyal, I might allow you the honor of becoming one of my lesser servants.”

The man fell to his knees. “I’d like nothing more, your dragon majesty.”

Pip gagged. “Jesus Christ, Leo. Could you lick his arsehole any harder?”

“This is a dream come true, Pip. Not the prisoner part of course,” Leo quickly added. “But you don’t know how long I’ve wanted a chance to interact with an actual dragon.”

“Well, guess you’re getting your wish. Now that everyone is happy, I need a drink before I figure out how we’re supposed to hide all those cooked bodies.”

“Leave them out that everyone might see I am a force to be reckoned with.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Pip muttered. “I’m thinking we toss them in the burning barn and claim they had a party that got out of control.”

“Before you do that, I require sustenance. A lot of it,” I announced. It had been a busy day.

“Move away from the dragon, Leo.” A new voice spoke and I whirled to see the man in the suit standing at the window, microphone in hand. It seemed my work wasn’t yet done.

“It’s over, Malone,” Pip snarled. “You aren’t caging Abaddon.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, he’s already inside.”

“As if this place can hold me,” I boasted.

“It can,” Malone insisted. “This whole dome is encased in panels comprised of the five highest melting point metals: tungsten, rhenium, tantalum, molybdenum, and niobium. It cost a fortune considering how much we needed and the difficulty in forging those elements. Even the window has a tungsten shield we can drop over it. Your breath might be hotter than expected, seeing as how you can melt steel, but even the weakest of those alloys requires over two thousand degrees Celsius.”

A heat even I couldn’t generate. “I should have hunted you first,” I stated noting he’d closed the door to the control room. Coward.

“But you didn’t, and now I’m safe inside the control room, and you’re where you belong. In the prison I helped design.” Malone smirked.

And I lost my temper.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Abaddon! Stop!” I screamed. “You’ll catch the whole place on fire.”

Despite my dragon aiming his jet flame at the window—more specifically Malone—the heat of it had me sweating. The only good news was nothing ignitable stood in his path—and that included the window. Malone had guessed what Abaddon would do and the tungsten shield he’d spoken of slammed down before the fiery stream hit.

Realizing he’d been foiled, Abaddon’s jaw snapped shut. “I won’t be caged, Pip.”

“I know, and I promise we’ll find a way out.” And if we couldn’t, Maddox surely would rescue us. I glanced at Leo. “Is there another exit?”

He shook his head. “Not one we can access from in here. We do have a hangar door at the top of the dome for lowering in stuff, but it can only be opened from the control room.”

“That seems shortsighted,” I muttered.

“So I’m seeing. Guess there were more things I should have taken into consideration when constructing the habitat.” Leo hung his head. “I’m sorry, Pip. In my excitement at finally finding a dragon, I did things I’m not proud of.”

“Not proud of? Jesus Christ, Leo, you sent guys armed with tranqs to my home. Spied on us, drugged us, fucking experimented on Abaddon while he was knocked out.”

“Not to mention, he should be apologizing to me,” Abaddon huffed.

“If you give me a chance, I will do everything I can to make up for it. Money, food, luxuries, you name it,” Leo promised.

“Easy thing to say now, seeing as how we’re stuck.” I planted my hands on my hips and glared at the door. I knew we should have run. Being Malone’s prisoner? The worst possible scenario because, unlike Leo, he didn’t seem to have a soft spot in his heart. That realization led to a new fear: Maddox. My lover wouldn’t flee and leave us prisoner, but if he attempted to rescue us, Malone wouldn’t hesitate to harm him.

Whir.

The mechanical noise was followed by the window shield lifting, although slower than it had lowered. Abaddon leapt to my shoulder and leaned forward ready to blast, only I saw a hint of plaid and yelled, “Hold your fire!”

A moment later, the door to the habitat opened and Maddox strode in, dragging an unconscious Malone.

“Finally, he does his job,” Abaddon crowed, fluttering to the ground.

“Hope I’m not late to the party,” my boyfriend and now hero exclaimed.

“You’re just in time,” I said with a smile that held a shit ton of relief at seeing him in one piece. “Although, I am surprised you fit through the hole Abaddon melted in that door. I barely managed to squeeze in.”

“Yeah, my ass would never have fit. Lucky for me, asshole here”—Maddox shook the limp body—“opened it when I went up the hall to look for a tool to pry it wider. The coat you shed on the other side got partially wedged in the jamb and kept it from

completely closing. Took me a few minutes to get down all those damned stairs, seeing as how the asshole took the elevator and I wanted to surprise him. Caught him at the tail end of his villain speech.”

“You surprised him alright.” I draped my arms around Maddox’s neck. “Thanks for coming to the rescue.”

His lips curved. “Always wanted to save a damsel in distress.”

“You are so getting lucky tonight,” I purred, giving him a kiss.

Abaddon gagged. “Must you two always be doing that?”

With our lips still locked, I flashed a middle finger and Little Fella sighed. “Leo, show me somewhere in this habitat where we can imprison this Malone.”

“After all he’s done, you’re not going to torch him?” Leo asked.

“It occurs to me that since he’s been studying my greatness, he might have knowledge of my kind that could prove interesting. However, unlike you, I doubt this Malone will be as accommodating, so we’ll want to place him somewhere secure.”

I leaned my head against Maddox’s chest as Leo replied, “Since we knew of the dragon propensity for collecting people as servants, we incorporated a few chambers for them to live in here with you. Only one is currently finished, though, as in working bathroom, bed, and stuff.”

“He doesn’t deserve that luxury. You shall have the completed room. He shall get one of the others, which is more than he deserves. Bring him, quickly now before my servants begin flinging off their clothes,” Abaddon ordered and my boss obeyed.

“Does he really think we’re going to fuck right here, right now?” Maddox murmured.

“Well, you know he’s got a good sense of smell.” And I’d never been hornier. Apparently, surviving whatever the fuck this day could be called had me wanting to reaffirm the fact I was alive. “I know it’s not the right time or place or?—”

“Shut up,” Maddox growled before scooping me up and carrying me into the computer room. He closed the door but left the shield open on the window.

It seemed rather exposed to me, but my lover wasn’t done. He dragged me into the elevator and pressed me against the wall.

“Ooh, now this is a first for me,” I murmured as I tangled my fingers in his hair to drag him close for a kiss.

“I plan for us to have many of those,” he replied as he took my mouth and breath away.

We didn’t waste time. My pants went down, and Maddox unbuttoned his. His strong hands held me aloft as he pinned me on his dick.

That lovely thick cock of his. There’d been a few moments over the past hour where I feared I’d never touch my lover again. For all we knew, this would be the last time. After all, there were a lot of bodies that would have to be handled and explained.

But I refused to think of that right now. I abandoned myself to the excitement and thrill that Maddox’s touch always brought. The intense pleasure he knew how to bring. The way we fit so well together, rocking and grinding and kissing and... coming.

The earth moved when I orgasmed. Technically the elevator did as we accidentally

bumped the up button. Either way, I climaxed hard and the words I'd never before uttered burst out of me. "I love you."

"Not as much as I love you, babe."

I loved him even more when he volunteered to handle the charred bodies scattered outside—with a green-faced Leo helping.

Despite the storm having died down, I remained inside the ranch house where it was warm and watched the boys work. Abaddon perched on my shoulder, not something he'd be able to do for much longer given his growth.

As I watched Leo heaving as he went to drag a corpse only to have the crispy arm break off, I murmured, "What happened to keeping Leo prisoner?"

"Oh, he's going back down to the habitat when he's done. His punishment has only begun. However, he does seem sincere in his desire to please me. Doing this is part of him proving his loyalty."

As Maddox trudged by, dragging a garbage bag, my lips pinched. "You killed a lot of folks today. We could have a problem if anyone comes looking for them."

"Leo assures me these aren't the kind of people that will be noticed missing. They were chosen for being discreet and undocumented. He also claimed that the mineshaft they are using to dispose of the remains is deep enough no one will ever find them." A better plan, as it turned out, than us sticking the bodies in the burning barn which would have led to cops asking too many questions.

I gnawed my thumb.

"You're worried," my dragon commented.

“Yeah, because I know a few got away.” According to Abaddon, three had fled in a vehicle.

“Actually, they didn’t. On my aerial reconnaissance to check out this mine and clear the opening of snow, I came across them in a ditch just past the driveway.”

I almost dreaded asking. “And?”

“They won’t be a problem.”

“Abaddon, don’t tell me you torched them!”

“I would have, only the storm took care of them for me. The fools kept their engine running despite the snow piling up around their exhaust pipe. They died of carbon monoxide.”

My mouth rounded. “Well, shit.” While their deaths would most likely result in a knock on the ranch door by the cops, if we played our cards right and insisted we knew nothing, it would most likely be chalked up as a mishap. It happened more often than it should.

“I think this property will suit me well as a starting point for the beginning of my dominion,” Abaddon declared.

“It’s certainly big enough.”

“And Leo has assured me that he will keep the larder full. You no longer have to work to feed me.”

“What if I want to?” I argued.

Little Fella rubbed his scaly cheek against mine before humming, “Go work if you must. I’m sure I’ll find ways to entertain myself. I wonder how fast Malone can run.”

I knew Abaddon was purposely goading me into caving to his demands but he did raise an interesting question. Should I return to inking, or was I now meant for something greater?

“I’m hungry. Make me some food, woman.”

“Make it yourself. You know how to use a microwave.”

“You are a terrible servant,” he lamented. “I don’t know why I keep you around.”

“Because you love me,” I stated, grabbing hold of him and giving him a squish.

He didn’t try too hard to squirm away. “Argh. Don’t do that. What if someone were to see?”

“It’s just me and you, Little Fella.”

“Forever, my Pip.”

A girl and her dragon, taking on the world.

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Even using snowmobiles, it took several hours to complete the clean-up. The charred and melted spots in the snow ended up covered by blown drifts, leaving no sign of the carnage. The front door proved a tad more difficult to fix, but once the truck was pulled free, Maddox set to work covering it with a tarp.

As all this went on, Malone woke and, not surprisingly, was a ranting lunatic about his new status. Abaddon took great delight in telling Malone that he only lived by his mercy and that disobedience would be punished. Although Malone did calm down a bit when told he'd be expected to continue his dragon studies so long as everything learned was shared.

The morning after the storm—and thankfully after pre-breakfast nookie with Maddox—the cops showed up. They eyed the tarped front door, but surprisingly didn't ask about it, most likely assuming storm damage. Then again, they'd come on more serious matters. They questioned us—us being me, Maddox, and Leo, who promised to behave if he could spend time with Abaddon—about the car with its dead occupants found in the ditch nearby.

No, sir. I don't know them. No identification? How odd. And that was the end of it, for us at least. A news report theorized they were drug smugglers, seeing as how the vehicle had never been registered and the plates were fakes.

The next few weeks we settled into a routine. I woke, made my dragon's breakfast, showered, made him his second breakfast, then headed off to work with Maddox, leaving Abaddon with Leo who was allowed free reign during that time under the dragon's watchful eye.

I didn't worry about Leo trying to do anything because, quite frankly, I'd never seen someone so utterly besotted. I didn't think he could shove his nose any further up Abaddon's ass. As for Little Fella, you know he enjoyed the adulation.

With Leo not working, the tattoo shop kept me busy. Too busy, until we hired two more artists, one to replace Leo and an extra so I could reduce my hours. After all, I no longer technically needed to work. Leo provided everything we needed and as an apology to me, had the prebuilt house we'd been talking about dropped on Granny's lot in case I ever decided to leave the ranch. I couldn't see that happening. Our current location offered Abaddon everything he needed and I wasn't about to abandon my Little Fella.

Things with Maddox were going well, to the point he and Princess moved permanently to the ranch. Suzy took over his apartment. He let her have it rent-free and made her a partner at the pet shop, which meant more time for us to spend together—time to fuck, talk, and convince Abaddon he needed his own bedroom.

The latter proved easier than expected. Abaddon declared himself too old to be sleeping with servants. Guess Princess didn't count. Rather than sleep with us, she'd taken to hanging with Abaddon. Those two had become the best of friends and you rarely saw one without the other.

As for Malone, he remained a surly and annoying man, but I would give him credit. He knew a shit ton about dragons. He might be angry at being held captive, but that didn't stop the cryptozoologist from studying Abaddon and comparing what he learned to what he'd studied in the old texts the so-called dragon stewards had passed down.

Life was good. Even great. I should have known Abaddon would ruin it.

"Pip, I have some exciting news," he announced, bouncing on the bed Maddox had just rolled out of with a promise to fetch me a cup of much-needed coffee.

“It’s too early for this,” I grumbled, shoving my head under the pillow.

“Too early? It’s already past my first breakfast time,” was his disdainful reply.

“Because it’s Saturday. The day I get to sleep in.”

“No sleeping in. You must pack your belongings. You are going on a voyage.”

“To where?” I grumbled.

“South America.”

That grabbed my interest. I peeked at Abaddon—now the size of a large dog—and noticed he trembled with excitement. “Why do I need to go to South America?”

“To find a dragon, of course.”

And that was the reason why Maddox and I ended up on a private jet—with Abaddon left behind with Leo, who would coordinate anything we might need—heading to South America to embark on a wild jungle adventure.

Will they find another dragon? Find out in the next book, *Serving My Dragon*.