



HER *Dragon* CAPTOR

THEODORA TAYLOR

HER DRAGON CAPTOR (BOOK 1  
OF THE HER DRAGON KING  
DUET)

50 LOVING STATES, NORTH DAKOTA, PT. 1

THEODORA TAYLOR

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## PART I

*“Come they will under Freya’s purple lights in the five-and-thirty winter of  
our Fenris not yet. An enemy who will kill many of our wolves and give  
final harm to Olafr’s human. And will they the future of our fenrir and his  
queen take.”*

—Sorceress Bera, *Her Viking Wolves*

## PROLOGUE

They came underneath a violet sky of dancing lights, winged shadows converging from every direction. Later this collision of charged particles cast off from the sun and the earth's gaseous atmosphere would come to be known as *aurora borealis* or the Northern Lights.

The future etymology of the upright primates mattered little to Damianos back then. But for the rest of his life he would recall how appropriate this plasmatic solar windstorm seemed. How utterly dramatic a background it was for the wrong they would right that morn.

He and the other drakkon set down in the agreed upon assembling space, a wide expanse of land on the south side of a mountain. The mountain stood between them and the village his horde planned to attack, gargantuan and intimidating. Damianos supposed the sight of it alone might have been enough to turn back their weaker enemies.

The south face of the mountain was covered in glittering ice and inclined so steeply, the path up could almost be described as vertical. And there weren't many alternatives to surmounting the monstrous marriage of rock and earth. An angry sea crashed formidable waves into one side the mountain. A dense forest filled with the heat signatures of all manner of predators, stretching as far as even a drakkon eye could see.

Indeed, the North Wolves had positioned their seat of power well. They'd surrounded themselves with a natural fortress of mountain, forest, and sea. The mountains and forest were nearly in-



surmountable, while the sea allowed the village's wolf mutations to easily spot an incoming fleet of enemy ships, well before they had the chance to storm their shores.

A lesser army would have given up without a fight.

Fortunately their horde had wings. What was impossible for the second most advanced species on this planet was but a bit of work for them.

Damianos was the first to arrive but the last to land. He circled above, waiting until there were no more incoming drakkon on the horizon before setting down himself.

All the world's drakkon had been called forth to wage this battle, but Damianos picked his father from the others in the horde easily. Only three dark blue drakkon were left in their species after their numbers were so tragically reduced by the Terrible Destroyer. Those remaining drakkon were his father, the Royal Overlord; his cousin, who everyone continued to refer to as the new king several millennia after his unexpected assumption of power, and himself. The Royal Overlord always arrived early and the new king, Damianos noted with one scan of the gathered forces, had not yet shown up.

He was late. Again.

It had been the new king's idea to use one of the Royal Geneticist's fating portals to take them to a time before the destruction of their planet. The plan had met with great cheer and instant agreement. Yet, after securing their agreement to wage attacks on several North Wolves villages in order to find one of these fating portals, the new king of the drakkon had barely been in contact.

Damianos was not surprised the new king had failed to show up this morn. Their king had achieved his current position through unexpected inheritance. Before that, he was the prince his brother had ordered Damianos and his father to assassinate, so as to erase any competition for the throne.

After their planet's destruction by the Royal Geneticist, the remaining drakkon had let his younger brother assume the mantle. That choice, the Royal Overlord pointed out to his son had been lazy and based purely in tradition. It certainly had nothing to do with any performance metrics. If those had been taken into account, the other drakkon would certainly have chosen Damianos as their new king. For none better exemplified the superiority of their race than

his son, a drakkon who'd been named to the most venerable position of Royal Huntmaster when he was little more than a millennia old.

Before his undeserved ascension, the new king had held two titles: Second Prince and, for the purposes of their mission, Royal Fate Maker. The second title only meant that the former Second Prince was a fating portal specialist, someone who'd spent more time writing lab reports than leading. And that was before he disappeared for many solar rotations, not showing up again until shortly after their planet was destroyed.

The Royal Fate Maker was no great hunter. Nor was he strong or particularly intelligent outside of his chosen field. And as far as Damianos could discern, the new king had no talent for execution.

But his cousin and his cousin alone possessed the knowledge required to pass the horde through fating portals that had not been originally assigned to their race. This meant Damianos and the rest of the drakkon would fight this day. And the new king would most likely show up toward the end of battle to issue orders, regarding the portals that he'd hypothesized could issue the members of their castaway horde to the most sexually compatible drakki from their destroyed planet.

*If only our initial plan to assassinate that mostly useless puppet had worked,* Damianos thought to himself as his father started delivering mission notes in the new king's absence. Yes, they'd all be stuck here on this useless planet for the rest of their lives, but Damianos would be the one in charge. Not his unworthy cousin.

However, this was not the time for emotion. He extinguished those resentful thoughts and did his best to keep his frustration from showing in his flame.

As his father had told him so often, only strategy and patience would win the throne.

"We could not have asked for better conditions," his father declared to the horde in the old language. "This particular tribe of the Terrible Destroyer's wolf mutations refers to the solar event happening above us as Freya's lights. They believe they are a sign from one of the gods they created to entertain themselves around their fires. A call for all North Wolves to go forth and mate. For this reason, claiming the village will be the easiest part of our mission. During this time, they divert much of their energy to feasting, drink, and fornication. Most likely they will be so deep in their silly celebrations, the

entire village will burn to the ground before it occurs to their warriors to put their penises and plates away, so that they might fight back."

Damianos and the other drakkon all exhaled steam with derisive grunts.

After thousands of years of being stranded on this water planet, they'd all observed how obsessed the upright primates were with food and sex. Drakkon only mated to procreate. And while drakkon had enjoyed hunting on this game planet before their own home was destroyed, eating was considered no more than a required ingestion of needed nutrients.

However, the upright primates seemed to think of little else, and those two activities were often the impetus for their species' greatest successes and downfalls alike. And after making his home in the southern Greek peninsula overseen by the Roman Empire for the last few centuries, Damianos had no trouble believing that their horde would find the warriors in the midst of an orgy of feasting and sex, just as his father predicted.

"Perhaps we should only have a small advance team of warriors attack the village," Damianos suggested. He flickered his flame, as if the idea was just now occurring to him and hadn't been discussed with his father the previous night.

"This is a good idea, Royal Huntmaster," his father answered, using his son's formal title and flickering his own flame with surprised delight. "There is no reason to waste our energy with a full battalion."

*Or share the glory,* Damianos silently noted before choosing five other drakkon to accompany him into battle. "The rest will hold their position in the air, in case reinforcements are needed, which they will not be," he told the horde.

"We must wait for the new king to approve this strategy," Hwedo, the Lead Researcher pointed out. He was a dragon of the deepest red and liked to do everything, including choosing their leader, by the old rules. "Don't you agree, Royal Overlord?"

The red drakkon's point played so perfectly into his father's plan, Damianos had to wonder if it was a sincere question, or if his father had also held a secret conversation with their fussiest comrade last eve.

"Yes, I agree," his father answered, his flame burning with benevolent good will. Damianos couldn't help but admire his father in this moment. Impatience and rage often caused Damianos to lose control of his fire. But his father held his with a firm grip of carefully curated heat signatures. "We shall wait for the king's arrival and hope he approves of my son's proposed plan."

And so they waited. And waited

"It is now well past the mutation's mating hours," his father observed when their waiting reached the near dawn hour. "We might very well lose the surprise advantage if we don't attack now. Can we all agree to let my son lead us into battle in place of the former prince."

Damianos inwardly commended his father's use of titles. He used his son's most intimate designation to remind the other drakkon of his illustrious connection to their mission leader. At the same time, he reminded them of the mere title the new king had held when they'd first arrived on this water planet.

He'd been just another team member before his older brother, the real King of Drakkon died in the Royal Geneticist's planet-destroying terrorist attack. A mere fating portal engineer, who'd been officially sent, but more like secretly exiled, to this planet. His mission had been to help construct a fertility portal system for the wolf mutations the Royal Geneticist had created to serve as their hunting dogs.

Of course, the other drakkon had no idea that Damianos and his father had been secretly assigned the task of killing the king's younger brother, thus assuring he never returned to their home planet. But somewhere deep inside their flames, they had to understand who the true leaders were meant to be. The Royal Overlord and the Royal Huntmaster, not the missing king.

It went without saying that the gathered drakkon would all assent to his father's proposal.

At least Damianos assumed it did. Unlike his father, he'd never cared for these shows of democracy.

The fact was it had already been decided that he, the Royal Huntmaster, would command a small squad of drakkon in battle with the wolf mutations. As the fiercest hunter in their horde, who had trained countless wolf mutations and anthros to obey him, he was obviously the best suited to lead the charge. Who cared whether the

other drakkon agreed or not? Their spoken accord changed nothing about how events would unfold that morn.

To prove how little their assent mattered, Damianos launched himself into the sky before any of the drakkon could answer yay or nay. Even if the others continued to stupidly cling to a bloodline order that mattered little now that their numbers had been whittled down from six figures to a mere three, Damianos knew who the true king of the drakkon was.

Damianos thought of those moments before that battle often since that time. The memories of drakkon are photographic and exact. When he closed his eyes and concentrated, he could once again feel the wind rushing past his scales as he sailed over the mountain. He could still hear the beat of wings behind him. His would-be subjects rushing to catch up.

He'd been so certain of his place in the world before that battle. He had known without a doubt that he, not his worthless cousin the former prince, would be named King of Drakkon after that day.

And he'd been right in his prediction.

Unfortunately, his father had been wrong in his.

The wolf mutations were not engaged in their mindless sex and feast acts when they descended upon the village.

They had been armed. And expecting the drakkon who descended upon them.

The drakkon had been betrayed once again. This time by their new king, who for reasons Damianos still did not understand had allied with the wolf mutations, after sending his own drakkon subjects into a battle that would end in many of their deaths.

After uncovering the new king's betrayal, Damianos would indeed become the King of Drakkon. But his father fell that day, his life cut thousands of years short by the sword of the oldest North Wolves prince. And soon after, Damianos was attacked by the youngest wolf prince. By the time Damianos recovered and moved to exact his revenge on his father's killer, both princes and their sister had disappeared through the fating portals.

They'd used the drakkon's own fertility technology to escape his wrath. His rage burned as hot as the forest he set to flame after their departure.

Then it began to burn cold.

When he was alive, his father had often scolded Damianos about his impatience and his inability to manage his flame. "If you wish to assume your rightful place as King of Drakkon, you *must* learn to control that temper of yours."

Damianos had tried and failed so many times to honor his father's directions to manage his flame wisely prior to that tragic day. Ironically, revering his father after his death was how Damianos finally learned patience.

He bided his time through the following centuries. Torturing the Betrayer King endlessly as he waited for the wolf mutations who'd gotten away to reappear. He knew it was only a matter of patience. For a wolf mutation's lifespan is but a speck of time in comparison to a drakkon's.

Thus he waited. And waited. And waited some more. Carts gave way to cars which gave way to drones. The upright primates' villages became cities, one of which was located on Mars. And there was talk of going even further now. To the next solar system.

For their former food now believed they were worthy of forming civilizations on other planets. What hubris. But still Damianos waited.

Until one day both wolf prince brothers showed up in the North American territories. The fating portal had sent them both to the same mate, with whom they bore two girls. This only made his plans for revenge that much sweeter.

The only thing better than taking the lives of the two brothers responsible for his father's death would be also taking the lives of their mate and twin daughters for whom they had crossed centuries to unite with.

But the sister had yet to join them, and the revenge would not be complete without her.

So proving himself worthy of his father, he continued to wait. His father's killers grew older as did their daughters. Perhaps they would bear children he would also end before their grandfather's eyes. Both his desire and thirst for blood grew greater with each rotation of the planet around the sun.

And then one beautiful day, while standing upon the balcony of his Greek estate, he received the message for which he'd been waiting hundreds of years.

The sister, Myrna, had arrived at the exact right time. Just as the Ao Quong, the mission's Lead Field Engineer made a promising breakthrough in his many-century studies of the fating portals Damianos had acquired by one means or another all over the world.

It would seem that they would soon be able to enact the original plan without the Betrayer King's help after all.

After he visited his grisly revenge upon the family responsible for his father's demise, he would use the Idaho fating portal to travel back in time to the planet The Royal Geneticist destroyed.

His plan?

Become King of Drakkon once more. And as for the precocious, over-fertile anthrohominids who'd overrun this planet—he would return them to their rightful state as food for their drakkon hunts.

This he vowed.

However, something extraordinary happened soon after the North Wolves princess appeared in this time.

The Drakkon Murderers' daughters showed up at his estate.

As it turned out, the Betrayer King had a reason for allying with his father's murderers after all.

These males would eventually become the fathers of the Betrayer King's fated mate.

And that mate had born him a son.

An actual living, breathing son named Eos who spoke the old language, just as his father did. Eos seemed to Damianos, who had not seen a drakkon young in millennia, nothing short of miraculous.

Only one thing eclipsed that discovery of a hybrid wolf-drakkon... the twin sister of the Betrayer King's mate.

One look. A single look had been enough to change....not everything—he was still intent on making the twins' fathers pay for what they'd done. But in an instant, one name was removed from his list of those who would be slaughtered on his father's behalf.

Ola.

Her name was Ola.

And though she did not know it yet, she would soon be his.

With a snap of his secretly clawed fingers.

As one of the human cattle's ever-bleating musicians once declared...

*Don't believe me. Just watch.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### OLA

This is the best night of my entire life.

Everything I've been groomed for. Everything I worked for. It's all happening right now. And that's why nobody's clapping louder than me when my uncles take the stage in the kingdom house's main ballroom.

The King and Beta of North Dakota are both in their sixties now with nearly three decades of marriage behind them, but they're holding hands like they're newlyweds. And they don't look much different from the photograph, they took after Uncle Kyle received the crown from his father.

Uncle Clyde's rocking all black denim and leather, just like he did back then. Paying homage to his old Detroit pack which used to be just a few steps up from a motorcycle gang before my mom took over as the first alpha queen ever in the history of North America. He's also carrying the sawed-off Mossberg 500 twelve-gauge shotgun like a sword at his hip. That gun's made many a close-minded bitch think twice before crossing him or his husband. And everybody knows the ones who dared to say anything to their face about their previously unheard of royal gay union are currently buried six feet deep. It doesn't matter how old he gets or how sweet and kind he is when the kingdom's not watching, my uncle stays mean-mug-



gin' and straight-thuggin'. Just like in his and Kyle's coronation photograph, which now hangs over the kingdom house's mantle.

Which is kind of funny, because my uncle-in-law, Kyle, the alpha king of North Dakota is the total opposite of him. Still boyishly handsome with his carefully colored light blond hair and lanky physique, wearing the official pack crown, he reminds me of one of those early Disney princes—just with a few extra eye crinkles.

Nobody would have put them together, but everybody in North America knows what a great couple they are. And I don't think my Uncle Clyde has ever regretted, not even for one day, ceding his own crown to my mother and fathers, so that he could marry his then-secret boyfriend. And especially not now that they've made it to early retirement.

Watching my uncles take the stage together, I squeeze Akwasi's hand, secretly hoping we'll end up that happy one day. But, you know, without all the drama that kicked off my uncles' happy marriage...and my parents' happy marriage...and my sister's happy marriage to a dragon of all dudes...and okay, all of my triplet cousins' recent happy marriages—maybe they thought we were running out of crazy stories to tell around the fire at the Greenwolf-Ataneq-Nightwolf Thanksgiving table?

My stomach drops. Oh God, is it even possible for a member of my family to simply date and get married like normal wolves? My nerdy mom tried her best to make a go of it in a human career as a video game designer and even got engaged to her brother's BFF, the then Prince of North Dakota—totally practical move for a werewolf princess. But what did she get for all those level-headed decisions? An ex-fiancé who'd ended up marrying her brother, and not one, but two time-traveling Viking wolves claiming to be her fated mates. I mean, lucky for me, or my twin sister and I never would have been born but it seriously feels like the odds are completely stacked against me.

*Stop, Ola. Best night of your life. Remember?*

Okay, calm face emoji...that's totally right. I push thoughts of my family's notoriously bad, super dramatic, time-traveling often included relationship history out of my head and remind myself that doesn't have to be me.

I'm in a terrific relationship with the starting center for the North Dakota Elks, after all, and it's been 100% drama free so far. That's

pretty amazing considering my background and, you know, general personality, which is made up of one-part co-dependent twin, two parts descended from motorcycle gangsters and Vikings, and a whole lot of telling it like it is.

But somehow that didn't scare away my down-to-earth and no drama boyfriend. He appreciates my straight talk. "Your directness is refreshing. Honesty is important in a relationship, yes?" he'd told me on our third date. He finds my background, "very historical and fun." And as for my sister, he likes that I care about my family and he assures me he cares just as much about his, even though they're far away in Ghana. In fact, he wants us to take a trip there to meet his people in a couple more months. A trip I'm pretty sure will culminate in a biomedica post with the title, "He put a ring on it!!!"

That is if I don't fuck it up.

"Are you okay, my baby?" Akwasi asks. He has to lean in close to be heard over all the hooting and hollering.

Geez, he smells good. That expensive cologne on top of rich and famous kind of good that regular wolves just can't replicate. Plus, he laughs at all my jokes—even the really inappropriate ones, and he hasn't so much as flirted with another woman since our first date. I know, because I dosed him with a spy drone on our second one.

What?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know spy drones are super illegal, and some might argue a pretty large invasion of privacy, but whatever. I'm a distrustful bitch—everybody knows that.

Besides, Akwasi passed all my tests with flying colors. Isn't that what counts? My famous and super talented boyfriend is tall, dark, and handsome as hell. Plus, he's really into me. He calls me "my baby" with a seriously sexy African accent, but unlike the string of guys I dated before him, he's been respecting my decision not to have sex until I go into heat.

I should also throw some extra points at him for actually showing up to the most important night of my life.

Other than my parents, it's not exactly a family reunion up in here.

You see, my cousins, the Nightwolf triplets decided to schedule their totally unnecessary triple vow renewal on the same weekend as my coronation.

I'm sure, the oldest triplet, Rafe had a lot to do with that date choice. He's the President of the North American Lupine, and he hates my guts, which is totally unfair because I'm fucking awesome and he's a stuck up prick. But unfortunately, he made it a choice between the three of them and the one of me, and all my favorite aunts and cousins opted to spend the weekend in Mississippi instead of North Dakota.

And as for that twin sister I used to be so co-dependent on—well, she's currently in hiding from our family's mortal dragon enemy.

A mortal enemy who I sort of grabbed by the dick last year. Or by the dicks, maybe? Still not exactly sure what was going on down there. But whatever I touched was large and pulsing. And nearly a year later, I can still remember the sensation of it or them moving around beneath my hand.

Look, I don't normally go around grabbing guys by the dick. That's all sorts of bad hashtags, which I'm supposed to be avoiding now that I'm officially representing for a state pack. I was just trying to distract him, while my sister and her mate escaped from his supervillain fortress located on a remote Greek isle. You know, hero stuff!

But I've kind of been having a hard time scrubbing that memory from my head. And sometimes when I let myself think about it too long, I get a little scared. Because it wasn't pure horror I felt when I touched him. I mean there was a lot of that. But there was also a weird feeling in my stomach.

*My wolf stood up.*

So many of my relatives have used that phrase to describe how they felt the first time they laid eyes on their mate. I'd never been able to envision what that felt like. My wolf had always been pretty background, like, "I'm just going to let you do you, Ola. You're bitch enough for the both of us and I truly believe you got this, girl."

Normally, she and me are totally copacetic and on the same page. But when I touched our family's mortal enemy, that strange sensation...was that what it was? No, it couldn't be.

Could it?

"Ola? Are you okay?"

Akwasi again. Bringing me back to reality. Back to the room where wolves from both the Michigan and North Dakota packs are cheering loudly.

I look up at my perfect boyfriend and mentally slap myself. Why the hell am I thinking about that dragon supervillain when I have this total package standing right next to me?

"I'm fucking fantastic," I assure him with a big grin as I join back in with all the clapping and shouting out for my Uncle, the best king North Dakota has ever had.

"Alright, alright, calm down," Uncle Kyle says on stage, motioning with both hands for everyone to stop clapping already.

But they don't stop. If anything, the hoots, hollers, and whistles grow even louder. I totally get why the crowd can't stop cheering. Under Uncle Kyle, the state pack has flourished, moving from a steady mid-level treasury to become one of the top ten richest territories in North America. Real talk 100, he's leaving me a state that pretty much runs itself. And now that he's retiring early, everyone in the ballroom wants him to know how much they adore him, including me. Especially me. I pump my fist and jump up and down, encouraging the crowd to keep it going.

As the applause goes on and on, Kyle shakes his head at his subjects, his expression indulgent and exasperated.

My Uncle Clyde isn't having it, though. His man told the crowd to calm down, so they better do what he says. He holds up a hand. And his eyes slit with what my mom calls a "Leroy Greenwolf" look after my great-grandfather, who fought and shot his way into becoming Michigan's first black state pack alpha king.

The look itself is hard to describe. It's kind of like the biggest baddest muthafucka in a 70s prison movie, and everybody who's ever tried to fight Rocky Balboa got together to make a glare baby.

It works. The enthusiastic audience stops clapping like a switch has been flipped, allowing Uncle Kyle to finally get some words in.

"When I took over as North America's first openly gay king, many said I'd upend our state's legacy. They claimed I would turn the kingdom house into a spectacle and earn our pack a reputation as a bunch of wild and hedonistic wolves. They said if I were allowed to take over, I'd hashtag our pack in irrevocable ways. And do you know what my mate Clyde and I would like to say to those haters now, on the night of my niece's coronation?"

This is where Clyde steps in, the Leroy Greenwolf glare morphing into a crazy face emoji grin as he calls out, "Y'all bitches was TOTALLY RIGHT!"

Just when I thought the crowd couldn't possibly get any louder, they take it to the next decibel level.

Kyle's laughing by the time the applause and shouts of approval finally die down. "I could not think of a better person than Ola to keep our non-traditional reputation going. She's loyal, intelligent, courageous, and fierce with and without hair and makeup. So please join me in welcoming our new queen, the princess of Michigan, and one hell of a she-wolf, Ola Greenwolf!"

My heart leaps in my chest. *This is it!*

I walk up the stairs, in a glittering gown made entirely of gold-plated nanite sequins and specially customized to squeeze every curve. It feels like I'm floating on air. No role seemed to fit my out-sized personality until I started training under my uncles to take over as queen of North Dakota. And now I've finally made it to the night of my coronation.

I cross the stage and my uncle, who's a few inches shorter than me, lifts the heavy gold crown from his head. He pauses long enough for me to get a glimpse of the North Dakota pack's raised wolf symbol on its front. Then he places the crown on top of my hair, which I had straightened, just so it could fit underneath the ornamental headdress.

"All yours, honey," he says his eyes brimming with tears.

"Thanks, Uncle Kyle," I whisper back.

Listen, I'm no crying-ass bitch. Leroy Greenwolf did half-raise me until the age of five, and a few of the older members of the Michigan pack swear I'm carrying around his reincarnated soul. But the tears shining in Uncle Kyle's eyes make me all that more determined to be a great queen.

Queen Ola.

That's my official title now. I turn to face the audience's slightly less enthusiastic applause.

Most of the North Dakota pack clap just enough to be polite—which is fine. I'm new, from out-of-state, and even if I'm dating a famous basketball player, I haven't proven myself yet. I've got time to work myself up to thunderous applause.

However, the male wolves standing toward the back of the room worry me. They've all taken the same stance, arms folded tight and jaws clenched with impotent frustration.

Yellow Mountain Wolves. It's easy to tell because they're wearing t-shirts, covered in silhouettes of guns underneath camo jackets—which is dressed up for them. They also look totally pissed that the gay king they didn't approve of is now being replaced by a black she-wolf from another state's pack. I'm basically their worst nightmare, and I have the feeling that the only thing keeping them from out-and-out booing is all the strapped up Michigan wolves standing between them and the stage.

If great granddaddy Leroy were here, he'd be calling all these sour-faced YMWs punk bitches to their face. And my throat itches to honor that legacy. Too bad Uncle Kyle made me promise I wouldn't say anything to them tonight. Their small pack is in charge of the North Dakota time gate, so I'm supposed to be nice. You know, politics. The total opposite of hero stuff.

But whatever. I look them directly in the eyes, as I brush their hate off my shoulder. This is my night. And I'm not going to let any enemies, old or new, ruin it.

Besides, my parents are here, cheering and smiling up at me from the front of the crowd. Best distraction from the haters ever. My mom's eyes are shining with total pride that her daughter's also an alpha queen now. And my dads are waving their Viking swords in the air. They're all so proud of me, it almost makes up for Fensa not being here.

Plus, half the audience is made up of visiting subjects from my former Michigan pack. And thanks to the heavy motorcycle boots many of them still wear in homage to our twentieth century motorcycle gang roots, their hooting and hollering game echoes way louder than the North Dakota pack's anemic clapping and the Yellow Mountain Wolves anger emoji impressions.

In any case, I don't bother to motion for them to stop applauding. As anyone who knows me would attest, I'm a loud ass. And as short as Uncle Kyle's speech was, mine is even shorter:

"I've been waiting my entire life for this moment," I shout out to my new pack, keeping it Real Emotion 100.

Then I raise a bottle of champagne in the air, and yell "Let's light this shit up!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### DAMIANOS

I'm sitting in the back seat of an early twenty-first town car parked far beyond the North Dakota kingdom house's front gates. Yet, the applause is so loud inside the North Dakota kingdom mansion, I can hear it clearly. It creates a strange stereo effect as I watch Ola Greenwolf take the stage at her coronation through one of my thrall's eyes.

An odd wish suddenly floats through my mind. A desire for an invisible cloak of the sort often described in the upright primate's fantasy novels and comic books. And though I've never been the fanciful sort, for a moment I indulge myself in imagining that I am in the ballroom with the rest of her new subjects. Watching her accept her crown with my own eyes, not those of a dog thrall.

She addresses the crowd with a speech, short and utterly inappropriate.

Of course, it is. My time with her was also short, and significantly inappropriate. Even before receiving the reams of background information on her life, I had the sense that Ola Greenwolf and the word "dignified" had never and would never be used in the same sentence.

But despite her crude nature and her lineage, she has become my sole obsession.

Before our first meeting, there had been what I could only describe as an itch within me. An uncomfortable sensation located so

deep inside my belly that no matter how much I rubbed upon my stomach I could gain no relief.

Eventually, I began referring to it as my night pain, for it often plagued me on the eves when I found myself alone in my study sipping on tsipouro. In the months leading up to my first interaction with Ola, my night pain had become quite vexing, but it had been manageable.

That is until I walked down the front steps of my estate one night and found Ola standing there with her fraternal twin sister. Her beauty...it was almost impossible to describe, especially for a drakkon who'd only gained the ability to see as the anthros do less than a century ago. But I found her brown color combination of creamy beige skin, dark umber eyes, and russet hair pleasing, along with her larger than average body proportions.

She stood taller than most females of her species and possessed wide hips and immense teats, which she pushed out proudly when she talked with her hands on her hips.

I would soon find out that she had an over prideful stance and an obstinate mouth, but it would change nothing about my response to her.

My male works descended. Immediately. For her. And for the time I was with her, the itch...the pain. It stopped.

Even more shocking, she had touched me most intimately, for what had turned out to be a trick on her part. A ruse meant to distract me, while her sister absconded with my prisoner.

Ola had also gotten away that night. But the damage she'd done had been catastrophic for reasons beyond my interrupted torture of the Betrayer King.

The night pain was back. And what had started out as a faint itch has morphed into a clawing need I can no longer ignore. Since her departure, I haven't been able to rest properly, and I can barely think, much less focus on my ultimate plan of revenge against her fathers.

The dogs who murdered my father.

I shift my thrall's eyes and watch them, standing near the front of the stage with their mate. By anthrohominid standards, the warriors are much older than when we first met underneath that purple sky. And they're now wearing formal suits, instead of handsewn outfits



made of hides. But my flame still blazes red with rage at the very sight of them.

This would have been the perfect occasion to strike them down. I could have set their entire pack on fire around them. Made them watch their mate die upon the oldest brother's sword, exactly as my father did. I think of the surprise bit of intel I received regarding the Betrayer King's location. Also, of the polar bear tooth, currently sitting in a glass display case inside the library of my Greek isle estate. A totem of the lengths I would go to in order to exact my revenge.

But I might not ever break the glass on that display case. I won't be burning this kingdom house to the ground or acting on that intel. At least not any time soon.

Because of Ola.

My need for her—it has been nothing short of debilitating. Instead of plotting the final steps of my revenge over the last months, thoughts of laying claim to my enemies' daughter have consumed my attention.

How many nights had I lain awake back in Greece, my male works, pressing against my stomach? The sweet pain of wanting her had been so excruciating, I often had to unshell and swim laps around my isle until I could fall into an exhausted sleep at the bottom of the Aegean Sea. Ever since our first meeting, she has been my last thought before I sleep and my first upon waking. An absolute distraction from my most important goals.

As if to punctuate my point, the phone, sitting on the middle seat armrest lights up. Like this car, the smartphone is vintage. A rather rudimentary communication instrument, dating back to the time before biosystems and comm rings became popular, rendering physical devices like phones and computers obsolete. But this is my chosen method of communication, as I refuse to allow the upright primate's still inferior technology into my head.

A typed message from Ao Quong, our mission's original Lead Field Engineer, appears on the screen. *Phase 1 is complete. When shall we begin the trials for our too long delayed trip?*

His question feels like a repudiation.

I have spent centuries biding my time and planning another trip through the fating portal. Yet now all those plans are as the cattle would say, "up in the air." And now here I am. Lurking in the shad-

ows of my she-wolf's coronation instead of plotting how to kill her entire family with the utmost suffering.

Impatience and frustration course through me, bouncing off the walls of my shell. No, I cannot allow this she-wolf to stand between me and my ultimate goals. She has been my sole obsession for months on end.

And that needs to stop.

That *must* stop.

Now.

Leaving the message unanswered, I close my eyes and god speak the thrall I am using to watch her. *Bring her to me*, I command into his mind.

Then I tell Colby, the latest in my generational line of human servants dating back to the middle ages, to drive to our next destination. I do not bother to await an answer from the thrall currently watching Ola inside the mansion. I know he will do as commanded, just as surely as I know the newly crowned Queen of North Dakota belongs to me.

Whether she knows it yet or not.

Tonight I will stake my claim.

## CHAPTER THREE

## VIKING AGE NORWAY

### FENRIS

The air stilled in his chest when he awoke to the familiar sight of his mate asleep beside him that morn.

They had shared a pillow for nearly forty winters. She had born three of his pups and made nearly all of his meals. Yet, his breath still caught when he looked upon her dark beauty. Even after so many winters together, he found it difficult to believe that such a glorious she-wolf should belong to him, care for him, pass each night beneath his furs.

He woke her with a hungry kiss. And after a mew of surprise, she returned his passion. He rolled her onto her back, covering her body with his, then entered her and joined them as one.

They were both nearing sixty winters, but on morns like this, he was a young wolf again. She was his fated mate, and no matter how many winters had passed, he remained desperate as a young wolf to possess her.

"Oh, Fenris, I love you. I love you so much," she gasped as he moved in and out of her.

In truth, he still did not fully comprehend the language she called *English*. But these words he recognized. He had come to know them well over their many winters together. Know and treasure.

"I love you, too," he whispered back in her *English*, the words thick and clumsy on his tongue.

She no longer screamed out her pleasure as she used to when they were first mated. But he could tell she was close to her women's peak by the way her hands tightened around his arms as if he were her only port in a storm. He came down to his forearms, sheltering her body with his as a great tide of pleasure overtook them both.

For many moments they floated upon that sea of pleasure. Clinging to each other. Murmuring words of love and gratitude over their mate bond.

These were the moments he wished could go on forever. But alas, they did not. He and his mate eventually washed back to the shore of their current life.

He began to worry that his body had become too heavy on top of hers. However, when he rolled away from her, his eyes found a ceiling made of thatch. Not the intricately carved roof of the bed closet they used to share in the North Wolves' kingdom longhouse.

To think about how his Chloe used to complain about the scant privacy their accommodations provided them from the rest of their family. Now they lived in a remote cabin deep in the woods a half day's walk from the kingdom village he once ruled over as *fenrir*, the alpha of all the North Wolves.

For a brief moment, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to remember the last morn they were all together in the longhouse.

Their oldest son, Fenrisson, who they'd called FJ and their daughter, Myrna had been squabbling about how she should be allowed to wear pants inside the longhouse, even if it was forbidden outside of it.

When Chloe and Fenris emerged from their bed closet to intervene, they found Myrna already dressed in a pair of trousers made from hide scraps. She'd glared at FJ, bristling with anger from the bottom of her leather boots to the top of her unruly red curls. Meanwhile their wolf-bound son, Olafr sat on all fours between them, his dark red head swinging back and forth as Myrna accused FJ of acting as if he were the *fenrir* already, not merely the *fenrir* next.

"Better than an ever maid who not only has failed to do her family marriage duty but would now seek to embarrass them by dressing as a male," he scolded back. He was no less angry than Myrna, though his appearance was much neater. Unlike his sister, who hated having her hair washed and detangled, he kept his long red hair tied back in two neat braids.

As usual, Chloe and he took opposite sides.

"Your sister was correct. You are not yet the *fenrir*," Fenris reminded FJ. "You have no authority over her in this house."

"Thank you, papa—" Myrna had begun to say.

"That doesn't mean we're going to let you go out of the house looking like that," Chloe informed Myrna before she could finish thanking her father. "What happened to your hair? Why didn't you

wear the sleep cap I made for you last night? And what kind of sew job is this?"

Chloe bent down to tug at the makeshift trousers. "Have you purposefully ignored everything I ever taught you about how to make a good stitch? These are too hideous to look at. Here take them off. I'll bring them with me on the ship and turn them into a skirt with a split. I needed a project anyway."

"But mom..." Myrna began to whine in her mother's tongue.

"Father, surely you are not taking her side," FJ began to argue in his father's tongue.

And thus, they'd spent the entire morning arguing with the son and daughter they each thought should do a better job of representing their parents. Not knowing they would soon lose FJ forever.

Or that they'd never see Myrna again?

"Do you think they're okay?" his wife suddenly asked through the magic bond that allowed mated wolves to speak without moving lips and feel each other's emotions as if they were their own.

He did not have to ask who she was referring to. Several winters had passed since their sons departed but waking up in this lonely cabin remained hard on the both of them. Fenris was not sure his mate would ever be able to reconcile not knowing their children's ultimate fate.

"Naturally, they are," he assured her, nonetheless. "*They are in your future land with their fated mates. Even Olafr.*"

"Even Olafr..." she murmured. After nearly thirty winters of believing their son mentally incapable of changing from his wolf form, she still sounded stunned that it turned out he was not wolf-bound after all but seeking to ensure Chloe and he didn't die as secretly prophesied to him and FJ by their sorceress aunt Bera.

"He was such a good boy," she said. "I mean is. He's still alive... somewhere...just not here."

"Yes," Fenris agreed, "*Alive and happy and mated by fate as they are.*"

"Yes..." Chloe's reply was positive, but her voice sounded distant inside his head.

They would never see their children again. And though she tried to hide it, he could feel her grief and sorrow rippling over their mate bond.

"We should get up. Make breakfast. Keep moving," she said in his tongue, which she often referred to as Old Norse.

He took her hands and placed them upon his chest. "I will fell a tree or two, then we shall begin the preparations for my winter hunt."

"My brawny wolf," she said with a laugh. "It's so sexy when you do stuff like felling trees."

He laughed as well. And for a few moments, they were as they used to be. Happy and fortunate. Over the past winters, he'd become used to this swing back and forth between muddy sadness and light happiness, with the necessary work of sustaining a lone cabin in the woods in between.

Yea, this morning was the same as the many that had come before it. But then without warning, it was not.

Just as they rose from the bed to break their fast, a knock sounded upon their door.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### OLA

**T**he North Dakota kingdom house has five spaces that aren't bathrooms downstairs, and each one of those spaces has been kitted out to a different theme for my coronation.

The ballroom has undergone a full-on Regency era makeover, complete with a human band playing classical music for English country dances. In the foyer, we'd set up a sick early millennium dance party, with a DJ in a flip phone costume, spinning oldies by early 21<sup>st</sup> century acts like Lil Wayne, The White Stripes, and Destiny's Child.

When people get hungry, they can hit up the kitchen for a Roman feast that would make Bacchus set fire to his grape fields in a fit of jealousy. And nerdier wolves, like my mom, can currently be found in the kingdom house library, enjoying a literary salon, hosted by none other than London Graywolf, the only shifter to have ever won a Nobel Prize in Literature.

There's seriously something for everyone at my once-in-a-lifetime coronation. But where do I find my boyfriend three hours after I'm officially crowned the Alpha Queen of North Dakota? Posted up on a wall in the garden, sipping on a glass of champagne, and not paying any kind of attention to the full-on Mardi Gras festivities going on in the kingdom house's sprawling backyard.

He's so obviously bored. And, I feel like a terrible girlfriend as I make my way over to him.



How has it taken me this long to notice that the only one not enjoying my party is my boyfriend? It's not like Akwasi is hard to miss. Even leaned up against the wall, at six-six, he's a good head taller than most of the people at the garden party, including me. And standing six one in my glittery gold heels, I'm not exactly a shrinking violet myself.

Yet, here he is, hidden in the shadows like this is an after party for a game he didn't win and not his girlfriend's coronation.

"You probably thinking you've won something tonight, don't you? You expecting us to bow down to you now? Call you queen?"

The voice turns my head from my observations of Akwasi. Ugh face emoji, it's Kirk Waters, the pack's current gatekeeper. My uncles appointed him to the well paid position about a year ago after performing a very unimpressive candidate search of Yellow Mountain Wolves, who said the least crazy things, on the Civil War 2 preppers forums.

But like I'd warned my uncles at the time, that didn't mean he wasn't just as crazy as the rest of his mountain pack. The Yellow Mountain Wolves—or as Uncle Kyle calls them with a sigh, "those tragic YMWs," were a pack time had left behind. They'd started off as the wolves who'd chosen to stay in the original kingdom village when the state pack decided to move to a suburb of Fargo in the mid-1900s.

Back then, the YMWs had been a motley mix of the ancestors of both Native Americans and white homesteaders who'd been bitten by werewolves. They'd simply wanted to continue to live off the land, hidden away from humans. And for a while, things had gone great for them. But then advances like she-wolf rights and heat control had hit our state along with biosystems and WolfNet.

Unfortunately, Uncle Kyle and Clyde hadn't realized how radicalized the Yellow Mountain Wolves were becoming until it was too late. And by the time they did, there wasn't much they could do.

Over the last few decades, the majority of YMWs had become active Civil Wolf War Preppers—a group of mostly male wolves who believed the North American territories were headed toward a civil war, which would cleanse the lupine nation of progressives and roll-back she-wolf rights.

And would you look at that? Turns out no she-wolf in her right mind wanted to live in the woods with a bunch of guys who had

zero communication skills, negative digits EQs and expected she-wolves to conform to a version of the good ol' days when they had few choices or rights.

Well, we do have choices now. And thankfully, most of the younger females living on Yellow Mountain opted to get the heat control shots our North Dakota clinic doctors provided for free at the state pack run wolf schools. Many of them also managed to leave Yellow Mountain behind for college as soon as they turned eighteen, taking advantage of the generous scholarship fund Uncle Kyle had set up for wolves in under-served communities.

However, the fathers and brothers they left behind weren't grateful for my uncle's interference. Like at all. Most of the Yellow Mountain she-wolves had wisely decided to disappear without announcing that they were going off to college. And after losing all their mate prospects, the younger YMW males had morphed into a virulent involuntary celibate (incel) community.

Even worse, they'd recently started attracting other young Civil Wolf War Preppers. Males from all over North America who thought the best thing they could do to address their inability to attract she-wolves was to move into the woods with a bunch of other male wolves who liked to whine about being the victims of modern lupine politics.

It was mad annoying, and real talk 100, I didn't care what my uncle said. Those tragic YMWs would be receiving zero invites to any more kingdom house parties during my reign.

But you know, I promised not to cause a scene tonight. So instead of cussing him out loudly, I quietly point out, "Nobody in any North American state has ever been expected to bow to their queen or king. You don't even have to show us respect. Just like I don't have to keep you on as gatekeeper if you decide to be an asshole to me at my own coronation."

"You can't fire me!" he says, sneering with, like, his whole face. "That's a four-year position."

"Keep talking. Bet I can find a way to get around that pesky law. You know how keen my cousin, the *President*, is to bring all the gates under federal control. One call to him and that house we built for you will be replaced with a black box and a soldier from Wolf Force."

Okay, I'm bluffing here. While it's technically true that Rafe is the president of the North American wolves, it's also true that Rafe despises me. So he probably wouldn't take my side on anything, even if it benefitted his black box program.

However, Kirk doesn't know that. And since the YMWs don't believe in biosystems—it's a liberal conspiracy to literally get in your head according to them—he probably needs this job to pay those high vintage wi-fi bills. Not to mention the fact that he lives in the newly renovated gatehouse, which is still the property of the North Dakota kingdom.

Kirk backs down but spits a wad of tobacco in the general direction of my feet before walking away.

If not for growing up with a great grandfather whose only face setting was "mean mugshot," I'd probably be ewwing all over the place. Who spits tobacco anymore? Seriously, those YMWs are the worst!

I turn to continue my beeline toward Akwasi, only to falter when I see that he's looking straight at me. Which means he must have seen everything that went down.

And did nothing.

Okay, I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On the one hand, I'm the Queen of a pack now. I don't want or need my boyfriend rushing to my rescue every time one of my new subjects gets irate. But on the other hand, it kind of would have been nice to, you know, have to tell him that, because he had rushed to my rescue.

But, no, no...bad Ola. I can't say I want a boyfriend who trusts me to handle my shit, but then get mad when he actually does. Thinking like that is how us Viking Wolf descendants end up in relationships filled with drama and time-travel.

And Drama Free 100 relationships take work, I remind myself as I resume walking toward my best chance at a normal marriage. I push through past the well-wishers, offering me beads in exchange for a peek at my now queenly tits and saunter up to my tall Ghanaian wolf.

"Hey, Akwasi, you pissed I didn't bring you up on stage with me?" I ask, giving him a playful shove. "You want a crown, too?"

"Nah," he answers, shoving me back, but not nearly as hard. The apologetic smile he gives me makes him even more handsome. "This

just isn't my scene, Ola, that is all. It is...over the top."

I hold on to my smile, but my wolf crooks its head inside of me.

*He has a right to his opinion*, I remind her. Even if that opinion completely dismisses the fete my uncles and I spent the last five months planning and doesn't exactly scream supportive boyfriend.

But...compromise...understanding...giving—isn't that what my fathers insisted it takes to make their marriage with my mom work after all the drama was done?

I decisively shove down my wolf and take Akwasi by the hands. "Hey, why don't you go up to my suite and wait for me there?" I suggest with a flirty smile. "I know I said I wanted to wait until I went into heat for real, but tonight I feel like celebrating."

Akwasi's eyes light up at the word "celebrating." He'd been a perfect gentleman about not having any sex until now. He'd even said that spending quality time with me was better than any hook-ups he could be having with his human groupies—which I believe, thanks to my spybot. But he's still a male wolf with needs. Needs I wouldn't mind meeting tonight.

I already know he's the one I want to breed me when I go off heat control, and as the newly crowned Queen of North Dakota, my people will expect me to produce an heir for my own throne soon. No, I'm not off heat control yet. But... "Why not commemorate my coronation with a decommission of my virgin status?

"Are you sure?" Akwasi asks, his tone considerate but eager.

I smile up at him. No, it's not quite love I'm feeling for him yet, but it's definitely a strong case of getting there. And as for my virginity—ugh face emoji, it was such an outdated concept anyway, even for she-wolves who literally can't get spontaneously wet until we go into heat. I'm on the back end of my twenties now, and this new queen title means I have zero use for anything that would get me labeled an innocent girl.

"Yeah, I'm totally sure. I want to. I want to with you." I hold his gaze, liking the way his deep brown eyes soften at my words.

But then a hesitant look clouds over his tender expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Before you came over, I received a message. My silent investor is in town," he answers with another apologetic smile. "I must stop by and talk to him, even if it is just for a few minutes."

"Oh," I say, not quite knowing how to feel about that.

Akwasi opened a club called the Wolf Lounge a few months ago, shortly after Fargo became an unexpected hot spot, thanks to Go Gutierrez and Barron Calson deciding to establish a branch of GoB-ionics there. Akwasi bet both his and his silent investor's money that a hot night club would give both the influx of tech workers and his sports fans somewhere to go after work and games, and that bet had paid off.

The Wolf Lounge became very successful and very popular seemingly overnight. And yeah, I'm enough of a businesswoman to know, you definitely want to stay sucking up to your biggest investor, so I understand why he would want to pay his respects. Still, a pang of some unfamiliar emotion went through me.

"You scheduled a meeting on the night of my coronation?"

"It was very unexpected," he answers, his expression becoming even more contrite. "I only found out he was here a couple of hours ago."

"You can't just tell him you already have plans?" I ask, my tone tight with all the annoyance I'm trying to suppress to keep our relationship drama free.

"No, I can't," Akwasi responds as if I've asked if he can keep the sun from coming up tomorrow morning.

Anger, hurt, and disappointment snap through me. "Wow, okay..." I'm livid, but this is technically our first fight, like, ever, which makes me unsure of how to handle his refusal.

Old Ola would have cursed Akwasi straight out and called "next" to the first available hottie while walking away. But new Ola is trying for a healthy relationship, and I have the feeling that following my instinct to huff off and grab some new guy to grind on won't win me any good communication awards.

As if sensing my dilemma, Akwasi cups my shoulders. "Come with me. It will only take a few minutes to get there in my drone and talk to him, then we'll come right back here for cake...*and other things*. Please, Ola, I don't want to be without you. Even for an hour."

I hesitate. I like that Akwasi doesn't want to be without me, though, even for an hour. That's how real couples work, right?

I wait for a "hell yeah, that's right!" from my wolf, but it doesn't come. We're not on the same page about Akwasi. She's not being a bitch about it, not wilding out like the wolves of my cousins Rafes

and Nago, who have both been diagnosed with an emotional shifting disorder. But she's not standing up at the prospect of *other things* either. Not like she did when I grabbed Damianos Drákon's junk. My human wants this more than she does.

Maybe that's why weird feelings tremble through me now. Ones so unfamiliar, I have to examine them carefully in order to attach labels: uncertainty... anxiety... dread... the opposite of my usual zero fucks, YOLO 100 setting. My wolf doesn't want to go with him to his club. Even for just a few minutes.

*C'mon, this is Akwasi*, I remind her. The sweet b-ball player who actually had trouble looking me in the eye when he asked me out. His shyness reminded me of my mother and my sister, Fensa.

With a pang, I think of the twin who can't be here tonight, because she and her family are in hiding on an island that I'm only allowed to visit once every six months.

Before Fensa got yanked into and came back from the really long ago past, I was the co-dependent twin. It used to be that I'd whine if my sister didn't make time to see me twice a month, even though we were living in separate states. Those two weeks she'd gone missing had been the worst of my entire life. But now I can only see her twice a year.

Plus, as long as I'd been dreaming about my coronation, the one thing I never imagined was her not being here for it. But she isn't. And I miss her. So much, my chest feels like it's cracking if I let myself think on it too long.

So I don't.

I concentrate on what I do have. Like this crown on my head. And this thing with Akwasi.

With that thought in mind, I flick my eyes back up to meet his. I like him, and he likes me. My wolf is just being silly. Resisting all the changes that come with deciding to take on a crown and a possible mate. A really cool, drama-free mate.

"Okay," I say softly. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER FIVE

**B**y the time we make it to Akwasi's club, I decide this detour is a good thing.

Coronations are more for the people than the royals anyway. They're something we do to give them good memories forever of the time we took the throne. Neither my old Michigan nor my new North Dakota pack needs me there to have a good time.

Plus, I have to drone down to Mississippi early tomorrow morning. I promised my time-traveling Viking era Aunt Myrna (such a long story), that I'd attend her vow renewal to my cousin Rafes (another long story). And I never, ever break my promises.

Even if, as I mentioned before, Rafes hardcore hates my guts. For silly reasons, really. All I did was everything in my power to keep his anti-dragon North Dakota black box project from going through, before helping his awesome Viking mate, Myrna, almost wolf divorce his undeserving ass.

It made their marriage stronger if you ask me. But did he thank me?

No! He decided to hate me forever—which means, I've definitely got to show up at his wedding wearing my new North Dakota crown, right?

I might be turning over a new leaf when it comes to my romantic relationships, but c'mon, I'm still Ola. And I have no plans to stop being a pain in my president cousin's ass any time soon.

A petty giggle escapes me at the thought of the look on Rafes' face when he sees me, sitting front and center at his wedding as we approach the club's VIP section.

Which is why I'm smiling when I look up to meet Akwasi's silent investor for the first time. But that smile disappears when I see him.

Damianos Drákon.

He's sitting by himself in the choicest VIP booth, large and imposing, even though he's not standing up. He doesn't have a bunch of human girls in the booth with him, like most of the other men, both human and werewolf, who reserve tables in The Wolf Lounge's VIP section would.

It's just him here. But just him feels even more ominous.

My wolf picks up his scent, hold it in my lungs. Fire. He smells like a blazing night fire. Dark, smoky, and crackling with dangerous flames.

A low growl vibrates through my body as he becomes the center of our awareness. And my wolf once again feels like she's rising to her feet. To run or fight. I'm not sure.

He doesn't stand to greet us when we stop in front of his low table. In fact, he exudes an expectant air. North American Kings and Queens don't require any kind of formality. Hell, my cousin, Nago, lets everyone in both the states where he's the alpha call him Nags. But I suspect Damianos Drákon would be entirely comfortable if Akwasi and I decided to drop to our knees and bow.

God, he is enormous. I recall the last time I saw him in person. The way he'd towered over Fensa, me, and her son, Eos.

He regards me now, his light brown eyes running over my sparkling dress, and the crown perched on top of my long straightened hair at a jaunty angle. And I regard him right back with my chin high in the air... hating the way my hidden wolf is whimpering inside of me.

He's the most handsome man I've ever seen. He radiates evil, but his face has more symmetries going on than a 100% geometry quiz.

And his body...well, let's just say I think of the Colossus of Rhodes, the fallen seventh wonder they reconstructed a few years back when I look at him. This guy doesn't just remind me of a Greek statue but the largest damn statue in the ancient world.

*Ancient.*

Yes, that's the word to describe him. To other people in the club, he probably appears to be a businessman in his thirties, rocking a dark beard, and finely attired in a tailored suit. Here to have some fun just like all other rich guys in VIP.



But I know the real deal. He's millennia, not decades old. A trillionaire who's neither human nor werewolf. And if he's here in North Dakota, it's not in search of fun. Or to check in on his investment.

I stare at him. He stares at me.

Somewhere in the distance, Akwasi is saying, "Hey, Mr. Drákon, this is my baby, Ola..."

And somewhere in the distance, the huge sun god statue answers, "Ola and I have met."

My head pulses with a strange pushing pressure. Like something other than my wolf is trying to crawl inside of me.

"We should go," I say to Akwasi. Even to my ears my voice also sounds far away.

"No, Ola, you should stay," Damianos says. His voice sounds like black syrup poured over pancakes as he transfers his piercing gaze from me to Akwasi. "You two will dance. I will watch."

"I don't want to dance." My answer is firm and final, but it only seems to amuse Damianos.

"Go ahead, Ola, have your fun," he says as if I hadn't protested at all. "I'll wait."

"C'mon, Ola, let's dance," Akwasi says. Then he's pulling me toward the dance floor, like us getting down is the most urgent mission in the world right now.

"Stop, let me go!" I try to yank my arm away, but Akwasi has it in a vice-grip. I'm a big, bodacious woman. Not just tall, but also a couple of hundred pounds and some change. But Akwasi is an elite athlete and a male wolf. He's stronger than me, and we're on the dance floor before I can put up much of a struggle.

"We've got to go," I tell him as he pulls me into an old-fashioned ballroom pose, even though a Trap Metal song is blasting overhead. "I can't stay here. I've got to tell my uncles that Damianos Drákon is —"

I stop, realizing that my uncles are no longer the go-to royals for threats against our kingdom. No, that would be me. The freshly minted North Dakota queen. It was on me to deal with the dragon who'd nearly killed both my fathers and my aunt back in the Viking day. A dragon whose threat was so dire, my sister's mate had insisted on going into hiding lest he finds them.

*Shit*, I realize, with a sinking heart. This situation is beyond what I can handle. I would have to reach out to Rafes.

"I need to make a comm," I tell Akwasi, pulling my hands down so that I can ell Rafes.

For the first time ever, I'm more annoyed than proud that Rafes completely bioblocked me a few months ago, because I pissed him off so bad. Usually, that's something to brag about at dinner parties, but in this case, him hating my guts means I can't just send him a quick biomessage like I would anyone else. I've got to ell him and hope to my mother's God, and my fathers' Fenrir Wolf, that he accepts my comm request—

"No comm rings!" Akwasi barks when I ell my fingers to make a view screen. Then he yanks the titanium comm rings off my fingers before I can make the comm request!

"What the hell, Akwasi? Give me back my rings!"

He doesn't give me back my rings, and when I try to make a grab for them, he yells, "NO COMM RINGS!" and pushes me. Like, he legit shoves me backward. Hard. Not playfully like before at my coronation.

I nearly fall, and when I regain my feet, there's no flirt in his eyes. None of the gentle shyness I remember. More than a few of the humans on the dance floor are staring at us now. A few of them have lit up recording rings behind their right eyes...and yep...there it is, already trending on my human news biofeed.

*Look at this!!! World Basketball Association Superstar @therealAkwasi fighting with his girlfriend at his club right now!!! ...with an accompanying link to the live feed.*

Ugh face emoji! What the hell was Akwasi thinking, snatching my rings like that and pushing me so hard?

"It's time to go," he says, shoving the rings into his jacket pocket. His voice sounds dull like he didn't just kill a bunch of endorsement deals by publicly laying hands on his girlfriend in his own nightclub.

*Time to go.* My brain chews on the command. No, I don't want to go anywhere with him. But humans might not be the only ones recording. I just got crowned the Queen of North Dakota. And though I try to keep it zero fucks always, gotta admit this ain't a good look for my very first twenty-four hours on the throne.

In the end, I draw myself up to my full height and raise my chin high. I walk with him out of the club, silently vowing to cuss him all

the way out as soon as we get inside his soundproof drone.

However, when we reach the back of the club, there's a car parked in front of Akwasi's two-person sports drone, blocking our access to it.

And this car isn't driverless like the one I hired to take me from Florida into the no-drone state of Mississippi for tomorrow's triple vow renewal ceremony. It's long and dark, and there's a young man seated behind its steering wheel. So it's manual, like the vintage Cadillac Escalade I drive, but way older. I can hear and smell the growling engine underneath. It runs on diesel, which makes me wonder if it even has a computer system.

And if that's not creepy enough, the back door opens. and Damianos Drákon steps out.

My heart slams into my chest wall at the sight of him, his expression as hard and unforgiving as the black pavement beneath our feet.

"Hello again, Ola."

## CHAPTER SIX

Damianos Drákon closes the car door behind him and rises to his full height. Large and so much more imposing than when he was sitting down. He's got to be at least seven feet. Maybe even taller. His shadow is so long, it stretches past both of us, underneath the parking lot's lights.

*Shift!* My wolf screams at me. This time, she's not even a smidge confused about what needs doing. If I have any chance of winning a fight with this dangerous seven-foot plus dragon, I'll have to get into wolf form—

Akwasi moves beside me, and the next thing I know he's fastening something around my neck that closes with a softly hissed click.

*What the...*

I reach up to feel the thing he clipped around my neck. It's not a necklace...it's some kind of band. Cool and smooth and completely ungiving. It doesn't choke me, but it's fastened so tight I can't get my fingers underneath it so that I can pull it off with the force of my wolf strength.

I can't see the band, but I know what it is in the next instant when my biosystem abruptly powers down inside of me without so much as a systems failure warning.

Fear rolls through me like a dark tide. Oh fuck, it's a biocollar! A device human police officers put on suspects to keep them from accessing their biosystems while they're under arrest. However, us wolves use biocollar a little differently. Our biocollars don't just shut down our biosystems, they also keep weres from hard shifting into

their wolves when we need to detain them. Some weres also use them to keep from shifting when there's a full moon.

My wolf whines inside of me, wanting to help but unable to come out.

And I look up at the man who's collared me, my eyes full of betrayal. "Akwasi, why?"

"I don't know," he answers. His eyes are wide with fear. "I do not understand what I am doing!"

"Ola..." A dark, resonant voice calls out to me.

Akwasi and I turn to face the dragon calling my name.

"It is time to go," Damianos says. Then he opens the old car's back door. Like it's a thing already decided.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I answer, my voice so fierce, my throat hits the binding collar with every word.

There comes that pressing sensation again. Then a heavy frown from Damianos. "I see this will be a bit more difficult than I planned."

"A bit more?" I repeat, rage coursing through me. "If you think I'm getting in that car with you, you're out your dragon-ass mind."

The dragon king's head tilts, like a scientist observing some new species. "Such coarse language," he says.

"Oh, you think *that's* coarse, bitch? I'm about to show you just how rough my Detroit ass can get—" I start to vow.

Damianos cuts me off with one word: "Akwasi."

Then comes another *click*.

However, this one is much louder than the small sound of the biocollar snapping around my neck.

I turn to Akwasi, and my heart drops to my feet.

It's a gun. Akwasi, my shy, and formerly sweet boyfriend has a gun made up of cold and grey metal in his right hand. But he's not pointing it at me or Damianos. He's pointing it at himself.

Horror ices through my veins. "What...what are you doing?"

He doesn't seem to understand. Tears stream from his terrified eyes, even as he pushes the gun's barrel deeper into the side of his own temple. "I don't know! I don't know!"

Behind us, the dark voice repeats, "Get into the car, Ola."

I can't understand how or why this is happening. But I immediately know two things: This isn't Akwasi's fault, he's not in control of his body. And...despite not wanting to, he will shoot his own

brains out right here in this parking lot if I don't do as Damianos says.

Funny, everyone thinks I'm such a bitch. There were even articles on WolfNet about whether I was too selfish and abrasive to take over the North Dakota throne.

But I know in this moment, that I'm a good queen. That I would have been a good queen to the North Dakota wolves. Because without hesitation I turn to say to Damianos.

"I'll get into the car. But you've got to let Akwasi go. Whatever hold you have on him, it ends tonight, and you will never use him like this again."

Damianos studies me, his light brown eyes scanning my resolute face. "You realize I could snap your neck right now. End this negotiation."

Oh, I realized it all right. Dude has an easy foot on me, like, *fuck yo' heels, Ola!* And though I've often felt like the largest person in any room I enter, because of my height and weight, the dragon king's hulk makes me feel like a petite little thing. Easily broken.

But...

"We all die. Even dragons, so my dads tell me. And being loyal as fuck is my thing. Kind of like being creepy as fuck is your thing. So if you're going to snap my neck, do it. But I *promise* you, I'm not getting into that car until Akwasi drops that gun."

The silence...it's not quiet. It bangs between us, loud as a gong in an old martial arts movie.

Then I hear a clattering sound behind me.

And when I turn to look over my shoulder, Akwasi is sobbing into his empty hands. The gun...oh thank the Fenrir wolf...it's now lying on the ground.

"Come now, she-wolf," Damianos says, stepping back to the door. "Do not make either of us regret this negotiation."

I think about running then. I'm a shifter, with half a brain in her head. Of course, I do. But this is the dragon that made my sister's formidable mate turned tail and hide. Not easily gotten away from, I sense, especially with a biocollar around my neck. Also, if I try to run, and he catches me, I sense that both Akwasi and I will pay the price.

I remember the vows I made at this morning's much quieter formal coronation ceremony. The one about protecting my subjects at

all costs. Akwasi is my subject, and at the end of the day, I am his queen. The royal who must protect him. No matter what. Also, if I go and Akwasi lives, there's a chance—a small one—that he'll be able to get word to my people and send them to rescue me.

Expelling a quick breath, I get into the car.

Damianos closes the door. Like a warden locking me in his cage. A few seconds later, I hear him slip into the right side passenger seat beside me.

I don't look. I don't blink. I don't cry.

I stare straight ahead. Trying my best but then failing not to think the obvious question.

*Now that he has me, what is he planning to do with me?*

## PART II

*The Royal Geneticist conceded in his petition that both the anthrohominids and his bio-engineered lupinhominids were primitive and lacked higher intelligence. They were only slightly more evolved—due to their larger brains and capacity for language—than their primate ancestors.*

*But the lupinhominids, and at least one genus of the anthrohominids, he asserted, had begun developing tools, language, and rudimentary expressions of art. The Royal Geneticist believed both genera had the potential to evolve into two distinct, civilized species, and should therefore no longer be treated by drakkon as mere game and beasts of burden.*

*The petition had proven vexing for the drakkon planet's king and Damianos, his Royal Huntmaster.*

*For various reasons, a few restrictions had been added to the king's previously unchecked power when the Blue Drakkon line took over the throne. Petitions by members of the court could no longer be dismissed out of hand. Nor could they be simply ignored because the Crown Prince wished his hunts to continue uninterrupted.*

*The solution? Send the Royal Overlord with a team to the third planet from the sun. Half the team would conduct a thousand-year survey of both the evolved and the genetically manipulated hominids and collect the data needed to refute the Royal Geneticist's claim.*

*And as for Damianos and the other half of the team?*

*They would prepare the mutations for the hunt.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FENRIS

“**F**orgive this intrusion. But after hearing tale of your great feats in the kingdom village, I could not pass up the chance to meet with you in person.”

“Chance” was as his mate would term it, putting it quite liberally.

It was not as if they had invited the traveling skald currently seated across from him to their home. Nor had Fenris told anyone in their auld kingdom village where they lived. The skald had searched for a full day and made a camp overnight before receiving this “chance.”

“I am honored that you traveled out of your way to their home,” he answered, nonetheless as Chloe set a bowl of porridge in front of each of them. They were seated at the table upon stools his mate fashioned from the leftover trees he felled to make this cabin. “Have you tale of the village?”

“Indeed I do...”

They talked easily over their porridge about the recent homecoming of Fenrit, the fenrir who replaced him. After viking abroad from spring to harvest time, their current fenrir had returned to happy news. His mate had born their second child while he was away, a boy this time. “Thus is the next generation of the new Fenrit line secure,” the skald told them.

"That is lovely news," Chloe said from her position seated near the hearth. Having no expectation of ever receiving visitors, she and Fenris had only made two stools. She'd insisted on sitting on the floor with her porridge, her legs folded in a style she referred to as crisscross applesauce when their sons and daughters were children.

Fenris was surprised by the light tone of her voice.

Even though they'd both decided together to give up their royal titles, he would not have blamed her in the least for feeling jealous of the son of his former beta. Fenrit the Chosen, formerly known simply as Randulfsson had grown up beside FJ and had been meant to take on the role of beta when their eldest son assumed his destined place as ruler of the North Wolves.

Now Fenrit not only held the title that should have belonged to FJ, but he had also given his village an heir, thanks to his making a conventional mateship—ironically with the bride Fenris and Chloe had brought back from their last sea voyage for FJ.

With this second bairn, it would seem Fenrit now fully had the life that should have belonged to their son.

Chloe had cause to be jealous, to rue her mate ceding to him both the title and bride originally meant for FJ. But nay, her genuine delight upon hearing this news flowed over their mate bond.

She was still a true queen, Fenris realized then. Happy for others, even when they received gifts she and Fenris could never hope to have. Such as grandchildren they were fortunate enough to meet.

"More porridge?" she asked them.

"Yea, thank you," the skald and he answered together.

As they tucked into a second bowl of porridge, the subject turned to the Great Serpent Battle. And Fenris relayed the tale from beginning to end.

"So, you were not here the first time the drakkon set down upon your village, but you and your sons led the warriors who drove the drakkon from your villages?" the skald asked after he was done.

"Yes, that is correct," he answered, tensing. He did not mind the skald's question. Fenris did not often get the chance to talk with anyone other than Chloe. And regaling the skald with tales of their village warriors' feats of bravery during the Great Serpent Battle had been an enjoyable way to pass the morn.

However, the skald was now venturing onto what his wife would call "a sensitive topic." he glanced over his shoulder at Chloe, who

had now moved on to a sewing project, adding pockets to the lining of the bear coat Fenris would wear for his upcoming week-long hunt.

The skald followed his gaze, and Fenris could see the frank curiosity in his eyes as the smaller male looked upon his wife. Most wolves had never encountered anyone who looked as she did. Even the wolves who *viking* had only had a few encounters with peoples with skin the color of Chloe's. *Blamenn* they called them. And before the time gate delivered Fenris to Chloe's land, he, like his fellow viking warriors, had only come across humans with skin as dark as his mate's. Fenris imagined their skald guest had also never encountered a wolf who looked like his Chloe ere to this.

"Your dress is of such a strange design. Does it hail from the same land as you?" the skald asked Chloe.

"In a manner," Chloe answered without looking up from her sewing. "The dress I came here in fell apart many winters ago. This one was reconstructed from memory and made of a much heavier material."

Fenris inwardly frowned, recalling the eve she began sewing the first of three garments she referred to as "prairie dresses." He'd liked these dresses of hers well enough, as she was wearing such garb when first they did meet. But it unsettled him that she now wore her prairie dresses exclusively. Before they moved into this cabin, she'd happily worn *hangerok* aprons as the other North she-wolves of this land did.

"Your garb is enchanting," the skald said, interrupting those thoughts. "Such a wonderful detail to include in my tale. I am sure this story will become one of my most well-received poems. I only have a few more questions?"

The skald turned back to face Fenris across the table. "What happened to your sons, Fenrisson Ever the Man and Olafr Ever the Wolf, after the Great Serpent Battle? Why did your former beta's son become the *fenrir* of the North Wolves and not your own? When I asked Fenrit the Chosen about this, he could not answer for certain. So please tell me now, Fenris the Beardless, did your son die from his wounds after sacrificing himself to save us all from the serpent threat?"

Fenris the Beardless. No one had called Fenris that in quite a long while, even though his Chloe continued to shave his face twice a

week to keep the hair there from growing back.

The skald's breathless tone told Fenris this male had already decided his guess was true. And he opened his still beardless mouth to let him know that his sons did not die in battle but left to find their fated mate.

However, another voice stopped him. "Get out!"

They both turned to find Chloe, standing now with a furious look upon her face. "You think you can pick over our tragedy like a vulture? No, get out! Get out of my house now!" she screamed at the skald. Not in their North Wolves tongue, but in the *English* from the future land she'd left so many winters ago.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!"

"What is she saying?" the skald asked Fenris, his eyes wide with astonishment.

Fenris tightened his jaw, swallowing down the story he would have told him if not for Chloe's upset. Then he said, "You will leave now. And you will speak of this not in story, poem, nor song."

"But how shall I end my tale?" the skald demanded, looking between Fenris and the she-wolf whose unexpected fury Fenris could feel quavering over their mate bond.

Fenris rose from the table and went to his mate. "You shall say that after the great battle, Randulfsson became fenrir and the former alpha took a cabin in the woods," he answered the skald, wrapping an arm around his mate's shoulder. "You may also say that our hearts were...saddened by the loss of our three children."

"So does that mean—" the skald began to ask.

Fenris cut the persistent teller of tales off with his next words. "That was the end of the tale," he growled at him. "If I hear you have ended their story any other way, I will hunt you down and kill you."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### OLA

**A**s my mom often says after something crazy goes down...So that happened.

I sit collared and stunned in the back seat as Damianos intones, "Colby, you may continue on to our final destination."

"Right away, Master," the driver answers with a super posh English accent.

He turns an actual key to start the engine, and we drive past Akwasi and the gun, leaving them behind in the parking lot.

"Please fasten your seat belt," Posh British Dude says after a few minutes of driving, then he pulls onto a highway leading north without consulting any kind of GPS system I can see.

Hmm, he's English, but he knows how to drive on our sides of the road, no GPS required. I've never seen someone drive without a nav system before. Biosystems only work with driverless cars. And biomaps only work outside of moving vehicles, so as to avoid the kind of technological conflict of interests that ends up in car crashes.

But this man drives with more self-assurance than Uncle Clyde. And if you've ever seen a black man from Detroit drive anywhere, you know that's pretty damn confident.

"What's your name?" I demand.

"My name is Colby, Mistress." He looks at me over his right shoulder when he says that, and I inwardly jolt. He looks more like a fresh-faced college kid than a Bond villain's henchman. How old is this guy? Is he an ageless dragon like Damianos? No, I don't think so...

I covertly sniff in his direction. I don't pick up any wolf or fire. From what my nose is telling me, he's one-hundred percent human. Good. Maybe that means unlike the guy sitting next to me, he actually has some humanity.

"Colby what?" I ask. "I want to know exactly who's helping this asshole kidnap me."

"He won't feel any guilt over his assistance if that's your aim," Damianos says beside me. "I assure you, this Colby and all the Colbys before him heed me and only me without compunction."

He leans over, so close, his fire and ash are all I can smell, and pulls the seatbelt across me. The sides of his large hands brush against my body as he does, and there's no mistaking the sensation when he touches me this time. My wolf stands all the way up.

But why though? Does this stupid bitch not realize we're being kidnapped? By someone who probably plans to...actually I'm not quite sure what he's got planned for me.

"What exactly is this kidnapping about?" I demand. "What's your endgame? Where are you taking me?"

He slides me an icy look. "Does it really matter?"

"I'm sitting here with an electronic collar around my neck, so yeah I'd say it matters where you're taking me. It matters a lot."

"Funny that you should call the contraption I had Akwasi place around your neck a collar. *Dogs...*" His mouth tilts up, but the amusement in his voice never makes the climb all the way up to his deadly cold eyes. "That's what we drakkon began calling you wolf mutations after we saw how the anthros had domesticated many of your grey wolf cousins."

Okay... how much worse would this situation go for me if I punched him in his smug mouth?

But then I hear my uncles tutting in my head.

"Honey, you can't ever let them see they're getting to you," Kyle had explained after I cussed out one of the older small town pack leaders for calling me "the girl alpha."

"Just put a bullet in them when nobody's looking," Clyde advised.

*"Oh, Clyde," my uncle-in-law had said, giggling like his husband was telling a joke. Though I suspected from the lack of protestors throughout the first gay alpha's reign that Uncle Clyde might be a total "where is the lie?" meme come to life.*

Okay, I'm a queen now. What would a real queen do? Stall, I decide. Get more information. Keep him talking while I try to figure out what to do.

"Is that what you call humans?" I ask. "Anthros?"

"Anthrohominids. Also upright primates. And cattle."

Cattle....

*"They were basically raising the humans here like cattle. And I guess we were, like, their hunting dogs."*

I recall what my twin Fensa told me after we rescued her dragon mate. That it had been the alien dragons from Mercury who were responsible for the wolf shifters race. We'd been a genetic mutation of humans created by the dragon court's royal geneticist, a dragon named Fenrir. Our species was originally supposed to be some kind of gift to the royal dragon family. And apparently Fenrir, the Royal Geneticist, had been the basis of the Fenrir wolf myth we'd grown up with courtesy of our Viking werewolf fathers, not a wolf locked up by Odin—Fensa stopped here to let me know Xenon hadn't appreciated the North Wolves' colorful interpretation of what he had attempted to deliver to them as a fact-based history.

According to Fensa by way of Xenon, the Royal Geneticist had petitioned to make Earth a protected territory, due to our potential to eventually develop into an advanced civilization if left alone.

Xenon and friends had been sent here to supposedly investigate those allegations—but really to get the planet set up with what they called fertility portals and to train us werewolves for the next royal hunt. To nobody's surprise, the super corrupt investigation team sent back a report that Fenrir was wrong and of course the elite drakkon should be allowed to hunt us to their hearts' content.

But then to everybody's surprise, Fenrir blew up the dragon's home planet in response.

"He was, like, an ecoterrorist before that was really a thing," Fensa told me. "And before that, he'd designed us wolves to live amongst the humans, then aid in the fetching of them whenever dragons popped over to our planet to hunt them."

Real hashtag, it had been #toomuchtoprocess. "Okay, I'm going to pretend like I never heard that," I told her after she explained the origin of werewolves. "I'm just going to go back to what I believed before. That humans are basic, and wolves are, like, magic. Cuz there's no way I'm going to start saying 'what the Fenrir Dragon.'"

I'd done a good job of suppressing all of those true histories I hadn't asked to know. But now they all come racing back to me.

"Where are we going?" I ask again, my throat tight for reasons beyond the collar around my neck.

This time Damianos doesn't even bother to answer. He turns his hooded gaze to the window. Like I'm a gnat that somehow found its way inside his car.

He looks even more Greek statue-like in profile. Long, sharp nose, eyes intelligent and hooded like a really hot Oscar winner doing a take on Julius Caesar. I can easily imagine him in any era. The finest man in every room and the best dressed.

My wolf sniffs at him, curious and afraid at the same time.

*Okay, stop, girl, just stop!* I know my wolf and me weren't exactly on the same page about Akwasi, but her response to Damianos is crazy. *You shouldn't be eyeing up our family's mortal enemy like he's all that and a bag of chips.*

My wolf licks her lips only seeming to hear the part about a delicious bag of chips...also, why am I using my mom's outdated slang all of a sudden? Kill me now.

Actually, I decide, glancing across at my fathers' mortal enemy. Don't kill me now.

Okay, I've got to flip this queen switch. Think, think, think...

Without my biosystem online, I can only assume he's planning to put me on a drone and take me somewhere super clandestine and remote. Like that Greek Island fortress of his that doesn't show up on any maps, or even worse. Someplace, totally off the human or wolf grid that even my incredibly royal and powerful family would never know to look. Someplace they'd never find me.

Which I absolutely can't allow.

A basic plan develops crystal and clear. Do whatever I have to do not to get put on that drone. It's the only chance I have of being found before he hurts me...or worse.

The car turns left up a service road. It's too dark to see, even with wolf vision, but I think we're on some kind of mountain or hill. The



car tilts upwards as its tires snap and crackle over dead leaves and twigs. A thick tree line blocks out everything beyond the narrow road.

I can't help but be impressed. A mountain meadow is a perfect place to hide a private drone if you want to get in and out of the state undetected.

The car rolls to a stop, and I resist the urge to pull on the old-fashioned door handle. Better to wait for the human driver to come around and let me out. I'll act all docile, then make my move—wait a minute is that...

My mouth drops open at the sight in front of me.

There is a meadow with a drone gleaming under the moonlight in the far distance. But right in front of us sits a two-story French chalet log cabin with charming cedar gables and front walls made of glass. It features three bedrooms, two of which have ensuite bathrooms, and a large, warmly-lit two-story living room that could easily host a party for fifty or more guests. It also has smart walls in every room.

I know all of this because last winter, I got in a huge fight with my uncles about authorizing the formerly small cabin's over-the-top renovations.

"Is this part of some 'get your rednecks subjects to like you' plan?" I'd asked them when I saw how much building an official gatehouse on Yellow Mountain would cost the kingdom. "Because we don't owe those punk bitches shit."

"I don't need them to like me," Uncle Kyle had answered. "But I do want to keep them busy and comfortable building the new gatehouse. Most of them live below the poverty line, and angry, underfed wolves with nothing to do cause way more trouble than opinionated assholes with jobs. And remember you're the one who refused to let Rafe's black box us. We could have just left the old gatehouse a historic relic without running water or electricity if we weren't required to post a round-the-clock sentry as part of our opt-out agreement."

Kyle had a point. But I still hadn't liked the idea of funding the gatehouse project.

Thanks to us, those fools had a gatehouse so grand, it could be used as a meeting place by the YMWs. As part of our agreement with Rafe's, we'd even hired Kirk to live here year round. Like back

in the day when security wasn't just a matter of sticking camera buttons onto a bunch of trees and watching the feed from the security room at the kingdom house. And we gave the rest of the able-bodied YMWs enough well-paid construction work to pay the Wi-Fi bill and maybe even order themselves up a bride from some struggling underdeveloped country.

Clyde assured me he'd been checking in on the YMWs every week of the school year, making sure that anyone who was out absent wasn't being restricted from school and also keeping an eye for new she-wolves who'd been brought here against their will. He told me the YMWs had been surprisingly respectful during the check-ins, with no signs of foul play to be found. But still, the gatehouse project stuck in my craw, and I'd been planning to figure out a way to defund it as soon as I got my crown.

I've got my crown now. It's still resting, heavy and golden on top of my head.

But instead of sitting in my kingdom office, allocating the money we pay Kirk to some much worthier program, I'm sitting in the back of a car, looking up at the brand spanking new gatehouse for the first time.

What the Fenrir wolf? Why are we here at the gatehouse?

The answers to those questions hit me like a drone nuke.

I had been right about Damianos taking me somewhere my family would never know to look. Someplace they would never find me. But I was wrong about how he'd get me there.

Our final destination wasn't the drone. It's the cabin.

My kingdom's own fucking gatehouse.

"Sonovabitch..." I whisper.

## CHAPTER NINE

This night seriously couldn't get any worse, I think.

Then I immediately regret issuing that challenge, when Kirk Waters comes bounding down the cabin's front steps. Like this shitty night is saying, "I'll see your creepy kidnapping and raise you a misogynist, tobacco-spitting gatekeeper!

But he surprises me by bending down to greet me with a huge grin through the car's window. "There you are, Queen Ola! I was expecting you over an hour ago. I was afraid Colby got lost, even though I was sure the directions I wrote down for him were good enough to get him here without a hitch."

"They were," Colby assures him from the front seat. "But Master wished to see her dance."

"Oh, I bet that was a fun time!" Kirk says, throwing Colby a quick grin. He then turns back to me. "Here, let me help you out of the car. We had a terrible bad rainstorm yesterday and it's still pretty muddy. Wouldn't want you to slip!"

Wouldn't want me to slip? This prepper had looked like he was dying for me to slip earlier tonight at my coronation. Preferably off the stage, with a noose around my neck.

I stare at him, confused until suddenly I realize. "He got to you. He's hypnotized you or whatever he did to my boyfriend to make him do whatever he said."

"He wasn't truly your boyfriend, Ola."

I glance over my shoulder at Damianos, who's adjusting his cuff links. Like he couldn't be any more bored as he informs me, "He was merely a thrall I put in place to ensure you were exactly where you

needed to be when I was ready to make my claim. You may divest your mind of him now. I assure you; you won't be seeing him again."

Even more unsettling than the idea that my first mate potential boyfriend had been hypnotized into dating me was the word "claim."

"You must be tired after that big coronation party and the long drive," Kirk says before I can ask Damianos what the hell he meant by *claim*. "Master, is it okay for me to open the car door for her? I've got her room ready with her bed all turned down, just like you asked."

"Yes, fine," Damianos answers, shaking out his sleeves.

Let's get me inside...the newly renovated house that's at least a mile or two away from where my party took place. Where...no one...and I mean absolutely no one from my current kingdom town would ever think to look for me.

*Shit, shit, shit*, Could Damianos Drákon be any more diabolical? I wonder as Kirk opens the door and holds out his hand to me.

Then instead of taking Kirk's hand, I punch him in the nuts.

I run, run like my life depends on it. Because guess what? I'm pretty sure it does.

But dammit, Kirk was right about the mud. I don't even make it ten steps in my high heels. The crown I've been so proudly wearing all night tumbles from my head as I slip and fall like a skinny white girl in a horror film.

But unlike those ever-fallin' girls, I kick off my shoes and immediately push back up to my feet. No time for recovery. I grab back my crown, tuck it under my arm and take off again, determined to get away.

Unfortunately, the fall gives the trillionaire's English boy servant enough time to catch up with me, even with his relatively slow speed.

Lucky for me, dude's still a human and there's a three-quarter's moon hanging overhead. A quick football shove sends his gangly body flying into the closest tree as I continue running down the mountain. I've got to get back to the road Colby drove up to get here

—

KA-THUNK!

The ground shakes with the impact of something landing right in front of me.

It's Damianos, with a huge set of dragon wings now sticking out from the back of his suit.

Not enough time to hit the brakes, I'm running downhill and I've got too much momentum behind me. So another football shove it is. I dip my head, hold my hand out, and charge at him like a Sunday night bull.

It's like running hand first into a stone wall. He doesn't budge and I go flying backward, dropping the crown and landing on my butt.

Okay, she-wolf down. But still not a skinny girl in a movie. I roll to my knees, prepared to take off again.

But this time when I reach for my crown, pain, sharp as a razor slices up my left arm. *What the Fenrir wolf?*

Still not a crying-ass bitch. But there's some major anime face teeth clenching going on when two large legs appear between me and the crown I was reaching for.

Damianos crouches down, filling up my eye line. The front of his shirt now has a muddy handprint on it.

"You've ruined my suit." His voice is weirdly calm, considering the suit looks like it cost more than my dress and crown combined.

*Who cares about his voice, Ola? Run, run, we've got to run!* both my wolf and my human scream at me.

But I can't...

The pain in my arm, it's bigger now. Acrid and bitter. It's the sort of pain that can't be reconciled even by gotta-get-away adrenaline.

I raise my left arm, not wanting to see, but having to look....

There's a jagged edge of ivory sticking up where my wrist used to be.

My bone, I realize inside the fog of pain and confusion. The broken edge of what used to be one long radius.

*Like crashing into a stone wall...*

Oh...my...Fenrir Wolf. Charging him at that speed broke my arm.

I turn away from the sight, and every delicious thing I ate at coronation comes spewing out of my mouth.

Damianos releases a heavy sigh. "And now you've ruined my shoes."

Pain...pain...so much pain. And because of the collar, I can't shift into my wolf. My vision blurs, then darkens. Then I'm falling sideways...back into the mud.

Damianos rises to stand above me.

"Ola...." He retracts his wings and reaches down to pick up my crown. Then, with what only seems like a modicum of effort, he crushes the precious symbol of my sovereignty between his large hands like an aluminum can.

"Don't do that again," he says, before tossing my crown away like so much trash.

That's the last thing I see before the world fades to black.

## CHAPTER TEN

### KNUD

“I know you like the guy, but you’ve gotta let me kill him.” Layla’s pretty face crinkled up into a laughing smile as she chided, “Knud, my love, you can’t kill my father just because he asked us to move.”

“This is what you call *asking*?” Knud hitched their baby son higher on his hip so that he can use both hands to point out to his wife, “He waited until we left our apartment, changed our locks, and had a robot hand us an envelope with the address to this place!”

“To be fair, you did tell him we were thinking about finding a bigger apartment.”

“*Thinking* about a bigger *apartment*!” Knud repeated with emphasis on the thinking and apartment. “Not a castle with a moat!”

“It’s not a castle with a moat,” Layla argued, “It’s a Tudor style mansion with a private boat dock on a manmade lake.”

“I could fit all seven members of my immediate family in here, their wives and kids included! It’s a friggin’ castle!”

Anybody only overhearing this conversation would think Knud was exaggerating, but he wasn’t. They were standing in the nursery. Technically the smallest bedroom in the house, but it was larger than the main bedroom in the apartment they used to live in up until last Thursday when they made the mistake of leaving to attend the vow renewal ceremony with Knud’s triplet brothers.

A fine art mural of their son’s name, RUSTANOV was printed in huge block letters across the interior wall. And there was a bed en-

cased in what looked so much like a one-man rocket ship, Knud couldn't say for sure it was only a replica.

"Wocket! Wocket!" Rustanov squirmed down from his father's arm, at the same time Knud asked Layla, "Jesus Christ, how long has he been planning this?"

"I have no idea," Layla admitted. "Believe me if I had, I would have told him it was too much."

"Too much is an understatement, babe!"

As their son toddled over to the bed, Knud went over to the set of drawers underneath the ST in Rustanov's name. He'd bet his favorite stethoscope that they'd already been pre-stuffed with clothes—and yep, sure enough, the first thing he found in the top drawer of folded-up shirts was a miniature hockey jersey with RUSTANOV printed across the back.

Knud picked it up and waved it at Layla. "Is this a miniature version of Pavlov Rustanov's jersey or did grandpa already buy Rusty his own hockey team?"

"That is definitely my cousin's number. Don't worry!" Layla walked over to the dresser and rubbed her husband's back soothingly.

But then she admitted, "Though Dad did mention hiring a private coach at the vow renewal ceremony. And the new basement's large enough to put in a rink."

"He's a baby, Layla! He can barely walk. How is he supposed to pick up a hockey stick!" Knud wasn't trying to yell, but it was kind of hard not to shout when you had the world's most ridiculous father-in-law. "This is not how you *ask* anybody to do anything."

Layla cast her eyes to the side, seeming to give his reservations serious consideration. "You're right. Papa had no right to surprise us with this extremely generous, highly secure, and luxurious vow renewal gift. It would have been so much better if he had applied to be one of our bodyguards, then knocked somebody out on his first day in order to talk to us..."

Knud rolled his eyes. "You're never going to let me forget that."

"Nope," she assured him with a laugh. "And neither is Papa. So you might as well get comfortable with stunts like this."

Knud thought about it. Then bargained, "How about a punch at Thanksgiving? Just one itty-bitty punch."



Layla must have thought he was joking because she only laughed and drew him into her arms. "How about instead of thinking about ways to get back at my father who will never change, we channel all this frustration into something else?" she suggested, pressing a kiss into Knud's jaw.

"I like the sound of something else," he admitted, nuzzling his face into her lips. "Plus it's almost time to put Rustanov down for his nap. What do you think the chances are he'll be able to sleep in the new bed?"

"Wocket! Wocket!"

Knud and Layla looked up to see their son, jumping up and down on the bed he'd somehow managed to surmount on his own. Disproving everything Knud said earlier about him still being a baby without enough coordination to start taking hockey lessons.

Yeah, this kid was definitely going to get his own hockey team as a college graduation gift.

"It's looking pretty good," Layla answered, observing their son with a chuckle, her breath warm against his jaw. "And I'm thinking Level 10 afternoon delight."

Knud raised his eyebrows. "Level 10?"

His wife was still considered America's sweetheart, even after the announcement of her marriage to some shady doctor, with a mysterious background. But Knud wondered what people would think if they saw the gleam in her eyes now at the prospect of Level 10 afternoon delight. Wicked and sexy as hell.

"What do you say?" she asked.

He started to answer the same way he did when she proposed to him. With a "Hell yeah!"

But then a blaring siren erupted in his head. ***"Alert, Alert. You have a hail from President Nightwolf."***

"Papa?" Layla guessed with a sympathetic look when Knud cringed against the siren's wail.

"No, worse...Rafes."

He tapped his neck to answer his pushy oldest triplet's hail. "This had better be good."

\* \* \*

## RAFES

RAFES WAS GLAD HIS QUICK-TEMPERED BROTHER WAS WITH HIS LEVEL-headed mate when Knud answered his emergency hail.

Rafes used to be a cold and distant loner himself. But ever since Myrna, his wild red-haired former Viking princess, literally fell into his life via the North Dakota time gate, he'd come to appreciate the love and support of a completely opposite spouse. He and his wife were both sitting in the Wolf House office right now, he in a suit and Myrna in a cut-out spandex leotard. She'd been due at rehearsal for her next wrestling event over an hour ago but had opted to stay after he told her about what Nago had dug up on Ola's disappearance.

"Family is more important than rehearsal," she'd insisted. And now she held his hand while Rafes talked to his two younger triplet brothers, Knud and Nago, over an audio-only and heavily encrypted biolink.

Rafes was grateful to have her there. And he squeezed her hand as he told Knud, "With the basketball player boyfriend still insisting he has no idea what happened to her after she left the club, I was afraid the trail had gone cold. But then Nago found something important while he was sweeping Ola's biosystem files."

"Wait, you had Nago sweep Ola's biosystem files?" Knud asked.

Rafes rolled his eyes. Of course his contrarian brother would call him out on that. Knud's favorite pastime was thinking the worst of Rafes.

"She's in possession of state secrets, and with her biosystem having gone offline so abruptly, we had no idea if she'd been captured or if she was lying dead in a ditch somewhere. We had to secure North Dakota for either eventuality. I assure you this is standard protocol when royals go missing."

"Yeah, okay, if that's your excuse for having Nago hack into Ola's biosystem while her dads are going crazy trying to find her, that's your excuse," Knud answered, his voice full of skepticism.

Rafes growled low in his throat, his wolf threatening to rise. His middle triplet had always had a way of pushing his buttons. Months

of therapy and training, but a few words from Knud and his disordered wolf came right back to the surface, fur and all.

"Down, boy," Myrna murmured, sensing his distress over their mate bond, and flooding him with calm.

That worked. His wolf stepped back at their mate's command and allowed Rafes to calmly point out. "We wouldn't have made this breakthrough in the case if I hadn't put the safety of all the wolves in North America above the privacy rights of one queen."

Knud let out a disbelieving snort. "Okay, keep telling yourself that."

"Guys, stop fighting," Nago said right on cue. "Rafes, just let him think you're an asshole. And Knud, let him tell you what we found in Ola's biodata already."

Rafes nodded, his anger receding. This was why he'd put Nago on this call, even though he technically only needed to speak to Knud. Their youngest triplet had been breaking up their fights since they were all old enough to form words.

"As it turns out, Ola's not exactly a privacy nun herself," Nago told Knud. "She inserted a nanite spybot into her boyfriend. Probably via a drink."

"That is insanely illegal, but I am zero percent surprised," Knud replied, his voice knowing and dry.

"Me either," Rafes said, agreeing with Knud for once.

"I found some footage from the night she disappeared. Turn on your mind's eye for the playback..."

Rafes had already seen the video but switched back on his Mind's Eye View with a thought command so that he could view it again with his brothers.

Together they all watched Ola enter the club on Akwasi's arm. She was sparkling from head to toe, in a curve-hugging floor-length gold dress paired with the North Dakota crown. Rafes frowned as he often did at his tacky and needlessly crass cousin. Lupin royals were only supposed to wear their kingdom crowns at official ceremonies, and Ola was the only wolf queen in the world who would have chosen such a form-fitting dress for her coronation.

At least she *had been* the only queen in the world who would pull such a stunt. His chest panged as he watched his cousin through Akwasi's eyes. Yes, Ola had been nothing but a pain-in-the-ass since the

day she learned to argue. But now Rafe had no idea if he'd ever see her again.

"So she's going into the club with him, just like Akwasi reported..." Knud said. "Wait was that...?"

"Yes, it's Damianos Drákon," Rafe answered.

"I was surprised too when I first saw him on the spybot's feed," Nago told Knud. "I went through all the club's security tapes and he wasn't on any of them. I'm assuming he disabled them somehow. But let's fast forward about a couple of minutes past that fight that was all over WolfNet. Here's Akwasi and Ola talking in the parking lot with Damianos Drákon."

"Okay..." Knud murmured. Then came a few moments of silence until Knud said, "Holy shit!"

"Exactly," Rafe agreed, as he rewatched Akwasi collar Ola, then threaten to shoot himself, before Ola gave in and got into the car with Damianos.

"What the hell was that?" Knud asked as they watch the untraceable early-century car drive out of the parking lot and turn left through Akwasi's eyes. "Why did the boyfriend collar her like that? Then threaten to shoot himself?"

Yet another reason he'd made this call over the heavily encrypted presidential biolink. Rafe told Knud the highly classified state secret that he'd found out the hard way when his compromised personal security guard tried to hurt Myrna.

"We believe Damianos Drákon has some kind of strange mental power. One that allows him to brainwash his victims and make them do whatever he commands, even when he's far away. A further investigation by my team revealed that Drákon was the primary investor in Akwasi's club."

"Why would a trillionaire give two shits about a club in Fargo?" Knud asked.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking, too," Nago said. "But given what Rafe told me about these mental powers of his, I can only assume that's when he was compromised...and maybe why he approached Ola in the first place."

"I knew that hookup was too good to be true!" Knud said. "He's one of the nicest guys in basketball. Always giving back. Building orphanages in Africa, No drinking. No swearing. From the first time I heard he asked Ola out, I was like, but why though?"

"Hey, opposites attract," Rafes smiled at his wife in her sexy wrestling leotard.

"Yeah, you know I believe that," Knud conceded, most likely thinking about his own wife. "But there's opposite, then there's Ola. Even my lucky ass figured that relationship would end with her grabbing his heart out of his chest and eating it while he watched."

"Then yelling 'YOLO 100, bitch!'" Nago quipped.

They all laughed, only to sober at the thought of the incorrigible cousin who'd been kidnapped by her fathers' worst enemy.

"Even after watching it twice, I can't believe Drákon just grabbed her like that," Nago told them.

"Wish I could say the same." Rafes took Myrna's other hand as well, needing to feel even more of her skin against his. "But I've known Damianos Drákon was most likely planning some sort of revenge against Olafr and FJ and perhaps even Myrna for years now. I just didn't know he'd target Ola first."

Rafes shook his head, telling both his brother and Myrna, "I'm afraid the problem is much more complicated now. Not only do we need to find Ola. We need to rescue her and possibly deprogram her, which..." Rafes swallowed before admitting. "My people in mental services still haven't entirely figured out how to do."

"Wow, this is so jacked," Nago said.

"Yeah. The best-case scenario is we'll get a note soon with a list of his demands," Rafes answered.

"And the worst-case scenario?" Nago asked, his tone concerned.

Rafes had been afraid that would be Nago's next question.

Knud answered before he could, his voice as hard and cynical as it used to be before he struck the marriage jackpot. "Her fathers killed his father. Worst case scenario is he's trying to take from FJ and Olafr like they took from him."

Nago's answering curse sounded both angry and mournful.

"But we're not there yet," Rafes reminded both of his brothers. "There's still the chance Damianos will be in contact. And meanwhile, at least we know who we're looking for now. But we're going to need some help. That's why I hailed you, Knud. About that super-secret location that Alexei Rustanov arranged for Fensa. I think that dragon of hers can help us find Damianos..."

Now it was Knud's turn to curse. "Fuck, now I've got to ask my father-in-law for another favor. Looks like the fam and me will defi-

nitely be staying in this new house."

"You moved to a new house?" Nago asked. "When did that happen?"

Rafes was surprised, too. Knud moved into a two-bedroom apartment after snagging the famous daughter of one of the world's richest men, less than a year ago. "It's kind of soon to be moving, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Daddy Rustanov bought us a castle," Knud grumbled. "I'll be in touch after I talk to the other trillionaire pain-in-my-ass."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### OLA

I wake inside a bright room with the immediate sense that it's been a longer than usual time since I last opened my eyes. But not long enough.

Images of what happened immediately assail me...Akwasi with the gun to his head...sitting across from a seven-foot plus Greek statue who smelled like fire and ancient cologne...trying to run...

*"Ola. Don't do that again."*

My arm! That ancient asshole's chest broke my arm, I remember with a gasp. Reflexively, I raise the broken appendage to see it again. But...

Nothing. Save for a faint scar where the bone split skin and a slight dull ache at the breaking point, you'd never know that it was broken.

However, any relief I might have felt over that fact is quickly erased by what I see around my other wrist. A chain. A silver chain. And by silver, I don't mean the manmade chrome alloy that most people refer to as silver these days. I mean the native metal that burns like a motherfucker when supernatural folks like me touch it.

The only reason my skin isn't sizzling now is because of the cloth padding in between me and the cuff's underside. But that doesn't mean I can pull myself lose. I find out the hard, burn-y way that the edges have no protection when I try to use my wolf strength to tug my hand out.

"Oh good, you're awake! I was beginning to think you'd stay asleep forever."

I lift my head at the sound of the voice.

Kirk, the gatekeeper, is sitting in a chair near the bed, his smile warm and bright. He'd sullenly stood there when my uncles and I came out to Yellow Mountain for the poorly attended ceremony to appoint him as the official North Dakota gatekeeper. But now he's smiling down at me like we're long lost friends.

"I wouldn't try getting out of that chain again," he warns. "It's made out of one-hundred percent silver. Had a helluva time attaching the cuff after your wolf healed your arm and you shifted back."

Wait, I shifted? That must mean...

My heart surges with hope as I reach my free arm up to pat my throat...only to sink when I feel the biocollar still around my neck. I also notice that I'm dressed in some kind of linen nightgown, old-fashioned, loose, and long.

"Master told me to take it off you after you fainted. Then he had me put it back on as soon as your wolf was done healing your arm," Kirk explains. His tone helpful, even if his actions were not.

"Master," I repeat, shaking my head at Kirk. "You didn't want my uncles or me to run the pack, but now you're calling that dragon shifter Master?"

Kirk's eyes widen. "Is that what he is? A dragon shifter? I knew it had to be something special, but I was thinking a vampire or maybe even a demon when I saw those wings of his. A dragon! Who would have thought it?"

"Yeah, the asshole who kidnapped your state queen is major impressive," I start to answer. But then I stop.

*Patience...patience, Ola.* You need this guy to get out of here. Even if he is a Civil Wolf War Prepper turned abettor.

Okay, okay...assuming that he's underneath the same weird spell as Akwasi, I ask, "What exactly are your orders here? What did the dragon tell you to do?"

"You know, get the house ready for lady company. Make sure you were comfortable and attend to you—at least those were my orders before you punched me in the dick and tried to run away. After you broke your arm, he brought out the silver chain."

Kirk answers so casually. Like we're talking about plans for a formal tea that didn't quite pan out. How far gone is this guy?



Panic rises like bile in my throat.

*Remember Ola, most of being a good state ruler is figuring out what the problem is and making it look effortless when you solve it.*

My uncle's past advice shores up my mind and keeps it from caving in as I perform the first step in the good queen equation. Okay, what's the problem?

I'm stuck in a room with a guy who's been so thoroughly hypnotized he's not only being nice to me but also holding me prisoner. How do I solve it?

Kirk's first command had been to attend to me while I was here, and it had probably been made with some diabolical consideration. But the second command Kirk was given sounds hasty. Something Damianos shot off in the heat of the moment. Just how thorough was the supervillain's mind hack? I wonder.

"Your...uh...master told you to attend to me." As a descendant of slaves, the word master stuck in my throat. But after choking it out, I ask, "What would happen if I told you to attend to me by releasing me from this chain and driving me back to the North Dakota kingdom house?"

Kirk stares at me for a long blank moment. But then he says, "Well, I guess I would have to release you and drive you back to the kingdom house." He sounds just as surprised as me by his answer.

And I know I'm supposed to make this queen shit look effortless, but my mouth drops open before I recover and say, "Okay, yeah, great. Exactly the answer I was expecting. Let's do this thing then. Take this chain off and drive me back to the kingdom house."

"Yes, I will take the chain off and drive you to the kingdom house!" he repeats as he stands up and comes toward the bed.

I flinch. Having the Yellow Mountain wolf who spat tobacco at my feet last night come straight at me does not feel right or safe. But, once again, Uncle Kyle calms my mind from afar.

*Remember, Ola, they're all our subjects, even the ones we don't like. We have to figure out what each and every one of them needs. Figure out how to help them. That's what real kings and queens do.*

More good advice from Uncle Kyle. Okay, instead of shrinking away from Kirk, how can I help him?

Well, we're going to have to get him un hypnotized as soon as we return to the kingdom house. That's for sure. Can it be fixed? I've

never seen anything like the power Damianos seems to be wielding over Akwasi, that young driver dude, and Kirk.

But at least we found a workaround for now. That thought gives me solace.

That solace disappears when instead of putting on thick leather gloves and handling the silver gingerly as any other wolf would have, Kirk picks up the chain with his bare hand.

"Kirk! What are you doing?" I ask.

"Letting you out like you asked," he answers. His face has contorted into a painful grimace, but he pulls the key out of his pocket, nonetheless.

"But your hand!" I'm gagging on the smell of burning flesh. If I had anything left in my stomach, it would probably be all over the front of his gun silhouette t-shirt by now. And I'm no nerd like Fensa, but I have to wonder if he'll even be able to drive with a severe silver burn on the palm of his hand.

Megafrown emoji face, another problem. "I'll bandage you up after you're done and drive us both back to the kingdom house myself. Just give me your keys."

"Okay." He repockets the key and reaches into another pocket in his cargo pants.

"What are you doing?" I ask, eyeing the pocket where he disappeared the key to my freedom.

"Giving you my car keys like you said."

"No, let me out first. Then we'll deal with the keys."

"Okay." Tears of pain are spilling from his eyes, but he fishes the key out of his pocket again and raises it to my cuff...

"Oh, Ola. Did you really think it would be that easy?"

We both look up, and my heart stops when I see Damianos in the doorway. Dressed in a simple wool knit sweater and slacks. Looking very, very large and really, really in charge.

Shit! Cold dread drenches my body.

"That will be all, Gatekeeper. You may go downstairs now and complete The North Dakota Queen's lesson as previously discussed," Damianos says, his voice sounding calm as tea with the human British king.

"Okee-dokee," Kirk says, dropping the key to the floor where I couldn't possibly reach it.

He finally releases the silver cuff. And, oh Fenrir Wolf, the skin on the front of his palm detaches, fused as it now is to the silver.

After being half-raised by a great-grandfather who was a motorcycle gang leader, I've garnered a reputation as a pretty bad bitch over the years. But I just about faint all over again when I see that.

"Oh gee, that smarts," Kirk says, looking at his melted palm.

Grey fur sprouts on his face. The natural instinct of his wolf taking over to heal his human.

"No, Gatekeeper. You are not allowed to turn to your wolf for the pain," Damianos says, stepping further into the room. "This is, after all, a lesson."

The fur recedes as quick as it appeared, leaving his hand a disgusting mess.

"Kirk needs medical attention," I say, trying to keep it together. "You've gotta at least let him have bandages."

Damianos levels me with a cool look. "You are going to be even more vexing than I anticipated," he says before telling Kirk, "Attend to your wound, then complete the lesson. Use your good hand to open the door when you leave."

Kirk, no longer to my surprise, does exactly as commanded, running out of the room.

And then suddenly I'm alone.

With Damianos Drakkon.

For the very first time.

Chained to the bed...

And wearing a nightgown that makes me look like a tragic heroine in a Shakespearean play.

Not good. Really not good.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

There's a scared rabbit where my heart used to be, thumping its feet wildly and trying to get out. And I can't even be mad at myself for feeling scared. Yes, I was raised by motorcycle gangsters and Vikings, but Damianos...

He's something else.

Laying down prone and chained to the bed, my mind has a hard time processing how insanely large he is. He dwarfs both my father's and my sister's seven-foot plus dragon husband. And even though he's simply dressed, he's still radiating all-powerful trillionaire.

People like me act. Before I enter any room or conversation, I always make a conscious decision to pretend like I'm the baddest bitch on earth.

But this dude isn't acting. I know that as he looks down at me.

As bad as I pretend to be, he's way, way badder.

He's not just the elephant in the room.

He's the mega monster stealing all the air, making it impossible for me to breathe, much less say something cool and unbothered.

All I can do is stare as he comes to stand in front of the bed, towering over me, as his eyes slowly scan my prone body.

"Thralls can be unbelievably stupid, especially the dogs. If not given precise and specific commands they often hurt themselves in their eagerness to obey. You'll do well to remember that when dealing with servants during your time here."

His voice is so casual, that it takes me several moments to realize he's explaining why Kirk hurt himself trying to free me. And that he

expects me to do better in the future.

I consider lots and lots of answers before choking out, "During my time here....so you plan to keep me here for a while. Is this some kind of power move then? You planning to use me as a bargaining chip with my family? My dads or...?"

I think about the Black Box project that Rafe couldn't get traction on until he was elected for a second term. He'd been scared that Damianos Drakkon would somehow acquire enough of our time gates for some unknown supervillain plot. I used to think him paranoid. And I'd been relieved when he agreed to let us keep the gate his mate arrived at unboxed.

But now I have to ask Damianos, "Is this...is this about the North Dakota gate? Because I'll never agree to sell it to you. I don't care what you do to me."

"No, this is not about the gate." He crooks his head, but it doesn't come off as quite human. The gesture is almost slow motion in comparison. As if he thinks his head is much larger than it is.

Like a dragon, I realize. Even though he looks human, he still moves like a dragon.

"And as for how you fit into my overall plan..." he continues. "Originally you and your sister were merely pawns I planned to murder as part of my vengeance against your fathers. But your visit to my home in Greece changed all of that."

He stops here of all places. And I'm forced to ask, "Changed all of that how?"

His eyes scroll over me. And even though I'm wearing this billowing nightgown, I can feel his gaze pressing into my skin, like a slow, cold lick. From the bottom of my bare feet to the top of my hair, which I'm sure must look wild and untamed now. Machine straightening doesn't stand up to shifts.

"If I am correct about our..." he sneers, disgust curling his lip. "...unfortunate compatibility, we shall soon find out."

I narrow my eyes. "What the hell does that mean? We're not compatible. Like at all."

"No, I wouldn't think so either," he replies. Then he frowns hard, and I once again feel that weird pressing in my head.

"Okay, is that you?" I demand, raising my non-shackled hand to my temple.

His frown turns into a cold neutral look. "Is that me what?"

"I have no idea. It feels weird. Like someone's rooting around the outside of my brain. Trying to get in. If that's you, please stop."

The sensation suddenly ceases.

I lower my arm. "What were you trying to do? Hypnotize me like Akwasi, Kirk, and that boy you've got driving for you?"

Instead of answering, he bends down and retrieves the key Kirk dropped on the floor. "It is time to attend to your hygiene, Ola. Unfortunately, Colby is preparing for your lesson, so you will have to see to your own bathing. Please do so immediately. After these days of healing from your necessary punishment, your odor is penetrating even my capped drakkon tongue."

Okay, I think he's trying to say I stink, and he wants me to take a shower, so he's going to let me out of the cuff.

No argument here. Wolves don't process smells as good or bad like humans and apparently dragons do, but I can feel the days of sweat and grime on my skin. And maybe a shower will clear my head so that I can figure out a way out of this situation.

"I allowed you to heal after your attempted escape. Do you feel that dull ache in your arm bone, Ola?"

I don't answer, but I do reflexively rub at my arm, which I guess is answer enough for him. "Remember that when you think about running again," he says.

Then easily handling the silver arm-cuff, he picks it up and turns the key, freeing me with one twist of his wrist.

But before I can feel too much relief, he promises, "My shackle remains even though I've freed you from the silver cuff. You are no longer your own person. You belong to me now. And wherever you run, I will catch you. And when I catch you, you will be punished."

I sit up and rub at the dull, throbbing ache in my arm.

"Good, I see it is beginning to sink in," he says with a cold smile. "This business between us will go much easier for you if you keep that at the front of your mind over the next few months."

A deeper fear settles over me...did he say *months*. Months of what exactly? Being held as his hostage? Or worst?

Questions race through my mind and come tumbling out, one on top of another. "What business? Why did you bring me here? And why are you keeping me alive if the original plan was to kill me?"

"The facilities are that way," Damianos informs me, nodding toward the closed bathroom door as if I asked him nothing at all.

We stare off for a second or two. He's not only not going to answer my questions, I sense in those cold, silent moments, he's also getting a kick out of scaring me.

For that reason alone, I break off the staring contest and push myself off the bed to shove past him to the bathroom. I don't want him to see how much his tactics are working.

Okay, no more time for freaking out, I decide after the door slides shut behind me.

*Escape! Escape! ESCAPE!* Figuring a way out of here has to be my number one priority. With that in mind, I look around the wood and stone bathroom. The ceiling slopes on a diagonal angle, so this space must be located directly under one of the gables. But damn! No windows.

I get in the shower, crazy disappointed, but determined to figure this shit out. However, the shower suddenly stops five minutes into my mental analytics. Crap. I'd forgotten that we'd outfitted the entire house with climate-friendly settings. Lights turn off when no one is in the room, the dishwasher only runs in the evening. And in this particular case, the shower stops and automatically begins its dry cycle after only a five-minute rinse. Then it refuses to turn on again for the same user for another couple of hours.

Kind of my fault. Even though I use up more than 5 minutes' worth of water just thinking about washing my long, thick, and naturally curly hair, I might have pushed for some extra stringent climate controls. Did I mention I could be a petty bitch? Especially when it came to the Yellow Mountain Wolves. Well, I'm paying for it now. I won't be able to get fully clean, because I was too busy thinking when I should have been lathering up my body.

This smart house is turning out to be a real pain in the ass—

Wait, *smart*. The gatehouse is smart! I cut off my lament when I suddenly realize I might be able to use a wall to get some kind of communication out. What did Mom use to call those formal text messages you had to type out on a non-biological device and send through a special server? Email! Maybe I could use the wall to send some kind of email to one of her old accounts. Which I hoped to God she still checks.

Suddenly I'm a lot more eager to return to my bedroom. But then I cringe when I note what's missing from the bathroom.

Namely, towels. Or any kind of robe.

Okay, it seems the whole point of this abduction is for the universe to yell at me, "You, Ola Greenwolf, are a complete lie."

"You better represent for us fly girls and wear that bikini!" How many times had I told my sister that? She'd been self-conscious about our tall, double-wide brickhouse bodies growing up. And I'd been more than sure it would be a privilege for any man to see our banging curves on display.

But all that body positivity flies right out the window now. But to be fair, nobody in their right mind would want to walk naked into a room maybe still currently occupied by the Greek statue of a dragon shifter who kidnapped her ass.

Please don't be out there. Please don't be out there, I beg the universe as I tentatively open the door.

And you know what? The universe ain't shit.

Of course, Damianos is still in the bedroom, standing by the front-of-house window big as day.

He turns his head to me in that slow dragon way of his and openly stares at my naked body.

And my wolf...goddamn her. She stands up again, making me breathless for reasons I refuse to deliberate on.

"Don some attire, then join me at the window," Damianos commands. Then he cuts his gaze away like he's not at all impressed by anything he saw.

I am not upset. I am *not* upset about Damianos non-reaction to seeing me naked. This guy has kidnapped me. *Kidnapped me!* I don't care one way or the other if he doesn't find me as hot as I know I am because I'm not a stick like a lot of young rich women my height want to be.

I shouldn't care...

So I won't, I decide as I palm open the closet.

It doesn't take me long to decide what to wear. There are only linen nightgowns. Ten replicas of the one I woke up in. I check the push-button drawers underneath just in case. I would kill for my normal around the house wear, a t-shirt and a pair of yoga pants. But the drawers are empty. No underwear even. So, I guess old-timey sleepwear it is.

I slip it over my head then covertly look around for a smart screen or a set of controls. Anything I could use to get a message out...



"Have you forgotten the second part of my order?" I look up from my search to find Damianos once again regarding me now that I'm covered up. "Come, stand with me at the window. I would like for you to see this."

He raises one huge arm and beckons me forward.

It would almost seem like a friendly invite, if not for the stone-cold look on his beautiful face.

I go to him. Maybe playing along will get him out of here faster, so that I can spend some quality time with that smart wall.

I reluctantly go to stand next to him at the window, and the view hits me like a gut punch. Most of North Dakota is flat, and we're on a mountain. So you can see farther than expected. The original state pack village sits, nestled among the trees further down the mount. And if I squinted, maybe I could see all the way to New Wolfsburg, the North Dakota pack's current kingdom town, where my kingdom mansion sits, like the largest jewel in a crown dotted with houses. From this vantage point, New Wolfsburg feels so close.

But it's so far away.

"Don't look out," Damianos commands. "Look down at the gatekeeper. I believe you referred to him as *Kirk*."

I don't want to look down. But something inside me won't let me not look. And that's when I see Kirk.

Standing there. Just standing there. One hand bandaged and the other closed around a huge shiny butcher knife.

"What...what...?" Only the one word falls from my mouth. I'm too disturbed to construct the rest of the question, too afraid I already know the answer.

Kirk waves at me with his bandaged hand, a big goofy grin on his face.

He was so angry and resentful at my coronation. I never would have guessed he'd have a smile like that hidden underneath. But his bright smile makes what happens next that much more horrifying.

After waving, he raises the knife in his arm parallel to the ground.

"No, don't!" I scream. At Kirk. At Damianos.

But neither of them listens, and in the next moment, it becomes too late for pleas. Kirk slashes the knife across his throat, still smiling.

No...No....

*Remember, Ola, they're all our subjects, even the ones we don't like. We have to figure out what each and every one of them needs. Figure out how to help them. That's what real kings and queens do.*

I bang on the window and scream as Kirk's body slumps to the ground, Uncle Kyle's words ringing in my ears.

"Do not defy me. Do not attempt to escape," Damianos says beside me, his voice low and ominous. "If you cross me again, I assure you the next punishment will be much, much worse."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### DAMIANOS

**A**t my words, the North Dakota Queen falls to her knees and screams for a rather long time.

As I watch her lament upon the ground, a delicious power crackles inside my flame. After so much torment, I finally have the daughter of my father's murderers in my possession. And it would seem I have already succeeded in breaking her.

I'd been a bit worried that the gatekeeper's death wouldn't fully drive home my point. But apparently, my she-wolf overvalues the lives of her fellow wolf mutations. Even the enemy I saw spit at her feet through the eyes of Akwasi, one of my many thralls. 'Tis a silly, if not surprising reaction.

They can be soft-hearted, these upright primates, not to mention overly emotional. Why I've seen them fall into dramatic fits of disbelief when they see one of their kind die, even if the one dying is merely a fictional character in a story.

The recriminations will come next if experience holds out. Many "how could yous" and "I can't believe."

"How could you fucking do that?" my she-wolf demands as if having been given a cue. "You had no right. No right!"

I roll my eyes—a useless but amusing habit I learned from the cattle. Then I settle in for the inevitable next phase: piteous wailing.

Often I snap the outraged party's neck, just so I won't have to hear them carry on. Or I god speak them to simply forget what they saw and go away.

It is unfortunate I haven't been able to god speak my captive. It would make this unexpected business between us so much more palatable if she would simply do my bidding.

Despite my many previous failures, I once again attempt to compel her.

*"You will cease your caterwauling and return to the bed. You will wait there until it is time to do your mately duty, and there will be no more attempts to escape."*

She stiffens, then stands up straight. Then looks me directly in the eye.

Did it work? For the first time since I discovered that I could not god speak this female, my chest fills with hope.

But then she growls, "Stop trying to get into my head! Is this how you get off? What you call fun?"

She shoves at me. I don't move of course. But still...the shock of it. Why is she not crying? Or quivering before me and begging for her own life?

"You're pissed at my dads—who by the way, were defending their village when they killed your dad, you big-ass hypocrite. But life means so little to you, you don't think anything about taking it from innocents, people who have nothing to do with your beef!" she yells at me. "Well, fuck you, you big-ass arrogant bitch. From now on, I'm not doing *anything* you say! Kill me. I don't care. I'm done being your victim!" she declares.

Then she hauls back her right arm and punches me. In the throat!

"Ow, ow, ow!" she says directly afterward, shaking out her hand.

Her punch does not hurt me as it does her. Her strength is nothing compared to mine. But it is a rather irritating sensation. And I find myself rather peeved when despite her pain from the first punch, she draws her arm back to strike me again.

This time I catch her fist mid-strike with one hand and capture her jaw in the other.

From there it is but an easy thing to bring her body close to mine so that I might speak directly into her ear. "You are not done doing *everything* I command until I say you are. In fact, by the time our business is finished, I will hear you beg."

With what looks like a great amount of effort, she squeezes out, "Bitch, you do not know who you are fucking with. You think you can come into my territory and start killing up my people? Nah,

dragon, I'm going to find a way to punish *you*. You're going to pay for this. And I will never beg you for any damn thing. Believe that!"

This she-wolf...she does not at all respond as expected. Rage consumes my flame, as I assure her.

"You will beg. For mercy most of all. For it is you who has no proper comprehension of whom she is fucking with."

Before she can answer with another one of her emotional outbursts, I shove her away and send her tumbling back.

Then I quickly exit the room.

I can no longer trust myself. My patience...it has grown too thin. And there is this rather strange business of not being able to as she put it, "get inside her head."

I have never in my comparatively long life been so vexed. Dogs were literally bred to obey us, and I can barely reconcile her immunity...or that this crass, defiant she-wolf is truly a compatible mate.

Yet the proof that she is remains. My male works have fully descended, just as they did the first time I saw her waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs at the Greek estate. And in the parking lot, when she placed herself in my car, humbled and collared.

Fortunately, my male works retract back into my body after the bedroom door slides shut behind me, placing some distance between us. But that relief is short-lived.

Before I reach my own room—a rather modest bedroom and bathroom, that the former gatekeeper had the temerity to refer to as a master suite—the clawing need has once again overtaken me. Demanding I return to her and remain beside her, no matter how infuriated she makes me.

Not yet. I need time. Time to recover from my rage and brace myself for the next battle.

This in itself makes me feel weak.

She makes me feel weak.

And that is a first.

A first I do not like at all.

I cannot get into her head.

But she has somehow managed to wriggle her way into mine.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### OLA

I lie on the hard floor for a long time after Damianos shoves me away.

He makes me feel weak. Helpless.

And not in a good way, like that old *Hamilton* song they're always playing underneath meet cute scenes in romcoms.

There are so many voices swirling around my head, but the dragon king's voice rises above the rest.

Dark and ominous. Telling me to stay down. Resistance is futile and pretty much every single mean thing a supervillain has ever said in any film where the hero takes a fall.

I squeeze my eyes close and try to focus on the other voices. The better ones of people who love me.

My Uncle Kyle advises me to set an internal timer for five minutes. When it's done I'm no longer allowed to feel sorry for myself.

*Bitch betta get to queen solving*, Uncle Clyde advises, his voice Detroit frank.

But then another familiar voice floats in, small and sad. My twin sister explaining why she has to go hide forever on a secret island. *I'm sorry, Ola, I know you want us to fight, but we have to run. He's too powerful, and if he finds us, he'll kill us or worse.*

Fensa had been raised by gangsters and Vikings, just like me.

But even she didn't think Damianos Drákon was a problem she and her family could solve.

So many voices....

But eventually, I open my eyes and heave myself to my feet.

More out of spite than anything else. If that huge-ass dragon bitch has brought me here to abuse and kill me, I'll be damned if I'm going to make it easy for him. Get to queen solving it is.

The good news is that I'm finally alone, which means I can check the wall....

But the bad news deflates me again when I finally find the smart room's control pad hidden behind all the dresses.

The pad's screen is completely dead. It doesn't so much as change colors when I touch it. I guess the closet must be set on a basic sensor. Anyone can open it.

Same goes for the bathroom door, but not for the one leading out of the room. Like the control screen, it doesn't respond to my touch. The floor-to-ceiling windows are also super damn rude. It responds with underwhelmed clinks when I throw a heavy chair at it. And it merely lets out a muffled thunk when I run up against it with all my wolf strength, which fortunately hasn't been dampened by the biocollar.

Not so fortunate? I end up landing right back on the floor after my first and only painful attempt, pissed off and cussing. The window must be made out of the same kind of industrial strength glass we have at the kingdom house. Translucent iron made to look like glass. Unshatterable no matter how many bullets or wolf bodies you throw at it.

A floor to ceiling window made out of this stuff must have cost a fortune. And I know that wasn't in the original budget. Damianos must have hypnotized a few people on the construction project to make this happen—

A chill runs down my back as another thought, even more disturbing than that one suddenly drops down into my mind.

This house was renovated over six months ago. What the hell? Exactly how long had Damianos been planning to kidnap me?

The answer drops to my head just as unpleasantly as the previous realization.

Since I helped Xenon and Fensa escape from his lair.

I'd been wrong about this being about revenge against my fathers. It's about revenge against me.

I sit with that thought. But not for too long. Less than five minutes, probably—though I can't say for sure since, thanks to the bio-

collar, I no longer have access to my internal timer.

*Weapons!*

If I can't get out of this room, I need to make a weapon for the next time that fire-breathing asshole comes in.

Okay, what can I use?

I pull the bar down from the closet, dumping all the nightgowns. This will do 'er.

Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I dip my chin and start to go through the many self-defense drills Papa Olafr taught me. He tried to teach Fensa, too, but after a certain age, she was always so caught up in reading Aunt Alicia's books about ancient wolf civilizations, that he could never convince her to come down to his gym.

But I showed up every morning. And now there's another voice in my head.

*You're a warrior born, Ola, the father I was named after tells me. As long as you're fighting, you can never be defeated.*

I didn't fight smart earlier because Damianos had pissed me off. But I won't make the same mistake again. I start drilling everything Papa taught me about fighting with a stick. Dip my chin low, swing both ends at my invisible but easily imagined seven-foot plus opponent.

Fuck food, I tell my grumbling stomach after hours of practicing. Fuck rest, I tell my sore, only recently healed body. I don't need to eat. I don't need to sleep.

All I need to do is fight.

"The next time he enters this room only one of us is coming out alive," I growl out loud. "Eye of the fucking tiger emoji—"

The fever hits me in a pulsing wave, so sudden and intense I drop the stick. It hits the floor with a noisy clatter as I double over.

*What the...?*

My muscles turn to jelly and I break out into a sweat, suddenly hotter than I ever felt before. In an instant, clothes become a thing my skin can no longer bear. I tear at the old-fashioned nightgown until I'm naked as the day I was born.

What the hell is happening to me? Did he inject me with something while I slept? Some kind of poison maybe? Panic claws at my mind as I try to figure out what the hell is going on with me.

Is this a fever? Am I sick?



Those last two questions stop me in my mental tracks, as yet another remembered conversation downloads into my head.

*"No offense to Alisha, Chloe, and mom, but why does it always take them so long to realize they're in heat in these books?"* I once complained to Fensa, after doing all the assigned reading for my Modern She-Wolf History class at my university's top-secret Lupin Studies program. *"None of them have ever been sick a day in their lives, because they're freaking wolves, right? But in their books, they're always like, oh no, I must be sick! Maybe I've got a fever! None of them ever seem to get they're in heat."*

I'd laughed derisively before telling my sister, *"If I wasn't so loyal, I'd be telling the whole class how dumb they were at the next lecture."*

Fensa had laughed and commiserated.

But now I get it.

As my own dawning horror sinks in, I realize why the she-wolves who came before me would be eager to blame this feeling on something else. Sickness... a too hot temperature setting...a weird moon...because I too was desperate for this sudden fever to be anything—and I do mean *anything* but what it obviously was.

Heat.

I'm in heat.

But no...no...I can't be. The denial instinct swoops back in, along with a desperate reason why this can't be what it feels like. I get my heat control shot on the regular. Never missed an appointment at either the Michigan or North Dakota clinics. It has to be something else. Maybe this time, it really is some exotic sickness I've never heard of—

As if to confirm that I am currently living my worst nightmare, viscous liquid releases between my legs and a new, unfathomable smell reaches my nose. Sweet and filthy at the same time, and so, so, wrong. I recognize the scent immediately even though I've only ever heard tale of it. But I'm still surprised when it unleashes a powerful lust inside of me.

A raw whimper rushes from my throat as I quake with want and hunger. And my now soaking wet pussy clenches with a need more intense than anything I've ever felt before.

But then my nose gets hit with something even worse than the scent of my heat.

Fire and smoke and rich cologne.

*No, no, no...* I find myself once again following the she-wolf denial script. I argue, I demand, I plead with the universe.

But when I look up, naked and shaking with my sticky heat running down both thighs, there's Damianos. Somehow even larger than I remembered him from just a few hours ago.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I try to swallow but end up making a choked horrified sound instead. There is no liquid to be had anywhere above my waist. There is only the heat below. Pulsing and concentrated. On him. But it can't be him. It can't... "Please, please, you've got to help me."

A small smile crawls across his face. Like a deadly black spider. "I see you are already begging. Just as I said you would."

Evil-ass motherfucker.

I grit my teeth to keep the curse from escaping and instead force myself to go against my promise of just a few hours ago and beg some more.

"Please, you've got to help me. Call the kingdom house and have them send a wolf doctor to stop this heat."

He stares at me, his expression cold and unreadable. "Why would I do that?"

"Because if I don't get the heat patch, then I'll die unless I'm mated." A very, very bad thought occurs to me.

Every word of Aunt Alisha's book comes back to me. How she'd been forced to wait so long for Rafe Sr. that she'd gone through a terrifying list of everything that could possibly happen if she wasn't mated in time. From her forcing herself on her gay co-worker to dying of heart failure.

And I have to ask, "Is this why you brought me here? To kill me in the most horrific way possible?"

He tilts his head dragon slow to the side. "I would see why you would think that. But no, that is not why I brought you here."

Then he reaches behind him and closes the door.

I...

I...

"I don't understand," I say.

"Neither do I." His expression is dark and bemused. "But it would seem you and I are sexually compatible. And after being stranded here for so many millennia, I find myself unable to ignore the opportunity to continue my family line. As the former drakkon king has apparently done."

"The former drakkon king..." I repeat, only to trail off when I realize he's talking about Xenon. The cousin he kept chained up in his villain lair for hundreds of years after he helped my dads and grandfather win the Great Serpent War. The cousin who mated my twin sister after she went into heat. Twice.

"You—you plan to mate with me?" I ask, my voice little more than a whispered shriek.

"Yes," he answers, his own voice still perfectly calm. Like we're making plans for what to eat tonight.

"Like, you're going to force yourself on me when I'm weak?"

The idea shocks me to the core. But the lust, it surges. Not caring about his reasons. Just wanting to be claimed.

"Of course I will not force myself on you, Ola. I am a king. A true king. Not the silly powerless kind your ilk pretends to be. There is no need for force. What I want... *whoever* I want, I assure you; I will receive."

With those words, he pulls out the chair Kirk was sitting on earlier and turns it to face me. He takes a seat, leans forward, and, I swear to God, steeples his freaking hands. Like evil fucking incarnate. "I'll wait, Ola. As long as it takes for you to submit to me."

I stare at him. Unable to believe what he's proposing.

And he stares right back at me. Like he's waiting for me to catch up.

*No, no, no...*

Those useless words stomp through my mind again. What can I do? What can I do?

I've got to fight him. Get out of here and find a doctor.

I make a run for the door. He doesn't stop me. Just turns his head as I rush past him. That spider's smile still on his face. "I'll remain here until your return."

No, no, I won't come back. I'll find a doctor. Or another wolf. Anyone. I'll mate anyone but him. My fathers' worst enemy, my kidnapper who kills on a whim.

I push through the door and head toward the stairs, only to stumble when a new wave of arousal crashes over me. Stronger than before. Crippling.

My legs give out and I fall to the floor before I can reach the steps.

I can't get up, can't even crawl. At least not in the direction of the stairs.

I feel an urgent force inside of me. My wolf, I dimly realize. My wolf tugging my attention away from the stairs, back to the room with the dragon inside of it.

*"I'll wait, Ola. As long as it takes for you to submit to me."*

No, no, it can't be Damianos. Literally anyone but him. My wolf is doing this because he's the closest option, I tell myself. She'd fuck anyone with a pulse, right now. It doesn't matter who. Or what species.

One mating. One mating is all I'll need to be able to stand up and walk out of here with a clear head.

"Colby..." I start to croak, only to feel bile rise in my throat. My wolf pitches hard inside of me, like it would rather eject itself from my body than sleep with the human servant.

The intense nauseous feeling recedes as soon as I stop trying to call out to the much better alternative to Damianos Drákon.

But the crazy heat doesn't. Another wave of arousal hits me with so much force, I moan and roll over onto my back. The ache...it hurts...it hurts. Every nerve ending in my body is tingling with sticky need. Even the air feels too heavy on my naked skin. And when I look down, I find my pussy visibly clenching.

I want to be touched. I need to be touched.

I've never felt like this before. How many times had I watched porn simulations and felt nothing but a faint curiosity? How many times had I wondered what it would be like to actually want to have sex? Sex is always a decision for unheated she-wolves made from a place of curiosity or opportunity. Never desire.

Either we go into sex knowing that it will be uncomfortable verging on painful, or we trust our partner enough to make it good for us.

We never make it good for ourselves. It's just not an instinct any of us have.

But now...

Now the urge to touch myself, to rub at the ache between my legs overtakes me. Anything to relieve the painful need.

But no, I can't. How many of my she-wolf ancestors did exactly that? So many that I already know what would happen if I gave in to the temptation... touching myself would only make the urge ten thousand times worse. So unbearable, I'd do anything to make it stop.

Including fucking my family's mortal enemy.

*"The first time with Xenon...it didn't matter what he was. All I knew was that it had to be him."*

My twin sister's story about how she came to be mated to a dragon floats through my mind. And for a moment, the lust threatens to overwhelm me. But then I grit my teeth and haul myself to my knees with a new plan.

I crawl back into the room.

"That didn't take long at all, did it?" Damianos says as soon as I re-enter, his voice ringing with contemptuous delight. "Look how you drip heat as you literally come crawling back to me, Ola."

And I thought I was a petty bitch.

I grit my teeth, and move right on past him, keeping my mind on the goal. But as soon as I start moving in the opposite direction of him, crawling becomes hard. It feels like I'm inching through quicksand, and my knees give out.

But I don't give up. I can't give up. I drag myself across the floor until I reach the bed.

"Are you truly attempting to chain yourself up so that you won't submit to me?" Damianos ask behind me, his voice dark and chiding.

Ignoring him, I narrow my eyes on the silver cuff still dangling from the bedpost. It takes every bit of energy I have left to heave my arms up onto the mattress.

But just as I reach out for the silver cuff, it disappears from my sight.

Damianos simply removes the cuff from the bedpost and says, "Bathroom open."

The bathroom door slides open and he tosses the cuff inside.

I turn to rush toward the bathroom, because even better if I can lock the door behind me, and chain myself up to something in there. But the door slides back closed before the new plan is fully finished forming.

"Bathroom lock," the dragon towering over me says, the words precise and clipped.

The doors answering electronic whir tells me why my plan never would have worked. He's got the house on voice command. Fucking bastard!

But it's just me and that fucking bastard now. And the heat pulsing like a violent animal between us.

He goes back over to the chair and turns it to face me with precise, deliberate movements. Then he sits down and beckons me forward. Like a king on his throne. His eyes hot and hungry. For me.

My entire body trembles with the effort not to respond to that raw hunger, not to let him consume me. I shouldn't... I can't... I somehow manage to drag myself all the way on to the bed. There I lie back and close my eyes, blocking him out as I try to come up with a new plan.

But of course, I can't think. About anything but the small piece of engorged flesh now pulsing like the deepest hip-hop beat between my legs. My body has become one big nerve-ending. Begging to be touched. To be invaded. To be mated. Even by a dragon.

I fist my hands in the covers to keep myself from going to him. But I can no longer control my body. My back arches and my hips jack off the bed, circling in the air with the need to be mated. And my eyes tear with the effort to keep myself from bounding off the mattress.

"Why do you torture yourself?" Damianos asks, with what sounds like genuine curiosity. "This is what you she-wolves were designed for, you know. To breed above all else. And the king of your maker requires your services. You should rush to attend to me, instead of clinging to your silly pride."

*Silly*, he calls it.

This fucking bitch.

"Yes, you're right, I should rush to fulfill my one dream in life. Fucking a fifteen-thousand-year-old virgin," I say. The sheer meanness of my answer salves my wounded pride. "Fensa said she had to teach Xenon everything from the ground up. And I get the feeling

you're one of those entitled bitches who hasn't even watched a single how to please a woman video. I bet that's the real reason you want me to come to you. You wouldn't even know what to do with a female if you had her, you old-ass incel."

There comes a long moment of silence. Dangerous and burning.

Then: "Thank you for saying that, Ola. I will enjoy your utter humiliation even more now. It is 11:15. I predict you will give up within the half-hour."

Bad...stupid...prediction.... I'm going to hold on. I'm going to hold on as long as it takes.

My wolf is fighting me. My body is fighting me. But I'm going to hold on.

And that's exactly what I do. I grit my teeth and ignore the waves of lust crashing over my body. The world becomes the fight, and hours pass as I battle my wolf and all the pheromones raging through my body. But eventually, the heat lets up, and I look at the clock, victorious and drenched in sweat. "See, I told you I would hold..."

The "out" fades away when I see the time.

11:28.

And not 11:28 the next morning. Thirteen minutes. Only thirteen minutes have passed since I decided to die rather than give in.

And that's when I suddenly realize something that I didn't in that sophomore year health class.

Could...

The teachers and the textbooks said a she-wolf *could* die if she wasn't mated.

But in all the examples of bad mateships I've studied, I've never seen a history or even a fiction about a she-wolf dying from not mating when she was in heat. And that's because it's never happened.

*This is what you she-wolves were designed for, you know, to be bred above all else.*

Above all else.

That could had only been theory, I realize now. At a biological level, I can't die by not mating with Damianos, just like I couldn't die by holding my breath. Because on a biological level I won't be able to keep myself from mating with Damianos.

But maybe...once won't be enough to get me pregnant. If I can fuck him just long enough to regain my composure.



The strain to control myself gives away and the tears in my eyes become real as I give in and climb out of the bed. Not a crying-ass bitch, so I don't let them fall. But God I hate myself, hate my design as I move toward him.

"Yes, Ola, come to me." His dark voice says, pulling at me. Like a puppeteer's string.

My legs are so weak now, they give out.

If I'm expecting Damianos to feel sorry for me, forget that. His dark laugh provides the soundtrack as I crawl on my hands and knees over to his chair.

When I reach him, he holds up a hand and rises from his seat.

He's so much larger than me. Especially from my position on the ground. It's like watching a mountain grow even taller. Shame and humiliation wash over me as I watch him remove his shirt. His face is a good con job, thanks to his capped tongue and the teeth that, unlike Xenon's have apparently been shaven down from razor points. But his lower torso doesn't look like anything approaching a human's. Technically he has abs, but they're covered in some type of pale white scales.

That's a lot to process, but my mind completely stops when he pushes down his pants.

Okay, what am I seeing?

What. Am. I. Seeing?

I thought I was mistaken when I grabbed him inside his Greek villain fortress, but I wasn't.

He's packing two cocks. One of which is visibly moving. The first dick is heavy and thick. It's not scaled, but it has the same pale white coloring as his belly and it's so perfectly smooth it put me in mind of marble. Throbbing marble. But if the first dick is pulsing, the second one is full-on squirming. Long but thinner than the first one, it seems to be straining to find something.

And I'm pretty sure that something is me.

My mind blanks. I can feel my human trying to shut us down. To scream uncontrollably. Then faint.

But my wolf growls hungrily inside of me. Too dumb and feral with lust to even care that it's staring down, not one, but two dragon dicks.

And when he returns to his seat and says, "Come, Ola," my wolf springs us into his lap, making us little more than a beast at his

command.

"You will join with me now," he orders. "Take my seed.

His dark words turn me frantic for some reason. And the next thing I know, I'm doing exactly as he commands. Lifting up my hips and taking his overlarge top dick in one hand.

Oh, Fenrir Wolf...he so thick. It both looks and feels like I'm splitting myself open as I guide him into my virgin pussy.

There's a burst of pain as I set myself down on it. My first time is taking place on way too large a dick. But instead of protesting, I let out a long keen of aching need. Then I start moving up and down on his too big dick with ragged, jerking strokes.

"Yes, yes, Ola," his dark voice croons. "Take my seed. Fuck me until I spill into your womb. Your belly will be full of my child as I exact my ultimate revenge upon your fathers. You are my reward for my patience. This child will be the trophy I hold above my head when the final battle is done."

My eyes fill up with tears again, but my wolf.... I can't stop fucking him. "Shut up," I whisper. "Just stop talking while I'm fucking you."

To my surprise, he does just that. And for the next few humiliating minutes, all that can be heard is the frantic slap of my hips as I chase a climax I've only ever read about.

I chase and chase it, only to freeze when the second dick lodges itself into the bottom of my slit, stimulating me down there, while the too big one rubs into my clit.

Just like that, the climax is caught. I hold onto Damianos, calling out nonsense as the climax rockets through me.

The pleasure. It's the opposite of everything that's come before it. Relief, and happiness, and a sudden release of all emotions and desires. I am suddenly no longer the humiliated wolf. And he is no longer the haughty dragon. We just are. I hold on to him and he holds on to me. One being joined together in the creation of life.

I close my eyes again, but this time I'm not fighting this. I'm totally at peace. It's like I've been on a lifelong journey and I've finally found my way home.

But then he begins to swell inside of me, and my eyes pop back open. Like, super wide.

Oh God, he's knotting inside of me. Like a wolf. But not quite. His cock stretches me past all imagined limits, but instead of a knot,

what feels like dozens of soft spikes suddenly spring up on its hood.

I don't realize my hips were still dumbly moving up and down until his swollen spike dick abruptly locks me in place.

It doesn't hurt. In fact, the way the soft spikes rub against all my vagina's secret erogenous zones makes the new deeper sensations building up inside of me even more pleasurable.

At least at first. It's nice in the beginning, but it quickly becomes too much. He's electricity inside of me, lighting me up and stopping my heart. I whimper and scratch at his back, trying to get away and trying to take him deeper at the same time.

Then I come again. So hard, it's blinding.

I think he's suffering, too. "My queen," he bites out, his normally sonorous voice, coarse and ragged. Just as I'm coming down from my second orgasm, his large dragon dick kicks inside of me, and I feel an almost scalding hot torrent of cum release into my womb.

And oh God, I'm coming again. Even worse than before. It feels like my mind is unraveling as the third orgasm rips through me. Pain and pleasure. Pleasure and pain. I no longer know the difference.

There's only this very, very wrong thing with the dragon.

And then everything goes dark.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### DAMIANOS

I sit in the chair with her cradled in my arms for a too long time. To keep her from falling, I tell myself. Not because I've never experienced anything as sensational as the feel of her milking my primary cock, even as she sleeps.

Yet when her female works finally loosen, allowing me to move from within her folds, I don't.

For another too long time I hold her close, reveling in her warmth. Reliving those moments of connection we shared when she reached her first peak.

When she held onto me as she did, all my schemes...all my ultimate revenge plans...they had fallen away. Like so much ash.

In those moments it didn't matter. None of it mattered. And that scares me even more than not being able to figure out how to let her go.

This she-wolf is inferior. A crass hothead who does not deserve my attention, much less to carry my progeny.

Yet...she makes me want things beyond the single-minded goal I have carried with me for years. Impossible things I shouldn't even be considering.

"Reverence," I allow myself to hiss into her ear in the old language.

The one word feels like smoke held far too long inside my lungs and then finally let out.

No, I do not let her go.

At least not right away.

And therein lies the problem.

\* \* \*

OLA

I WAKE UP WITH A START. THEN GROAN WHEN I TRY TO MOVE. I USED TO love running marathons back before I began my royal apprenticeship with Uncle Kyle. And right now it feels like I've run another one. But this time with my pussy instead of my legs.

I'm completely naked for some reason and my body smells like... I sniff. Soap. Pure soap. Without any extra fragrance or anti-viral chemicals inside of it, like most shower gels. Did somebody bathe me?

The confusion gets even worse when I try to rub my tired eyes.

Only the yank of the chain, keeps me from taking a cuff of silver directly to my lids.

At first, I'm confused.

Then I just wish I was.

It all comes flooding back. Jumping the dragon king's bones. Fucking him and fucking him, even as he told me about how he was going to kill my whole family.

When was that? This afternoon? Yesterday?

I look to the window for some context clues. But all I see is dark beyond the windows. Both starless and moonless.

Like my current state of mind, after impaling myself on the dick of my fathers' greatest enemy. The guy who told me about how my belly would be full of his baby when he slaughtered my whole family...

For a few moments, shame and guilt threaten to overwhelm me, to drown my soul, and completely break my mind.

*But no, Ola, not now. You're not a crying-ass bitch, remember?*

Something inside me rallies up a strong face emoji. I'm a queen now, so I'm gonna have to save the nervous breakdowns for later. After I figure out how to escape.

I stop the mind unravel with a big sniff of air. Okay, good...

It doesn't matter what time it is. The main thing is I don't smell any extra pheromones on me. That means I'm not pregnant.

Great. So I'm not a complete traitor to my race and family.

But this reprieve from the heat won't last long. I need to get out of here. Pronto, before the dragon comes ba—

The bedroom door clicks open on that thought, and the air fills with the smell of fire and ash.

"You are finally awake. Good. You will eat. Then we will wait for your next heat to commence."

I blink of the sight of him. He's carrying a tray piled sky high with more food than I could ever eat in one sitting, but that's not what I'm blinking at.

Okay, I know I've been comparing him to, like, the grandmack-daddy of Greek statues since I saw him in the club. But the sight of him makes me think about the debate that raged over whether to put underwear on the rebooted version.

In the case of the New Colossus of Rhodes, the prudes who crowdsourced the project won out.

But the Greek statue standing in front of me is exactly what all the historians consulting on the project claims a man from that era would have been underneath his clothes. Full commando.

With one super important distinction. There was now nothing hanging down between his legs. He looks like the Greek statue version of a Ken Doll...no nipples on his chest and pale white scales where his abs and pelvis should be. Also, I'm pretty sure New Rhodey doesn't have webbed feet.

Have I said what the Fenrir wolf enough yet? Here's one more: *What the freaking Fenrir Wolf?!*

So many questions, but "Hey, where did your dicks go?" ends up winning out.

"Unlike your poorly-designed species, drakkon keep their male works tucked away until they are ready to procreate."

"But your dicks were out when I copped a feel back at your villain lair."

An irritated look flickers across his face. And instead of answering, he sets down the tray. "Eat now."

The scent of lamb dripping in olive oil and rosemary hits my nose as I pull the meal into my lap.

I'm glad for the food but sad to see there's no silverware on the tray. Just cubes of cheese and a mountain of dates and dried apricots.

Too bad, I could have used a knife or a fork as a weapon.

"If there is something you'd rather eat, I will relay your preferences to Colby."

"I get a say in what I get to eat?"

"You sound surprised."

"Well, I kind of figured there would be more starvation and torture involved. Fensa had to teach Xenon all sorts of tricks to help him get over the multi-century mind fuck you did on him."

If I'm expecting contrition, I'm soon disabused of that notion. "He betrayed his race in favor of yours. He deserved a much worse punishment than he received."

"Okay, then why didn't you just kill him instead of keeping him chained up?"

"I wanted him to be there when I enacted my final revenge. To see that his machinations were futile and that those he attempted to save would all die in the end despite his interference." the dragon king's voice is as dark and ominous as his answer.

"Wow, this revenge of yours is covering a lot of territory," I say, rubbing at my free wrist. "My dads, my brother-in-law, and now me. What exactly do you have planned for all of us?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he answers. "Especially if you refuse to behave."

His tone is soft and quiet, but it sends a shiver down my back.

"Enough questions. You must eat."

He's right. I've got to keep my strength up if I'm going to figure out how to escape. And the lamb tastes heavenly, total restaurant quality. "That kid you have driving you around and burying bodies made this?" I ask when I'm done chewing the first few delicious bites.

"Yes, all the modern Colbys train with chefs from the time they enter primary school. They believe it is simply a hobby until they discover it is not."

All the Colbys...

"That old guy who led my sister up the stairs in your castle? His name was Colby, too?"

"Yes, he died." An unreadable look passes over his face. "The new Colby is his son."

"Oh..." I say, but then I frown. "Wait, the old servant died, and the son just agreed to take his place?"

"There was no agreement necessary. When one Colby dies the son takes over his position. The Colby line of first-born sons has belonged to me since what your country refers to as the middle ages."

"The Colby line has belonged to you since medieval times?" I repeat, not quite understanding. Then suddenly I do. "Wait, are you trying to say you've been enslaving Colby and his ancestors for hundreds of years?"

He stiffens. Then nods at the almost empty plate in my lap. "Finish your food."

"I don't want to eat. I feel sick to my stomach just thinking about that poor boy you've enslaved. You get that I'm half black, right? We don't do slavery."

"Black," he repeats. "Are you referring to the color of your epidermis?"

My eyes widen. Is he serious? "Yes, I'm referring to the color of my skin and the skin of my ancestors who were brought over here in boats to serve masters they didn't want to work for until the Civil War."

"The Civil War...oh, so now we are conversing about one of the many atrocities you upright primates have visited upon each other? I see."

Damianos tilts his head with a thoughtful look. "There have been so many of these squabbles, it has been rather hard to keep track. Ah well, in any case, it is neither here nor there for a drakkon. We care very little about what any of you anthros or mutations do during the short time you are given to scurry about your planet."

Okay, no knife. Not even a fork. Rage face emoji. I would give anything right now to slit this uncaring bitch's throat.

I settle for tensing up, preparing to make a run for the door. There's no way I'm going to let myself fuck this two-dicked sociopath again—

But then a wave of heat completely interrupts that mental resolution. Like the universe is saying, "Fuck you, Ola, and the declaration



you rode in on.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the heat smell fills the room, I let out a long string of curses. Damianos picks the tray up from my lap and sets it aside. His expression is blank, but the bottom half of him sure ain't.

The boys are back in town...both fully erect and extended.

"You require breeding again," he says above them.

Yes, yes, I do. The new heat doesn't waste any time. It washes over me in waves, swelling my breasts, and plumping my pussy.

And it awakens my wolf.

Damianos is a psychopath, a sociopath, and probably a few other path words the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders hasn't come up with yet. But my wolf doesn't care. She pants inside of me. Wanting him again. Wanting him to fill her womb.

Not anyone, like they told us in health class when they warned us about the dangers of not getting the heat control shot. Him.

Only him.

"Would you like me to take you this time? Make it easier for your mind to reconcile?"

The dark smoke of his offer wafts over my bent head, both irritating and surprising me.

"No." I realize the truth of that answer at the same time I say it.

I don't want to do this. But I also don't want it to be out of my control.

"Lie down," I tell him, scooting backward to make room for him on the bed.

He does and it's a sight to behold. He's so long, his feet and most of his calves hang off the end of the mattress.

If he wasn't him, and I wasn't me, I might feel sorry for him.

As it is, there's no guilt to be found. Only disgust...but a lot less than I want to feel. And a lot of it directed at myself. Because I already know...

This time I'm not even going to try to run. This time I'm just going to give into the heat. So easily. Too easily.

But then I hesitate when my eyes land on the show going on between his hips. The primary cock lies pulsing on top of his scaled stomach, long and hard. The second one's squirming again, though, like a wolf's single dick never would.

I'm suddenly grateful for the bed blankets I pushed away when I sat up to eat. I pull them to the base of his primary cock and leave the other one squirming underneath. I mean what the hell is that second cock even about? What biological purpose could it possibly have—

Another wave of heat throbs through my body, as if to punish me for thinking about stuff that has nothing to do with me fucking this dude.

*Okay, never mind.* "Let's get this over with," I say out loud.

"It did not sound like you were merely getting it over with when you came thrice upon my primary seeder, then fainted as I filled you with my seed," he points out, in that calmly superior tone of his. So, so infuriating.

"Just lie there," I grit out. "Don't talk. Don't touch me. Don't say anything. Just come, spike, and get out."

To my surprise, he doesn't respond. He just lies with his hands on his sides. Exactly like I asked him to.

Which makes things a little awkward, actually.

I have to brace my hands on his lower torso in order to pull myself up. The pale white scales covering most of his stomach...if I squinted from far away, it would almost look like human skin. But it doesn't feel like it. His abs are slick and smooth under my thumbs, like liquid glass. They're not cool to the touch though. His scaled stomach is broiling like there's a fire burning underneath that I can't see.

Maybe that's why his jizz felt so hot. Curious, I let my hands roam over smooth scales.

His entire body trembles, like an earthquake. And his tongue whips out before retracting back in. Exactly like Fensa's son's did.

Though the dragon king's tongue is round and short, not long and forked.

The secondary dick is squirming even more now underneath my ass. And real talk, it's not turning me off.

Like at all.

My pussy is sloppy wet now, nasty with need. And when I lift up and set down on top of his insanely large dick, there's no pain. Just a quick, slick trip to the bottom. I take all of him with a long groan that has nothing to do with discomfort.

Then I start circling my hips in what I want to be detached strokes.

But they're not. Oh Fenrir wolf, they're so not. One stroke, two, and by the third stroke I can already feel the fire building.

By the tenth, him just lying there is no longer enough.

My whole body topples onto his. Needing more. Needing his skin against mine. "I changed my mind. Touch me. Oh God, touch me."

His arms come up in an instant like an automaton suddenly turned on. He envelops me in a crushing hug as his hips start moving between my legs. Deeper, he's even deeper now and holding me so tight, my clit has no choice but to feel the crazy erotic rub of every stroke.

I immediately come in this new position, gasping for air with broken lungs, my arms and legs flailing like someone trying not to drown. That's what it feels like though. Like I'm drowning, and I barely manage to keep my head above water as he continues rolling into me from underneath.

"My queen," he says again. Then both of his hands drop down to my ass cheeks, pulling my hips to him hard, right before his crazy hot cum jets into me.

Okay...okay...it's done.

I can feel myself calming, that frantic need-to-be-fucked feeling fading away.

But he's still holding me close. His head curls into my shoulder as his hips continue to pump into me from underneath, even though he's already released. He doesn't stop until he spikes inside of me.

He yells out. And the sensation...oh, Fenrir wolf!

I try to resist, but I instantly come again, crying out as a second orgasm lights me up.

But at least I don't pass out this time.

Little gifts, I tell myself as I lie curled on top of his huge body.

Sleep tugs on me. Wanting me to rest while my pussy extracts every bit of semen it can from this dragon dick. That's how she-wolves are designed to mate. Lots and lots of energy conservation. When we're in heat mode we're not supposed to be awake if we're not fucking or eating. But I can't let myself rest.

As my pussy spontaneously milks his dick, I think about how I woke up this morning. Sore and chained to the bed, but also clean and tended to.

He must have tended to me. Like a wolf would have if I had mated within my own species.

Was it possible that he cared about me for reasons that went beyond revenge or what had he called it? Our unfortunate compatibility.

Enfolded in his large arms with his belly burning like a warm stove a question occurs to me. And I have to ask it.

"What would happen if I apologized?" I ask him softly. "Apologized for what my fathers did and made them apologize, too? If I could arrange that, would you let me go?"

There's a long silence.

Then he answers, "There is no apology your fathers could give that I would ever accept for their murder of my most revered father. Only their slow and painful deaths will satisfy my thirst for vengeance. And as for letting you go..."

He pulls me closer, his mouth finding my ear. "One of us will have to die before I ever did that."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### EOS

**S***omething was not right.*

It was his mother's birthday, yet he once again woke with an anxious flame.

He'd had this not right feeling for days, and this morning his entire upper torso burned orange with unease.

It had been over a solar rotation since they reunited with Blue Father, but his last instruction before Eos departed with Wolf Mother from the long-ago time continued to smolder inside his flame.

*"Golden Son.... Wolf Mother is your duty now. Your only purpose after you leave this place is to pay her great reverence by protecting her and the hatchlings growing within her womb."*

Wolf Mother reminded him often that she was the mother and he was the five-year-old (it did not seem to matter to her that Eos stood nearly a head taller than she). And those two hatchlings were now twin girls, living outside her womb and growing at a much faster rate than Eos ever had. Also, Blue Father was returned to them within four moons of their arrival in this time. He could and would protect their family.

However, none of that mattered as Eos rose from his bed with the solemn duty to protect his mother and sisters still burning inside of him. For that reason, he made the same actions that he had every early morn since the orange fear started crackling inside his flame.

First, he gave his wolf two large glasses of water, gulping them down so that he would not complain about their early morning exer-

tions. Second, he opened all of the downstairs windows. Blue Father and he told the Golden Twins and Great Wolf Mother that they did this to let in the early morning sun and tropical breeze. But in truth, they were more interested in the 360-degree view which allowed them to see anyone or any danger approaching from every direction.

After this simple security measure was put in place, Eos walked out past the lanai for the third step of his morning routine. Springing into the air with such force, the palm trees closest to the house bent and swayed. Then releasing his golden wings first things first at the top of his jump, so as not to fall back to earth before he completed his transformation into his dragon form.

His father would have called this unshelling, but Eos wasn't quite sure what it was for him, the son of a wolf and a dragon.

His father's human form was a mere shell, something he folded his dragon into in order to breathe much easier on this overly oxygenated planet. "It is somewhat like a spacesuit for drakkon. A house for our bodies. However, we can survive in real form outside of it. Our shells were originally intended to help us blend in as we completed our original mission." Blue Father had explained this to Eos after laughing his way through a self-laudatory documentary about how a driverless car company built the first space elevator to the moon. "We do not need our shells simply to survive as these slow-advancing humans do."

I was one of those slow advancing humans. I was also a wolf, the by-product of a genetic experiment done by the original Fenrir. His mother's long-ago paternal ancestors had believed Fenrir to be a wolf god. But he was, in fact, another dragon. One who Blue Father referred to as the Royal Geneticist—though most other dragons called him the Terrible Destroyer, after he obliterated their planet to save both the human and wolf races.

Eos was also a dragon. But he did not consider his human form a shell. It was part of him, just like his wolf and his dragon.

In truth, it was very confusing.

And it did not help that there were no others like him on Earth.

Even his sisters were not quite the same. Blue Father's cousin, the current dragon king was aware of his existence. But his father had given him severe warning about what would happen if Damianos or any other dragons were to discover the existence of Golden Twin Sisters. They would stop at nothing to claim them.

They were only children. Small and too young to mate, even by the standards of dragons who were considered adults after the age of five.

But that wouldn't matter in this case. They were the only female dragons left in the known universe and dragons did not live by the same set of morals as wolves.

"Decades are but a blink to drakkon," Blue Father had warned him. "If any drakkon were to become aware of their existence, he would have no problem kidnapping them and keeping them imprisoned until they came of age. Then he would most likely keep one twin to mount and the other to sell to the highest bidder."

It terrified Eos to imagine such a future for his golden sisters. This was just one of the reasons he took on his dragon form to circle their island home every morn. Performing what the present time actors on TV, costumed in soldiers uniforms referred to as a *perimeter sweep*.

And this was why his flame went cold with dread when he saw the boat in the distance.

EOS FOUND HIS SISTERS AND FATHER GATHERED IN THE KITCHEN WHEN HE landed outside their island home. They appeared to be making breakfast together for Wolf Mother's birthday. Guilt sizzled inside his flame. Not only because he had forgotten about this most significant date, but also because he would have to interrupt his father's and sisters' happy preparations.

"Eos! Eos!" His twin sisters came running when they saw him and threw their arms around either side of his waist.

They wouldn't turn two for several more moon cycles, but they already resembled five-year-old human children. They were both much more intelligent and much larger than he'd been at their same age. His mother often kissed them each soundly, then complained about how she wouldn't even have kids for the five years she was promised if they didn't stop growing so fast.

This was yet another thing that separated him from both his mother's and his father's species. He aged much more rapidly than the wolves and humans, but not nearly as rapidly as his sisters. At



the age of five, he still appeared to be more of human/wolf teenager than a full-grown male.

"You have arrived at a good moment," Blue Father called out to Eos from the stove. "We were jusst about to go up to Great Wolf Mother'ssss room with her breakfasssst!"

He spoke quite jovially...only to lower the tray when he saw the color of his son's flame. "What is it?" he asked, switching to their dragon language.

"There's a boat coming this way with three males," Eos answered.

Blue Father immediately deposited the tray on the counter and untied the apron he was wearing. It had the declaration "Dis Shit Gon' Be GOOD!" written across its front. The apron had been a gift from Twin Sister of Great Wolf Mother—or Aunt Ola as she always insisted on being called. She'd given it to them the one and only time she was allowed to visit them.

"Daddy! Daddy! What's wrong?" the twins asked in a perfect replication of his mother's language, without any hissed esses. Unlike Eos and their father, they had perfect control over their forked tongues.

Instead of answering them, Blue Father exited the house at a full run and jumped into the air, much as Eos had done earlier that morn. And the next thing they saw through the open patio was his unshelled dark blue dragon flying into the horizon.

"It will be all right," Eos assured his sisters. Though he was not sure of that at all.

They must be protected. That was all he was certain of as he followed in his father's webbed footsteps. For that reason, he left his scared and confused sisters behind and released his own dragon as he took off after Blue Father into the sky.

THE MEN IN THE BOAT WERE WOLVES. ONE OF WHICH, EOS RECOGNIZED right away as the male who told him to "Call me, Knud, man. I don't need any of that title shit" when they were formally introduced after his sisters' birth. He was a cousin of his mother's, a healer who was married to the daughter of the man who had provided them with secret shelter upon this island.

Eos could hear Knud and his brothers arguing from many wingspans away, and the thinnest of the three was waving a white flag.

*"Oh hell, here they come,"* Knud said to his brothers, as they approached. *"Told you the kid was doing a security sweep when we saw him earlier."*

*"Fuck, they're big,"* the brother behind the wheel of the speedboat said. He was taller and broader than the other two but had their same complexion of burnt gold skin. *"Keep waving that flag, Rafe. Hopefully, they know what it means or else we're about to get burnt to a crisp. Seriously, lift it higher, bro!"*

The one he'd called Rafe did as instructed but glared at Knud. *"We wouldn't have to risk our lives like this if you hadn't helped them hide where no one could find or get to them."*

*"Hey, it was my father-in-law, not me. And they wouldn't have had to hide if you hadn't—"*

*"You know what, they're not going to stop,"* the largest brother yells over their argument. *"Maybe if we act like sitting ducks, they won't roast us first and ask questions later."*

*"Maybe,"* the two brothers answered. Neither of them sounded very hopeful.

The boat stopped and Blue Father screeched at Eos to do so as well.

Pulling his tail down beneath him, Eos hovered, flapping his wings to stay in place as Blue Father demanded to know why they were here in their dragon tongue.

This was a language the wolf brothers obviously didn't understand.

*"Oh, shit, we're going to die. Today's the day,"* Knud said with a despondent shake of his head. The one called Rafe didn't look much more optimistic.

*"Hey, how's it going, guys!"* Nago called up to them, obviously struggling to keep his voice casual. *"Great to finally meet you two. Sorry, I couldn't before, but I've heard great things—"*

Blue Father interrupted with a screeched command for Nago to stop rambling and tell him why they had compromised his family's security by coming to their island.

The meaning of Blue Father's words must come across. Nago cringed and raised his hands even higher as he answered, *"Look, we*

know you value your security, or you wouldn't be living out here in the island boonies. We never would have tracked you down if it wasn't important."

Nago then lowered his hands to say, "It's Ola. She's been taken. We're pretty sure it was Damianos Drákon, and we need your help to get her back."

Silence. For many, many moments on end, all that could be heard were the crash of the ocean waves, the speed boat's small engine, and the beating of their dragon wings against the air.

Then Blue Father roared, sending a great flame down directly in front of the brothers' boat.

And lest the brothers believed Blue Father made his roaring flame by mistake, he sent another one when they merely stood there, mouths agape. This time even closer.

Eos did not understand. The beloved twin sister of Great Wolf Mother had been taken. Should they not be reshelling and setting down in their boat? Asking how they might aid the brothers in their search?

No, it would seem not. Eos watched, sad and disappointed when the largest brother yanked hard on the wheel and turned the boat around.

"You will not tell Wolf Mother of what happened here this morn," Blue Father said as the brothers disappeared into the distance. "It is not reverent to upset her with the news of her sister."

"I won't," Eos promised, but that vow sat heavy in his flame as they turned to fly back to their island home.

Wolf Mother loved them all more than her own life, but she and Aunt Ola had a special bond. She was allowed to visit against Blue Father's wishes, because as mother told him, "Twins don't work like that. We can't do that never seeing each other again thing."

Her flame always burned bright yellow when she talked of Aunt Ola, just as it did for her children. And ever since her visit, Wolf Mother had referred to things she would ask her beloved twin sister to bring the next time she called.

Which she hadn't. In a long time. Too long of a time. Eos realized why now.

Yes, it would upset Wolf Mother greatly to hear of her twin sister's capture by Blue Father's mortal enemy.

However, as they flew back to their home at a much slower pace than they left it, he couldn't help but recall what Blue Father had said to him, after Eos asked him whether he, too, would be able to take a mate someday, despite his hybrid nature.

Blue Father's answer had been long and depressing. Their family may or may not ever be able to come out of hiding, he'd told him, but if by some miracle, they did, Eos would have to be careful around she-wolves, especially if he ever found himself in a "no drone" state.

Most of these states had banned heat control, and therefore had many she-wolves who could go into something called *heat* at any time.

Heat was the most confusing concept of all. Apparently, she-wolves had no spontaneous desire or inclination to perform reproductive acts until they were one day flooded with pheromones that compelled them to mate. When male wolves scented these pheromones, they often went "crazy" and would feel similarly compelled to mate. And if a male did copulate with a she-wolf in heat, they would mate for however long it took for the she-wolf to become pregnant. Anywhere from mere hours to several days.

Eos had been very, very confused.

"Will I become crazy, too?" he'd asked his father. "Even though I'm only half wolf?"

"I hope not," Blue Father answered. "We drakkon are not nearly so indiscriminate in any case. It is rare that even two drakkon are sexually compatible. So when we encounter a compatible being, we mate that being, no matter what. I felt compelled in such a way by Wolf Mother from the start, though I tried to deny it. And I suspect my superior compatibility with her was what caused her heat."

Eos had many more questions after that. Would his male works descend as well for the right she-wolf? For any she-wolf in heat? Would it be possible for him to mate with a human as well? How was he to know the difference?

His father gave him no clear answers. Nor did he know if Eos would experience sexual need prior to mating as Wolf Mother said male wolves often did.

"In any case, this is not something you will need to worry about for another decade. Your mother wishes you to be informed, but she

would also like for you to wait a standard sixteen planet rotations before you engage in sex with anyone."

Eos had nodded in agreement, though he was left with more questions with no answers after the talk with his father.

And now after the triplet brothers' departure, Eos had another question. "Why would the dragon king kidnap Twin Sister of Great Wolf Mother?" he asked, though he already suspected the answer.

"I imagine he has discovered that he is sexually compatible with her," Blue Father answered. "Otherwise, he would have murdered your aunt in the showiest way by now."

His stomach flame flared with nausea at Blue Father's answer. "So the dragon king took her to mate. But isn't that a terrible thing?"

Silence. Much, much silence, as Blue Father's wings beat in opposite time to his.

Then his father said. "I hope not. In fact, if my suspicion was right, Twin Sister of Great Wolf Mother might be the only one who can save us from my cousin's wrath."

"Then why not tell Wolf Mother and Family of Wolf Mother this?" Eos asked.

Blue Father answered immediately this time. "Because if I am wrong, she will pay with her life. We will all pay with our lives. And that knowledge would bring Great Wolf Mother even less peace than she has now."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### DAMIANOS

After she releases me, I once again find myself unable to let Colby bathe her, even though he is the servant and I am the king. Thus, instead of leaving her, I tell him to bring me the same items I requested last night.

And when he knocks on the door, I palm it open, positioning my body so he cannot see past me to my naked she-wolf.

"Here are the items you requested," he says, extending a bowl of soapy warm water, a sponge, and a large towel. He's dressed in what the anthro male children of this millennium refer to as pajamas: flannel pants and a t-shirt emblazoned with the name of his former university. I must have woken him from slumber with my command.

It matters not. Like all the Colbys, he never appears resentful, even in the early hours of the morning.

I do not thank him for rising from his bed. Please and thank you are useless human custom words. And I already feel all too human as I take the items I will need to give my she-wolf a sponge bath.

"I will expect breakfast at the same time tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Master."

I frown. His usage of that word reminds me of my conversation with Ola from earlier in the evening. How upset she'd been to find out that Colby and all his fathers before him were my thralls.

I palm the door closed in his face before I can give that memory too much sway.

This is why the she-wolf is dangerous, I remind myself as I return to the bed with the water and towels. This is why I cannot give in to these instincts crackling through my flame after mating with her a second time.

Turning my thoughts from Colby, I give her a sponge bath, reveling in the sight of her bare body as I run the sponge over it.

A drakki from my home planet would never have folded herself into an anthromorphic shell as we males do. Female drakkon were considered too precious for interstellar travel to planets where such a covering might be required. But if a drakki were to acquire a shell, I imagine she would look much like Ola, only with the entrance to her female works inside a scaled stomach as opposed to between her legs. Ola's human form is so much larger than most of the females on this planet, tall and fleshy, but relatively strong underneath. Any drakki would have fit well inside of a shell made with her light brown epidermis and bountiful curves.

I did not know that I liked curves prior to meeting Ola.

*Reverence...*

No, no, I cannot follow that instinct. This is temporary, and everything will be ruined if I allow myself to give in to those thoughts.

I quickly finish her sponge bath and reach for the silver cuff... only to find myself pausing before I take hold of it.

The anthros and their silly histories that they can never bring themselves to forget...

It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter.

Yet I find myself unable to reshackle her to the bedpost. Or depart from her just yet.

I leave the silver cuff dangling from the post, then settle into the chair beside her bed. Sensations, large and previously unknown disturb my flame, as I watch the up and down of her chest.

I do not like these new sensations. How do the upright primates refer to them, again? Ah yes, *feelings*. Well, these *feelings* are worse even than the great clawing itch I suffered before I gave in and claimed her. I rub at my chest, as I used to rub at my belly, wanting them gone.

Suddenly no longer able to bear it, I rise from my seat and leave the room, my nostrils flaring with the urge to burn something to the ground. *Feelings* were never a problem for me before. But ever since

the she-wolf crashed into my life, it has been a constant battle to keep my flame a cool blue.

I shed my accessories when I return to the master suite. This room is twice as large as the one I just left, with a bed made exactly to my specifications. I god spoke the architect and the consulting designer to get exactly what I wanted.

I'd thought I might keep her with me in here as well. Drakkon mates do not share quarters as modern anthros do, but I'd reasoned that it would be easier to monitor her during my resting hours if I imprisoned her in the same room.

However, that plan had revealed itself as impossible as soon as our eyes met at the Wolf Lounge, and I'd suddenly had the urge to rip the head off the wolf with whom she was holding hands. It did not matter that I had been the one who god spoke that basketball player idiot in the first place.

No, I could not fully control myself in her presence, could not be trusted in the same room with her. The vexing she-wolf was more dangerous to me than she knew. And if I could no longer bring myself to shackle her after twice performing the breeding act, what would happen when she fell pregnant with my progeny?

My fire flares inside of me, fearful and bright.

My ultimate revenge...my plan for my drakkon race...the reverence I owe my father...she could ruin everything.

I sleep fitfully that night and am awakened to an alert from the house's smart room. *"You have a biohail from Maxwell Kreft!"*

Is the latest Colby still labeled as Maxwell in the biosystem I allow him to use to complete necessary errands? How vexing. This has happened with a few of the Colbys. They name their sons something else in the hopes that it will be enough for their progeny to escape my service.

Naturally, it never works, but it is irritating. I huff smoke as I answer the hail. "You will change your biosystem name to Colby at once."

Several moments of silence, then, "It is done, Master."

Again, I don't bother with useless thank yous. "Why do you hail me? It is not yet time for breakfast."

"The she-wolf, Master. She is trying to escape."



## CHAPTER TWENTY

“The she-wolf, Master. She is trying to escape.”

Colby's answer hits me like the jet planes I must always be so mindful to avoid when I'm in the air. And I barely hear the rest of his words as my flame darkens with rage.

The details matter not. My she-wolf has once again tried to escape. Which can only mean one thing.

The gatekeeper's death was not enough. Despite my two claims, she still fights me. It was not enough to quell her. Her obstinate spirit...it must be crushed.

No more *feelings*. My flame burns with nothing but cold blue resolution as I make my way down the stairs.

I find Ola in the receiving room, dressed in a clean nightgown and swinging a wing chair into the two-story front window. “Why... are... all... these... windows... wolf-proof?”

She bangs the chair like a cricket bat against the window on every word. “I... know... that... wasn't... in... the... budget!”

If the scene below the stairs was happened upon by anyone but me, they might have found it comical. But my flame does not ripple with even an iota of amusement.

“Master? Master? Is that you?”

The voice is coming from the room's coat closet, which has a chair shoved underneath the knob. When I open it, I find Colby inside, dressed in his tailored black and white servant's uniform.

“I caught her sneaking down the stairs when I came out of my room to use the lavatory. She was right upset when I got in her way. But I managed to secure the rest of the house before I ran to hide

from her in this closet, Master. I made certain there was no way for her to escape.”

I glance around to see he is right. The room is perfectly secure at all of its perimeters, save the stairs. An impenetrable door has slid over the archway leading into the kitchen—the only room with a knobbed door in the house. And the front smart door has turned red, signaling that no one can enter or exit, until it receives a voice command from either Colby or myself.

This Colby is much savvier than his father. He learned his lesson from the incident outside when she easily sent him flying with just a push. And he wisely did not attempt to fight a she-wolf who is twice as strong as him. Simply used technology to make sure she didn’t escape.

With a pang, I think of the last Colby who, despite his advanced years, tried to prevent the Betrayer King from escaping my prison with physical action.

He never did recover from the injuries he sustained in that short scuffle. And after taking to his bed, he’d ended up dying of several underlying ailments he hadn’t bothered to get treated.

Colbys tended to do that. They accept their lot when they first come to me, but it was always necessary to send them back out into the world at the age of thirty or so, to ensure an heir to take their place. Family inevitably changed them. They’d come back after fulfilling their legacy with sad, hangdog eyes. I often did not get even two decades of good service after their return.

Colby hung on a bit longer than that, but his death had somehow been earlier than expected for me. Too early.

Colbys come and Colbys go and never shall a drakkon weep.

But sometimes... sometimes it was hard to look at this new Colby. His face had a great likeness to his father’s at the same age, but this Colby’s eyes shone much, much brighter.

I inwardly hiss, cutting off my foolish thoughts. More *feelings*. This business with the she-wolf is making me all too sentimental.

“Return upstairs,” I command, cutting my eyes away from the young upright primate. “Breakfast will be delayed.”

He rushes back up the stairs as I turn back to the she-wolf. She is a glorious sight, her face and arms radiant with sweat.

And I can feel her frustration and anger as if it is my own.

With a silent hiss, I acknowledge this is most likely due to a functioning mate bond. I had hoped one wouldn't form between us given our vastly different species. While I'd been straining for days to god speak this she-wolf, the last thing I want is her inside my own head. Yet here I stand, her *feelings* of anger, frustration, and fear pummeling into me.

I mute my own feelings. Perhaps this will keep her from discovering this newest weak spot in my armor.

Then I wait for her to acknowledge my presence.

And wait.

She is very much aware I am here. I can feel that awareness over our mate bond, intense and fearful. Also, her weariness. Swinging the heavy chair requires much exertion, even for a wolf. Yet she doggedly continues to do so long after I've come down the stairs.

"Cease this immediately. Or I will have to punish you for your defiance on top of the punishment of this latest attempt at escape."

She pauses at my words. Letting the chair rest on the floor while she breathes hard.

But then she stubbornly picks the piece of furniture back up and heaves it into the glass. Again and again. In open defiance.

I let her. She will tire soon and have to stop. Meanwhile, I ratchet up the severity of the punishment with every bang of the glass. Raised as she was, by American gangsters and two drakkon murderers, she thinks she may do whatever she wishes.

But I will teach her. Oh yes, I will.

However, my first prediction does not come true.

In the end, it is not fatigue that stops her deliberate swings of the chair into the glass. It is the release of a new heat that causes her to drop the now ruined piece of furniture.

"Fuccccckkkk!!!!" she screams at the ceiling as the smell of her heat fills the room.

"Will you try to run away, she-wolf?" I ask her. "Perhaps this time up the stairs?"

I make my tone as derisive as possible because she still does not understand... "Believe me, I was not pleased when my male works descended for you of all females. This business between us has ruined and delayed so many of my plans. But, understand, she-wolf, there is no running from this. For either of us."

My she-wolf raises herself to her full height, her eyes blazing, even as her body trembles with the lust of her heat.

And I wait, my own body poised to give chase if she does not heed my all-to-true warning.

But in the end, she turns around to face the window.

"I hate you," she whispers. "I hate this."

Then she bends over, extends her backside and raises her nightgown to reveal her female works. Which are dripping with heat.

There is an opportunity to speak many cruel truths here. After all, I have won. But blind lust blanks my mind.

I cross the space at lightning speed and mount her the same as I would if she were a drakki, one foot coming up to brace against the side of her thigh.

However, that is where all comparisons between her and a drakki end. She is much softer than the female of my species. Her body is a vertiginous landscape of curves, and I cannot stay my hands from touching...exploring. Even though this breeding act is only meant to be a means to an end.

This time, it is not necessary for her to guide me in. With an instinct I wouldn't have known it possessed, my primary cock finds her breeding hole and with a thrust of my hips, I'm in.

A long hiss escapes from my capped tongue. The feel of her...so tight and wet around my seeding vessel.

"*Reverence!*" I hiss in the old language. I use my superior weight to anchor her luscious body into the glass and begin taking her with long, slow punishing strokes.

"Oh fuck, why does that feel so good?" she answers.

I treasure the whine in her voice, the way her breath fogs up the glass as she complains about what I'm doing to her.

"You will take my seed and in your womb, my progeny will grow," I whisper into her ear. Then I grip her hips and drive myself in even deeper.

It is both too much and not enough. I want more of her than I am getting, but the exquisite feeling of being this deep inside of her sex is too much to bear.

For either of us. She begins to quiver around my primary seeder, releasing even more of her heat essence down my pulsing cock. She screams as she peaks, clamping down hard. The sensation!

One moment I am a drakkon king, taking what belongs to me. And in the next, I am falling over the edge with her. Unable to hold on. My primary cock jerks then spews into her, giving forth all of my seed.

The *feelings*...they aren't just in my chest flame now. They light up my entire body as I once again swell and spike.

As with the last two times, she crests again when I lock myself into her. And I enjoy the feel of her writhing underneath me as she moans helplessly into the window's glass.

However, as her moans decelerate into whimpers, the stupidity of my rash decision to take her against the front window soon becomes apparent.

My strength is immeasurable, but with my cock embedded so deep inside her from behind, there is no good way to get her back up the stairs into a bed or even to the couch on the other side of the receiving room. And as my she-wolf trembles, coming down from her second peak, I know she will not be long for consciousness.

The floor it is then...I lower us down to the carpet.

After I arrange our bodies upon the floor, I cover her body with half of mine, curving an arm over her torso and laying a leg down on top of hers.

She stiffens. "What are you doing."

"Attempting to keep you warm," I answer.

A long pause. Then, "Why? I know you hate me."

*No, Reverence. You know nothing about me at all if you believe I hate you.*

But I say nothing out loud. I cannot let her discover how much power she has over me. That would be a disaster. All my plans so finely crafted over centuries would be ruined.

So I lie there silent, waiting for her to fall asleep. But I can feel the confusion and upset *feelings* over our mate bond, keeping her awake.

Eventually, she says, "This wasn't how it was supposed to be. I wanted love and happiness. Like my parents. Not degradation and shame."

A sickened sensation scrapes across my stomach. Her *feelings*, not mine. My side of the mate bond remains muted but her side pulses intensely in the space no longer between us.

"There is no reason to carry shame over our breeding act," I tell her, nonetheless. "If it was something either of us could have helped,

I would have found a way."

"You could have helped it, bitch," she points out, both her words and her tone harsh. "You didn't have to kidnap me."

"We are sexually compatible, and I am a drakkon."

"Yeah, whatever, that doesn't mean you have an excuse to kidnap me."

"That is *exactly* what it means. You primate mutations insist on thinking you have free will despite all scientific and historical evidence to the contrary."

I wrap my body tighter around hers. "I had no choice but to find you and wait for you to go into heat, which you did, it should be noted, less than six hours after you were healed from your wounds. And I've read your files, Queen of North Dakota. I know you are currently on heat control."

Her body stiffens, and I continue on to my next point, twisting the knife. "This is something your anti-fertility drug could not fight against. A few hours was all it took. If you hadn't run and we had simply spent time together in the same space as I had originally planned, I have no doubt your heat would have come upon you even sooner. That is how sexually compatible we are."

Her uncharacteristic silence tells me I have broken past her stubborn pride.

"You are angry and bitter about this turn of events, and I am too," I conclude, my voice somber. "I would not have chosen to have matched in this manner with the daughter of my mortal enemies. But not mating with you after I discovered that we could produce young together...that would have been impossible. Like one of you mutated primates inhaling a breath and *deciding* not to let it out. You are my mate and I am yours. This cannot be denied by either of us."

More silence. Then she says "Okay, fine. Say I believe that fucking me is some kind of biological imperative for you. Why did you have to humiliate me? Why did you make me crawl?"

There are many true answers to this question and I pick the cruelest one. "You are a stubborn, defiant, idiot, she-wolf, and if I am to live with you as a mate until you bear my child, you must be brought to heel."

"Fuck you," she says before the last syllable has left my mouth. "I'm not your mate. I'm not your anything. I'm going to find a way to escape you. And then I'm going to hunt you down and kill you

like my fathers killed your daddy. Call me an idiot if you want, but one day, you're going to look up and find this idiot standing over you with a sword. I promise you that, and I *always* keep my promises."

She is correct about one thing only. Her fathers killed mine. For that, I must have my vengeance. Like my claim of her, this is nothing short of biological imperative. I will pay my father the reverence he deserves.

As for her threat, she is ridiculously weak, and I am nearly all-powerful.

She is hopelessly ignorant, and I hold all the cards.

Yet my fire ices over at her words. For they do not sound like a threat.

They sound like prophecy.

She falls asleep just a few moments later, and I lie there thinking about her vow. Somewhere behind me, I hear the sound of Colby's footsteps coming down the stairs. They recede into the kitchen even though it is still dark. He is most likely beginning early preparations for one of his gourmet breakfasts. Good, we will both need to eat before her next heat wave.

She lets me out of her milking hold about an hour later.

But as it turns out, there will not be another wave of heat. As soon as I pick her up, I smell it.

A hatchling! Sired by me. She did it. She actually took my seed and became fertile with it.

The confusing sparks of emotion suddenly give away to a new resolved flame.

As long as I draw fire, I will never let any harm come to this miraculous being now growing within her. And as for my unexpected mate, I will treasure her for as long as she lives. More than I treasure my own life.

Yet, as soon as those thoughts leave my head, the memory of what she said before I made my final claim invades my mind.

*"I hate you. I hate this."*

She said she hated me, and she meant it. Even now, in her sleep, I can sense the animosity emanating from her mate bond.

*Now that she is no longer under the heat spell...she will try to run again. This time with your progeny.*

The voice in my head is more than a thought, it is a certainty.

One I cannot let happen.

After carrying her upstairs, I lay her upon the bed.

This time I do not reverently clean her magnificent body. Or hesitate.

I pick up the silver cuff and snap it back around her wrist.

Then I stride from the room, the problem of keeping my now pregnant mate heavy on my mind.

She ran. The first chance she had. And even when I came downstairs, she continued to fight miserably for escape.

She must be punished for that in a way that convinces her not to attempt to escape from me again.

The answer to my conundrum appears in the next instant.

I must kill someone she loves; I conclude quite logically. Make an example of her or him.

Not one of her fathers or her aunt Myrna...it is not their time yet and I would prefer for their deaths to be painful and slow.

But yes, it should be a family member. Someone she holds dear, but who was not part of my original revenge plot.

The person's name appears like a wish granted.

A thrall I had yet to find much use for. But now, he will come in very handy indeed.

I wake him up with a thought and tell him exactly what to do. And by the time I reach my own bedroom, everything is in place for Ola's next lesson.

*Yes, this is a good plan*, I decide as I walk through the door. A very good plan in—

I stop when I see the male standing inside my room.

Tall and broad and completely surreal.

For a moment, my mind cannot process what I'm seeing. *Who* I'm seeing. It is a moment of confusion I'll soon come to regret.

For a moment is all he needs.



## PART III

*"If the fetus you carry survives laying...you will have granted me the boon of a hatchling. For this, I have no words to express my gratitude. In fact, on my planet, a drakkon who has been honored with a child will spend the rest of his life honoring the female who did bestow this gift upon him. Because of the young you carry within your womb, I will revere you for the rest of my breathing days, and never mate another. That is the Drakkon way, and we even have a formal set of customs to go along with this tradition. We call this custom Reverence."*

*--Xenon, Her Dragon Everlasting*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### AO QUONG

Ao Quong did not dream before he came to this planet. Nor had he experienced the sleeping trance state so many of the anthro-hominids had spoken and written about over the thousands of solar rotations he'd spent stranded here.

Yet that night moving images appeared inside his sleeping mind.

He dreamed of walking upon the grounds of his palace in Zone 6. The one that he'd managed to keep fortified throughout eras of anthrohominid conflict and away from the prying surveillance of the Chinese government. He hadn't been back to visit that palace in the nearly three decades—not since the King of Drakkon assigned him to the Idaho fating portal in Zone 8.

But this night he was back there, walking beside a female and gazing upon her most reverently. She was...something he didn't quite understand, but he did not mind her confusing nature. Quite the contrary, he marveled that she would exist.

*"Baba! Mama! Kan wo zheyang zuo a!"*

Ao Quong looked up to see a small boy. He wore an anthromorphic shell but had drakkon wings, which he used to hover above them. His flame, Ao Quong noted, burned pure yellow from the top of his head to the ends of his hands and feet. *Baba...*he'd called him father. And he'd called the strange female beside him *mama*.

Could this really be their son asking them to watch him do something?

The female slipped her hand into his, and together they waited to see what their son would do.

*"Incoming communication from the Lab Director! Incoming communication from the Lab Director!"*

The overhead caused the dream to blink out in an instant, and Ao Quong jolted awake to find himself lying in the dark of the real world.

No, he'd never had a dream before, but having it taken away so abruptly...it felt as if a vital organ had been removed. Without warning or permission.

*"Incoming communication from the Lab Director! Incoming communication from the Lab Director!"* the smart room intoned again, reminding him what had ripped him from the sweet dream.

Irritation flashed through him at being awakened. But nonetheless, he sat up in bed and ordered the lights on to answer the hail. Normally, the room was set to do not disturb during his resting hours. However, his anthro Lab Director was no fool. He would not have interrupted his sleep unless it was important.

"Damianos Drákon has finally returned my message," he guessed as soon as Ivar, appeared on his wall screen. He god spoke the brilliant Russian physicist decades ago, specifically to work with him on this project.

"Yes, Master," Ivar answered, his Russian accent still thick despite having now lived the majority of his life in the small Idaho mountain town where their lab was located. "We received a communication from Damianos Drákon just now."

So late at night? No matter. Ao Quong's flame flared with excitement at his assistant's announcement. Finally, the go ahead he'd been waiting for had arrived.

"Very good. We will review the portal trial plan at tomorrow's morning meeting before recruiting volunteers."

With that order, he opened his mouth to end the call. Perhaps if he returned to sleep now, the dream would come back to him. His flame quivered in anticipation.

"But Master, he did not give us the go-ahead to start conducting trials."

The words to end the call froze in Ao Quong's mouth, dissipated and reformed as, "What?"

"The communication...it said we were all allowed to return home as the project had been shuttered until further notice. And it ended with a dismissal. Mr. Drákon said our services were no longer needed."

*No longer needed...*millenniums of research, experimentation, and waiting for the technology on this backward planet to advance enough to recalibrate one of the Betrayer King's fating match portals to achieve their goal. And now his king was saying their project was no longer needed?

This time Ao Quong didn't ask, he roared, "WHAT?"

\* \* \*

DYANA

"ARE YOU SURE I CAN'T ESCORT YOU HOME?" BRANDON YELLED OVER the blaring club music after Dyana told her gang of #richkidsoflondon friends that she was shoving off. "Or you could come back to mine."

Dyana bit her lip. No, she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything but that she was a fool, an utter fool for what she was about to do.

Which was turning down yet another invitation to "come back to mine" from Brandon. Brandon, the boy she'd had a crush on for ages before Maxwell Kreft had come along.

Originally, the only reason she'd started flirting with Max at that meet-and-greet mixer for their Oxford MBA program was to make Brandon jealous. Max's hair had been hopelessly untrimmed, and he'd worn unimpressive store-bought clothes without a bit of nanite in them. But he'd also been the only bloke in their entire program who was both taller and fitter than Brandon, so she'd decided to chat him up. She'd wanted Brandon to see that unlike his weak-chinned girlfriend of the month, she could have any guy she set her sights on.

But the half-interested flirtation had quickly turned into a real conversation. And then a little voice in Dyana's head had told her that she was done with reality series bad boys. This sweet, handsome guy with the boarding school accent...yeah, he was it.

"You might not be any hashtags, but you're a right laugh," Dyana ended up telling Max. "And I promise I won't report you if you go in for a snog."

He'd taken her up on her invitation, and by the time Brandon broke it off with his latest girlfriend some short weeks later, Dyana was already head over heels in love with the totally unminted boy from the mixer. She'd floated Brandon a few sad face emojis, and that was that.

Dyana and Max hadn't had nearly as much in common as she and Brandon did. Brandon's parents had been on the same reality internet series as hers. And their parents' fans had been shipping them for ages. If Dyana had fallen into a relationship with Brandon after his breakup, she imagined they would've received advance offers of full wedding sponsorship in exchange for spontaneously "deciding" to get married.

Max had been the opposite of Brandon and every other boy she'd ever dated if Dyana were being honest. Much to her parents' dismay, he'd refused on-camera time, and he barely used his biosystem to do anything but study. He'd seemed to be dating Dyana despite her lux hashtags, not because of them. And when he asked her questions, he expected intelligent answers. Which had been a first, hadn't it? She'd always been quietly smart, but she'd never had a boy appreciate that about her.

Not until Max.

Max was unputtogether for reasons that had nothing to do with irony. He used a basic Tesco styler to cut his hair for presentations and interviews, and he only replaced clothes when they became holey—sometimes not even then.

But that didn't mean he had no pride or respect. Quite the opposite, really. Even though his only hashtag was #skint, he insisted on splitting the bill when they went out for dinner—which was rare, because he was an excellent cook.

And he'd even found a way to make her last birthday special, despite not being able to afford much. He'd contacted all of her friends behind her back and had them pair their favorite picture of her with a written memory on their biofeeds. Then he screenshot the lot of them all and delivered them to her in a scrapbook along with a wonderful meal, better than anything she could have gotten at a five-star

restaurant. The gift couldn't have cost more than a quid or two, but for a very long time, it was the most valuable thing she owned.

The truth was, she still brought it out nightly. But now when she flipped through it, she looked for clues about how she could have been so wrong about Maxwell Kreft.

Why had the sweet boy who'd gone out of his way to give her such a wonderful gift left without a word of explanation in the middle of the night during their Ibiza vacation? Just a few hours after he asked her to marry him!

Dyana still had no explanation.

For why Max had left.

Or for why instead of taking Brandon up on his invitation, she shook her head and said, "Thanks, mate, but it's straight to sleep when I get home. I've got an early day tomorrow, unlike you, Brandon."

Brandon was one of the lucky second generation, who was able to ride his parents' fame to a show of his own. He got paid to sleep in late and party until the wee hours of the morning. Also... "I know any of the other girls in this place would be happy to feature on your show as a one-night stand," she pointed out as she slipped on her coat.

"The truth is I'm kind of done with the one-night-stands." Brandon rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm ready to settle down, I think. With someone I respect."

Dyana crinkled her face skeptically. "Is this hypothetical someone you respect meant to be me then?"

But Brandon didn't laugh. "Remember when you used to call me Brandy?" he asked, his eyes full of hope. "Back when we were in the top ten on the #shippingwatch?"

Yes, she remembered. She also remembered how she'd called Max, Maxie. That was a cute thing she used to do to indicate to the biofans that this was a #boyilike.

But she'd grown up now. "See you at the next thing, Brandon," she answered. And she didn't give him a chance to answer before scurrying away.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid...* she lambasted herself all the way home in the driverless cab. Max had been gone for months and months, hadn't he? And Brandon would have been the perfect ego boost. Why was she going home to cry over a scrapbook with a glass of

wine, when she could be getting over Max by getting under Brandon?

But maybe tonight would be different, she thought as the cab pulled to a stop in front of her building.

Maybe tonight when she walked into the condominium her parents bought her as a graduation gift, she wouldn't be overwhelmed with sadness that Max and she had never gotten to share it.

Maybe tonight she would open her trash bin and chuck that scrapbook right on in.

Maybe tonight she would fall asleep and she wouldn't dream of the time when she called the piece of scum who had left her in Ibiza, Maxie.

Maybe tomorrow when she woke up, she'd stop wondering why he left her access to his locations services on so that she could see he was flitting all over—Greece, Frankfurt, and now apparently North Dakota.

Yet he'd refused to answer any of the biomessages she'd left for him, even the ones where she'd broken down crying.

As it turned out, all those maybes came true.

But not because of any willpower on Dyana's part.

When she stepped out of the cab, she saw a man leaning into the column closest to her building's front doors. At first, she assumed he was a doorman of some sort. Or maybe an actor. He was wearing an old-fashioned uniform as if he was auditioning for a part on the reboot of Downton Abbey. And his hair was perfectly trimmed.

But unlike all the #verifiedactors living in her building, who looked down their noses at reality series kids like Dyana, this man stood up straight as soon as he spotted her coming his way. Also, he looked familiar. Almost like...

She blinked, unable to believe what she was seeing, who she was seeing...

Not until Max said, "Dyana, it's me."

She blinked again, then tears filled her eyes. "Maxie?" she asked, forgetting in an instant she swore to never call him that again.

"Yes," he answered. Then he opened his arms.

She'd been so angry... so sad...but in the end, it wasn't even a decision. She rushed into his arms, so happy, so very relieved to see him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for disappearing like that,” he whispered into her neck. “But I’m back now. I’m back. And I’ll never leave you again.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### OLA

I wake up to once again find myself chained to the bed. No shocked face emoji there. I wouldn't expect anything less from the supervillain who kidnapped me after last night's escape attempt.

But a smell way more horrific than silver greets me along with that unsurprising discovery. It's a mix of wolf pheromones and fire that I've only smelled on three other people in my life. And those people were my sister's half-dragon children.

Pregnant....

I'm pregnant.

With the dragon king's baby.

Memories of our last heat session flash through my mind. Dark and heavy and somehow still extremely hot. The hate when he held me in his arms...along with the unbelievable comfort. I'd felt safe. So safe and protected in my abductor's arms.

A sickening guilt washes over my human, but my wolf whimpers. Missing him. Actually missing him.

I rub my nose with my good hand, low-key despising myself.

Usually, I'm a huge fan of being a werewolf, but at the end of the day, our wolves aren't anything but dumb animals. Really fucking dumb animals.

And mine doesn't care that he kidnapped and humiliated us. All she knows is that she's his mate. She's delighted to be pregnant with a pup of our own. And he's not here.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. It doesn't matter. My heat is done, and I'll die before I ever have sex with him again...

I trail off at the end of that mental vow, not because I don't mean it, but because of the object I spot on the nightstand.

The key. The old turnkey to the shackles is lying there, like *"Hey, what's up. Here's your freedom, just chillin'."*

I take a big breath before picking the key up. *Please don't be made of silver too.*

And for once my prayers are answered. The key is cool to the touch, no burn whatsoever. I pick it up.... carefully stick it into the cuffs latch, turn it...and just like that I'm out.

I stare at my free wrist, turning it all around.

That was too easy. This has got to be a trick. A trap of some sort.

But either way, it's back to Plan A. Which is figuring out how to get me, and now my newly formed baby, out of here.

I quietly go over to the closet and put a nightgown on, then try the door.

It immediately goes red, like, *Nah, bitch. Not this time.*

I silently curse. I knew getting out of the cuff was too easy, and of course, he's not going to leave the door open again after I almost escaped the last time.

Okay, new plan, I decide, once again reaching for the door. This time instead of drilling with the closet rod, I'll wait like a ninja beside the door and when he enters, I'll jump him and take him out.

The sound of a car brings my head up before I can pull the rod down again though. And not just any car either. An old one from the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an engine that growls instead of quietly whirring like most modern driverless cars do. There's an old mixtape of 90s-era West and East coast rap stuck in the otherwise still working tape deck. The third track from that album, LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out" is blasting at top volume out of the open driver's window. And that window is open, not because the driver wants it to be, but because he still hasn't found a mechanic in North Dakota who can fix it.

My stomach drops. I know that car. Know exactly who's driving it. Even before I run over to the window.

And my heart soars when I see Uncle Clyde's Ice Cream Cadillac pull up below the window.

"Uncle Clyde!" I scream, banging on the floor-to-ceiling window.

He looks up, and his eyes bug when he sees me standing there in my gothic nightgown. "Ola?"

I recognize my name on his lips, even if the word itself doesn't carry as far as a bassed-up LL Cool J jam.

"Yes, Uncle Clyde it's me!" I scream back.

Like, I said, I'm not a crying bitch, but I'm real close to crying.

I can't believe he found me!

However, my heart sinks when I see the only reinforcement he brought along was *Problem Solver*. Problem Solver was what he calls the vintage sawed-off Mossberg 500 twelve-gauge shotgun strapped to his side. He named it that after finding out that my dad FJ had named his dragon slaying sword, *The Death Maker*. And just like my Dad, he takes his main weapon boo with him everywhere.

But Problem Solver is not enough. Not enough for an enemy like Damianos.

"Uncle Clyde, you've got to get back in the car. Run! Get reinforcements." I frantically point at the car.

But he just shakes his head at me, clearly not understanding.

"Uncle Clyde. You must run! You must get more people!" I yell at the top of my lungs, wildly gesticulating. I'm ready to do a full-on pantomime show if that's what it takes—

But I stop when his gaze suddenly shifts away from me. And my heart goes into total freefall. Even without a good sightline, I know exactly who he's looking at.

Oh no...oh no....

"Run!" I scream at Uncle Clyde, hitting the window harder than I ever hit anything before. "Run! Run! Run!"

But Uncle Clyde doesn't run.

To my abject horror, he smiles broadly and meets Damianos half-way to offer him a hearty dap.

And I realize then that my initial assumption wasn't true. Uncle Clyde didn't find me. He was brought here.

By Damianos.

The memory of Kirk slashing his own throat flashes through my mind...along with Damianos promise to punish me last night. "No! No! Please, no!"

Close, but too far away, I pound on the glass and scream my throat raw, begging Uncle Clyde to snap out of it and run while he still can.

However, I stop shouting and banging on the glass when instead of sticking the business end of the Mossberg in his own mouth, Uncle Clyde bumps knuckles with Damianos, gets in his car and drives away. Just drives away.

I watch his car disappear down the road, my mouth open, the sides of my fist still pressed against the cool glass.

What the hell?

As if to answer my question, the door slides open behind me.

I turn to find Damianos and he looks...different. Really, really different.

First of all, his eyes are glowing. They look like two amber stones, lit up from the inside. Second of all his tongue is forked. I know because, the first thing he does is whip it out, before quickly retracting it back in.

Like a frog.

No...no...like a snake, I amend. Fensa explained that dragons smelled with their tongues just like snakes do, after I asked what was up with her son Eos, occasionally licking the air.

He was smelling. Me, if the direction and intensity of his gaze was any indication.

I stare at him, and he stares at me, his nostrils flaring.

Then without any warning, he crosses the room, sweeps me up in his arms, and shoves that forked tongue into my mouth!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He kisses me. He kisses me like I've never been kissed before. Especially by my last boyfriend. Akwasi had been a "Hey, baby!" and an affectionate press of the lips. No tongue. No pressure.

Damianos is a fire. Burning me up.

All tongue. All pressure.

It's not a choice to kiss him back. It's a simple submission to physics. Fire eats matter. There's nothing a bundle of sticks can do when it's being consumed by flame.

We kiss, and my wolf sighs, finally back where she wants to be.

But then my human remembers... the kidnapping... the heat session... the baby.... Uncle Clyde!

I push at him, and it does absolutely nothing. Honestly, it feels like I'm pushing against a stone wall.

There's nothing I can do to break free of this kiss. But to my shock, I don't have to do anything else.

He immediately draws back, his glowing amber eyes staring down into mine, as his hands come to rest just beneath my shoulders. *"Please accept my deepest apologies, Reverence. I was so excited to behold you again that I did not think before seizing you in my arms. I hope I did not offend you with my kiss. Or hurt you."*

I start to open my mouth to tell him off for his weirdly passionate, mind-melting kiss. But then I stop when his words fully sink in. "Wait...did you just apologize? And say please?"

His expression softens and he smiles down at me. *"Yes, I said and meant all of those things, including being excited to behold you."*

I try to talk, but nothing comes out. I'm so shocked to hear those words from the mouth of Damianos Drakkon, the most arrogant and cruel prick I've ever met.

For a good few seconds, I'm at a total loss for words, but then I remember.... Clyde!

"Let me go!" I say, pulling all the way out of his arms. "I saw you with my uncle. Did you hypnotize him? Are you going to make him do something horrible too? Because if you do, I swear I'll never fucking forgive—"

*"Yes, I god spoke Clyde," Damianos answers before I can finish. "I planned to have him kill himself in front of you. The thought was to show you the extent of my power over those you value so that you wouldn't try to escape again. But as you can see, I changed my mind. I did not hurt your uncle. I simply sent him away with a command to forget that he had seen you in this place."*

He says this casually. Like we're talking about the weather.

Relief blossoms through me even though I hardly understand. "Wait, what?" I ask, taking a huge step back. "I don't get it. You were going to kill him, but then you decided not to? *Why?*"

He dips and turns his head so that I can no longer see his glowing eyes.

*"I realize now that would be cruel. Too cruel."*

I jut my chin, barely able to believe what I'm hearing. "So you're trying to say that after kidnapping me, chaining me to a bed, killing our kingdom's gatekeeper, and threatening to grisly murder every other member of my immediate family that you just magically learned the concept of 'too cruel' overnight?"

An excited smile erupts across his face. *"Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Thank you for providing such a concise and clever summation."*

I stare at him for a few hard beats, then I demand, "Okay, what the hell kind of game are you trying to run on me?"

*"No game, Reverence. I only wish to revere you as I should have from the start."* His head comes back up, and the look on his face punches me in the heart. Tortured and filled with regret. *"That is my sole wish."*

Okay...I'm not sure what to do here. So much fucked up shit has happened over the last—dude, I can't even tell you how many days it's been, that's how fucked up this shit is. But I can feel his sincerity and regret now. The emotions wash over me like they're my own.

A new realization suddenly blazes across my mind. His emotions...I can feel them now. And on top of that, his words...they're not coming from his mouth, they're coming from his mind straight into mine.

Our mate bond. It must be working even though we're from different species. And that means...

"You're inside my head!"

"Yes," he answers, without moving his mouth.

"Get out of my head!"

He dips his head again, then says, "Of coursssse, Reverenccccce. But I do not think you will like the ssssound of my voicccce without the tongue cap."

Okay...well...he's right about that. This is weird. Like talking to a lizard.

The head communication was better. But... "I don't want you in my head. Where's your tongue cap? And whatever you were wearing to cover up your eyes?"

"I am not ssssure. I threw them away and they were never recovered."

"Why did you throw them away?"

"Becaussse..." he gives me another pained look, and another wave of sadness washes over our mate bond. "I wisssshed to look upon you with my own drakkon eyessss. To tasssste you with my own drakkon tongue."

A shiver runs through my body because again I can feel his sincerity, even though I know this is bullshit he's spouting. It has to be.

"Did you..." My stomach turns at just the thought of it, but I have to ask, "Did you hypnotize me, too?"

"No, I cannot god speak you, Reverenccccce. That hassss been a problem from the ssssstart. It issss a weaknesssss where you were concccerned. One I did not want you to know about."

"But you're telling me now."

"Yessss."

My heart thumps fiercely. "Why?"

He gives me another sad look. "Becaussse you are the mother of my hatchling, and I wissssh to give you the Reverenccccce you are due. Assss I ssssaid before that is my only wissssh. My only wissssh in thissss life."

He takes me by the hand. "Come, Reverenccce. I will draw you a bath and tend to you assss you deserve."

A bath. That sounds so beyond great. Like the #relationshipgoals I had before I found out my thing with Akwasi was a complete sham. But no wait, I've got to remember who I'm dealing with.

I tug back on his hand. "Is this some kind of set up? Some new and even crueler way to hurt me? And my family?"

He looks back at me, his eyes intense in a way that goes way beyond their glow. "I will never hurt you. Or anyone in your family. That wassss my plan, but it issss not anymore."

The promise, so sincere and unexpected stops my heart. Then lifts it with hope. But I keep my expression cynical as I demand, "You expect me to believe you?"

Another wave of emotion washes over our mate bond. Intense and unfathomably sad. "I exxxxpect nothing of you. I am aware I will have to work for everything I recccceive from you. In the meanwhile, my only wissssh issss to revere you in the time we have left."

Maybe it's the weird sad feeling coming off of him. Maybe it's because I'm so confused. Maybe he's a lying-ass bitch and he really did use our mate bond to hypnotize me.

Probably number three.

I mean why else would I give in with a simple, "Okay?"



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### CHLOE

**C**hloe woke up and immediately reached for Fenris, but his side of the bed was empty.

At first, she panicked. Had he left her too?

But then she remembered...Fenris departed yesterday for the westward-bound part of his annual hunting trip. He did this at the start of every winter. Went off for a day or two in each direction, catching as much meat as he could on each trip. And when he passed back by the house to go in the next direction, he'd leave everything he'd caught so far for her to preserve and salt.

She imagined her mate had camped overnight and got up early to hunt some more this morning. Last year when he went west, he'd brought home a stash so large it had taken her most of the day and half the night to pickle, salt, and jerk it all.

She hoped he was similarly successful this year. The extra work would be a welcome diversion. Also, she'd get to visit with him for a little bit at the drop off. See for herself that he was safe and hadn't been mauled by a bear or something.

She didn't like these solo hunting trips of his. She'd rather become a winter vegetarian than risk losing the only family member she had left. At least in this time period.

Tears sprang to her eyes at that thought, and she gave in to the emotions she only allowed herself when Fenris wasn't around. Her shoulders shook and sobs racked her body as she remembered that last argument with Myrna and watching the boys walk away into the swirling snow. Olafr and FJ took a chunk of her heart along with them on their journey, and it was never the same.

Fenris didn't understand. He couldn't understand. In this time Viking kids set off on adventures all the time. Some of them come back, some of them were never heard from again. There were no social media updates in the Viking age, no postal service even. Occasionally news came from other traders, passing by on ships. But none of the other North Wolf parents felt entitled to know whether the grown children who went off to make their fortune were alive or dead.

She used to find this no-technology time period charming. She'd been so happy to dedicate the rest of her life to the kind of projects she used to do purely for entertainment on her Black Mountain Woman Vlog.

She'd managed to gain a bit of a following online, but she'd been an anomaly in her 21<sup>st</sup> century wolf town just a few miles outside of Denver. Even Rafe, her best friend and fiancé, hadn't understood why she'd insisted on sewing all her own clothes by hand and cooking every meal from scratch with meat from chickens she'd raised and vegetables and herbs from her garden.

For most of her life in her original time period, she'd been something either watched for entertainment purposes or tolerated by other wolves. And she knew Rafe had only been indulging her little hobby until she went into heat.

"No way she's going to be able to keep all this up after we have kids," he'd insisted to their friends.

But then Fenris landed outside their kingdom town's time portal and everything changed.

The Viking wolf didn't just tolerate her strange talent set. "It was as if the Fenrir wolf designed you for me. You were fated not only to be my mate, but also to live in this time with me," he'd insisted after he tricked her into returning to the Viking age.

And she'd believed him. For decades she'd lived in a happy ending filled with laughter, family, and a never-ending series of DIY projects.

But now....

Now she cried inconsolably whenever Fenris wasn't there to see.

She'd taught him the concept of loving and open communication toward the beginning of their relationship. And they'd exchanged solemn vows about always using it with each other.

She wished she could have kept that vow. She wished she could have continued to be the mate a warrior king like him deserved. But how could she communicate with him about how she'd been feeling in the years since they lost all of their children?

*Sorry, honey. I know you think this is enough, but I'm so sad, every morning it feels like I'm waking up to a nightmare.* How could she tell him that she was so depressed, or that it felt like her life was over, even though he was still here? She could barely keep all the despair from radiating over their mate bond.

She shouldn't have screamed at the skald the other day. She'd been doing such a good job of keeping it together. But hearing Fenris and the musician talk about their children, like they were stories that had ended too abruptly, instead of real people she missed every day—she hadn't been able to take it.

Chloe wished more than anything that she hadn't been so mean to Myrna before they left for their trip. Yes, Myrna had driven her crazy with her tomboy ways, but why hadn't Chloe ever taken her side when she argued with FJ? She remembered how she insisted to Fenris that women from her time didn't let themselves get pushed around by Viking bullies. Ha!

After so many years of feeling misunderstood in her own time, what had she gone and done? Treated Myrna the same way because she preferred swordplay with her father to running their longhouse with her.

She should have been nicer. She would have been nicer if she'd known she'd never get the chance to see her again...to say goodbye....

A fresh spate of tears poured from Chloe's eyes.

However, she abruptly stopped crying when she heard footsteps in the far distance. Fenris was back, earlier than she expected.

And if she was reading the light's position through the window right, she'd spent the whole morning crying and feeling sorry for herself.

Okay, self-pity time was over. Chloe scrambled out of bed, splashed her face with some cold water, and threw on one of her heavy prairie dresses. If she could get the stove lit, maybe it would look like she'd merely overslept and was just now getting around to making the porridge for breakfast.

Throwing herself back into the illusion that she was not falling apart brought some relief. She imagined herself asking Fenris if he'd caught a boar as soon as he comes through the door and pretending like she was just dying to make boar bacon.

But she didn't end up asking him about the boar when he came through the door.

Instead, she stared at him as he stomped his boots to clear the snow from his shoes on the fur hide she put down for just that purpose.

However, Chloe did not greet him.

Her mate was back, but instead of fresh game, he was carrying a wolf pup, sleeping and nuzzled inside one of his arms.

"*What is this?*" she pushed into his head, too shocked to speak to him in the North Wolves' language.

"*A present,*" he answered with a huge smile, holding the sleeping pup out to her. "*I brought her back from the old village. Just for you.*"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### OLA

The next hour as the dragon king's prisoner is...strange.

There's no other way to describe it. It starts off with him drawing me a bath. Like, an actual bubble bath, complete with a pearly perfumed soap poured out of a bottle and flower petals he produces out of nowhere.

"Reverenccccce, pleasssse dissssrobe, sssso that I may help you into the bath," he says after switching off the faucet.

"Okay, fine, I can't take the hissing anymore," I answer. "You were right. Let's go back to you talking inside my head."

He gives me a grateful look, then my mind fills with him saying, *"Thank you, Reverence. It is difficult for me to speak your language without my tongue cap. I believe this will be much more comfortable for both of us."*

"There is nothing comfortable about any of this shit," I answer out loud.

*"Yes, I can feel both your mental and physical discomfort over our mate bond,"* he answers with an apologetic tilt of his head. *"Only time and patience will cure the mental discomfort, but if you like, I can tend to your muscle soreness by removing your clothes for you, Reverence."*

"Nah, Supervillain, back right the hell up. I'll do it myself," I reply. Only to end up grimacing as I perform the now super achy task

of pulling the old-fashioned nightgown over my head.

Standing there with him after I'm done is weird. He's fully clothed in another billionaire-at-leisure trousers and sweater ensemble, and I'm totally naked. And just in case I think he's not noticing, his glowing eyes scroll up and down my body. Like I'm a meal, and he's a very, very hungry dragon.

I feel totally exposed.

And a little turned on.

Which is fucked up. So, so fucked up.

I'm no longer in heat. And he's still the guy whose ultimate goal in life is to psycho-murder my fathers. How had he put it before he decided to start putting on this act? *Only their slow and painful deaths will satisfy my thirst for vengeance.*

I quickly step into the tub and lower myself down into the water. And it feels like I'm hiding from those glowing eyes when I slip down so that my breasts and everything else is hidden under all the pretty smelling bubbles.

However, that's not enough to get away from him. I find that out when he produces something I haven't seen since the invention of wash-and-dry shower systems, when I was, like, ten. A yellowish-brown sea sponge and some soap.

*"I brought this sea sponge with me from my home in Greece,"* he says, dipping the sponge in the bathwater. *"I hope it pleases you."*

*Seriously?* I ask inside my head. While out loud, I say, "I can do that."

*"Please allow me,"* he answers, soaping up the sponge. *It is my duty to pay you reverence in this manner."*

There goes that P-word again. Less than an hour ago I wouldn't have figured he knew the word even existed, and now he's used it twice. Also... "What do you mean it's your duty? You weren't acting very reverent last night."

*"No, I have not acted as I should have since the moment I realized you could and would become the mother of my progeny. And for this, I will never be able to apologize or punish myself enough. But I plan to spend the rest of your time upon this Earth reversing that error. Starting with this bath."*

I'm so stunned, I don't protest or pull back when he lifts my arm out the water and starts to clean it.

*Reverence....* that's what he's been calling me ever since he came through my bedroom door after Uncle Clyde left in one piece.

And reverent is the only word I can think of to describe the look in his golden eyes as he moves the sponge over my arm. The emotions riding over our mate bond...I can't help but feel valued and so, so cared for as he washes first my left, then my right arm. Like I'm the most precious thing on earth.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to let him keep going. "I'll take care of the rest," I say after he dips and re-soaps the sponge. "I don't need you cleaning my breasts."

He bows his head, his eyes lowering in what looks a lot like deference.

Deference from Damianos Drákon. All the exploding head emojis.

*"Of course, Reverence,"* he says inside my head. *"I would not want to make you more uncomfortable, knowing how much you've already suffered my presence."*

His acquiescence sounds so sincere, I feel like I'm being churlish when I take the sponge from him and start cleaning myself underneath the bubble layer, much more efficiently than he did.

But instead of leaving, he just sits back on his heels, his eyes devouring me as I work.

"Could you stop that?"

*"Stop what, Reverence?"*

"Looking at me, like I'm giving you a show."

He immediately lowers both his head and his eyes again. *"Forgive me, Reverence. It is hard not to bask in the glow of your beauty. I meant no offense."*

I stare at him, not even a little sure how to respond to that.

*"May I wash and tend to your hair?"* he asks into my gaping silence. *"That way, I will not be tempted to stare upon your magnificent flame."*

I close my mouth...swallow...then find myself saying, "Okay."

I mean, it's better than having him stare at me like he was before. Burning up my body with his eyes and giving me the ideas that are the opposite of never having sex with him again.

Big, gigantic mistake. I'd never had my hair washed in the bath by someone who wasn't my stressed-out mom. And I find out the hard way that having a man do it, is much, much different.

The dragon king's fingers on my scalp as he shampoos my hair feel better than any electronic head massager I've ever tried. And

when he uses those large hands of his to pour water over my head and rinse the shampoo out? Let's just say I didn't know that hair-gasms were a thing before that.

My whole body feels limp as a noodle by the time he conditions my hair. And to my surprise, he was serious about tending to my hair, too. He leaves the conditioner on and starts finger-detangling my curls slow and easy, no rush. Definitely not like Mom at all. There are no painful tugs at my scalp, no ripping of ends, or constant questions about what I was doing outside to make my hair get this bad. Just quiet work until my curls are knot-free and it's time to rinse out the conditioner.

But wait, he's still not done. The next thing I feel is the pointy end of a wide-tooth comb to my scalp.

I frown when I realize he's making a part. Then I just about faint when he ties off the rest of my hair and starts braiding the parted-off section in a neat and efficient cornrow.

What. The. Fenrir. Wolf.

"Are you...? Are you braiding my hair?" I ask him.

"Yes, Reverence."

I sit in shocked silence for the next fifteen minutes as he throws my wet curls into five braids like it's no big deal.

And from what I can feel with the tips of my fingers after he's done, they're neat and straight. "Like, I don't know how to cornrow, how do you know how to cornrow?" I demand.

*"It was but a simple matter of research and practice. During the preparations for my reverent apology, I discover that tired soon-to-be mothers often have a hard time with grooming their hair. This inability to groom, I read, might then lead to a depressive state. I want nothing but comfort and happiness for you during your gestation period. For this reason, I studied how to make styles that would frame your great beauty and also keep the hair out of your face. I hope it is to your liking. If not, I have also learned to prepare a few other simple hairdos, including French braids, twists, and Bantu knots."*

A few shocked beats go by, then I have to ask him straight up: "Okay, is this a trick to score a VIP pass to the party in my pants?"

*"Score a VIP pass to the party in your pants...?"* He tilts his large head. "Are you referring to sex?"

"Yes," I answer, turning my freshly braided head around to regard him frankly. "I just don't understand why you're being like this



if you're not trying to get it in."

He shifts uncomfortably and looks down at something below the tub line. I find out what it is when he says, *"Tis a new wonder. At just the mention of performing the mating act with you outside of breeding reasons, my male works have descended."* But then he looks back up at me to say, *"However, the answer to your question about whether I am angling for one of these pants party VIP passes is no. It would never occur to a drakkon to expect such a thing from his mate, even if she survived her birthing."*

"Hold up..." I displace a bunch of water, bringing my hands up to grip the edge of the tub. "You think I won't survive this birthing?"

A shadow passes over his face. *"I am not certain..."* he admits. *"But I have consulted with my cousin on this matter, and he has instructed me upon what would be needed for you and our progeny to survive a live birth after three months of gestation. I have great hopes that if I follow his instructions, the three of us can make a life on this planet as he has with your sister and their three offspring."*

I blink. So many questions popping off in my head. "Wait, you've been in contact with Xenon? And he told you about...?"

Damianos was a good 50% of why my sister and her family had to go into hiding, but the twins were the other 50%. When Fensa and he announced their plan to go somewhere where neither Damianos nor any other drakkon would be able to find them, I'd cornered him alone to ask why they couldn't just stay here and fight.

"There's a ton of us wolves and like, a very few of them," I pointed out. "We could take them on."

"No, I cannot risssk it Twin Ssssister of Treasured Mate," Xenon had insisted. "If any of the drakkon were to dissssscover Treasured Mate had given birth to not one but two biologically compatible drakki, it would start a ccccivil war among the drakkon, many of whom are on the short list of this planet's trillionairessss."

"Even if we managed to best Damianossss, more drakkon would attempt to kidnap Golden Twin Daughterssss. Their lives would not be their own but that of their captorssss. And drakkon do not have the concept of mental age as you do. If captured, they would be forcceed to breed as ssssoon as their fertility workssss developed. And that is a fate I could never abide for them. For those reasonssss, I would rather hide than fight."

It made sense, even to a hothead like me. And I would have died myself before telling Damianos or any other of those dragon bitches about the twins.

But now here the supervillain is, casually dropping mention of them like they're a known secret.

*"You have no need to worry about me telling anyone about the Betrayer King's golden drakki twins. You forget, they are my family, too, and I would not wish harm on them."*

"How did you know I was worried about that?" I demand. Is he reading my actual secret thoughts now? Is this some weird side-effect of our cross-species mate bond? I'd heard all sorts of wonky things happened when wolves got with humans, which is why Knud's and Layla's romance is yet another long story in our family cannon.

*"'Twas a simple guess,"* he answers both my spoken and unspoken questions. *"I can feel your upset over our mate bond and your flame has become incredibly agitated."*

"My flame," I repeat, not understanding.

*"Ah, yes, drakkon see the world in what would most easily be described as thermal vision. Though, this is the first time I have been able to see your flame. About a century ago, one of my drakkon subjects designed contacts for our shells that allowed us to not only mask our eye glow but also to see the world as anthros see it."*

Okay, so many questions. Like, all the questions. But I start with, "So wait, Xenon not only knows I'm here but also talked you through how to help me give birth...in three months?"

"Yes."

"Does Fensa—"

*"No, she is not aware I have taken you as my mate, or even that my cousin and I are in contact. The Betrayer King was afraid that if she knew what he'd kept from her, their mateship would suffer."*

"More than suffer," I answer. "She'd never forgive him if she knew he knew I'd been kidnapped, and he hadn't lifted a finger to help me."

*"That is exactly his fear if our union doesn't result in a live birth, with both you and the baby intact."* Damianos nods as if we're in perfect agreement.

But I shake my head back at him. Because he's totally not getting it. *"Fensa will still be pissed. Just like me. It doesn't matter if I live through*

*the birth. It's not like I'm going to suddenly decide, 'Oh, it's totally okay that you kidnapped me and forced me into proximity heat.'*"

A long silence. Then he says, "No, my queen, I do not expect you to suddenly decide to forgive me for my many wrongs. But it is my fervent hope that by the time our hatchling is born your flame turns yellow for me and that it will lead you to forgive me for what I have done."

"What do you mean about my flame turning yellow?" I ask, so, so confused.

*"The Betrayer King's flame burns a pure yellow when he talks of his mate. He told me her flame began to burn this color for him too before they parted after years together in the Ice Age. I believe the emotion is referred to as 'love' in your human language."*

Love...I choke on the notion. "Wait, you want me to fall in love with you before the baby is born and tell my sister no harm, no foul about you kidnapping me the next time I see her?"

*"Yet another clever summation of my dialogue,"* he answers, his admiration evident as he smiles. *"But enough talk of the future, your flame tells me you are hungry. I will wait for you in your room so as not to offend you with my admiring gaze when you rise from the bath."*

With that, he stands up and leaves the room.

Leaving me behind, stunned and flabbergasted.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

**S**tunned and flabbergasted. That's pretty much the way I stay in the hours that follow.

Damianos Drákon is ruthless, arrogant, the kind of asshole who would have the guy he hypnotized into becoming your boyfriend collar you and then threaten to kill himself.

But he's waiting like a lap dog when I come out of the bathroom, this time wrapped in a big fluffy towel he left behind.

I don't know whether to say, "Hello again" or "What the hell?"

I settle for eyeing him mistrustfully as I edge past him to the closet.

But I can feel his gaze on me as I slip a new nightgown over my head. Glowing and hot.

"What do you wish to do today, Reverence?" he asks behind me.

"Go home and sleep in my own bed," I shoot back, shutting the closet door. "Resume my duties as the queen of North Dakota, like I was supposed to before you kidnapped me.

In an instant, he closes the space between us. "*We are each other's homes now.*" His voice is calm and gentle inside my head like he's explaining simple facts to a six-year-old. "*You are my queen, and my bed is yours should ever you have wish to share it.*"

God, it's hard to think straight with his voice inside my head, dark and rich as chocolate syrup. Total temptation.

For a moment, I can't help but imagine the picture he's trying to paint. Us...not prisoner and captor, but the kind of couple that would let a bath turn into other things....

Exasperated face emoji...what am I doing? Why would I even let my mind stray down that road?

This is a trick. It has to be, I remind myself before answering out loud, "Okay, fine. I guess we could binge something. Does this place have a TV?"

It does. After a lunch, consisting of a simple turkey sandwich for me, and a pile of lunchmeat for him, Damianos takes me into the living room and asks the house to watch TV. A pre-biochip era flat screen emerges from the wall in front of the couch, one so old, it doesn't even project holos.

But I grew up with this kind of set, so after a few minutes or so of watching a superhero movie from the 2010s, I get used to the flat way entertainments used to look...if not the dragon shifter sitting at the opposite end of the couch.

*What the hell is he up to?* I wonder, frowning. But Escape is still Plan A, B, and C. Maybe if I act like I'm buying his nice dragon act, I can make an opportunity to get the hell out of here.

Uncle Kyle had wielded friendliness like a weapon, while Uncle Clyde had done the necessary, dirty work behind the scenes. They'd both warned me that I would have to figure out how to fulfill both roles since I'd opted not to take on a beta. Real Talk 100, I'd been more worried about the friendly part than the behind-the-scenes ass-kicking. But now, here was my chance to see if I could be half the diplomat Uncle Kyle was.

"So what do you usually watch back in Greece?" I make myself ask Damianos during the obligatory breather scene when the superhero and her love interest talk and actually get to know each other while on their way to another fight.

*"I do not watch such entertainments,"* he answers, immediately shifting his eyes to me as if I were way more interesting than anything happening on screen. *"After spending my early millennia here in the part of Zone 4 that would eventually come to be known as Greece, I much prefer live entertainments. But I even stopped attending those after a certain point. Most of the music produced after the baroque period is complete and utter trash. European music especially was perfect before Mozart came along with his juvenile, overly flamboyant compositions."*

I narrow my eyes, and not just because no one else I know would dare to hate on Mozart, but also because I think I might have heard a

compliment buried deep inside of there. "So music...that's the one thing you like about humans?"

Damianos sniffs. *"Music is the sole place humans excel. Drakkon do not have such a concept, so yes, I suppose it was somewhat fascinating to watch the upright primates go from singing their unintelligible throat songs with only rude hand carved instruments as accompaniment to composing symphonies."*

The superhero on screen is headed toward the World War II trenches now. We're almost to my favorite part where she fucks a bunch of Nazis all the way up.

But I stay turned toward Damianos, strangely fascinated for reasons that have nothing to do with my Uncle Kyle impression. No, I hadn't missed all that disdain for humans in his voice. But it was hard not to appreciate his short and concise summary of music from the Ice Age until "Mozart came along."

"Okay, you loved music pre-Mozart but hate the modern stuff. So what do you do for fun then?" I ask, honestly curious.

He shrugs one huge shoulder. *"In truth, not much these days. I do not wish to have your inferior technology attached to my brain stem, which means nearly all manner of interactive entertainments are inaccessible to me. It's unfortunate that live entertainment can no longer be easily curated, as it was before the Middle Ages. During the peak of the Roman empire, I had a stable of gladiators acquired from all over the world who fought exclusively for my entertainment. I had merely to wonder who would win in a weaponless fight between a Berber and a former centurion, and that night I could watch it unfold over dinner. The answer, if you're wondering, was the Berber."*

"Okay, I was totally wondering," I admit, leaning even further in. "I would've loved to have watched that fight."

*"It was quite the spectacle. The guests at my party talked about the surprise upset for years afterward. You see the Berber was quite small, but he figured out how to use this to his advantage..."*

And that's how I ended up spending the rest of the afternoon, ignoring the superhero movies playing in the background, and listening to stories from my captor's Roman Empire days.

His actually-lived history was more than a little fascinating and probably why I didn't notice who was missing until Damianos stands up and says, *"Stay here while I heat up our dinner. I am afraid we*

*must make do with leftovers until I can make alternative arrangements with a food delivery service."*

"Where's Colby?" I call after him, realizing for the first time that I haven't seen him all day.

Damianos answers, *"I imagine Colby is back in England now. I released him from his generational service."* Then he disappears through the sliding door.

Forget staying put, I follow him into the kitchen. "Wait, you released him? Just like that? But I thought you had no problems being a modern-day slave owner."

*"All the Colbys have been paid. Quite handsomely I might add,"* Damianos answers as he scrolls through the current items list on the fridge's digital display window. *"And no, I did not have any problems at all with acquiring his life for my beckoning. But that was then. This is now."*

I shake my head, unable to believe that he actually gave his manservant his walking papers. "What happened between then and now?"

He stops scrolling and turns his intense glowing gaze on me, magnetizing me with just a look. *"You. You happened. And you changed everything."*

I don't believe him. I shouldn't believe him. It's obvious that this is a trick. So obvious.

Still, he's looking at me in that way again. Like he adores me more than anyone else on Earth.

But why? I don't understand how he transformed from an arrogant asshole to an adoring companion overnight.

The answer is he didn't, I tell myself over a dinner of overcooked lamb chunks and mashed potatoes. I've got to stay on guard and I've really got to figure how to escape my now weirdly pleasant imprisonment.

For those reasons and those reasons only, I continue playing along. The conversation flows over dinner and though we do end up back in the living room to finish watching the rest of the movies in superhero's personal series, the television never gets turned back on. We talk and talk until Damianos informs me it's time to go to bed if I wish to be well-rested.

He walks me to my bedroom door like we're kids in one of those pre-biochip movies from back when teens still dated in person in-

stead of via avatars.

Then he dips his head low, his lips hovering directly above mine.

*Is he going to kiss me again?* I'm still a prisoner, looking for a way out. But my heart beats silly and stupid with the question.

*"Would you like to sleep in this room alone or come to my bed as we discussed earlier?"*

"You made an offer, there was no discussion involved," I remind him. "And I...I never agreed to that." My response is meant to be a declaration, but the words come out as little more than a weak stutter. It's hard to keep my voice as firm as I want it to be with my wolf dancing in my stomach.

*"No, you didn't agree to share my bed,"* he answers, both his expression and voice sad. But instead of arguing, he takes a step back and says, *"Good night, Reverence."*

*That's it?* I feel disappointed and like a fool at the same damn time. "Okay, um, good night," I answer before escaping into the room.

But of course, I don't fall asleep after I climb into bed. As soon as I deem it late enough, I creep to the door, hoping to God and the Fenrir wolf that Damianos forgot to lock it again, like the one time I managed to get all the way downstairs.

You see, I gathered an important piece of intel over dinner. The kitchen...it has three doors: a sliding one that leads out to the living room, and two regular ones with old-fashioned knobs. One of the regular doors is full wood and looks like it leads to the basement, but the other one has a window and I could see it definitely leads to the outside.

Taking a deep breath, I press my palm to the door.

To my utter surprise, it totally opens.

But then, to my utter disappointment, I find Damianos curled up on the floor outside my room.

Damn hermetically sealed suite! If this had been a regular house, I would have known he was right on the other side of the door. But maybe he was sleeping so soundly I could just creep over his huge body.

*"Is there any way I might serve you, Reverence? Do you require water or more food?"* the dragon king's voice appears inside my head, completely cutting off that idea.



With an irritated huff, I palm the door closed again, not bothering to answer.

The next time I find myself in the kitchen, it's because Damianos has escorted me down there after administering my morning bath.

"How about you let me handle breakfast," I offer, not wanting to sit through another rubbery meal of overcooked whatever Colby left in the fridge.

A weird thing happens when we're done eating, though. I feel a tremendous surge of hunger.

Which is crazy since I'd made myself four eggs, and that's more than I usually eat for breakfast. But then I realize the ravenous feeling isn't coming not from inside of me but over my mate bond.

"Are you still hungry?" I ask Damianos.

*"Forgive me, Reverence, but we drakkon require much more sustenance than wolves. I will as the humans say, raid the refrigerator to see what else I might eat."*

"No, I can make more," I answer, standing up. For reasons I don't care to fully examine right now, I do not like the idea of Damianos starving. "How much did Colby use to cook for you?"

*"The last Colby would have food delivered toward the beginning of the week. I believe he ordered a carton of eggs for each day until the next delivery and a package of bacon."*

Well, that explained why there were so many cartons of eggs and at least ten packages of bacon wrapped in brown paper in the fridge.

"You want some toast, too?" I ask, closing the door with one of the cartons and brown-paper packages tucked under one arm.

*"Drakkon are carnivorous. We do not require breads, grains, or plants."*

A chill runs down my back at the word carnivorous. And it's not one of fear. Why does everything he says remind me of sex? Which I shouldn't be wanting to have right now. Especially with him.

I concentrate on figuring out how to scramble a whole carton of eggs at the same time.

"You honor me with this feast," Damianos declares when I set down a plate piled high with eggs and bacon.

"I'm sure this is nothing in comparison to what Colby would have made," I answer.

*"Yes, all of the Colbys train for a time under master chefs. However, this meal was made by your reverent hand, and therefore it automatically qualifies as the best thing I've ever eaten."*

My cheeks warm. It's embarrassing how pleased his declaration makes me feel, even though cooking a simple breakfast like this really wasn't any kind of big deal. I guess my great-grandfather Leroy was right though.

*"Remember, Twins, the best way to a man's heart is through food,"* he'd once told us when our overworked mom walked in with a bucket of KFC for the fourth night in a row. This had been back before our dads had returned to share the parenting and kingdom burden with our mother, who was not only a video game business CEO but also holding down the Queen of Michigan title at the same time.

*"And notice your mama don't have a man,"* Leroy had added, just in case the meaning of his callous dig hadn't come across clear.

My mother had merely glared at him and suggested the retired king do something other than make her life harder. But now a new idea occurs to me...

*"I could make meals for us from now on if you want me to. But I'll need you to do a grocery store run."*

*"I cannot do as you have asked,"* he immediately answers. *"But please do not worry, a new delivery will be made every week."*

My heart sinks.

Well, that's the end of that nub of a plan.

A few days later while we're eating breakfast, and I'm still no closer to figuring out how to execute Plan Escape, the house informs us that the delivery person from the local grocery store is here.

I still, and Damianos regards me across the table, his golden gaze slitting.

*"I do not believe you would wish for me to harm the man making the delivery or for me to god speak his mind,"* he says. *"But that is exactly what will happen if you attempt to follow me and seek his assistance."*

With that threat, he leaves to answer the door.

My heart beats loudly in my ears as I consider the kitchen door. It's so close and there's just enough time to make a run for it. If I made it to the Yellow Mountain village, I might be back on my throne in New Wolfsburg by the time the night is through.

*Or...*

The memory of Kirk slicing his own neck flashes across my mind. No, I can't make a run for it...if I try to escape while the delivery person is here, who knows how Damianos will punish me if he catches me?

A few days of him being nice to me doesn't erase the very real possibilities of what he'll do if I make him mad again. I force myself to stay seated and I even manage a smile when Damianos comes back with a huge box, which we unpack together.

*"Do you prefer steak then?"* he asks after I pull out a large package of rib eyes. *"I can feel your great excitement over our mate bond."*

*"Yes, I love steak,"* I answer. This is how I find out for sure he can't read my mind. Because if he knew why I was really so excited about the steak, he would throw the rib eyes straight into the trash.

But instead of chucking them, Damianos says, *"If it pleases you, Reverence, let's have it for breakfast tomorrow. Do you know of this dish, steak and eggs? Colby used to make it often."*

*"It does please me, and I totally know how to make steak and eggs,"* I answer with my brightest smile. *"Thanks!"*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mom forced our local K-12 wolf school to incorporate meditation into the curriculum after she took over as Queen of Michigan. Neither of my dads saw much use for it, and I hadn't either. For twelve years, I'd squirmed on a mat for the first half-hour of school, wondering why we had to do this useless shit.

But after figuring out my new escape plan, I was making all the mental apologies to Mom. If not for being able to focus my mind by rote, there's no way I would have been able to keep it calm enough not to broadcast over our mate bond that I was totally up to something.

I make it through lunch and dinner that day and even watch the first few episodes of a World War II documentary series while sitting beside Damianos on the couch. The truth is, I've never loved long multi-part documentaries. Give me a collection of short vids about how to actually do something any day. My dads say that's my Grandma Chloe's influence. She was one of the original vloggers back in her day and enjoyed making the same kind of tutorials I loved to watch.

But as it turns out, documentaries are fun to watch with Damianos, somebody who has lived through all the eras being covered. His side notes and scathing corrections make learning about history way less boring.

Though our easy couch camaraderie does hit a snag when I ask him why he didn't help out in World War II as the fourth episode's credits roll.

*"You asking me that is the equivalent of me asking you why your kind did not help out your primate ancestors. How could you let them carry out their squabbles and sometimes even kill each other to gain dominance?" he answers. "Other than for entertainment purposes, I gave little thought or consideration to what the anthros did to each other, especially after I decreed that we drakkon should purposefully become myth and stop eating humans."*

"Why did you do that?" I ask, hoping for an even halfway moral reason.

But that hope dies a quicker than quick death. *"For the same reasons you would, if your meat sources not only outnumbered you but had taught themselves to build and wield nuclear weapons. It was a decision both practical and tactical."*

"Yet, you're here with me," I point out. "Expecting a baby with me...what did you call us? Dogs?"

I like the irritation that ripples over our mate bond from his end. I also like that we're arguing. It's a much-needed reminder that I'm absolutely within my rights to do what I've got planned.

But then his expression sobers. *"Yes, I did at a time call you that. What a fool I was."*

He lets out a steaming sigh. *"For too long I clung to the old hierarchy and dismissed your kind as idiot animals not deserving of your planet. You see, if I hadn't done that, I would have been required to make certain admissions to myself."*

He trails off, but obviously I'm not going to let him stop there. "What didn't you want to admit to yourself?"

*"That my most reverent father was wrong, and The Royal Geneticist was correct,"* he answers, his tone plain and simple. *"Our mission to this planet was supposed to be an investigation of his claim, but it was corrupted from the start."*

He turns his glowing eyes to the distance as if watching a memory play out. *"We brought along the then Second Prince of Drakkon to construct more fertility matching devices—what we called fating portals—since The Royal Geneticist had stopped making wolves after breeding just a few dozen test groups in Zone 4. Much of our mission revolved around establishing humans on every continent so that the then drakkon king would be able to hunt in any clime. And it was my job as Royal Huntmaster to train the wolves so that they could assist us in our hunts. The decision to send the prince and me along with the team of surveyors made it clear to*

*everyone, including The Royal Geneticist, that the only way he would be able to save the humans and the wolves he believed would evolve into a worthy species would be by destroying us."*

Damianos shakes his head, and I can feel his real regret flowing over our mate bond as he tells me, "So, you see, Reverence, giving up my prejudices against humans and wolves would have been admitting that truth. That the Royal Geneticist was right, and that my father was wrong to send back recommendations that your races had no potential at all. Drakkon must honor their parents and show them reverence. But if not for my father's biased report, the Royal Geneticist wouldn't have destroyed our planet, setting off the series of events that led to his death."

I pause the World War II doc in the middle of its intro. Wow, I thought I was poking at the elephant in the room when I brought this subject up. But here Damianos is, kicking it all the way awake.

And that makes me want to ask even more direct questions. "I always wondered, why did you show up out of the blue like that in my father's village?"

Again, Damianos doesn't hesitate before answering. It's almost as if he's been waiting for the chance to explain himself. "Back then, the Betrayer King you call Xenon, came up with a theory. That if we found Fenrir's original fating portal and said the code into it, then we would all be transported to our perfect matches—which at the time we believed could certainly only be one of the extinct drakki. However, it would take us much time to find the fating portal since Fenris's original gates were sculpted on a quantum field only canine can perceive. Also, if the plan worked, there was a good chance we would land in a time period when drakki were much more fertile, and that would be too early for us to save our planet—this time period might even be before our drakkon civilization's quantum leap. However, after living so long here on this then technology-free world, we decided that was a sacrifice we were willing to make if it meant we would be able to live out the rest of our millennia on the planet your people refer to as Mercury.

"So the idea was to ransack a bunch of villages, while you were looking for the original gate?" I summarize. "Why didn't you just get a wolf to lead you to the gate? Hypnotize them like you do everyone else."

"It is difficult to control more than two or three thralls at the same time with god speech. Also, even with the aid we presumed we would have from the Betrayer King, it would have taken him some time to configure the fating portal. That is why I have used an intricate system of bribes and god

*spoken human emissaries to gain access to the fating portals we studied to finally realize the Betrayer King's broken promise."*

"So that's why you bought the Greek wolf kingdom island and the Idaho kingdom gate," I say. Back in the day, when I was only a few years old, we passed a new law about kingdom towns not being allowed to sell property to humans. This had been in response to an Idaho king, who had lost his entire kingdom town to a Russian oligarch in a high-stakes poker game. The oligarch had gone on to sell it to Damianos Drakkon, a male the Lupine council had thought at the time was a simple billionaire. But who I'm now finding out was really a bitter alien, setting the stage to return to an earlier time on his planet.

"So why are you still here then?" I ask. "You have your gates. What else do you need to go back?"

*"Alas, there was only one fating portal engineer on our mission, and that was the Betrayer King. Just like it has in your society now, our technology had reached the point that it was very hard for a lay drakkon to fully understand it, much less manipulate it. Without guidance or instruction, it has taken decades of study for us to not only locate potential fating portals but also reconfigure them so that a drakkon could use it to get matched with a fated mate. On our home planet, these fertility portals were used to draw your mate to you, not the other way around. So, it was not only a matter of changing the genetic coding on the gates, but also figuring out how to make it so the fating portal would send a drakkon male to his female match and not the other way around. We have only recently broken the science on it. Unfortunate timing, as this was exactly when my desire for you reached a fever pitch I could no longer ignore."*

"Okay," I say, sifting carefully through that huge download of information. "So, you were planning to what, pump a baby into me, so that you could stop the itch, then bounce to your fated mate, who'd probably be a female dragon like you?"

He makes a sound in his chest, that might or might not be a chuckle. "Yes, *Clever Reverence*. That was exactly what I planned to do. I am impressed that you so easily figured it out. However, while I understood that it would be a biological imperative to mate with you, I did not give enough consideration to how hard it would be to leave you. I was a fool, and I will spend the rest of my life punishing myself for taking for granted this connection we share. That is why I ordered the project shut down. Nothing will be allowed to disturb the happy life I have planned for us."

My heart stutters. He's planning a whole life together while I'm planning how to escape. But I press on, wanting to make sure I've got what he's trying to tell me right. "So the project's shut down and you're not going to go through the fated mate gate?"

*"Why would I?" he asks. "You are my mate, the mother of my progeny. There is no greater point to my existence than paying you the reverence you are due for the rest of my life. But enough about that, Treasured Mate. It is now getting late. I will give you escort to your room."*

I follow him in a daze. Not sure how to respond to his latest declaration, or even how to feel.

But my wolf has some ideas. She flips onto her back, legs spread wide open. Total THOT emoji.

*This doesn't change anything, I tell that ho-wolf over there. I have no way of knowing if anything he just claimed is true, including the part about wanting a happy ending for us. The dude is still a supervillain. And you know this is part of some ultimate plan. We're basically carrying the spawn of Thanos here, I remind her.*

But apparently, my wolf has nothing against civilization destroying monsters. She whines and complains about no longer wanting to go through with the plan. It makes me want to scream and call her a basic bitch.

But now is nowhere near the time to get into it with my wolf.

Instead, I focus on projecting happiness and calm over my side of the mating bond as I turn to say, "Okay, I guess I'll see you tomorrow for my bath."

*"There is no reason to guess at such things. I will, of course, appear to pay you reverence at the appointed hour."*

Yeah, definitely need to apologize to mom in real life about complaining so much about the meditation requirement when I return to my kingdom house. It takes every single ounce of my childhood training to keep my wolf from vomiting up all her guilt over our mate bond.

No lingering at the door like 20<sup>th</sup>-century teenagers tonight.

"Good night," I say quickly before disappearing into the room and crawling straight into bed. There I concentrate on falling asleep, but I'm not going to lie, it takes a while.



THE NEXT MORNING, I SET A PLATE OF STEAK PILED HIGH, AND A carton's worth of eggs in front of him. Just like I planned.

His delighted smile makes my wolf whinny inside of me, as I sit down across from him with a steak of my own.

*Stop it. Bad girl,* I say as I make a big show of trying to cut up my steak with a butter knife.

"That looks impossible," Damianos says after a few seconds of watching me, just like I was hoping he would.

"I mean, I'm going to have to make do. I couldn't find anything sharper in the silverware drawer."

Damianos frowns. Tilts his head, then rises from his seat.

I watch him pull open a few cabinets. Then he disappears from eyesight and the next sounds I hear are of the doors beneath the island being pulled open.

When he rises again, it's too plunk a butcher block filled with knives down on the island counter. *"Colby did not do a very good job of following my instructions to hide these."*

I seize on Colby to keep my mate bond from relaying my excitement. "He probably didn't think you'd ever let me out of my room," I say, trying as hard as I can to sound like myself. Not somebody plotting something.

He pulls two small steak knives from the butcher block's lower slots. Then he comes to sit down across from me with them. There's a tension in the air between us, and I can't tell if it's coming from me or him.

Probably me. *Stay cool, you've got to stay cool,* I warn my wolf.

He holds up the steak knife, blade down. But instead of extending it to me, he says, *"That chapter of our story is over now. You understand that I only wish to revere you for my remaining days upon this planet, and you have no plans to ruin this peace between us, correct?"*

I almost quickly lie and agree yes. Tell him we're all kumbaya now, no harm, no foul, just to get him to trust me. But the real Ola would never do that, and I can't go too far with the Uncle Kyle act. I'm pretending I've warmed up to him, not gotten a total lobotomy. So I take the risk...

"It's kind of hard to feel revered with this collar around my neck," I answer, holding his glowing gaze. "You say you no longer think of me as a dog, that you want some kind of future together for us, but here I am, still your prisoner."

He holds my eyes for a second or two, but then dips his huge head, looking away from me.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I say into his silence.

Then I reach across the table and pluck the knife out of his hand. "C'mon, let's just eat before the food turns cold."

I don't try to stab him. Not that week. Or the next. I still don't have access to my internal bioclock, but time...I'm definitely biding it.

I act like I believe he's a changed dragon. I laugh and talk with him over meals like I totally don't see that butcher block of knives he left out on the island counter. And I pretend that I'm perfectly happy with the new routine he's established.

Bath in the morning, breakfast made by me, several laps around the house, followed by a series of squat exercises that Damianos says I'll need for when it comes time to "lay our hatchling." (I know from watching Fensa's C-section that there won't be any actual eggshells involved, but it still skeeves me out every time he refers to it that way).

After exercising, we have lunch, followed by a nap for me. Then comes an early dinner. Tons of meat for Damianos and a little meat and whatever carbs I want for me. And lastly, we end the evening with either an action film or a historical documentary.

You'd think I'd be going out of my mind after a month of this. My days as a Queen-in-training used to be non-stop, and the first week the feeling that I should be working hangs over me. But a few weeks into the short pregnancy, making breakfast, lunch, and dinner, really begins to take it out of me. Even with my afternoon nap, Damianos often has to wake me because I've fallen asleep in front of the television and it's time to go upstairs.

*"You must allow me to god speak another manservant,"* he says when we stop outside my door, one such night. *"Much of your energy will go to growing the baby over the next two moons, and I do not wish for you to overtire yourself."*

Funny, I've become totally used to having his voice inside my head, but I still haven't been able to wrap my mind around it being less than two months until I'll be expected to squat and squeeze out this baby.

But it's definitely happening. Now that I'm in the fourth week of my unintended stay, my stomach has gone from a soft and fluffy bel-

ly roll to a firm little ball, filled with my half-dragon baby.

Yet another reason, I've got to get out of here, back to my own kind and a doctor who can cut this winged bowling ball out of me if the dragon king's extended squat labor plan doesn't work.

"Nah, I've got this," I answer. Yeah, it would be nice to rest a little more, but I can't let him take away the few freedoms I have. So I push all sorts of *easy breezy totally no prob* down our mate bond as I tell him, "And it's not like I'm cooking anything hard. Just eggs and sandwiches and stews."

My tone is reassuring, but his worry continues to resonate over our mate bond. *"Would you...would you mind sleeping in my room with me tonight? I assure you, this is not an attempt to gain VIP access to your pants party. But as the pregnancy progresses, I find it harder to be apart from you at night. Everything in my drakkon being yearns to stay close to you. To protect you and watch over you, even when I sleep."*

God, why does he always sound so sincere when he says stuff like that to me? My wolf rolls over inside of me, wanting to give in to the delusion that he's a protective papa and I'm the center of his universe.

But...

It's just a trick, I remind my wolf. I don't know what his endgame is, but there's no possible way he went from the asshole who humiliated and derided me to this anxious father-to-be overnight.

"Why don't you sleep in your own bed tonight," I suggest. "Prove to me that you trust me like you want me to trust you."

A hesitation, then another downward dip of his head.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I say. And with that, I retire to my room, leaving him outside in the hallway.

A few more days slip by. More biding time.

Then one day while we're watching an Egyptian Kings documentary I realize it's time. I've just gotten done listening intently to a story from Damianos about the Royal Geneticist's *Canis lupaster* program. A *lupaster* is smaller than a wolf, bigger than a jackal, and apparently harder to manage than both. The program got out of hand so quickly, that he shuttered operations on the African continent, and rebooted with the much less clever European wolves. However, the ancestors of these lupasters went on to become some of Egypt's most infamous kings and queens.

"Okay, we definitely have to watch a Cleopatra documentary next," I say, queuing one up as I come to my feet. Hopefully, the show will be enough to distract him from noticing that I'm—

*"Where are you going?"* he asks inside my head before I can even finish that thought.

"To the bathroom. Then to make some popcorn," I answer as I scamper to the little bathroom located under the stairs.

I take my time using the toilet. Maybe if I stay in here long enough, he'll be so wrapped up in the doc, he won't notice when I slip back through the living room and into the kitchen.

But, of course not. He's waiting in the kitchen for me when I enter. With a bag of microwave popcorn in his hands.

*"I've been ruminating...if you refuse to let me god speak a new servant, then you should teach me how to do the things you do as you will soon be too tired to honor me with your meals. First, you will teach me how to make this popcorn you like so much."*

Normally it would be hard not to laugh at the way he says popcorn, like it's a foreign word. But a memory hits me. The first time I'd laughed at one of his many, many alternate versions of history.

He'd stilled mid-sentence.

"What?" I'd asked, the smile falling off my face.

*"It's just that I never saw you smile, much less laugh,"* he'd answered, his tone full of awe. *"Even music before the unfortunate entry of Mozart does not sound so beautiful."*

I'd laugh more times than I would have expected since then.

*But it was a trick,* I remind myself brutally. I've been tricking him, and he's been tricking me.

*If we give in to this delusion, the only way our story ends is with everyone we love dead,* I tell my wolf, as I reach out to take the sealed bag of popcorn from Damianos.

"Okay, the secret to microwave popcorn is adding more butter and salt when it's done." I open the pack and hand it back to Damianos without the outer wrapper. "Here, put this in the oven for a minute and forty seconds and I'll show you how I get it tasting just like the real thing after that."

The bag really only needs to go in for 90 seconds, but that's just three presses of the microwave's 30-second button. Not enough time for what I needed to pull off, while his back was turned.

Just as I expected, the small electrical oven with all its options stymies him. After several seconds of searching, he says, *"I cannot find any numbers to key in..."*

*"The keypad's inside the door. You have to open it to get to it."*

I glance at the butcher block Damianos left on the counter 3 weeks ago ...only to find the slot for the chef's knife empty. Guess Kirk literally took that one with him to his grave, so the much thinner slicing knife will have to do. Quietly slipping it out, I flood our mate bond with good cheer and yummy popcorn anticipation, as I say, *"Sorry, I should have told you that."*

*"There is no need to apologize, Reverence,"* he answers, opening the door. *"It is I who should apologize to you for never having properly learned these things so that I might revere you more readily."*

God, I wish he hadn't called me that...or apologized. It feels like a punch in a gut, one so painful, I can't hold on to my fake cheer.

His shoulders stiffen.

*"What is wrong..."* he begins to ask, turning back around.

But he never finishes that sentence because I plunge the knife straight into his neck.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I run. And run. And run some more. But it's not far enough to get the last picture of Damianos out of my head. Collapsed on the floor and choking on the knife embedded in his neck.

There had been blood. So much blood. And I could feel everything he felt over the mate bond: blinding pain, and even more rage.

It was hard to discern whether I was sticking to the plan when I turned and ran out the kitchen door or if I was trying to get away from all that pain and rage.

But I ran, and I didn't stop running until I could no longer feel him.

Did that mean he was dead?

My wolf whimpers inconsolably inside of me at the thought. Even though she should understand what I did was necessary. No matter what he'd said about revering me forever, the fact remained that he had me collared and was keeping me prisoner.

*It was the only way, I tell my inconsolable wolf, the only way we could be free—wait a minute, where am I?*

I look around, totally confused. I've been running downhill for sure and I'm finally on flat land. But instead of a road, there's...more woods.

Trees as far as even my wolf eyes could see in the dark. And dammit...I can't hear any traffic, even when I cup both ears. Which means I have no idea which way to walk to get out of here.

I'm on the verge of falling to my knees and shaking my fist at the sky when the smell of roasting meat hits my nose. Some kind of big

game mammal, even though hunters are only allowed to hunt birds in this part of North Dakota. Kyle worked for years with animal rights activists to get those laws passed.

Who cares? Where there's smoke, there's someone who is not a sociopath dragon making that smoke. I run toward the smell and let out a huge sigh of relief when I find a group of hunters sitting around a fire.

"The hell? Where'd you come from?" one of them demands, grabbing his rifle when I emerge from the dark.

I sniff the air. They're not YMWs, they're humans. Humans stupid enough to hunt in a protected territory, if the carcass hanging upside down over their campfire is any indication. Normally, I'd be tearing them all a new one for daring to shoot anything on four legs around here. I cannot express enough how dangerous that is for the shifters who have to turn into wolves every full moon.

But today, I feel nothing but relief at the sight of them. And I can't even blame them for pointing their guns at me.

I bet I look like I stepped straight out of a horror movie in my white nightgown covered in dragon blood.

"I'm not trying to hurt you. Lower your guns," I say, holding up both hands.

Wolves have a lot of cool powers, but surviving gunshots isn't one of them. And I'm deeply aware that I'm now surviving for two.

"I was kidnapped," I explain. "And I just now managed to get away. I need you to call someone to come get me and take me out of here."

"None of us have biochips. No way we're letting those chinks hack our brains and shit."

Okay...and apparently they're racist conspiracy theorists. Total side-eye emoji. But unfortunately, they're my only hope right now.

My dads can get anywhere they want in the woods. They're always doing things like telling us to head east or west as opposed to left or right, or predicting the time of day by where the sun's located in the sky. But I'm stupid dependent on my bioGPS, and I'm pretty sure I've overshot the old kingdom village I saw the other day. These racist bags of trash disguised as humans are better than the prospect of getting even more lost trying to find a road.

"Can I borrow a phone then?" Then realizing I don't know any phone numbers I could punch in from memory, I ask, "Or could one

of you call 9-1-1?"

There's usually a wolf embedded in every police department. Surely one of them would be able to get me back in contact with the kingdom house.

"No reception," one of the guys answers, his gun still raised. "That's why we like coming here to hunt. It's a chance to get away from the city."

*While violating at least six different conservation and territory laws.* But I bite back on my frustration. "Okay then could one of you drive me to the closest police station? I just need to find someone to help me."

No one answers. No one lowers their guns.

Then someone toward the back of the group asks, "What's that around your neck?"

I still, a bad feeling coming over me. A really, really bad feeling.

"Looks like one of those biosystem-blocking collars," another one observes.

The guy who told me there was no reception out here finally lowers his gun. But he has a look on his face...one I'd describe as amusement if it didn't hit me in the stomach like a gut punch.

"That means she ain't recording none of this," he tells the others. "And there's no way for her to call out."

That's when I get it. That I've escaped one danger only to run right up to another. And ask it for help.

The biochip age has led to a revolution of sorts. Crime has gone down to almost zero in most states. There's less sexual harassment, fewer openly racist incidents, and almost zero kidnappings, because would-be-criminals never know who could be recording. These days, crime shows are either historical set pieces or tech mysteries involving cyber law violations I can barely understand.

But before Fensa and I went off to our separate universities, my mother warned us that those were just statistics. "Data only tracks what data can see. Keep your biochip on. Don't accept drinks from people you don't know. Guard yourself even among the humans who don't know you're both in line to inherit kingdoms. It doesn't matter that your she-wolves with biosystems, all the same rules for human women still apply."

I take a step back. Then another. Then I break out running back toward the mountain, doing my best not to trip over the long hem of



my gown.

The men quickly give pursuit on foot, like I'm a ten-point buck. I suppose I should be happy they didn't shoot me like they would have a deer.

But then my wolf reminds me, *they're not shooting because they're planning to do something worst.*

I try to run faster. Normally my wolf speed would be enough to outdistance them. But the baby...it's heavy in my stomach with no give whatsoever. It feels like I'm trying to run away with a bowling ball underneath my nightgown.

Fear grips my heart. My wolf speed just isn't enough to outrun their enthusiasm to hurt me. And even a bad-ass like me can't fight off five humans with guns.

Another statistic pops into my head now. There are almost zero kidnappings these days. But when there are, the bodies of the victims are pretty much never found.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" I whisper to my unborn baby. Because I know these horrible humans won't let us live after they're done with me.

No, they'll kill me, then do whatever it takes to make sure I'm never found.

*KA-THUNK!*

Something lands in front of me, so hard, it makes the ground beneath my feet shake.

Rearing back, I look up, way, way up to see a dragon. So huge and black, that save for its golden eyes, it's hardly discernable from the night.

One huge claw with razor-sharp talons comes shooting toward me. And the next thing I know I'm being crushed into a soft underbelly of scales. No, not crushed I realize after a few seconds of panic. Hugged.

He's hugging me to him. Protecting me.

There comes an unearthly noise from above, like a roar and a shriek decided to get together for a death metal concert.

Then the air all around me heats.

And the next thing I hear is the sound of screaming.

I turn my head, the only part of my body I can move underneath the dragon's tight grip. And immediately wish I hadn't looked.

The men who were pursuing me are now running around in a panic. Not because they just saw something they thought was only a myth, but because they're all on fire. Torches dancing to a soundtrack of bloodcurdling screams.

The screaming doesn't last long though.

I watch their faces melt away like they're in an *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* reboot. The screams stop when everything capable of emitting sound gets eaten up by the fire. And that fire burns and burns until they're nothing but five piles of ashes with embers inside.

Only then does the dragon let me go.

He treads past me to put out those sizzling embers with a few clomps of its huge webbed foot. Now that I can see him up close under the moonlight, I realize he's actually blue.

I stare at the midnight blue dragon as it stomps out what's left of the human hunters.

Then I shiver when it turns back to look down at me, its golden eyes glowing bright with anger.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I don't realize I'm holding my breath until it all expels from my body in one terrified gust. The dragon continues to stare down at me for several long moments. So obviously Damianos I don't even need an introduction.

Then he lowers his head, displacing so much air, the leaves on the surrounding tree rustle as he drops his chin to the ground with his neck extended.

Okay, well, I don't know anything about dragon body language, but I think he wants me to get on.

I hesitate. Then hesitate some more. Then remember his dark promise the last time I tried to escape.

*Cease this immediately. Or I will have to punish you for your defiance on top of the punishment of this latest attempt at escape.*

More defiance will only get me into more trouble. And even if I dared to try to run again, I think Damianos has more than proven tonight that there's no getting away when it comes to him.

I climb on, then hold on tight as he launches us into the air.

SO THE GOOD NEWS IS YOUR GIRL GOT TO RIDE A DRAGON. AND THE flight was beautiful. You know, wind rushing through my cornrows, them 360-degree overhead Imax views—that's what's up!

I would have clocked it as one of the best experiences of my life if I wasn't returning to my prison.

And punishment unknown.

The bad news is that the ride ends all too soon with a coasting descent down to the gatehouse. He lowers his neck again. And I'm not sure if it's intentional, but I have a perfect view of the mound of dirt where the former gatekeeper was buried as I climb off his back.

I swallow hard. He almost killed my uncle the last time I tried to run.

What would he do after I stabbed him and left him to die?

That's all I'm thinking about as I watch Damianos shift bit by bit. First the body trunk, then the face, then last, but not least, he retracts his huge blue-black wings.

He's completely naked in that Ken Doll way of his. And that mortal wound I thought I served his neck? Nowhere to be found.

*What the Fenrir Wolf? How bionic is this dude?*

He takes a step toward me.

And I raise my chin defiantly, like, "Bring it on!"

But if we're spitting truth right now, that's just Ola the Bad Bitch on automatic.

"Never let a n-word see you sweat, baby girl." That's what great granddad used to tell me after Mom made him switch to a somewhat more sanitized version of his longtime personal motto.

I'd been born to the first female alpha of a state pack. She'd had people gunning for her and her throne from the start. And the last thing Great Granddad had done before he joined that motorcycle gang in the sky was instill in me the value of a chin all the way up with a zero fucks look, even when I was scared as hell.

I'd been pretending to be the toughest she-wolf in the land since I was a kid.

But it's harder than usual with this unearthly shifter staring down at me.

He's not even breathing hard. I guess giving me a dragon taxi ride home after firebombing a bunch of racist rapists wasn't even much of a workout.

But he looks mad. So mad. It's hard to stand there with my chin up and not give in to the urge to run again or quiver and beg him not to murder anyone else over this.

"Ola..." He steps to me, his voice a menacing presence inside my head, his eyes glowing so intense.

I ball my fists because if he wants to break me, he is going to have to fight me—

All those thoughts cut off when he suddenly leans down and enfolds me in his huge arms.

"Ola," he says again inside my head. *"Please tell me they didn't hurt you. If they hurt you, killing them with my fire wasn't enough. I will find the parents who raised them and burn them alive too as punishment for what these men have done."*

"Whoa, whoa, whoa slow down there, supervillain," I say, my voice muffled in his chest because he's got me wrapped up so tight in his arms. "They scared me, but I'm okay. No need to go hunting down anybody's parents."

He grabs me by my shoulders and holds me away from him, his gaze scanning me like he's running some kind of internal lie detector test behind that glowing gaze of his.

I guess I passed because he just hugs me again after he's done. *"You frightened me, Reverence. It took nearly an hour for my shell to fix the wound after I pulled out the knife. And I was so afeared that I wouldn't find you. If anything had happened to you. If those men had hurt you, or even touched you..."*

He lets out a great huff of air and it steams my back, hot and panicked.

Now he's breathing hard and holding me even tighter.

I find myself in the weird position of raising my arms to awkwardly hug him back. "It's okay," I tell him. "I'm fine. I promise you, I'm fine. Plus, I got to ride a dragon, so look at me now."

He pulls back again with a severe look. Then he lets out a long grumble.

It takes me a few confused seconds to ask, "Wait, are you laughing?"

*"Yes, Reverence. I undervalued and perhaps will never value enough how diverting you can be. You make me laugh."*

"I make you laugh," I repeat, feeling a little crazed.

He abruptly stops laughing. *"You have great confusion. Tell me why, Reverence."*

I shake my head at him. "This wasn't how I expected this conversation to go."

*"What did you expect other than my utter relief?"* he asks, sounding just as confused as I feel.

"I don't know. I figured maybe you'd yell at me for straight shanking you in the neck. Maybe break the other arm for trying to

run away again. Kill a few relatives...."

That's another joke, but his face darkens. *"I would never visit physical harm upon you. Nor would I kill any of your family members. I made you that promise the day I sent your uncle away."*

"Yeah, I know what you said. And I'm a big believer in promises myself. I never break them. But I figured since it was you making the promise, it was just another trick. Like, you know, hypnotizing a famous basketball player and getting him to become my boyfriend, just so you could gain access to me. Plus, I stabbed you..."

A strange guilt washes over me when I admit this out loud. And I bow my head, my eyes dropping and staying on the ground. Just like my infamously awkward mom.

*"Look at me, Reverence. Please, give me your eyes."*

I never have problems looking people in the eye. I'm Ola fucking Greenwolf and I don't play that shy she-wolf shit.

But now it feels like I'm dragging my eyes through mud as I lift them to meet his.

*"I am not the drakkon I was before,"* he tells me, his glowing gaze burning into mine. *"I do not know how I can convince you of this. But the drakkon who manipulated you, who hurt you, who humiliated you because his ego could not accept such an unexpected fated mate—he is gone now. I have taken his place, and I will never hurt you again. You could stab me with a thousand different knives, and my only concern would be for your safety."*

I let out another breath I didn't realize I was holding, but this one is filled with relief. "Really?"

*"Truly, Reverence,"* he answers. *"I no longer care about myself, my subjects, my home planet even. You and our hatchling are my entire world, and the only future I want."*

Okay...okay...I'm trying to stay a cynical bitch here. I'm trying to be the bad-ass queen I was raised to be. But I've still got adrenaline going from all the attempted murder and running away and flying through the air. And the way he's looking down at me under the three-quarters moon, his head bent so low, like there's truly nothing more important than me in his entire world.

No one's ever looked at me like that before.

Suddenly I'm grabbing on to him with both hands. Pulling his face down to mine. Kissing him. And not just a little thank you peck for saving me from the Deliverance hunters either.

This is me, the wolf queen, claiming him, the dragon king, with my mouth. Invading with my tongue and demanding that he take what I have to give with a kiss.

And after a shocked moment, Damianos kisses me back, his beard scraping into my face as he devours me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Things catch fire pretty quickly from there.

He picks me up in his arms, there's some door sliding and some stair climbing, then some laying me down like I'm a delicate crystal on his extremely large bed.

Seriously, who paid for all the custom furniture in here? I know that wasn't in the original budget!

But all questions about paperwork blank out of my mind when the two dicks suddenly descend from his webbed stomach, dropping right on down, like "hello again."

And yes, the second one is still squirming.

"What exactly is the purpose of that secondary dick?" I ask, my voice cracking on the question.

*"A drakki's female works are much different from yours. She has several entrances into her womb, and a few of them are quite hard to find,"* he answers.

Okay, well that explanation just put some interesting images into my head. And it doesn't settle my mind at all.

*"You have no reason to fear it, Reverence. I will keep it lodged into the bottom of your female works as I did the last time we mated."*

The last night of my heat flashes into my memory. The shame, the degradation, but also the amazing orgasm when I came on his dick.

*"Why has your flame turned to embarrassment, Reverence?"* The question appears inside my head, overlapping the memory.

And maybe that's why I find myself telling him the truth. "I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed because I actually enjoyed sex with you. Having both of the dicks at the top and bottom of my pussy. Fucking



you in general. My heat's totally done, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about it."

He considers my words for a long hot moment, both dicks pulsing hard.

Then he says, *"You have made this confession, so I will make one as well. I am ashamed too, Reverence. What you said before about me being a 15,000-year-old virgin. Well, I am older than that. But the other label is true. I was a virgin the same as you when your heat started. When I sat in that chair and made you come to me it was more about pride than humiliation. Male wolves, including the basketball player I bid to date you, most often have sex before their first heat session. But drakkon do not have such instincts until their male works drop for a female they are sexually compatible with. You are the only female who has ever made my reproductive organs respond in such a manner. I was...confused about that, but mostly I did not want to hurt you with my ignorance."*

My eyes are two saucers by the time he's done.

*"I have shocked you into speechlessness."* He looks away from me, his giant body going stiff, and I can feel his shame radiating over our mate bond. *"If you no longer wish to mate with me outside of your heat, I understand."*

I know he's a dragon. And an alien on top of that. But there's something so human about him in this moment. I reach out and press a hand into his bearded cheek to get him to face me. "Hey, you look at me now."

His glowing gaze lifts back up to mine.

"Since we're both coming in awkward to this sex stuff, how about we figure it out together. Okay?"

A slow smile spreads across his face. *"You honor me with your offer,"* he answers. *"Okay."*

*"Alright then."* I get on my hands and knees and smile over my shoulder at him. *"Let's try this again. From the top."*

I'm trying to be funny, yet it feels like the most serious thing I've ever said.

I don't know what I'm doing. Or why I'm doing it. Or how it's all going to turn out.

But as he tentatively lines up behind me, a new truth settles over my heart.

Something changed between us tonight. This new leaf of Dami-anos still feels too good to be true, but starting right now, I'm going

to stop questioning it.

No more putting all my energy into planning another getaway. No more running. I'm here. And I'm going to stay here until something takes away this new feeling forming in my chest.

I don't know how. And I couldn't say why if anybody asked me to explain it.

But right here, right now?

I'm totally his.

"Let's do this," I tell him out loud.

"Yes, let's."

We're both good and rarin' to go, but unfortunately, I find out in the next moment that enthusiasm isn't all you need to pull off good, or even halfway decent sex.

I suddenly realize how extremely large he is when he starts to push in. And without my heat obliterating all considerations for emotional and physical comfort, my body seizes up like "*Nerp! Not happening!*"

He barely gets the tip in before I'm crying out, "Ouch...stop...stop. Please stop!"

He immediately stops behind me.

*"Reverence, forgive me. I can see by the way your flame burns with discomfort that I am too large to fit inside of you. Without your mating heat, your female works will no longer grant me entry."*

He pulls the tip out of me, and can you believe my wolf has the nerve to cry out? I wouldn't call the girl a pain slut, but she definitely doesn't care how much it hurts, as long as she's being claimed.

I flip over, and it feels like I'm addressing both him and her, when I say, "Yeah, we've got some size issues, but I'm pretty sure, this is what foreplay was invented for."

*"Foreplay,"* he repeats, tilting his head.

I tilt my own damn head right back at him. "Seriously, 15000 years old and you still never heard of foreplay? It's a human concept going pretty far back."

That haughty look I haven't seen in a while comes back. "*As I said, I do not concern myself with the affairs of catt—I mean, humans.*"

But then his expression softens, and he says, "*However if this foreplay will convince your female works to grant me entry as they did before, I am happy to learn and execute the concept most thoroughly. You are my*

*queen, and I would rather forego my own pleasure than cause you a moment of discomfort."*

His words melt my new reservations away. He at least corrected himself when he started to call the humans cattle. That's progress, right? And to be fair, he's not the only man who's come into a sexual relationship without a clue. At least he has an excuse...and the will to learn.

*"Please instruct me in the ways of foreplay,"* he says now.

"Well, um, it can be a lot of things. But usually, people start with kissing, then level up to touching and licking."

*"Yes, I let him kiss you, but stayed his body when he thought to do other things with you. Would you like me to do the things I wouldn't let him do?"*

It takes me a moment to register who "him" is. Akwasi. "Just how far into his head were you?" I ask, feeling some kind of way. It seems nothing in the relationship I'd thought was leading to marriage was any kind of real.

*"He initiated the first contact and then asked for your access codes. When one of my thralls reported this invitation, I decided to use it to my advantage."* Damianos answers, tone simple. Like taking over somebody's head was the obvious conclusion to that problem.

"So you feel bad about all the things you've done to me, but not what you did to him? And all your other mind slaves?"

He looks at me and answers, *"You matter. They do not."*

"You think it's up to you to decide I matter, and they don't?" I sit up on my forearms, the warm, sexy feelings definitely fading. "Like, you really think you're God."

*"Why would you compare me to the supposed deity you believe designed your race? If he was a drakkon, he would have done a much better job."*

No, he didn't just say that. I open my mouth to tell him all the way off. But before I can, he says, *"And as for you mattering most of all to me—that was not a decision, Reverence. As much as I tried to fight it, you became the only one who truly mattered the moment you made my male works drop."*

"So, it's all my fault you're obsessed with me?"

"Yes," he answers, his expression somewhat baffled. *"Who else's fault would it be?"*

I look away, trying to figure out how to respond to that...to him.

*"I have distressed your flame. Please tell me why so that I might fix it."*

"I don't know if you can," I answer, dropping my eyes. "I'm trying to wrap my head around all of this. You're a sociopath who's obsessed with me. And now I'm in your bed."

*"Does this mean you do not wish me to do those things to you?"* he asks into my pensive silence.

"It should," I reply, finally looking up. "But, it doesn't. And I don't know why."

*"Yes, I am seeing that now,"* he says. *"You never understood the reason for us. The absolute genetic certainty that we should be mates. I thought sending the basketball player for your first long-term relationship would properly prepare you for me. But I should have done more to explain it to you. The fating portals are a feat of great quantum design. When they make a mate match, there can be no doubt that the two candidates are meant to be. That is not magic or romance. It is a basic immutable fact. It does not matter that I am a sociopath as you called me or that you are an overly emotional she-wolf. There is no one else for us. I wish you had understood this. I wish it more than anything."*

I shake my head at him. "But we're not fated mates. Neither of us went through the portal."

*"I know that we are fated mates. I know it like a human baby knows to breathe air. And there is no need for a trip through the fertility portal for me to be certain. Ola, my queen, you matter to me. You are the only wolf mutation or anthro on this planet who matters to me. I will never apologize for that."*

He'd never apologize for that. And suddenly I don't want him to. I don't want to think about the past. Or worry about the future. Or even talk.

I get up on my knees and kiss him, coming back to the here and now.

Maybe he feels that way too. No more questions. No more explanations. No more requests.

He touches me as we kiss. His hand finds a breast and massages it, until I begin to moan. Then without another word, he settles me back on the bed, before bending one of my legs over his shoulder.

Oh God, his tongue. I'm not ready for it.

I can feel the distinct fork slithering along my tunnel walls. It's even longer than I thought, and it goes in so deep, producing all

sorts of amazing sensations as it explores. Then it grazes against something that makes me gush like I'm in heat again.

He pauses then grazes it again. And then again. And then he presses down hard on it. Oh, my fucking Fenrir Wolf! My insides start to convulse. At the same time, my entire body goes rigid as a shockwave of electric pleasure rushes through me.

I can't move. Can't speak. All I can do is come and come and come some more on his dragon tongue.

He abruptly lifts his head, his tongue retreating from my vagina.

A mercy, I think, but then he says, *"Please turn over, Reverence. I believe your female works will grant me access now,"* inside my head.

"Dude, I wish I could move. But that tongue of yours rendered me incapable," I answer, my words slurred and dazed.

The next thing I know, his large hands are turning me over. Easy, like I don't weigh a damn thing.

He braces his heavy body over mine, places one webbed foot flat on the top of my thigh... then pushes into me with so much ease, it feels more like an easy glide than an invasion.

It might have been embarrassing...if it didn't feel so good.

I expect him to start going at it right away, but there's a long heavy pause, then his voice finally reappears inside my head. *"Ola, I have never felt any sensation on this planet or mine akin to the pleasure of being inside of you without need of heat or reason."*

Okay...

He's a sociopath for sure.

And obsessed with me, which is bad.

But I want to say thank you. I want to call him baby and tell him I feel exactly the same.

Instead, I reach up with energy I didn't know I still had and curl a hand around the back of his neck. "Please, just..." I beg.

Granting my wish, he starts to take me with deep rolling strokes. Then it's just the pleasure again. No sounds but my moans and cries as he pushes in and out. His secondary dick is a heavy presence at the bottom of my pussy, and somehow that makes the sensations even more unbelievable.

I'm so close. I want him to be where I am. "Please, you come... you come too."

He lets out a coarse grunt pushing in harder, pushing in deeper. But then slows to a pause.

"What's...what's wrong?" I ask from the dazed edge of my own pleasure.

*"My secondary seeder has become sireki."*

"Sireki..." I repeat, confused at the foreign word. I thought the mate bond was supposed to serve as some kind of translator.

*"There is no one corresponding word in any of your human languages for its state. The best I can describe it is agitated, confused, and stuck. It is refusing to let my primary cock release until it has been allowed to seed in your second available hole as it would with a drakki."*

I sift through that extremely disturbing dragon anatomy lesson to figure out, "Wait are you saying it's refusing to let you cum until I let it have my ass?"

*"Another clever summation, Reverence."*

But I'm feeling more stunned than clever as I ask, "Can't you just stroke it out?"

*"Stroke it out..."* he says, sounding just as confused as I did about sireki. *"This is a euphemism for when males of your species rub themselves until their semen arrives, yes?"*

The fact that he's asking means it's going to take too long for him to actually do it. And my huge orgasm is beginning to recede, like, *you're turning me off with all this talking.*

"Okay, okay, just let the second dick do its thing," I say before my big O can fade all the way away.

A shocked pause. *"Reverence, are you sure?"*

"I'm sure I'd rather have this orgasm than lose it," I answer, my voice frank as hell. "Now, can you please just stick the second dick in, before I come to my senses?"

I wouldn't say Damianos got down to business so much as his secondary dick did. Suddenly, it's squirming again. No, not squirming, *striking.*

I gasp out loud when it starts to push into my pussy, along with Damianos primary dick. It's not painful, but I slap his thigh because "I don't think I can take two dicks in my pussy. I saw that porn, and I did not like it."

*"That is not its aim, Reverence,"* Damianos assures me.

In the next moment, it pulls out, and then I feel it at the entrance of my ass. But this time it doesn't strike. Instead, it dribbles something hot and wet into the puckered hole. Pre-cum? My own essence?

I can't tell, but it slides in with no problem after that. And then it's dicks in both holes, pumping and filling me up. Until suddenly they both surge at the same time and jet streams of cum into me.

And was I acting like this was some kind of huge sacrifice?

Alright, take that back. I come. I come so hard that everything fades to black, before suddenly exploding into a thousand colorful stars.

Is this why they sometimes call orgasms "seeing fireworks?"

The question echoes as the light show pops off behind my eyes.

Eventually, he pulls out. There's some talk of "the great mess we've made." Then I'm in what must be a shower. I still don't have enough access to my senses to open my eyes, but hot water washes over my tired body as I mutter, "What did you do to me?" against his chest.

*"I would put the same question to you, Ola. You called me obsessed before we mated without breeding. Now I am something even more than that."*

"What's more than obsessed?" I ask, my eyes tracing the rivulets of water, running down his nipple-free, but heavily muscled chest.

*"I do not quite know. But my flame...it burns yellow as the Betrayer King's did for his mate. And I want things so badly. Your happiness most of all. But I also want your flame to burn the same color as mine. My queen..."*

He tips my face up as water sluices down both of us. *"I find myself wanting to act as a human does, to wed you as a human would in front of your wolves and my drakkon. And though I am a drakkon, I wish not to live even a minute longer than you. I would die first if I could arrange it or have my life end at the same time as yours. In fact, the very thought of losing you makes my flame burn crazed with Widower's Madness, though you are still here."*

Suddenly I'm wide awake again and overwhelmed by his emphatic words. My wolf jumps up and down, demanding that I declare the same.

But then the water clicks off and the dryer system blows a bunch of hot air in my face. Reminding me...

I'm a wolf and he's a dragon. And not a good one like my sister's mate, but like the dragon that killed half my fathers' village.

Also... "I don't think we can have this conversation with this collar around my neck. Maybe if you took it off, we could talk about

what it would take to make those dreams of yours come true.”

I look at him, my eyes imploring. But he looks away as he always does.

*“I’m sorry, Ola. You don’t know how long I considered letting you out of that contraption. How many nights I fretted over it. But in the end, it is just too risky when your flame does not also burn yellow for me. I will do all I can to turn your flame to a similar color. And until then, I will make life so pleasurable for you, you will surely forget the collar around your neck.”*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

**I** *will make life so pleasurable for you, you will surely forget the collar around your neck.*

The epic promise swirls around my head as I fall asleep in the dragon king's arms. The bed has been stripped of everything but the pillows and one fitted sheet. I don't need blankets to stay warm. I'm a wolf and even if I wasn't, this dragon burns incredibly hot.

But I wake up the next morning, chilled and alone, without a dragon in sight.

"Damianos?"

I call out his name but receive no answer.

Hmm, strange.

Figuring I should get dressed, I hike over to my room and grab one of the nightgowns before making my way downstairs to the kitchen.

Only to find he's not there either.

"Damianos?" I call out again.

Again, no answer.

I look at the kitchen door. An opportunity suddenly glowing. Now that it's daytime, do I have a better chance of escape?

Do I even want to escape, or do I want to stay here, with the dragon who made such emphatic vows to me last night?

I didn't make any promises myself. Sure, I'd said no more running, but only in my heart...so why does it feel like I'd be breaking a serious vow if I took off again? This time in the daylight when I'd be able to see enough to make my way to the old Yellow Mountain kingdom village.

*"You have risen much earlier than usual,"* his voice suddenly says inside my head before I can answer that question. *"I am sorry I was not there to attend to you when you awoke."*

I turn to see Damianos emerging from the kitchen's other knobbed door. A set of black steel stairs peek out at me before he closes it behind him. And turns the lock.

"What's down there?" I ask.

*"Some things the last Colby left behind,"* Damianos answers. *"I was hoping I might find the computer he used to make all our arrangements."*

"He didn't have bioware?" I ask, my eyes lingering on that lock. If he's no longer down there, why did Damianos lock the door behind him?

*"Ah, yes, he did. But, of course, I told him to only access his communication lines when he needed to hail me. For that reason, I simply told him to make use of his father's laptop to carry out my orders."*

"And now you're trying to find that laptop because why exactly?" I ask.

*"I was hoping to make some changes to our standing grocery order."*

"Oh, I'm totally on board with that," I answer, voice light as I send lots of "sure I believe that" down our mate bond. "How about I go downstairs to the basement and take a look, too? You didn't grow up with a twin like I did, but I can't tell you how many times one of us would be looking for something, mention it, and then the other twin says, look it's right there. Two eyes are better than one and all that. Especially since mine can actually see in stereoscope."

I reach for the knob, but he stops me, his hand wrapping around my wrist. *"I assure you, Reverence. I searched quite thoroughly."*

I tighten my hand on the knob. Torn between wanting the tender and new feelings from last night to keep on burning and my natural distrust of the dude who kidnapped me.

"I want to trust you, but I need you to swear to me. Like, swear to me on this baby that you didn't lie about letting Colby go," I say in the end. "Tell me...tell me you're not keeping him in that basement right under my nose."

Instead of answering out loud, he uses his free hand to pull a phone out of the pocket of his trousers and make a call.

"Hello?"

"Hi...is this Colby?" I ask, frowning up at Damianos.

"No, this is Maxwell Kreft. Colby was my father," the voice on the other side of the line answers. He has a British accent that sounds just as posh as the one I remember. Only a lot more suspicious as he asks, "Who is this? How did you get my number?"

Damianos presses his finger into the red phone symbol before I can answer.

"His name wasn't Colby," I point out.

*"No, his father named him something else. Sometimes the Colbys do that. I believe they think it will save their sons from their destinies. Humans can be...the kindest phrase I can utilize here is 'magical thinkers.'"*

I stare at him. Glance back at the phone. Then I say, "I believe you. Why do I believe you when I barely trust anybody else outside my family?"

"Because unlike 'anybody else,' I want nothing more than to revere you, to be the drakkon you can trust with your life." He gazes down at me as he says this, his expression open, sincerity radiating over our mate bond.

I breathe in his reassuring words, then sigh out as I let go of the knob.

We locate the computer less than twenty minutes later in the top drawer of a side table in the living room. Like it was just waiting for us to find it.

I haven't used a computer, since I was, like, in junior high. And from what I can see, Damianos has exclusively employed minions to do all of his dirty and practical work. But between the two of us, we manage to change the order to include things I like instead of a bunch of weird British shit I will never eat, like mushy peas and Marmite (seriously, so gross).

That very same night, I'm chilling in a comfortable maternity dress and a sweater cardigan instead of a nightgown. And eating from a tub of ice cream on the couch.

"I'm not going to say I forgot the collar like you promised," I tell him. "But this Ben & Jerry's is bringing me real close. Though I think my body's not used to dessert anymore. My stomach's having a weird reaction."

*"I am glad you like your dessert,"* Damianos says over our mate bond. *"Apparently our son likes it too."*

I follow his gaze down to my belly, and then just about have a heart attack when I see that the heavy bowling ball inside of me is

now visibly squirming. Like, Alien style. So all the stomach grumbling wasn't a reaction to the dessert then.

"Okay, that's new," I say, lowering the spoon. I've suddenly lost my appetite.

*"It is a fortunate sign," Damianos assures me. "Many drakki perish when their babies begin to move about in this manner too early. My own mother died when I broke the egg inside of her with my movements."*

"Your mother died in childbirth?" I reach out to take his hand. "I'm so sorry."

His eyes drop to my hand on top of his, then swing back up to mine. I can feel his pleasant surprise at my unexpected touch.

*"You honor me with your sympathy, but it was a common occurrence back on my home planet. Also, my father did not suffer Widower's Madness, so it did not affect my life much before I came here."*

"But didn't it though?" I ask, squeezing his hand. "That was your mother and you had to grow up without her."

*"This was the fate of most mothers on our former planet. The reason for Reverence itself."*

I shake my head. "I don't understand."

*"You see, drakkon praise our mothers as your species praises your deities. Whether they live or die, we revere them for the rest of our lives. The Betrayer King's father, the Third Blue King, had a special palace erected in his drakki's honor after she survived the birth of her first son. It was so large one could see its heat signature from space. By the time she died giving birth to the former Second Prince of Drakkon, her first son and her mate had an entire millennium to revere her. That was considered a very rare privilege. Most drakkon are like the Second Prince and me. We can only revere our mothers as drakki we never knew."*

I think about and almost understand what he's saying. Before my fathers came back when we were five, I didn't quite understand that they were time traveling Vikings who the history books assumed hadn't survived the Great Serpent battle. But I knew they were heroes from the way everybody talked about them. I remember how they'd seemed more like gods than real-life people, who had actually lived and breathed.

My heart pangs with understanding, and a new realization.... "So most of you dragons were born after accidentally killing your mothers in childbirth? And that's why you treat your mates like you do. Because you're afraid you'll lose her like you did your mothers?"

*"Yet another clever summation, Reverence, but not quite specific enough. The mortality rate is so high, the more apt word would be assume. The best most of us could hope for was the live birth of our progeny. And toward the end of our drakkon civilization, we often did not achieve that."*

I place a hand over the baby, suddenly less disgusted by its squirming than scared for both of us. "You don't think either of us will survive this birth?"

*"We should change the subject. Your flame is becoming upset." Damianos nods toward the carton of ice cream. "Eat your ice cream so that your flame might once again burn with content."*

I bug my eyes at him and set the carton of ice cream aside. "My brain is raining The Scream emojis right now. And there's no way ice cream is fixing that. You need to finish telling me why you assume me and this baby are going to die in childbirth."

Damianos lets out a cloud of steam, which I think is his version of a sigh. But he starts talking again, just like I demanded.

*"If you were a drakki, I would assume I would lose at best you, and at worst both you and baby in the birth. But the Betrayer King has given me hope. He told me he had assumed the same thing before the birth of his Golden Son. And of course, he did not have high hopes when he sent Fensa back to her original time after the discovery that she was pregnant with twins. But she and his three hatchlings survived both births beautifully. And now he has a hypothesis to explain why. He believes that our mating with your species might be an evolutionary necessity of sorts."*

"An evolutionary necessity?" I repeat.

*"It is a bit like the history of your anthro ancestors. For a short period of time, they were scattered all over the globe and only interacted with their own tribes and regions. They shared the same features, rituals, and ways. With the invention of boats, they encountered people from different regions. Most often this would result in war and death by sickness. But there were other results, too. Reproductive interactions—many of which produced children who were even hardier than their parents."*

*"Many humans went against their cultural dictates and laws to pair with others outside their region and tribes. And now thanks to advances in medicine, none of which can be attributed to one single culture, the ancestors of these mixed interregional interactions have reached the very cusp of the quantum leap. It is as if your designer programmed you to distrust other humans until you reached a certain stage of technological advancement,*

*but then pushed certain buttons to make you seek out those with dissimilar DNA to make strong children who could survive in any part of the world."*

I'm so confused I'm barely able to process any of this, but I take a stab at summarizing what he's just told me. "So you're saying the huge uptick in interracial relationships and the many technological advancements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century go hand and hand? The more we mix and work together, the closer we'll come to this quantum leap you keep talking about?"

*"Yes, that is the Betrayer King's hypothesis exactly. What you free will believers would classify as changing attitudes is actually a timed evolutionary advancement as you approach your quantum age. Early drakkon are said to have had a similar evolution regarding our outer flames. There was a very long time ago when drakkon were only Red, Blue, or Yellow."*

Okay, I'm trying to keep up. I really am. But damn. "Outer flames?" I repeat, hopelessly confused."

*"Outer flames are how we refer to how our drakkon epidermises reflect the sun. In the far-off past, it is said we only reflected three colors. But now, there are green, orange, purple, and even black drakkon, thanks to the various mixings of our flame colors. In fact, though my and my cousin's familial line is referred to as the Blue Line, our outer flames reflect a much darker blue because we have so many of these mixed drakkon in our lineage. It is understood by all that we never would have reached the age of quantum if we had not begun to mix our flames, both privately and publicly."*

"So you think our current diversity levels means were about to level up to a quantum age," I translate carefully. "Which is what exactly?"

*"This is the age when your scientists learn to manipulate the quantum field so that your species may do simple things. Like creating fating portals and vehicles capable of intergalactic space travel. Also, folding yourselves into exoskeletons as we drakkon do."*

"Oh, yeah, all those things sound totally simple," I say with a rueful eye roll.

He regards me with another smoky rumble. "In truth, I have only a rudimentary understanding of quantum physics myself. I would compare my use of it to a four-year-old learning how to use a smart device at the beginning of the century. Once such advancement is understood and achieved by anyone, the rest of the civilization can enjoy and use it without an explicit understanding of it. In truth, I turned my attention to more physical matters like hunting and sport. I barely paid attention during our schooling

*when we learned about such matters. Though, I deeply came to regret that instinct after my cousin turned on our drakkon race. Without a drakkon possessing specific technological knowledge to manipulate the fating portals, we had no choice but to reverse engineer the process. This, as I've already told you took a very long time. Even by drakkon standards."*

"But you think our civilization is about to get on your dragon level?" I ask.

*"Yes, with every century, anthros are getting exponentially closer to our quantum capabilities," Damianos answers. "And this is why, my cousin believes his mate survived both her first birth and her second birth of drakki twins—a feat unprecedented by drakki. He told me it is well documented that after a quantum leap, many alien civilizations have problems with severely decreased fertility. Many have even died out. His professors taught him that this declining birth rate was the inevitable cost of advancement and something to battle against with the fating portals. But now, my cousin believes it might be a higher evolutionary directive from our designer to seek out another species with whom to mate. Species from other planets. According to my cousin, Golden Son was punier than most drakkon at first, but on the cusp of adulthood, he appeared as strong as any drakkon who'd come before him. Mightier even because he can choose to walk as a true human, a drakkon, or a wolf."*

"So according to Xenon, this baby and me are going to be all right because evolution wants you to mate with somebody who isn't a drakki?" That theory sounds wild to me and crazy. But for some reason, I feel a lot more peaceful than I did before.

As if reading my mind, Damianos says, *"Yes, that is my cousin's belief, and I am choosing to make it my belief as well. The alternative...even the thought of it is too much to bear."*

A huge wave of grief washes over our mate bond as he says this, and I suddenly feel like an insensitive asshole. He's putting on a brave face, but obviously, nobody's going to get over accidentally killing their mom as the very first thing they do in life. He needs to believe this. I can't see his flame, but I can tell my many questions are upsetting it.

"Hey," I say, grabbing onto his arm. "If you believe, I believe. Don't start mourning me yet. We got this."

He lowers his head, and the crazed grief abruptly fades away, like he's made a decision to brutally suppress it.

*"My cousin tells me this is the same thing his fated mate told him when he first spoke to her of the danger attendant with giving birth to a drakkon hatchling."*

"Yeah, not surprised to hear that at all," I answer. "Us Greenwolf girls are some loyal-ass bitches. And when we ride, we don't die—that's how the Vikings and gangsters raised us."

He winces and a bemused feeling ripples over our mate bond. *"If that is your crude way of saying you are incredibly loyal and brave, I agree. I wish I had known that from the start. Before I did what I did."*

I shake my head at him, all sorts of pissed.

*"Why is your flame burning with irritation."*

"Because you're so ridiculously hot, and this tortured regret thing you've got going is too good a look on you," I whine.

*"Now I am the one who is confused. You do not wish me to lament the things I have done to hurt you?"*

"No," I admit. "Your regret makes it harder not to forgive you."

Now he shakes his head. *"I would never ask for your forgiveness. In truth, I do not deserve it. My only intention in any of this is to repent my transgressions and revere you for the rest of—"*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, the rest of our lives. Heard it. Got it. Can we fuck now? Because *in truth* this reformed bad boy act of yours is really turning me on."

Damianos opens his mouth, probably to make another declaration that will make me feel like throwing my heart at him, like, "Here, take my money!"

But I kiss him before he can get it out.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I kiss him into silence a lot over the next several weeks. Because guess what. Sex Ed Class totally lied. Sex doesn't complicate things. Sex is easy. And fun. And really fucking hot.

Talking complicates things. I thought he was dangerous before, but as it turns out, he's way more dangerous when he opens his mouth.

The hungry way he looks at me, even though I've got a beach ball in my stomach complicates things.

The warm feelings that floods over my mate bond when we're doing stupid stuff like watching television or arguing about how many squats I should do or trying to convince ourselves to get out of bed instead of fucking some more in the mornings—God that complicates things. More than I want.

By the third month of the pregnancy, I'm pretty much clinging to my list of grievances from before he turned over this new leaf, looking for any reason, any reason at all not to give into this.

Sure, he's spectacular in bed. More spectacular than a 15K virgin has any right to be. But it's not like I would have ever chosen to have sex with him if he hadn't forcibly arranged for himself to be there when I went into heat. I've got to remember that.

The day after I decided that both this baby and me are going to live, I came downstairs to find him at the desk in the receiving room, tapping with two index fingers on Colby's laptop. When I get closer, I see there a document called up on the screen with the words, "OLA'S FAVORITE DISHES" at the top.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

*"Looking over the recipes the chef at your old Detroit kingdom house gave Colby after I god spoke him."*

"You mean Antonio?" I translated. "You hypnotized my old cook?"

*"Yes, how else would Colby know how to keep you in the comfort you deserve as the Queen of Drakkon?"* he answered, still scrolling.

I blinked. "I thought all this 'my queen' business was about my North Dakota title. You're trying to make me the queen of dragons, too?"

Finally, he looked up from the screen to answer, *"There is no trying, Reverence. You were the queen of our race from the moment you became pregnant with our next ruler. Our son will be the King of both drakkon and wolves, whether our subjects like it or not."*

I hold up my hands. "Wait, the other dragons aren't on board?"

*"It matters not whether they are on board or not. I am their king. They will show you proper respect."*

*"That's, like, the opposite of how wolf royalty operates,"* I let him know.

*"Yes, I've pointed out the design flaws in your species many times before,"* he returns.

"Yeah, just like I've pointed out you can be an arrogant asshole. Looks like we both need to keep on posting them reminders," I shoot back. But then I think of Xenon's top-secret twins and have to ask, "And what if it's a girl?"

*"It's a boy,"* he assured me.

I narrowed my eyes at his too quick answer. "Is this science or a feeling?"

*"I will make these Eggs Antonio for breakfast and lamb stew for lunch and perhaps dinner if there is any leftover,"* he said, instead of answering my question.

And damn if his Eggs Antonio (also known as Eggs Benedict with scrambled eggs outside the Detroit kingdom house) weren't delicious. Probably because unlike me, Damianos had enough attention span to actually follow a written-out recipe from start to finish.

I scarfed down every bite.

But then my eyes fell on the kitchen's other knobbed door. More specifically the new bit of hardware now attached to it. A padlock.

He'd asked me to trust him...and then made sure I would, rather I wanted to or not. I shouldn't be surprised. That's Damianos. The

real Damianos.

I had to remember that.

Other than the padlock, our lives went back to the same old routine, but this time with sex.

We still go on walks every morning after breakfast. Or as I began to call it after another four weeks passed my daily waddle.

Damianos shortens his stride and slows his pace to a crawl to accommodate me. He also began complimenting me excessively on still being able to walk after I reached my third month.

And when I told him I was able to carry what feels like a thirty-pound medicine ball because all of the strength training I used to do, he says, "It is as if both of our designers collaborated to give me you as a gift, one I will treasure always."

As compliments go, that one didn't suck. And it was a lot better than all the people who used to try to body shame me because I don't look like other girls who work out regularly.

But his compliments don't mean much, I often remind myself. I'm only pregnant with the heaviest baby ever because he manipulated me and so many other people to knock me up. I've got to remember that.

He reveres me all day and (in my best R&B bass baritone) *all night*. But he'll never give me the chance to compare him to anyone else.

He cooks my favorite things...after he *god spoke* my chef and the Fenrir Wolf knows who else.

He grants my every wish, except letting me out of this collar.

I've got to remember that.

I've got to remember that.

I've got to, got to, *got to* remember that.

*"Reverence, whatever are you doing?"*

That morning while I'm making breakfast, the dragon king's voice suddenly appears in my head, frantic and harsh.

I look up from the stove, to find him at the door leading out to the living room, his eyes glowing even brighter than usual.

"Oh, I'm making us grits and, like, a ton of ham for breakfast," I answer. "What's up with you?"

His glowing eyes shift from me to the stove. *"Why would you do that? I am your acolyte everlasting, especially in these late days of your pregnancy. You should have left the making of these grits and ham to me."*

"Wow, no thank you," I answer. "These are my Great Granddad's grits, boy. And while I'm all for super-evolving both our races like Xenon said, there are some things black people just aren't capable of letting white people cook for them. Especially if that white person isn't from the south like my Great Granddad. Or an actual white person at all. Because he's a dragon from another planet."

It's a joke. I'm expecting him to rumble laugh like he does so often. But he just stands there, staring at me with a wounded look. Like I've stabbed him in the neck again.

*"When I woke up and saw you were gone from our bed, I thought you had made another attempt to run. I feared you were hurt."*

"Oh..." I say, suddenly getting it.

I turn down the burner. "Listen, I get it. For the first few years after my dads got back from the Viking age, Fensa and me would freak out every time they left the house. But..."

I gaze up at him, making my eyes soft and sincere. "Do you see how fucking pregnant I am? I can barely waddle around the house. You do not have to worry about me running away. And even if I did, all you would have to do is walk out the door. You'd probably catch up with my slow ass in one or two minutes tops. You wouldn't even have to pop your wings."

He gives me a chiding look, but then gives in with the rumble laugh I was expecting before. *"How you amuse me, Reverence. In truth, I am eager to try these grits."*

"In truth, they are going to blow your fucking mind. Nobody on earth made grits better than my great granddad. Like all black people say that about whoever made them grits growing up, but this is the only case where it's true. Fight me."

*"Why would I...oh, this is another one of your euphemisms,"* Damianos realizes before he finishes asking the question. *"I will make the ham while you attend to the sacred dish only black people can make."*

Now it's my turn to laugh. "Thank you," I say, wiggling my butt as I go back to stirring my grits.

I stay in a great mood, even though Damianos only takes a little nibble of the straight manna I made before declaring it, *"Quite tasty for an unnecessary grain,"* and going right back to his huge plate of ham.

I hadn't been lying when I said he could catch me if I ran, easily. But...

"I woke up early with a lot of energy for some reason," I tell Damianos as I'm finishing up my first bowl of grits and he's cutting into his second plate of ham. "I feel like I could take a really long walk, or"—I wiggle my eyebrows at him—"take you on a very nice ride."

It's been over a week since I've had enough energy to do anything but lie on my side like a beached whale during sex as Damianos took us both across the finish line. So I'm expecting him to be like, "Yassss, Reverence! Let's do this!"

But instead, he lowers his fork, and a certain dread floods my mate bond.

"What?" I ask, putting down my spoon.

*"You are within days, or perhaps mere hours of labor. The Betrayer King explained that before Golden Son was born, his treasured mate also had a sudden burst of ecstatic energy. It is your body flooding you with adrenaline and endorphins to aid you in your labor."*

Okay, well I put my fork down, too. "Wow, really? Because that's the basic opposite of human and wolf births. We're just in a lot of pain."

*"Perhaps your original designer was so surprised by your race's outrageously high reproductive rates that they made birth painful to discourage you from replicating like rabbits," he says with a thoughtful look.*

"What did you just say?" I start to ask.

*"There is no time for questions, Reverence. I must prepare a nest for you of blankets and pillows, so that you may lay our hatchling. We'll also need towels and other necessary sanitation tools."*

He starts to leave the room, but then he stops and looks back at me.

And his expression...there's no way to describe it. Not anger, I realize right away after checking in with our mate bond. It's more like distress with a weird layering of grief on top.

If I wasn't sitting right there, I'd think I'd already died from the way he's looking back at me.

And I find myself asking him, "What's wrong?" even though I'm the one whose apparently in the early stages of labor.

He doesn't answer.

And I'm starting to get scared. Really scared. So scared that for the first time ever, I push into his head. *"Damianos...baby...what's wrong. Talk to me. You're scaring me."*

He jerks his head as if my words inside his head have ripped him out of some sort of trance.

Then he says, *"I...I can't do this. I shouldn't do this. If anything goes wrong, it is once again my fault."*

"What?" I ask for what feels like the umpteenth time this morning.

He turns all the way back around and walks over to where I'm still sitting with my empty plate.

*"I must...I must grant you access to your family,"* he says, his voice quiet inside my head now. Somber. *"If this labor does not go as planned and there is any chance they might help you..."*

He reaches his hand out to my collar and presses into it with his thumb.

And just like that, the collar loosens around my neck.

With a noiseless *whomp*, my head suddenly fills with the sounds of my rebooting system.

*"Your GoGen chip was turned off without sufficient notice,"* a perfectly modulated voice informs me. *"Running emergency diagnostic check..."*

I look at Damianos, unable to believe he did this. He gave me my freedom. Just gave it to me, without any warning at all.

"So you're letting me go?" I ask, a weird ugly emotion washing over me. "What happened to one of us having to be dead?"

*"I'll never truly let you go. Until my dying day, you will remain in my heart."* His voice is little more than a harsh whisper inside my head now with all the rebooting notices popping off. *"But I do not want our hatchling born to an imprisoned mother. I want what I envisioned for us, a wedding in front of your wolves and my drakkon. What you talked about during our last round of heat sex...the matching yellow flame you call love. I want that for him. And I want that for you. And therefore, I cannot make the same mistakes as before. This is a second chance, and this time I must do right by you."*

I stare at him. Not knowing what to say. Or what to do.

*"Alert! Alert!"* my biochip screams at me. *"You are in the early stages of labor. Please proceed carefully to the nearest hospital. Would you like me to call an ambulance for you?"*

He's let me go. Because he sees it.

And suddenly....

I see it, too. How amazing these last three months have been once we stopped battling. And what we could be if I choose him like he's chosen me.

A ride-never-die couple. An epic love story.

The happy ending my soul has been craving all along.

No, I didn't ever make any promises to him that I would feel obligated to keep. But I didn't have to.

My heart...he was right. From the moment our eyes met, it belonged to him. I belong to him. We belong to each other.

Vows...no need. Him and me are the fucking vow.

It's been a while since I had access to thought commands, but somehow, I immediately know what to do. *"System Power Down,"* I say both out loud and inside my head, then I swipe my eyes sharply to the left to push enter on the command.

By the time my eyes swing back, my dragon king's expression has gone from determined to shock. *"You turned your biosystem off."*

*"Yeah,"* I answer inside his head, just as shocked as him. *"I turned it off."*

His eyes suddenly drop down my body. *"And your flame...it is burning yellow. Does it...?"* He looks back up at me, his eyes tender and scared. Like he's afraid to hope. *"Does it burn yellow for me?"*

I nod wordlessly.

*"But why, Reverence? Why have you decided to bless me in this manner?"*

Still not a crying bitch, but there's definitely some sheen in my eyes as I look up at him. *"I guess it's like you said. This love. Us. It wasn't ever a decision. Not really. I think you're right about us being fated mates, even if we didn't do the whole gate thing. And if my people come, this ends. Right here. Right now. I don't want that. I want you. For the rest of my life, just like you promised. So now, I'm making you a promise. We're going to make this work, you and me. We're going to kill this family beef, so that we can get married in front of my wolves and your drakkon, just like you envisioned. You've got my promise on that, and I never, ever break my promises."*

*"Oh, Reverence..."*

His beautiful, perfectly symmetrical face...how could I have ever thought it as cold as a statue? It's now soft with gratitude, disbelief, and all the other things that make up that ineffable feeling called love.

*"You are my fated mate," he says, taking my face in his hands. "The most perfect female in all galaxies. And you honor me. You honor me so verily with your flame. I promise you as you have promised me, I will do whatever it takes to make both your wishes and mine come true."*

Okay, well, I'm descended from a whole bunch of crazy epic happily ever afters. So I know what comes next.

This is the part where after having both finally gotten out of our own ways, my love and I un-complicate everything and simply resolve to be together forever. No more drama. No more misery.

The dark night of the soul has passed. Damianos has proven himself to me. And now we get to kiss the hell out of each other, knowing that no matter what his subjects and my family think, this happily ever after will be forever.

Damianos isn't from around here, but I can tell he gets it too by the way his eyes glow as he looks down at me, adoring and intense.

*"I love you, baby,"* I say quickly, wanting to get in those final words before we do this happy ending shit.

*"And I love you, too, Reverence. My flame will burn yellow for you until the day it extinguishes."*

*"Wow, you are so much better at sweet talking than me. Will you just get down here?"* I grab the front of his shirt to pull him the rest of the way down for our final kiss.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what I said before about wanting drama-free love. I know that this is the opposite of that—not to mention all kinds of wrong.

But it feels right.

This wrong love is what I want.

What my soul needs.

And I close my eyes as we make it happen.

Only to open them again a few seconds later, when the kiss never comes.

The sweater Damianos was wearing...it's now hanging slack in my arms. And there are a pair of pants lying in a pool on the floor along with topsiders and socks.

What the Fenrir Wolf?

I look all around, sure this is some kind of joke. A really bad one, that I'd probably be laughing at right now if my heart wasn't hammering in my chest due to the sudden disappearance of the male I just pledged to love forever.



But Damianos is nowhere to be seen in the kitchen. Or the living room.

Okay, what the Fenrir Wolf? What the Fenrir Wolf? *What the fucking Fenrir Wolf.*

Thankfully, the wolf part of me kicks in before I can completely freak out.

My wolf sniffs the air and catches his distinct fire scent. He's in the house I'm assured. She's just not exactly sure where.

Cutting my panic attack short, I see what she means. I can't see him, but I can smell him. Not quite close by. But also, not far away.

I start sniffing in the direction of the door leading to the living room, only to stop when the scent starts to fade. Is he outside then? No... the same thing happens when I start sniffing toward the door.

Now, I'm more than irritated. The baby's also twisting and turning. Not so much that it's painful, but definitely more than usual. I think Damianos and my biosystem were right. It's coming. Soon....

"Damianos!" I yell. "Damianos, where are you? If this is some kind of trick or joke, it's officially not fucking funny. This baby wants out, and I don't want to do this without you!"

I wait, all the things he's said about revering me, about loving me until his flame extinguishes echoing in my head. But no answer.

"Damianos!" I yell again. I clutch my squirming stomach, feeling alone for the very first time in my life.

"*Damianos...baby...please...*" I plead into mental air, my badass bitch voice totally breaking.

"*My queen...*"

His voice drops into my head. Small like it's coming from somewhere far, far away. But I can smell him. I can smell him like he's in the other room, even though the scent gives out whenever I try to leave the kitchen.

Where else could he be? I look up, trying to think what would be above the kitchen. A bedroom, maybe? A bathroom?

But no, the kitchen ceiling is too high up for his scent to be emanating this big. It's like it's rising directly into my nose.

*Rising...*

My eyes suddenly find the padlock on the door leading to the basement.

But no, it couldn't be. Could it?

The baby moves again, and this time, it's way beyond squirming. I watch as he does a full on one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees turn underneath the skin of my stomach. Like he's lining himself up. It doesn't hurt, but holy Fenrir Wolf does it look and feel strange.

I need some help. I can't do this alone.

Okay, forget trusting Damianos. I'm desperate.

I grab the cast-iron frying pan off the stove and hit the padlock with all my wolf strength. That does it. I tear the broken lock off its new hinge, twist the privacy lock on the knob below, and yank the door open.

I'm immediately hit with a wall of Damiano's fire scent along with an underlying, but fairly strong body odor.

"So you got magic tricks," I call down the stairs. "Good one. But can you come up here? I swear this baby is about to come flying out of my vagina like 'welcome to show!'"

No answer.

And I don't understand. I really don't understand why he would be ignoring me. But a very, very bad feeling invades the extremely small part of my gut not currently taken up by the dragon king's big-ass baby.

I don't want to go down the stairs.

But something is telling me I have to.

"Damianos?" I call, my voice small as I grab on to the rail and start making the trek down with the contorting XXL medicine ball inside my stomach.

No answer.

"Damianos?" I demand again after I somehow make it to the bottom of the stairs without falling.

Still no answer.

"Damianos, why are you—"

I stop when I see the man chained to the wall, with shackles on both his wrists and his ankles. There's not one, but three thick strips of duct tape over his mouth.

He's sickly thin and only wearing a pair of loose pants.

Like Xenon when we found him....

But not quite. He doesn't look like Xenon. He looks exactly like Damianos if he suddenly dropped a massive amount of weight.

The shackled dragon's head lolls to the side in a way that makes me suspect he wouldn't have been able to respond even if his mouth

wasn't duct-taped shut. He stares back at me out of one glazed eye. And his face...his beautiful, perfectly symmetrical Greek statue of a face...it's been beaten to a pulp. There are also cuts all over his body. Like, actual stab wounds, deep and painful-looking. Along with bruises.

I have no idea what's going on, but this man has obviously been beaten, stabbed, tortured, and starved. For weeks.

*No, for months*, a voice says inside of me, starting to put two and two together.

I take a step forward, unable to tear my eyes away from the pitiful sight of the male who looks exactly like my dragon king underneath all those wounds. No, it couldn't be...

But the single glazed eye proves it.

It's brown and matte.

Not golden and glowing.

My heart drops to my feet with a sickening thud. I'd been right, I realize in that moment. I'd been right all along.

Damianos suddenly deciding to turn over a new leaf and becoming my most adoring stan... It was too good to be true. I had been right about that.

The man I've spent the last three months with....

The one who made me laugh....

Who told me such great stories...

Who sexed me so good....

And eventually, set me free, because he cared more about my safety than his heart...

That hadn't been Damianos. At least not the Damianos who got me pregnant three months ago.

*This was.*

Thank you SO MUCH for reading part one of the HER DRAGON KING duet! I know this is such an awful place to leave it. But I promise you're going to want to find out how this epic story ends.

[Click here to read the final book in the Alpha Kings saga, HER DRAGON KING!](#)

So much love,

Theodora Taylor

P.S. - If you haven't already read the other books in the Alpha Kings saga, check them out below!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theodora Taylor writes hot books with heart. When not reading, writing, or reviewing, she enjoys spending time with her amazing family, going on date nights with her wonderful husband, and attending parties thrown by others. She now lives in Los Angeles, California, and she LOVES to hear from readers. So....

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