**Winter Dragon**

**Chapter One**

The sting of the arrowhead was barely noticeable to the blue dragon. It plunged into his side, little more than a pinprick, as he raced to get home before the full force of winter arrived.

It was only when the magic began to spread, when he dipped precariously low and nearly caught himself on a tree stripped of its leaves, that he realized something was wrong. By then it was too late.

The claws that could sunder a human into pieces or haul a *seta*-*beast*’s carcass to his lair for a feast were numb, useless against the arrow. His wings would soon follow.

Beneath him was familiar territory, a neutral valley that served as a flight-way for all dragons. In front of him and to the right were the imposing cliffs marking the outer boundary of the land the blue dragons laid claim to. In front and to the left was territory claimed by scarlet dragons.

Though it would cost a great chunk of his hoard to get help from the scarlet dragons, he knew there was little choice. The distance to the lair-city he called home was too great and he was rapidly losing the ability to fly.

The dragon lifted his head and stretched out his neck, intending to trumpet his request for assistance. But his vocal cords were frozen, rendered as useless as his sharp talons.

A treetop scraped his belly. Fear skittered through him though he refused to let it form an icy knot in his belly.

His knowledge was vast. It was his true hoard, the thing he valued far more than the gold and gems lining the floor of his private lair. And unlike the majority of his kind, whose interests tended to be limited to the dragon world and the pursuit of treasure, he was a being who thrived on studying everything of the world around him—including elves and humans.

Whether it was a human sorcerer or an elf, whoever had sent the spell arrow into his side would have a tracking spell attached to it and would soon arrive to claim their prize. He would use his knowledge to evade their snare.

The dragon silently grunted as the needles of a pine tree rained down on his wing after striking the branch. He made the decision to land and barely reached a small clearing before he lost all ability to fly.

Cold seeped into him immediately. With the last of his will and strength, the dragon whose most private, self-given fifth name was Aizik, forced the change, gave up the dragon’s form for a human one.

Misery came with the touch of naked flesh to frigid land, with the chilled wind that served as a deadly blanket leaching his heat away. Aizik shivered but was grateful he’d managed the shift. He could preserve the fire at his core and sustain life longer in his second form. And when the sorcerer or elf came to collect him, there’d be less temptation to kill him for a dragon’s skin. Instead, they might be willing to bargain.

Every moment felt like an hour. Aizik’s mind wandered, first by choice, then later with disconnected thoughts and mosaic images as he drifted toward a final, deadly sleep.

Aizik thought he’d slipped into hallucination when he saw the small herd of unicorns appear. They entered the clearing tentatively, snorting and stamping deadly black hooves, nickering back and forth as if in conversation, until finally they approached.

Several of them went to their knees then settled against him, sharing their body heat. Pain sliced through him as cold-numbed limbs warmed, though the spell-paralysis remained.

Their behavior was beyond his understanding, something from a human fairy tale. He wondered if the spell had masked his dragon nature from them. Otherwise he couldn’t imagine them approaching. But he was grateful for their presence and their heat. He knew they had most likely saved his life.

Aizik’s mind cleared as the deadly chill left him. He noticed a mare and stallion leave the herd. He became aware of the dragon song.

The wind carried the news of Ember’s failure as her foot found the final toehold set in the jagged rock face. Tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them away along with the grit from her long downward climb.

Far above her, dragons flew in a cloud-dotted sky and perched at lair entranceways. They trumpeted the tale of her banishment, spread it across the mountain ranges and valley, their voices beautiful despite the pain their song caused her.

There was no going back. The lair-city was no longer her home, the dragons no longer a part of her world.

Ember pushed away from the wall to drop onto a path that would take her to the base of the mountain. She landed cleanly, with the grace of someone accustomed to having made the same jump repeatedly.

Sorrow closed her throat. It blended with the slicing pain in her chest.

A ragged breath escaped. She brushed at the tears sliding down her cheeks and caught sight of the mark on her left hand. Its sudden appearance was the reason her mother and the other females had given when they demanded she stand before the elders and prove she was dragon despite the Elven looks and the ability to do spell magic she’d inherited from her father.

The strange mark formed a circle though the lines weren’t smooth in every place. Patterned sections—ripples, jagged lines, sharp spiked points—broke up the shape’s curve.

One of the patterns was repeated in the circle’s middle. The jagged series of lines made her think of fissures in the earth, the veins of precious gems and gold that found their way into so many of her memories of her father.

He’d been River in Stone, an elf banished from his homeland and forbidden to enter Elven lands under penalty of death. And now her life paralleled his. She’d been banished from the place she’d called home since his death.

With a heavy heart, Ember forced herself forward. She had a long walk ahead of her if she was going to make it to the retreat she’d fashioned for herself.

It’d started out as a playhouse, a hodgepodge of tree branches and rocks set against the entranceway to a cave with a hot spring in it. But over the years, as she’d grown to look more Elven, she’d needed a place she could escape to and so she’d refined and expanded it. Now it looked much like the cottage of her childhood.

Ember’s throat tightened again. She tried to turn away from memories of the earthquake that had crushed River in Stone where he worked in the mine—and what had come next—but it was impossible. With his death, the star in the center of the blue pendant around her mother’s neck had winked out and Ember’s life had forever changed.

Her mother had stepped through the cottage door and taken a dragon’s form for the first time in Ember’s memory. She’d been more awed than terrified at the sight of the blood-red scales and magnificent being—until the dragon’s gaze had settled on her.

Eyes often colored with coolness flickered instead with dislike and disdain before giving way to flat nothingness. Then her mother turned the massive dragon’s head toward the cottage they’d just left. She opened her mouth and sent a breath of fire to curl around and claim the place that had been Ember’s home.

It burned as Ember stood shell-shocked, tears running down her face. And when it finished burning, her mother launched herself into the sky and flew away.

Ember looked down at the mark on her palm. Even her grandfather, the one who’d arrived a week after the earthquake to take her to the dragons’ city of lairs, hadn’t been able to sway enough of the elders to allow her to stay.

Dragons hated and feared magic, especially Elven spell magic. They saw the mark on her hand as evidence she would soon grow stronger, and winter—the time when they were most vulnerable—was rapidly arriving.

Soon there’d be snow and ice. The land would be reduced to a frozen, barren place.

Only the strongest dragons would leave the lair-city to hunt fresh meat. The young, the old, those who couldn’t keep their body temperatures from dropping would stay inside, where fires burned and hot springs fought off the frigid outside temperature, making it safe to sleep without the worry of never waking.

The winter made the humans more of a threat. Dragon skins were valuable, as was dragon meat to people who were struggling to survive.

She didn’t see what threat she offered. She would never betray the dragons to the humans who grew bolder about attacking in the cold months.

Her spell magic seemed limited to the ability to start small fires. And while she had some affinity for stone, she didn’t have enough to hear its whispering or to call it to her so anything in its path would be crushed.

Ember swallowed hard, thinking of the earthquake and the days she’d struggled to scrape away dirt and boulders—numbing her mind to her mother’s destruction of the cottage and abandonment—even as her hands grew raw and painful in a desperate attempt to reach her father. Until her grandfather’s arrival, she’d refused to give up hope that she would find her father alive in the rubble. Only when her grandfather had explained that her mother’s regaining of a dragon form meant she’d been freed from an enchantment spell, did Ember understand that the moment the star faded from the pendant was the moment she’d lost both of her parents. And even though it had happened years ago, and she was now fully grown, old enough to have a mate and gain a lair of her own, the memory remained fresh, hurtful.

The narrow, steep path gave way to the valley floor. Ember shivered as wind whipped through, its chill slicing past the layers of her clothing.

Above her the dragon song had finally stopped. Now silence reigned except for the call of a falcon, the rustle of grass where it bent nearly to the ground, as if bowing to the impending winter.

Much of the wildlife had already migrated to warmer climates, or found sheltered places to settle into when not hunting. It would be a lonely winter without their company. Her greatest abilities were with living things. But she didn’t blame those who could for leaving, and those who remained for being wary about emerging from their hiding places—even in her presence.

Winter was a time of death as surely as spring was a time of birth. Survival was a prize that went to the strongest, the toughest, to those with the greatest will and the most luck.

She glanced up and knew she needed to hurry. Blue skies had yielded to great banks of snow clouds.

The valley floor was crisscrossed with paths, most leading to the stream-fed lake at the far end. It was bordered on three sides by deep forest, one of which abruptly ended at sheer cliffs and a mountain range belonging to dragons who owed allegiance to a different lair-city.

Even if she could have scaled the cliff walls and explored that dragon realm, she wouldn’t have. The blue dragons were fierce, deadly. They were said to guard even the outer reaches of their territory with the same protectiveness as the lair-city at its heart.

The first flake of snow reached her as she neared the forest edge. It was soft and wet, like a tiny kiss of greeting, and Ember smiled despite having no family to call her own, no dragon form or dragon name.

By the time she stepped under the sheltering canopy of evergreen trees, the temperature in the valley had dropped and the snow was falling more rapidly. Ember hurried forward, the trail so well memorized her feet knew it by rote.

She tucked her head, intending to adjust the scarf she wore around her neck. A soft whinny had her glancing up to find a unicorn blocking the path.

Its brown summer coat had shed to the white one that would allow it to blend in during its migration. Once the first snow was on the ground, the unicorns would leave.

“Coming to say goodbye,” Ember said, recognizing the mare by the distinctive pattern of black and gold on its horn.

The mare nickered, as if agreeing with Ember, then turned and went down on a knee. Ember slid gracefully onto the animal’s back, using the light touch of her legs to the unicorn’s sides and her fingers grasping the mane to stay in position.

It was as close to flying as she ever got, to race through the valley and along forest paths on the back of a unicorn. It was a gift that never failed to lift her spirits, to make her value her Elven heritage, as it soothed the pain of not being dragon enough to change form and take to the skies.

The hot shame of having to stand naked in front of the elders as they all watched and waited for her to prove she was one of them was extinguished—at least for the moment—as the unicorn ran and Ember felt the exhilarating sting of ice against her cheeks.

The mare barely slowed as she rounded corners and leaped over fallen limbs as if they were giant tree trunks. Joy filled Ember when a second unicorn joined the first, a magnificent stallion who followed closely at the mare’s heels.

Ember didn’t care when they passed the trail leading to her hideaway. If she had to walk the rest of the day and into the night in order to get to her cottage, it would be worth it to take the memory of this last ride with her into winter.

It might be the last one she ever experienced. In the spring she would be gone from this place of magic, perhaps forever.

She loved the open spaces and dark forest, the placid lake and towering beauty of the mountains. She took pride in the cottage she’d built with the help of the wild creatures. But she craved more than just a home, she craved a family.

The thought of being among humans scared her. She had so little experience with them, yet she knew she needed to travel to one of their cities and see if she could be happy there.

Except for the rounded tips of her ears, she might look elf, but she would never be welcome among them and might well be killed if they knew her father was River in Stone. From her earliest memories he’d instructed her to hide should any elves stumble upon their home in the human land bordering that of the elves. At first she’d thought he was ashamed of having a halfling daughter, but gradually, as she’d aged, she’d learned at least part of his story—how he’d come to be clan-less because his parents and brother were caught plotting an assassination of Elven royalty in order to gain power.

The stallion whinnied and his call was returned by unseen animals. The mare slowed her pace to a trot before turning abruptly and entering a small clearing where the rest of the herd waited. Ember’s breath caught in her throat when several unicorns rose from the ground to reveal the naked man they’d kept warm with the heat of their bodies.

He lay unmoving except for the rise and fall of his chest, his masculine perfection marred only by the arrow in his side. Ember slid from the mare’s back and hurried to him.

**Chapter Two**

Cold jolted Aizik from a light doze when the unicorns suddenly stood, taking their life-preserving warmth with them. He had the presence of mind to open his eyes only enough to determine what had startled them.

He expected to see the arrow’s maker bearing down on him. Instead he saw a woman astride the unicorn mare he’d noticed leaving the herd.

*Elf* , Aizik thought, and despite her race, he felt his body stir in reaction to her beauty when she dismounted gracefully and hurried toward him.

She was pale-skinned and dark-haired, winter personified. But when she reached his side and touched her bare palm to his naked flesh, she brought waves of heat instead of frigid agony.

He would have moaned in pleasure if the spell-tipped arrow hadn’t left him without voice. And though he’d encountered Elven females before during his explorations of human cities, he’d never had one of them fill his cock with blood and his thoughts with carnal images.

She explored the arrow’s entry point with gentle fingers then slid them up the wooden shaft, and the image of her doing the same to his erection made him shiver with need. Her effect on him opened the door to suspicion, to the worry she was the one who’d let the arrow fly.

Aizik looked at her face and found her eyebrows drawn together, her bottom lip caught gently between her teeth. He blocked his mind to fantasy and forced himself to look at her as his enemy, to prepare for the moment when he could escape the trap he found himself in.

Dark, dark eyelashes lifted unexpectedly. Winter-blue eyes caught him watching her and her small gasp had his thoughts traveling in the direction he’d forbidden them.

“The arrow is spelled,” she said, her voice soft with concern. “I’m not sure what will happen if I try to remove it.”

A hesitant smile formed on her lips, then disappeared when he didn’t respond. “Can you speak?” she asked, and he would have done so just to please her if he’d been able.

Her teeth caught her bottom lip again. The fingers touching the feathered ridges on the arrow’s shaft slid downward to touch his side again, making him groan inwardly and almost wish it were pain he felt instead of raging desire.

She gave him no warning, not that he would have protested. A quick yank and the arrow’s tip ripped from his side.

Aizik began shivering violently as the spell magic fled his body, leaving deep, wide places for the cold to fill. The flesh on his side sealed as though it had never been penetrated, locking the deadly chill inside him. If he didn’t get somewhere warm soon, he would perish despite the human form.

“Thank you,” he managed through chattering teeth, but she was already standing and turning, speaking to the stallion in low, musical tones. And then the animal was kneeling, offering its back, and somehow Aizik was astride, an Elven arm around his waist, a female body pressed to his back, the top layers of her protective clothing peeled away to share her warmth with him.

The trip through the woods was a mix of agony and wonder, the sight of a small cottage set against the sheer cliffs a welcome one. Aizik let her help him inside and didn’t protest when she guided him to her bed and settled him under the covers.

Ember turned away from the naked human in order to start a fire in the fireplace. Her heart pounded, fed by adrenaline as well as hope.

He was a gift from the unicorns. There was no other explanation for why they’d offered their warmth to him, why they’d taken her to him, then helped her get him to safety.

The elves revered the unicorns. Her father had often told her tales of them. They were sacred, magical beasts, as were the winged horses she’d seen only once in her life.

Ember’s heart swelled with happiness. They meant for the stranger to be her mate.

Her hands shook as she traced patterns in the air and whispered the words that had once brought flames to life. But she wasn’t surprised when nothing happened. Since the mark appeared on her hand, what little magic she did possess seemed to have deserted her. Even the minnow flashes of dragon fire she’d sometimes felt were gone now, taking with them any possibility she might have another form.

Ember started a fire with a flint-stone, as her father had taught her to do. It crackled to life, quickly catching on the smaller twigs in the fireplace, growing in intensity to lick hungrily at the larger ones.

She could feel the human’s eyes on her back and felt a sudden shyness, a nervousness she hadn’t felt earlier. When her father was alive, there had been few visitors, and those she’d seen from a distance. And while the sight of a naked man was familiar since even the scarlet dragons *lessened* themselves by taking a human form when it was more convenient or pleasurable to do so, she hadn’t spent any time around humans, didn’t know what he might be thinking.

The flames in the fireplace grew hotter, filling the cottage with warmth and hastening the moment when she would need to turn around, to see to the stranger in her bed. Ember stood and shed her coat and scarf, draping them over a chair.

For a moment she saw the cottage as a stranger might. It was comfortable, pleasing to the eye though tiny. A sense of pride filled her as she looked at it. Everything in it had been crafted by her own hands except for the figurines and glass globe on the mantle above the fireplace.

A lump formed in her throat as her eyes settled on them. They were all that was left of her father. Each summer, starting with the very first one when the unicorns accepted her on their backs, she’d made the long trip to the burned remains of her childhood home in order to sift through the debris. The valuable gems and precious metals were gone—taken by dragons—but Ember had never cared about those items.

She lifted her hand, seeking the comfort that handling the carved pieces and the small globe with its winter scene usually brought, then let it fall away as memories of those final moments in the dragons’ lair-city crowded in. She turned from the fire and found her guest watching her, his blue eyes dark, a beautiful contrast to his raven-black hair.

Ember glanced down, said the first thing that came to mind. “It was too dangerous to keep the arrow for you to examine. The unicorns are leaving the valley. They’ll drop it somewhere away from here.”

Strength poured into Aizik as the temperature in the room rose. The heat filled the hollow places left by the spell magic. It fed the dragon flame at his core. Soon he’d be strong enough to take the dragon’s form and fly home. But as his eyes traveled over the woman, he found himself reluctant to leave her. More than that, he found himself aching to possess her.

The need was there in his rigid cock, in the fantasies that flooded him each time he met her gaze or glimpsed delicate white teeth worrying a lip meant to be explored, kissed, sucked.

He forced himself into a sitting position and brought his knee up in order to hide her effect on him. If she were dragon instead of elf, the fiery heat she generated in him might tempt him into thinking she was meant to be his mate.

Embarrassment and outrage filled Aizik as his thoughts went to what had prompted his most recent travels. He was well known for his odd interest in the world beyond the dragon territories, and his even more horrifying habit of spending large amounts of time in a human form so he could explore it. But to learn that the eldest living dragon of his family name had offered a prize of gold to any female who could convince him to mate with her had been a blow to his pride.

A reward! As if he were a dragon of dull scales or puny size! As if he couldn’t attract a female on his own or didn’t want one!

He did want a mate. But he wanted someone…different, unique, someone who had interests other than collecting shiny things and basking in the sun. He wanted someone who saw who he was *inside* and wanted him just the way he was.

If he’d felt safe wintering among the humans, he would have stayed away from the lair-city. He’d even been tempted to stay among dragons of a different color, but he doubted the offer of a bounty for mating with him had been rescinded, and he preferred to risk the long winter months in close confinement with females who couldn’t fool him into thinking they wanted him for himself.

“I’m Aizik,” he said, extending his hand in the human way, hoping to draw the elf closer.

She was exquisite, sleek and willowy with black hair that flowed down in straight lines to her buttocks. Now that she’d shed her coat, he could see the feminine curves he’d felt against his back as they’d ridden the unicorn.

“I’m Ember Caught in Stone,” she said, moving toward him gracefully, hesitating briefly before tucking her hair behind her ears to reveal that despite her name and her appearance, she wasn’t fully elf.

The closer she got to him the more he wanted to touch her, to see if the heat in her cheeks, the shy glances she gave him from underneath dark eyelashes signaled she felt the same burning desire he did. His cock stretched along his abdomen, begging to be sheathed inside her.

She placed her hand in his and he nearly groaned. He couldn’t resist the urge to capture her other hand as well. Shock trapped Aizik’s breath in his throat when he felt the mark on her palm.

This was the female the scarlet dragons sang about as he lay trapped by the spell. This was the halfling who’d failed to take a dragon form and been banished. And if that were true…

Aizik turned her hand over to assure himself he wasn’t caught in a fantasy of his own creation. He brushed his thumb over the circular mark, felt Ember shiver and heard her quick intake of breath.

He lifted his face. Their eyes met. Held.

“When did this appear?” he asked.

“This morning.” She glanced down at her palm and worried her bottom lip for a second before adding in a soft whisper, “Do you know what it means?”

Aizik traced the mark with his thumb. His thoughts shuffled through some of the stories and legends he’d collected in oral form and in the books he hoarded. One in particular teased at the edges of his memory but wouldn’t emerge.

Finally he said, “I’ve heard about marks appearing like this. But I’m not sure anyone knows what they mean. The elves don’t share their tales. The ones I can easily remember feature humans. If the mark appears on magic practitioners, it blocks their magic for a while then afterward they’re usually more powerful. If it appears on a null, one with no inherent magical ability, they’re unchanged by it. Either way, the mark remains for a short time then disappears.”

Aizik looked up at Ember’s face and felt his heart thunder in his chest when he saw her for the gift she was. Here was a female who carried dragon blood but saw him as human, ordinary. Here was someone he could share his true self with, who wouldn’t be impressed by his ancestry, or worse, pretend an interest in him in order to snare him as a mate and add to their hoard of treasure.

Here was someone unique, different. He doubted she would have heard about the prize offered for mating with him.

When he’d given her his name, he’d given her the last set of letters in a name that was forty-three characters long. He’d shared what he called himself. If she’d heard of him at all, then she’d heard mention of him by his fourth name, the common name given to him by his parents and used by all.

He couldn’t take her to the lair-city until the mark faded. The blue dragons were more tolerant of magic than the scarlet, but with the arrival of winter, they wouldn’t welcome an unknown female who looked like an elf and bore a magical mark.

Aizik’s lips curved in anticipation. They could winter together here. The flame at his core burned hot and strong enough that he could risk the cold. By the time spring came…

A small knot of worry formed in chest. Would she want a dragon mate? Especially after having been banished from the scarlet lair-city for having no dragon form? Would she want to tie herself to a race where she would always be considered *less* when her Elven heritage would make her a prize beyond measure to a human male, especially a sorcerer?

Aizik pushed the disquieting thoughts away with firm resolve. Despite what his ancestor might think, he was no dull-scaled, puny-sized dragon who couldn’t attract a female on his own. By the time he revealed his dragon form to Ember, she wouldn’t care because she would already know *who* he was.

Ember took comfort that Aizik didn’t fear the mark. His lack of concern over it added weight to her belief he was human.

She’d had a fleeting thought he might be dragon, though it didn’t seem likely since it was her Elven heritage that drew the unicorns. They were prey for dragons, especially during times when food was scarce.

“Are you a sorcerer?” she asked.

Aizik’s laugh sent flutters through her chest. “No, I’m not magical at all.”

Ember’s eyes traveled from his face to his healed side. Her nipples pebbled at the sight of his smooth skin and muscled body.

He might not consider himself magical, but she did. Where their hands touched, heat flowed into her, making her want to guide them to her breasts, her belly, to the needy place between her thighs.

She knew what it was like to be touched there, but only by her own hand. There’d been dragon males who found her attractive. They’d whispered promises of pleasure—if she would meet them in the woods, away from the sun-baked rocks where couples fucked in both human and dragon form in the warm months. They’d offered to mount her, but only if they could do it without openly acknowledging it—as if the desire to cover her body with theirs was a dirty secret they were ashamed of.

Carnal images cascaded through Ember’s mind. The scarlet dragons might think the human form was less, but they often took it when they coupled. In the summer it was impossible to avoid seeing males and females engaged in sexual acts. It was impossible to escape the sound of their moans and their screams of pleasure.

She’d fantasized about being one of them. Of having a male gaze at her adoringly as he worshiped her body with his hands and mouth, mounted her from behind and mated with her for all to see. She’d dreamed of having a male let her touch him possessively, love him thoroughly, both physically and emotionally.

Ember’s gaze lifted to find Aizik studying her with the same intensity as she was studying him. He found her attractive. She knew that look, though she’d never let herself act on it. Until now.

She worried her bottom lip nervously. Heat flashed through her when his face tightened. “Do you know who shot you?” she asked, wondering what rules humans applied to coupling, if it would be too forward of her to speak of her willingness to be intimate with him. She couldn’t expect him to know she was meant to be his mate, though she believed it was true.

Aizik sighed and her heart melted when a slight blush colored his cheeks, making him seem vulnerable. “I’m afraid I have a tendency to lose myself in thought. By the time I noticed the arrow, it was too late. The damage was done. I can’t be certain I was the intended target, though I suspect I must have been since neither sorcerers nor elves are known for wasting their spells.”

She was curious about how he came to be naked, if he remembered shedding his clothing since no human traveled without them, even in the summer. But she didn’t want to embarrass him and she thought it was probably the result of the spell.

“Do you live in Saintcrow?” she asked, naming the nearest human settlement. It was several days away and she’d only ventured there once before being forbidden to do so by the dragon elders.

“No, though I’ve visited often enough. There’s a bookseller in the old section of town. I’ve been known to disappear into his shop for days on end. Some of the things that pass through his hands—”

Aizik halted. His lips curved in a wry smile that made Ember want to lean forward and touch them with hers. “You’re a scholar,” she guessed.

“Yes. And a traveler.”

“I’ve only been to Saintcrow once,” she confessed. “This valley and one other are all I’ve ever known. But I’ve explored them so well I could navigate them in dense fog or pitch dark.”

His chuckle was like warm honey. It made liquid hunger pool in her labia and breasts.

“I wouldn’t expect any less from a female who rides unicorns.”

She didn’t resist when he placed her hands on his raised knee before cupping her face with his. Calloused fingertips stroked her cheeks, her lips, and she quivered in anticipation.

“I haven’t thanked you properly for saving my life,” Aizik said in a husky voice.

**Chapter Three**

Slowly, as though he intended to give her a chance to escape if she desired it, Aizik leaned forward. His breath reached her first, warm and masculine. And then his lips arrived, butterfly-soft as they pressed to hers.

Ember sighed and he answered it with a moan, with the velvety stroke of his tongue against the seam of her mouth. She opened for him, shivered when he sealed their mouths together before feeding her hunger with the rub of tongue against tongue.

She whimpered when his hands traveled downward, when his fingers brushed across her chest as he unbuttoned her shirt. Nipples hardened and strained, pouted for him to discover them, and when he did, her back arched, her eyes closed at the exquisite sensation of being touched so intimately by another.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured before tugging at her bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth and sending bursts of heat to her nipples.

Her hands left his knee to tangle in hair as black and silky as her own. She wanted to explore every inch of him with her fingers, her lips, her tongue. But she could only cling to him as once again he pressed his mouth to hers, mated his tongue with hers in a sensuous slide that mimicked the thrust and retreat of a cock in a woman’s sheath.

Liquid heat pooled in her breasts, her woman’s folds, escaped from her slit to wet her panties and inner thighs. His hands tightened on her hips and she wondered if his sense of smell was as keen as a dragon’s, if he could scent how ready she was for him to mount her.

Without lifting his mouth from hers, Aizik shifted his position so he was sitting on the edge of the bed with her standing between his legs. Of their own accord her fingers left his hair, explored broad, powerful shoulders and a muscled chest.

She found his nipples and his moan sent joy cascading through her. It surprised her how much the sound of his enjoyment increased her own.

“Ember,” he panted when she squeezed his nipples as he’d done all too briefly to hers.

He left her mouth to kiss her neck, the curve of her jaw. She trembled when he reached her ear, whimpered when he took the lobe between his lips and sucked on it, his rhythm matching the squeeze and release of her fingers on his nipples.

Sensation bombarded her. It drove out all thought, left only heat, a sense of belonging, the overwhelming need to feel him inside her, filling her core with his fire.

Ember cried out when his tongue found her sensitive ear canal, fucked into it. She thrilled at the way his chest muscles bunched underneath her palms, as if he were only barely managing to keep himself from taking her. Her clit was erect against the silky material of her panties, desperate to be touched, to rub against the smooth hardness of his cock.

Lust roared through Aizik in a fiery heat unlike anything he’d ever experienced. It left him wanting to rub and hump against Ember like a fledgling caught in the first rush of raw desire.

Already his sac was full, the skin pulled tight over his testicles. Each tug on his nipples sent a lance of exquisite agony through his shaft, a warning along his spine that he was close to coating her with his seed.

Aizik shuddered, panted with the image of having her bared and marking her in such a primitive manner, of rubbing his semen and his scent into her soft folds and silky skin. He’d never done that with any female, never been tempted even when their scent announced they were ready to breed.

He’d known he wouldn’t settle for a brood-bond, a mating that lasted until the young fledged from the lair. He wanted a permanent bond with a female whose heart, soul and body would mesh seamlessly with his.

With a groan and a final thrust of his tongue into Ember’s ear, Aizik pulled back. His hands left her hips, went to cover hers, to still the fingers sending tortured ecstasy from his nipples to his cock.

“Undress for me,” he whispered, his penis swelling further at the sight of her standing in front of him with needy eyes, her chest rising and falling quickly, making him hunger to see more of her than her face and the strip of flesh exposed by her parted shirt.

She trembled slightly and he nearly took over the task of stripping her when she nibbled on her bottom lip, transmitting her shyness, her worry. The part of him that was a gentle scholar urged him to lean into her, to coax and encourage. But a dragon male’s instinct to make a bold display in front of his prospective mate was stronger.

Aizik pushed what remained of the bedding aside, let her see the way his cock stood thick and proud, the globes beneath it full of seed. There was no hiding his response to her, the way her soft moan at the sight of him caused his foreskin to pull back and further expose the glistening tip of his penis.

Heat coiled in Ember’s belly as she ate him with her eyes. He was as smooth and hairless between his thighs as a dragon male was. And his scent… It was alluring, like a darkly carnal spice that begged to be inhaled, tasted.

An unfamiliar boldness filled her as another bead of arousal escaped the slit in his cock head. He was hers, a gift from the unicorns she was meant to explore and enjoy, to mate and share a life with.

She’d never thought to be the aggressor, but having him show himself to her, having him respond so erotically to her fingers on his nipples made her feel desirable, confident. Her lack of a dragon form didn’t matter to him, and though she didn’t know whether or not it was the human way, she thought if Aizik were dragon, he’d take her openly on the sun-baked rocks. He’d accept her touch, revel in having the other males see her respond to his hard cock and mate-scent.

She’d never imagined human males and dragon males would share similarities, but perhaps it wasn’t so surprising. Dragons would couple in their true forms, but from the displays she’d witnessed, they took far more pleasure in doing it in a form they usually considered inferior.

Ember pulled her hands from underneath his and placed them against his muscled thighs. His hips jerked in reaction, sending an answering throb through her blood-filled clit.

She couldn’t have stopped herself from leaning down if she’d wanted to. Urges that were primitive, powerful, forced her mouth to his cock, to the flesh straining to reach her, to know her touch.

He tumbled backward onto his elbows with a groan when her lips caressed his shaft, took great fistfuls of her hair in his hands as if he were afraid she would try to escape.

Nothing was further from her mind.

His scent was intoxicating. His taste was addicting.

She’d heard such a thing was true of bonded dragon pairs, but she’d never guessed she could crave a male as profoundly as she already craved Aizik. It took only the barest touch of her mouth to his cock and she knew she wouldn’t be satisfied until she’d swallowed his essence.

Aizik’s thighs bunched and strained beneath her palms. His breath came out in ragged pants as she trailed kisses down his thick cock, traced the heavy veins with her tongue before sucking the loose skin into her mouth.

His hips lifted repeatedly. The air heated with a spicy scent that left her torn between continuing to hold his thighs open or sliding her hand beneath the waistband of her panties and touching herself.

“Take me in your mouth,” he whispered, his voice guttural, urgent.

Her hands left his thighs, one to cup and fondle the smooth heavy globes of his testicles, the other to circle his erection. His skin was feverish, darkened. His cock throbbed, its beat matching the spasming of her cunt. She ran her tongue up his length before taking the tip of his penis between her lips.

Aizik nearly came as soon as she put him in her mouth. He thrust upward, unable to check the violence of his need.

Lust roared through him, a mating heat beyond anything he’d never known. “Please,” he managed, not wanting to hurt her in his passion, but knowing he was at the edge of his endurance.

He might view himself as a scholar, had given himself the name of Aizik in recognition of his truest nature, but he was still a dragon male—capable of primitive acts of domination.

“Please,” he whispered, stroking her cheeks with hands still wrapped in strands of her hair, trying to entice her to take him deep in her mouth and accept his essence.

He shivered when she moaned, cried out when her tongue rasped the tip of his cock. His muscles tensed. Breathing became a struggle.

He panted when her lips closed firmly around his penis and she began sucking, slowly at first, then faster, until there was no thought. No reality other than the pull of her mouth. Until there was only pleasure so extreme it couldn’t be held back, couldn’t be contained, couldn’t be limited.

Aizik nearly passed out as orgasm took him like a bonfire, as ecstasy exploded through him with each jet of semen through his cock. Dragon flames roared from his depths, would have escaped through his mouth in a breath of fire if he’d been in his other form.

He sank to his back, shuddering, sated, his heart swelling as he watched Ember nuzzle and lick his already-filling cock before lifting her face. There was satisfaction in her expression, the heated, pleased look of a female who’d gotten what she wanted.

They were meant to be mates. He’d never produced the mate-scent when he was with another female, had never smelled it on any female the way he could smell it on Ember.

In another minute he’d be ready to mount and couple with her. But before he did, he wanted to taste her, to bury his face between her thighs and give her the same pleasure she’d given him.

Aizik forced himself into a sitting position. He loved the way Ember’s dark eyelashes dropped and her face warmed. The way she was both bold and submissive.

He’d always wanted an equal in a mate, and Ember would be that despite having no dragon’s form. But he was also a male dragon, and the part of him not governed by intellect wanted to dominate, even if it was only occasionally, and only in bed.

Fantasies of breeding her filtered through his thoughts. Images of seeing her in a nest of jewels as she grew swollen with the first of their young had his heart racing.

Their offspring would be dragon. Legend said it was only when a pure elf mated with a dragon that the young were denied a dragon form.

Aizik didn’t know if it was true. Such matings were so rare. He wondered if Elven magic weakened or doused the dragon flame at their core. A memory flickered at the edge of his consciousness then was gone as physical pursuits thrust intellectual ones away.

He captured Ember’s lips and slid his tongue into her mouth in a darkly carnal, utterly savage celebration of the ecstasy she’d just given him. He reveled in the way she tasted of him, in the way she crowded closer, pressing the front of her body against his, tantalizing him with the feel of skin and the reminder that she was a treasure yet to be fully viewed or explored. When the kiss ended, he repeated his earlier words, only this time they weren’t a request, they were a command. “Undress for me.”

Aizik’s demand sent a wicked thrill through Ember. She’d witnessed male dragons taking females in savage couplings, had fantasized about having a mate who desired her so possessively, who would show her his strength and make her feel safe because of it.

Instinctively she knew Aizik’s nature was gentler than a dragon male’s, that he lived more in the world of intellect than physical force. But lust burned and coiled in her belly at the way he looked at her, at the way he was willing to demonstrate he could master her.

Ember trembled as she shrugged her unbuttoned shirt off her shoulders. Unhappy memories tried to crowd in—of standing naked in front of the elders and being unable to change—but before they could, Aizik’s hands were on her breasts as if he guessed the nature of her thoughts.

“Nothing matters but the two of us,” he said, his fingers gripping her nipples, sending painful pleasure to her clit in a sensual punishment for letting her thoughts wander.

Ember shivered and he squeezed again, made her hips jerk as another bolt of icy-hot need pulsed into her rigid knob. “Say it,” he demanded.

**Chapter Four**

“Nothing matters but the two of us,” Ember whispered and he rewarded her by leaning forward, by freeing one nipple and claiming it with his mouth.

At first he rooted and nuzzled, suckled sweetly. But then his lips and tongue became possessive.

Ember cried out when he gripped her nipple with his teeth and bit down. Her hands found the front of her pants, struggled against the buttons in her hurry to bare herself, to find some relief from the inferno of need building inside her.

“Please,” she whispered, pressing against him, nearly sinking to the floor when he began sucking in hard pulls that reached her womb and had her keening, shivering with the need to feel his touch between her thighs.

She whimpered in protest when he released her. Trembled when he leaned back to survey the effects of what he’d done to her.

“The rest of it,” he growled and she quickly obeyed, shed the short suede boots and then her pants and underwear.

He didn’t give her time to worry about whether or not she appealed to him, didn’t let the doubts do more than flutter into existence before he banished them by pulling her onto the bed, rolling them so they were in the center with him straddling her.

“Aizik,” she whispered, acutely aware of the rigid length of his erection against her bare mound. Wherever their skin touched there was heat, the need to rub and grind, to meld even more closely together.

“What do you want?” he asked, rocking, striking her clit with his thick, hard cock.

“You,” she said, arching her back, reaching for him.

He grabbed her wrists and held them to the mattress. “My turn,” he said, taking her mouth, plundering it with his tongue and filling it with his taste.

The heady dark spice scent had her hungrily tangling her tongue with his, delving into his mouth. She fought to spread her thighs even as she thrust her engorged clit against his throbbing erection, whimpered with the desire to have him find her opening.

Aizik fought to keep his thighs clamped to Ember’s. Her scent was driving him crazy, making him wrestle with his self-control. It was evocative, warm molasses on a winter breeze, a promise of hearth and home.

He forced himself away from her mouth. Kissed down her throat to delicately curved breasts just large enough to fit in his hand. Their shape and texture was enthralling, the mix of elf genetics and dragon, pure perfection.

It was a revelation to him just how much he loved their gentle swell, how aroused he became sucking and biting her dark, winter-berry nipples. Dragon females had flat chests except when there were young to nurse. And human females, with their larger breasts, had never stirred him. But Ember—

He alternated. Kissing, laving, suckling at each breast as she writhed and whimpered beneath him.

Her scent blended with his, filled the air with the heady musk of dragons in the first stages of bonding. His cock was wet from rubbing against her slick folds, from the lubrication a male dragon produces to ease his thick, heavily veined penis into a female’s sheath.

The instinct to claim her drove him downward to her mound. Like a pure dragon female, she was smooth, bare. But the sight of her parted cunt lips, the dark berry-colored slit, affected him as no dragon female ever had.

*Mine* ! The word roared through him, imprinted itself on every fiber of his being along with the image of her partially splayed thighs and woman’s flesh.

Until it was time to breed, dragons weren’t possessive of their lovers and some chose to find pleasure with multiple partners. But Ember would never know another’s touch. She would never lie on the heated rocks and ledges of the lair-city in summertime and couple with other males. He wouldn’t tolerate it, felt himself ready to do battle at the mere thought of it.

Aizik pressed his lips to her lower ones with a possessive growl. His tongue pierced her, gathered her essence.

Her scent was mesmerizing, her taste addicting. With the first stab of his tongue into her hot core, he knew they would need and desire only each other. Theirs would be a mating to last a lifetime.

He swallowed her down. Used his tongue, his lips to claim every inch of her cunt.

She fought to spread her thighs wider, to free her hands, but he kept her prisoner to the fiery lust that burned between them. He savored her arousal, preened at the panted sound of his name as she pleaded with him to cover her, to fill her with his cock.

Aizik’s attention shifted to her engorged clit. To the tiny vulnerable tip. He lashed it with his tongue, took it in his mouth and sucked.

Mindless pleasure rocked Ember. Her hips jerked. Her toes curled as shards of icy-hot desire pulsed through her clit. Her channel spasmed and wept, clutched helplessly at an emptiness that felt soul-deep.

“Please, Aizik, please,” she begged, arching upward, driving her clit deeper into his mouth, fucking it through firm masculine lips.

He answered by freeing her hands so he could cup her hips and intensify his carnal assault. Ember responded by tangling her fingers in his hair, by holding him tightly. She thrashed as he stroked the underside of her swollen knob, rasped over the naked head—repeated the cycle until she was lost in savage release.

Her vision blurred into darkness. Her heart raced and heat radiated from her center. It was so much better, so different than anything she’d felt by her own hand.

Ember wanted to sink into the mattress. She wanted to luxuriate as she’d seen dragons do after being sated physically.

Pleasure rippled through her. Contentment as she’d never known pulsed in heated waves from her core.

She forced her eyes open to meet Aizik’s. He held her gaze as he shifted position, offered her the chance to spread her thighs fully for him.

Ember opened for him, felt the clawing hunger return to rake through her belly. She canted her hips. Lifted them. Saw fierce possessiveness in his gaze as he cleaned her with his tongue.

When he was finished, he kissed his way up her body, returned to her mouth. “Mine,” he growled, covering her lips with his in a darkly carnal kiss that held her essence as well as his.

Ember moaned when his cock head found her opening. He was hot and thick, as wet as she was.

She shuddered as he worked himself in slowly, gentle despite the tension vibrating through him, the rigid muscles in his back and shoulders.

The sensation was indescribable, exquisite agony and unbearable pleasure rolled into one. He stretched her. Filled her.

The pulsing, hard heat of him had her channel tightening hungrily, her nipples beading. It was impossible to stay still.

His kiss became more dominant, his body heavier on hers. She wrapped her legs around his hips and loved the way he growled into her mouth, fought to get even deeper with both his tongue and his cock.

Lust roared through her, flickering along her nerve endings like a fire testing the boundaries, desperate to spread. And she wanted it to spread. *Made* it spread.

Her fingers left his hair. They raked down his back and shredded his control.

Gentleness disappeared. The bed shook with the frenzy of his movements as he pistoned into her.

She strained and writhed underneath his onslaught, burned with an erotic fire that grew hotter as she neared completion. When it burst over her she clung to him, knew utter satisfaction as he shuddered and gasped, yielded to her spasming sheath and let her milk him of his seed.

“Was I too rough?” he asked long moments later, the question announcing the return of the scholar, the man who’d admitted to disappearing into a bookseller’s shop for days on end.

Tenderness flooded Ember. She loved the feel of his weight, the intensity of his stare as he seemed to probe, looking for confirmation their coupling had satisfied her.

She lifted her head to press a kiss to his mouth, blushed as she admitted, “It was perfect, everything I ever dreamed my first time would be.”

The blue of his eyes deepened with intense satisfaction. Masculine pride radiated along his hardened body.

“Good,” he said, the rumble in his voice making her think of a male dragon.

He rolled off her, but took her with him so they lay on their sides, faces inches apart.

The room was warm, the fireplace blaze steady. She toyed with his hair, pushed it over his shoulder and behind his back, smiled when he did the same to hers.

“Do you have a place you call home?” she asked, and felt a tendril of anxiety creep into her chest when he tensed slightly and worry flashed across his features.

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “My home is in the mountains your cottage touches.”

Surprise replaced the anxiety. “The blue dragons allow it?”

Aizik’s laugh was rueful. “I’m an oddity. They don’t understand my fascination with collecting books instead of gold and precious gems, or my interest in traveling and exploring other worlds.”

Contentment filled Ember, a peace unlike any she’d every known. He was perfect for her.

How the unicorns had known would probably always remain a mystery, but here was a human who could live in a place where dragons reigned and wasn’t terrified by them or envious of their hoards. Here was a man who wasn’t frightened by the mark on her hand or her Elven heritage.

Ember stroked his chest, thrilled at the way his heartbeat accelerated against her palm and his eyes darkened with desire. “My mother is dragon,” she admitted, fighting to keep any other thought about her mother at bay.

His expression softened with understanding. “She was enchanted?”

A tightness settled in Ember’s chest but she wanted him to know more about her. “I didn’t understand she stayed because of a spell until my father died and she shifted into a dragon.

“Children see what they want to see. She and my father seemed happy together. But looking back on it, I know that impression was formed when he brought a fresh batch of gemstones from the mine and they sorted them together, determining which ones to keep and which ones to sell. All the other times she seemed cool, especially when she and I were alone. Once I became old enough to help my father in his mine or in his workroom, I spent most of my time with him.”

Aizik pressed a kiss to her forehead. “He was good to you?”

“Yes. He spent hours upon hours with me. His warmth more than made up for her lack of it. Later I learned that when he was banished, he was forbidden to have children. His line was to die out with him.”

“How did he come to bespell your mother?”

“There are whispered stories she heard about a hoard of treasure and went to steal it. I don’t know whether my father knew her true nature or not.”

Aizik traced the rounded shell of Ember’s ear with his fingertip. “Among human sorcerers it’s considered acceptable to use spell magic to ensorcell a mate. I don’t know if the same is true among elves.”

Ember bit down on her bottom lip. She loved her father and even though she knew his outcast status had made him unbearably lonely, she hated it that he’d bespelled her mother. “I would never do that to another.”

Aizik’s husky laugh made her smile. His whispered “You don’t have to” made heated desire coil in her stomach.

“This is the only form I have,” Ember said, wanting Aizik to accept her as she truly was, someone who was neither elf nor dragon, who had no place in either of those worlds.

He caught her hand where it rested on his chest and took it to his mouth, pressed a tender kiss to her palm. “I am very satisfied with what I see, with what I’ve found. Or more correctly, with the one who found me.”

Ember leaned forward to rub the tip of her nose against his. “I want to share something with you. Do you feel like a bath?”

Aizik’s cock pulsed against her belly in answer. Her heart filled and expanded, felt as though it might burst with happiness.

She slid from the bed, using the hand he still held to urge him to his feet, then to lead him to the narrow door set directly against the mountain. It was only when her hand touched the knob that she remembered the mark and wondered if the cavern containing the hot spring would be pitch-black.

Ember shrugged the worry off. There were candles in the cottage. They’d use them if necessary.

But when she opened the door and stepped inside with Aizik, she found it wasn’t necessary. The crystals in the ceiling began shining like thousands of tiny stars competing against one another in a night sky. For her father they would have sung and whispered the secrets lying in their heart, for Ember they sparkled and danced, provided light for bathing and wonder for the man she already thought of as her mate.

She knew she would forever cherish the look on his face, the smile he directed at her when he could tear his attention away from the walls of the cave. Without a word he swung her up into his arms and covered her mouth with his as he carried her to the heated pool of water at the center of the cavern.

**Chapter Five**

Aizik couldn’t believe she hadn’t been claimed by one of the males of the scarlet lair-city. He couldn’t understand how they’d allowed lack of a dragon form and their fear of her Elven heritage to prevent them from seeing her as the treasure she was. But he was glad they had.

Carnal images flooded him as he stepped into the water with her. The tip of his cock glistened in the crystal-lit cavern. Dense beads of arousal coated the silken crest in anticipation of claiming her again.

There was a ledge of rock underneath the surface of the water. Aizik settled there, felt his heart sing when Ember turned in his arms, straddled him so their bodies touched intimately in the magic of the cavern.

Her eyes sparked as brightly as the crystals above him. He knew she was already more important to him than the hoard of gems and gold lining his lair.

He captured her mouth as his hands glided down her sides to her hips, lifting her so he could slide his cock into the place it recognized as home. Wherever she was, that’s where he wanted to be.

Ember’s moan of appreciation, her tremble of pleasure sent hot waves of desire through his penis and up to his heart. He shuddered as the muscles of her sheath rippled and spasmed, tightened on his engorged shaft.

They clung to each other, their hands roaming, exploring water-slick flesh, their tongues twining, thrusting, feeding the passion slowly, building the fire into an inferno until the need to find release was impossible to deny.

Aizik used his strength to lift her, to torment himself by sliding out of her until only the very tip of his penis knew the bliss of her channel. He kissed her breasts, licked over her nipples. He loved the way she gripped his shoulders, ran her fingernails over his back and pleaded with him to fill her again, and again and again, until the tight, pulsing squeeze of her inner muscles signaled her release and caused his own.

They lingered in the water and talked about the world Ember knew, about the one beyond the valley Aizik explored. When they finally left the crystal-lit cavern, the mark on her palm looked darker, like a crevice through snowy white stone.

The fire in the hearth drew them and they lay on the thick *seta*-*beast* pelt that served as a rug in front of the fireplace. Aizik felt languid, sated. He combed his fingers through Ember’s hair and imagined them lying together in his lair, or basking in the fire’s heat at one of the common hearths after making love.

His eyelids drifted shut. Contentment settled deeply inside him and his mind drifted to his earlier contemplation of legend and his theory that somehow a pure elf’s magic contained or doused a dragon’s flame so offspring produced of such matings had no dragon form.

His eyebrows drew together as he realized that in all his travels, he’d never met a half-elf, much less one who had a dragon parent. It would be an unusual pairing, but not as unlikely as in the past. Treaties now existed between elves and dragons because otherwise they risked weakening each other so severely the humans would encroach farther into both of their territories.

Aizik opened his eyes. He smiled when he saw Ember studying him.

Her hand rested above his heart, as if she found comfort and security in the way it now beat for her. He covered it with his, resisted the urge to carry it downward to a cock that was rapidly becoming engorged again.

His thumb found her palm and traced over the mark. Was it his imagination or did it seem hot?

Aizik turned her hand over. Her gasp gave voice to his own surprise. The mark was now deep red.

The story that had tugged at his memory earlier blossomed. He thought perhaps it was in one of the books he’d browsed at a bookseller’s shop, maybe the one in Saintcrow, though it might have been one much farther south, in New Holyoak, the city where the witches and warlocks gathered to teach others of their kind.

He’d thought the book a work of fiction, a clever forgery despite its ancient binding and barely legible pages. But what if it wasn’t?

Aizik closed his eyes. He could picture the book clearly, but not where he’d seen it.

Mentally he turned the pages and reread the legend that had seemed so far-fetched he’d thought it a fairy tale. But now…

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Ember whispered, her voice quivering, holding an uncertainty he couldn’t bear hearing.

He opened his eyes to find her on one elbow, looking down at him with her bottom lip caught between her teeth. *It*’*s too soon*! an internal voice shouted.

He’d wanted time with her before revealing he was dragon. But the way the mark was changing made him think it would soon disappear.

Aizik traced it with his thumb again. How could he deny her hope, even if it meant he might lose her?

“I was remembering a story I read. It was about a male dragon halfling who couldn’t change forms. The tale didn’t mention his father or his mother, only that he was well-loved so when a circular mark similar to yours appeared on his palm, those in his lair-city sought out an elf who was willing to advise them about it for a share of their hoard.

“The elf they consulted said if the dragon halfling held a firestar against the mark until it faded, he would be able to take the dragon’s form. The dragons had never heard of a firestar, and of course, the old elf just happened to have one he was willing to trade for more gold. But as I said, the halfling was well-loved and so the dragons agreed to the bargain. And when the mark disappeared, the elf’s prophecy came true.”

Aizik pressed a kiss to the mark on Ember’s palm. The nearest elf enclave was at least a day away by flight, weeks away on foot. He’d have to reveal his dragon form to Ember and carry her if they had any chance of getting there before the mark faded.

A shudder went through him at the prospect of being caught in winter cold if the elves turned them away. And there was no guarantee the elves would have a firestar or be willing to part with it.

A cold fist of fear squeezed his heart. What if Ember wasn’t safe among the elves? What if they guessed her heritage? Her father had been banished from their lands and forbidden children.

Aizik agonized. He was at his weakest during the winter, and even at his strongest, he was no match for an enclave of elves wielding spell magic. Dragon form or no dragon form, he wanted Ember for his mate.

If he said nothing, the mark would fade and they could go on as they were. The mark might fade anyway, before they could get to the enclave. And if it did, then the risk of winter and his revelation of his dragon form would have been for nothing.

Pain lanced through him. It would be a betrayal to take the choice from her.

“I can take you to an elf enclave,” he said, meeting her eyes, expecting to see hope and excitement, but finding somber contemplation instead.

Ember studied the man in front of her. He was a gift, the mate the unicorns thought her future lay with. He would accept her if she gained a dragon form, but what would his life be like? What would *their* life be like?

It was dangerous for dragons to live for long periods of time away from a lair-city. And if they had offspring, they would *need* to live among dragons to keep their young safe.

The scarlet dragons would take her back with a dragon form, perhaps some would even offer friendship. But the thought of returning to a place where she’d been banished, of knowing they valued her only because of her form, sent a twisted shard of pain slicing through her.

She could make her home with another lair of dragons. But as she looked at Aizik, she knew she couldn’t do that to him, couldn’t ask him to live in a place where he’d always be considered *less*. She knew the pain of that too well. Almost from the first instant when she’d seen her mother transform into a scarlet dragon, she’d dreamed of being able to do the same and felt the sting of rejection and disdain because she couldn’t.

“I can take you to an elf enclave,” Aizik repeated.

Her heart filled with warm tenderness at the worry she read in his face, as if his thoughts had followed the same path as hers, and regardless of what it would mean for *him*, he wanted *her* dream to come true.

Only now she understood the cost of some dreams was too high. She wanted him, she wanted a home and a family with Aizik.

“You don’t need to,” Ember said. She rose to her feet long enough to take the globe her father had crafted for her off the fireplace mantle.

A lump formed in her throat as she gently shook it, turning the scene into a snowy one. It was the last gift River in Stone had given her.

*For my winter child* , *an Ember Caught in Stone*.

Awe coursed through Aizik as he took the offered globe. The snow inside swirled around a kneeling figure that was Ember. Her head was bowed to look at the fiery star held in cupped hands.

How had her father known the mark would appear on Ember’s palm? Aizik wondered then thought of the story he’d recounted and guessed the dragon halfling had also been part elf as well. Joy filled him and he looked up, intending to blurt out the truth of his own dragon heritage.

But before he could do it, Ember pressed her fingers to his lips and said, “I don’t need to be a dragon to be happy.”

At her words, emotion churned inside Aizik. Her willingness to sacrifice her dream for him nearly undid him.

He kissed the fingers against his lips then gently pulled them away. “You don’t have to deny your heritage, Ember. I’m dragon.” And lest she think he’d meant to mislead her, he repeated what he’d said earlier, shared the entire truth with her. “I’m an oddity. The blue dragons of the lair-city I call home don’t understand my fascination with collecting books instead of gold and precious gems. They don’t value my interest in traveling and exploring other worlds. The eldest of my family line has even offered gold and jewels to the female who will mate with me!”

Ember’s smile was like the first rays of spring arriving to chase away the winter. She leaned in and touched her lips to his. “Do you want know what I thought when I saw the unicorns protecting you from the cold?”

“What?”

“That you were their gift to me. I find everything about you perfect.”

Her tongue licked along the seam of his lips and he responded by opening for her, by letting her feel the dragon heat at his core as their tongues rubbed and twined in sensual prelude. The air grew thick with bonding-scent, turned gentle communion into an overpowering need to mate.

When their mouths parted for breath, Ember broke the globe on the hearth’s edge and took the firestar in her hand, held it to the mark on her palm. Without a word she positioned herself on her hands and knees, spread her thighs to expose her berry-colored slit, offered herself in a way no male dragon could resist.

Fierce possessiveness surged through Aizik along with the primitive satisfaction that came from knowing *his* cock was the first—and the last—she would ever know. He leaned in, rubbed his cheek against her silky buttocks. He inhaled the scent of her arousal, reveled in the way it coated her flushed cunt lips and made them glisten like the intoxicating lure of nectar at the center of a flower. He couldn’t resist the urge to taste her, to run his tongue over her slit and dip it into her sweet sheath.

His cock licked a wet kiss over his belly, throbbed with the urgent need to get inside her. Aizik yielded to the overpowering desire. He pierced her with a single hard thrust, covered her completely and gave in to the primitive instinct to mate.

Ecstasy roared through Ember. Aizik was a fire in her bloodstream, a dragon song in her heart.

She panted, moaned, trembled as his testicles slapped against her swollen flesh and sent exquisite sensation through her clit. Her channel spasmed, coaxed, demanded, and he answered by giving her more of his weight, by thrusting harder, deeper, taking her to the point where pain and pleasure blended perfectly, to the point where there was only frenzied need and uncontrollable hunger.

Ember screamed when he bit her shoulder. Her sheath clenched in the savage acceptance of a dragon mate. Fiery ecstasy poured into her, through her, burned so fiercely that if she’d had a dragon form, flames would have escaped her throat with the sound of her orgasm.

They collapsed on the soft pelt in a tangle of arms and legs, their bodies still trembling in the aftermath of passion. Ember felt like purring in contentment when Aizik’s hand cupped her breast possessively and his tongue licked over the place he’d bitten, where he’d marked her as belonging to him.

“You’re everything I wanted in a mate,” he murmured against her skin.

Ember heard reassurance in his voice, and truth. She believed in him, as well as in herself and the unicorns that brought them together.

The mark was gone when she opened her hand, the firestone burned out so completely that darkened ash fell to the rug. She didn’t feel different, or at least, she felt no different than she had since the moment she’d realized Aizik was meant to be her mate.

He rose to his feet and scooped her up in his arms. “Whatever happens, you belong to me,” he said and the joy of knowing she’d found a man who accepted her for who she was instead of what she was, kept her worry at bay.

At the doorway she returned his kiss with the same deep passion he offered. Then he set her on her feet and took her hand in his. They stepped out into the snowy wonderland as equals, as a bonded pair.

The winter could so easily bring death to their kind, but as the cold struck Ember’s naked flesh, the minnow flashes of fire she’d felt all her life transformed into a roaring inferno that heralded the birth of a dragon.

There was no pain, no fear. There was only the wild rush of heat and the exhilarating thunder of her heart as the body she’d always known yielded to a form bigger than it could contain, as she *became*.

Magic, she was pure magic, Aizik thought as he looked at the winter-white dragon that was Ember. She was iridescent, like mother-of-pearl, her beauty so breathtaking she would outshine all of the other females in the lair-city.

Possessiveness and pride filled him. He took his dragon form and the desire to mate returned with a vengeance when she nuzzled him, rubbed her neck against his in a dragon’s display of closeness and affection.

They wouldn’t stay out long in the cold. But there was no resisting the urge to launch themselves upward, to soar in winter skies and let the wind carry their dragon song, one celebrating a love that was already the stuff of legend.