



Cobblestone Press Presents

# Shifters

Crystal Jordan



*Wereplanets: In Smoke*

*By*

*Crystal Jordan*

## **Wereplanets: In Smoke by Crystal Jordan**

---

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

### **Wereplanets: In Smoke**

Copyright© 2007 Crystal Jordan

ISBN: 978-1-60088-139-8

Cover Artist: Leita Stevens

Editor: Susan Greene

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

## **Dedication**

To my awesome critique partner, R.G. Alexander. To Kelly Lynn, who had to rule the world. To the usual cast of characters: Loribelle Hunt, Shelli Stevens, Karen Erickson, Lillian Feisty, Lacy Danes, Robin L. Rotham, Dayna Hart, Jennifer McKenzie, and Eden Bradley. To the real women who inspire me on a daily basis: Adriana, who's a dream to work with, and Elia, who helped me survive graduate school. You're both getting your own stories, I swear. Y'all are the best and deserve better than my meager talents can give you.

## Chapter One

*So that's Harena.*

Katryn tried to dredge up some excitement. It was her first visit to her home world, after all. Even if she hadn't been there since she was a small child, she should feel some connection to it, shouldn't she? But, no. She had no desire to be here. Now that her ambassador father was dead, her family intended to marry her off as a member of some man's *harim*. Would that make her his third wife or his fifth? She had no idea. She only knew his name was Lord Nadir. The rest was a complete mystery. What she knew about her own kind could fit onto the tip of her smallest finger with room left to spare. Weredragons weren't known to give away the secrets of their society, and she hadn't grown up among them, so she felt the keen lack of knowledge more now than ever before.

Gods. She'd traveled for six standard months just to get to this sun burnt rock in the back end of space. The thought didn't please her. As low as her expectations were, the planet below was worse than she imagined. No blue of ocean broke the landscape of endless red sand. If it looked this bad from here, she wasn't certain she wanted to get much closer. As if she had a choice now. She sighed and rested her head against the curved window of the observation lounge.

Katryn wrinkled her nose at her wavy reflection in the glass, noticing the thin layer of purple scaling that reached from the middle of her hands to her biceps. The barest touch against her scales could elicit an intense sexual reaction. Dragons were very proud of their markings, or so

her father had once mentioned to her. It was one of the few things he'd ever told her about her race before he died. She only knew she was entirely different from the weretigers she'd grown up with on Vesperi.

She was concentrating on the window so hard that she didn't notice her best friend, Mahlia, walk up behind her until she spoke. "Look, Katryn! Isn't it amazing?"

"Yes, Mahlia, that is exactly what I was thinking." Katryn made a derisive noise in the back of her throat, but it erupted as a reptilian hiss. She'd spent too many Turns picking up the conversational habits of tigers.

Mahlia raised her eyebrows and lifted her baby, Crown Prince Razak, against her shoulder to pat his back. "Such enthusiasm. This is an important trade relationship to maintain between our planets...and in order to trade, we're finally getting off this spaceship. Thank the Gods. Besides, it could be fun."

"Says the happily mated woman with new twin cubs." She smiled to take the bite out of her words. If anyone deserved the joy they'd found, it was Mahlia and Varad. The two weretiger monarchs had lost their first child to a rare genetic defect, and the agonizing loss had nearly dissolved their mating. Katryn longed for that kind of mating, a bond that could survive anything, no matter how tragic. But being raised among those unlike her, and returning to a planet where she knew nothing of the culture, she was unlikely to find that kind of acceptance, the sense of belonging she had always craved. Always apart. That was her fate. She sighed and leaned against the window.

"Now, now, Katryn, you just can't judge a tiger by its stripes." Katryn groaned as Mahlia fluffed her cream-and-brown striped hair. "And they are throwing us a welcoming party when we get to the landing site."

"Yes, so the men can club us and drag us back to their sand pits." Katryn arched an innocent brow.

"Well, I guess that makes us the cat's meow."

"Mah-lia, the cat jokes are so trite."

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty," Mahlia sing-songed.

Katryn laughed so hard she had to wrap her arms around her belly.

Trust Mahlia to make this easier for her, to make her laugh about it. Her friend knew how upset she was about the arranged mating, about the lack of a single mate. Tigers might have many mates throughout their lives, but only one at a time. That she was now to be just another woman in a dragon's *harim* made her stomach churn in disquiet. "Just wait until you see the dragon-skinned boys down there. Then we'll see how funny it is."

Mahlia straightened at the reference to ancient Earthans' gene-splicing humans with sea dragons to make shape-shifting dragons. Unlike the three other shape-shifting races—werebears, weretigers, and merpeople—humans had died out when the Earthan sun went supernova. Weredragons were the only ones that had been created from a non-Earthan animal. The desert climate created by the binary suns of Harena called for a wereanimal that could withstand a harsh, drought-prone environment. When, for unknown reasons, gene-splicing with Earthan reptiles had failed to take, scientists had turned to the sea dragons found on the water world of Aquatilis, home planet of the merpeople. "I've never been with a weredragon, only tigers. Are our hosts really scaled all over?"

"Not all over, but I'll let you guess exactly which parts are." Katryn leered, but she didn't know the true answer. She'd never had sex with a dragon either. The only other weredragon on Vesperi was her father. She shuddered. No, she'd definitely never been with another dragon.

Mahlia gasped, her eyes rounding with horrified fascination. The slitted cat's pupils in her crystal blue snow tiger eyes expanded. "Really? Down there?"

She chortled, flicking imaginary dust flecks off of her purple scales. "You don't want to play snake charmer, *Amira*?"

"It might be interesting to find out what that feels like. You shouldn't limit yourself, Katryn."

"Yes, and she's the only one of you who might find that out." A low growl sounded from the doorway. Varad padded in with his daughter cradled to his chest. He bent to press a gentle kiss on his mate's lips. The twins reached for each other, patting their hands together and gurgling. The tiny girl, Princess Varana, had her father's golden eyes and

auburn and black striped hair, whereas Razak had his mother's paler snow tiger coloring. They were both the most beautiful babies Katryn had ever seen. She sighed, allowing herself a moment of pure, self-indulgent envy. She wished her future looked half as bright as Mahlia's, but it did not. Her heart twisted. She'd never have love, never know the sweet, hot lust for a mate that she saw so often in her friend's gaze. No, Katryn's life was the same one she'd always known, no matter which planet she lived on. She never belonged anywhere or to anyone.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Everything will change soon.*

The telepathic voice of Nadir's mate filled his head. A harsh, desperate edge colored Tarkesh's tone. Nadir slipped his fingers over the band of silver scales that formed a rough crown on his mate's forehead, then buried them in the other man's long hair before he answered.

*Then we must take advantage of the time we have now.*

Tarkesh ran his hands down the wide, muscled planes of Nadir's chest. His breath hissed out as Tarkesh's fingers danced over the black scales that trailed down the centerline of his torso. His hips jerked forward at even the light contact. Nothing felt better than his mate's hands on him.

"Don't tease me, Tark. I'm in no mood for it." His hand snapped out and caught the slimmer man around the waist to draw him forward. Their cocks stroked against each other, and they both groaned at the contact.

"Nor am I. I need..." Tarkesh chuckled at Nadir's usual rough impatience, so Nadir scraped his nails down the silver scales on Tarkesh's arm. A draconic shriek ripped from his throat. Goddess, but he loved that reaction in his mate.

*"I know. Bend for me, my mate."*

A cheeky grin spread over Tarkesh's sculpted features. Leaning sideways, he hooked a finger around a bottle of spiced oil from the bedside table. He handed it to Nadir. His dark eyes flashed with heat and anticipation. "I live to please you, my mate."



"Now." Nadir could tell his mate needed it rough and fast this night. No niceties, no, subtlety, no playing. Just hard, deep fucking. The silver dragon wanted to forget the changes they faced as a mated pair. And he would give that to him. Gladly.

Nadir fisted his fingers in his mate's long hair, jerking his head back to nip at his throat. He felt Tarkesh's breath brush against his temple, felt his pulse pounding beneath his lips. Lust clenched in his gut. No more. He couldn't wait. Using his free hand, he shoved Tarkesh backward onto the wide bed. Smooth, black saltwater silk from Aquatilis felt slick under his knees as he climbed up. He flicked the cork from the blue glass bottle and poured oil into his palm.

"Open for me." He didn't wait and shoved his mate's legs high and wide. Working his fingers against the tight hole of Tarkesh's anus, he eased the oil into his mate's ass. Tarkesh groaned, his hips arching off the bed. Ah, yes. This oil had spices designed to elevate passion, to burn. He wrapped his other hand around Tarkesh's cock to slip up and down the long, hard shaft. Tarkesh swallowed audibly, his eyes pinching closed as he arched into Nadir's stroking fingers. Nadir rubbed his thumb over the tiny opening at the crest, smearing the glistening drop of cum around the tip. He let a dark smile curve his lips. *You want this, don't you, Tarkesh?*

Tarkesh's dark eyes flashed open, clashed with Nadir's. They blazed with anger and uncertainty. *Yes, fuck me now.*

*I'll fuck you hard. I know how you like it.* Nadir knew Tarkesh needed to forget, to be pushed past the worry that consumed him. That he would enjoy the pushing was an additional boon. He did what he must to please his mate. A harsh laugh rumbled his chest. A man's duty was never done. He smiled and firmed his hold on Tarkesh's thick cock. *After I've made you come, I'll slide my cock inside your ass and ride you hard. You love that, don't you?*

"Yes. Nadir."

He watched a muscle tick in Tarkesh's jaw and his breath choke out. A draconic hiss erupted from the silver dragon's throat. His eyes glazed, unfocused. His cock slid faster and faster through the tight grip of Nadir's fingers. Tarkesh's hips jerked, slamming upward as Nadir's hands

worked downward. Nadir smiled as he watched his mate's face flush with hot lust, watched as orgasm dragged him under. He froze, his pelvis lifted. He came, his juices erupting over Nadir and the bed. "Nadir."

Leaning forward, Nadir braced his hand on either side of his mate's shoulders. Tarkesh wrapped his fingers over the back of his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. Their lips fused, and he thrust his tongue into Tarkesh's mouth. He shuddered as his mate's hands ran over his scales. Lust clouded his mind, his control ripping loose. He thrust his cock between Tarkesh's legs. He didn't pause; he needed more and needed it now. Dragging his mate's legs up to wrap around his waist, he slid into the oiled pucker of his anus. Tarkesh groaned, lifting his hips into the thrust. Nadir worked the full length of his cock inside the other man, his strokes building in speed and force. His breath hissed out at the hot, tight fit of his mate closing around his penis.

Orgasm fisted in his gut, building higher, pushing him past the edge of his endurance. His heart slammed in his chest, his head bent back, and he roared out. His cum jetted inside his mate. "Tarkesh."

Intense carnal feeling twisting with hot emotion banded his chest. Goddess, but he craved this man. More than his next breath. Nothing could compare to what he felt when he was near. Slamming his eyes closed, he let the feeling take him. Only with Tarkesh had he ever let go of the control he held so tightly to. Only the silver dragon could match him for ferocity, for passion. Never would he let him go; he would do whatever it took to keep his mate.

Sliding from Tarkesh's anus made them both groan at the drag of flesh on flesh. Nadir collapsed beside his mate, panting. His kissed the silver scales that trailed down the slimmer man's shoulder, curving an arm around his waist. Tarkesh remained quiet, still, a sure sign that he was thinking deeply. Nadir sighed and shifted to settle against the pile of pillows, hugging Tarkesh to him. Long experience told him he would have no peace until his mate talked through whatever troubled him. "You are worried."

"When will she be here?"

Ah. So that was the way of it. He blew out a breath and waited for

the same discussion they had had a hundred times before. "Soon. A few days. This upsets you?"

"Do you truly believe that adding her to our bond won't change things between us?" Impatience rang from Tarkesh's voice. It seemed as if they'd both had more than their share of this subject.

He stroked his hand down the sensitive silver scales covering his mate's spine, eliciting a small shudder. "We have no choice. You know this. Mating with her will cement our position in the Matriarchies. We have to be a breeding partnership."

"I know." Tarkesh relaxed against him, sighing. "It is simply that..."

He forced his voice to remain calm, soothing. "You fear change. A *harim* is not a bad change, Tarkesh. You don't know that we won't love her, and she, us."

The saltwater silk rustled as Tarkesh flopped over with a low growl. "You don't know that we will. She could make things difficult with us, with her foreign weretiger ways."

"She is a dragon in the most powerful Matriarchy on Harena, regardless of where she was raised. We agreed her lack of experience with dragons would only be to for the good. Mating with her will benefit all our families and will give us the legitimacy that both of us desire." He shrugged as he stated what he saw as obvious.

Tarkesh sucked a breath in through his teeth. "I understand all this. Goddess knows we've discussed it a thousand times. That doesn't change the situation."

"I can't give you any guarantees." Frustration clawed at Nadir's gut. This was the *only* option open to Harenan pairs of the same gender. Matings that could not produce the rare dragon child were compelled to take a third mate of the opposite sex, form a *harim*. Most saw it as a convenient arrangement, but he knew Tarkesh wanted more than that from *any* mate.

"And I'm not asking for any."

He shrugged again, at a loss about how to make this better, easier for his mate. "What would you have me do?"

Tarkesh tensed beside him, and he heard him drag in a deep breath. "Allow me to meet her at the shuttle landing and accompany her to the capital myself. Alone."

He chuckled, propping his hands behind his head. This was a request he hadn't anticipated. "Afraid I'll scare her, Tark?"

Tarkesh propped himself up on an elbow to look down at him, his forehead furrowing with worry. A sudden, sly grin spread across his features, and he shoved his long hair out of his face. "No woman has been man enough to satisfy you before. I was the one who switched back and forth before you."

Nadir laughed outright at that, wrapping an arm around his own belly. He stroked his fingers down his short goatee to try and hide a grin. "It isn't that women aren't appealing. It's simply that my tastes are too rough for most of them. Delicate little desert blossoms."

And it was the truth. Women were attractive, arousing, but many shied away from his rougher tastes. He knew himself, his preferences. Only Tarkesh had ever matched him for his demanding pleasure.

"Don't let a matriarch hear you say that."

"I wouldn't." He reached out to slide his fingers through his mate's hair, cupping the back of his head. "Would it ease your fears to meet her before the binding ceremony?"

"Yes." Tarkesh leaned into him.

"Then go, with my blessing." He let a grin tug his lips up. "And be certain to test her skills at bed play. I wouldn't want to terrify the blossom. Break her in gently."

Tarkesh chuckled, his fingers wrapping around Nadir's cock to stroke him back to full arousal. Nadir groaned through gritted teeth.

"Perhaps. For now, my mate, I have no desire for gentle."

He rolled Tarkesh onto his belly, pulling his hips up. He slid his hands down to cup his mate's ass and parted the globes to rub the tip of his cock against the tight anus. "I live to please you. My mate."

## Chapter Two

The metal floor rattled beneath Katryn's feet. Her stomach pitched as the space shuttle dropped through Harena's atmosphere. Her knuckles turned white as her fingers bit into the safety straps that held her in place. She wished the nausea churning in her belly was just the unfamiliar change in pressure that made her ears pop, but it wasn't. This was it. There was no escape for her now. Her fate was sealed. She swallowed down a lump that threatened to strangle her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and struggled to control her breathing. The spaceship shuddered hard, and she bounced in her seat. She moaned, leaning into the harness. Praying that this landing would be over soon would only bring her mating that much closer.

The ship seemed to jolt sideways and knocked the wind out of her as they bounced on the ground. Metal ground against metal. Were they landing on sand or something man-made? She hadn't bothered to ask where they would land or how the weight of the ship wouldn't sink them into the loose sand; she'd been more concerned with what would happen to her after they touched down.

"That was...exciting." Mahlia's voice broke the silence, and Katryn opened her eyes to see a gamin grin spreading across her friend's face. It was so good to see her blue eyes clear of the crippling pain of Jeevan's loss. The sadness still lurked there, and Katryn suspected it always would, but she smiled now, and it shone in her eyes. Her friend was happy. She tried to imprint this moment on her memory. This might be the last time

she saw her, and the knowledge cut deep. She had so few true friends, so few people she trusted. Mahlia and Varad would hand the trade run over to Varad's younger brother Taymullah when they returned to Vesperi this Turn. One ship made one run each Turn to all four colonized planets. So much of the Earthan technology had been lost. Only Aquatilis maintained any level of technology in order to generate the life support systems in their underwater cities.

"I'm ready to have my feet on solid ground."

"I confess that I would like that as well." Mahlia leaned over to unbuckle her son from his carrier. He swung his arms in clumsy circles, kicking his feet and cooing.

"I'll hold him." Katryn flicked off the harness straps and scooped Razak up. "It will be the last time."

"You don't know that. You can never tell what the future holds, bitter or sweet."

Tears pressed against Katryn's eyelids, and she spun toward the door, cradling the baby against her breast. "Then it will be the last time I see him so small."

"That is the truth. They gain flesh with every day that passes. Soon I won't be able to carry them." Mahlia straightened her ceremonial robe, running her hands down the royal blue saltwater silk. Katryn shrugged to resettle her own lavender robe. It was sleeveless to leave her scales bare. They had all changed into their finery before preparing for landing. A trading party would meet them, goods would be exchanged over several weeks' time, and then Varad and Mahlia would fly away and leave her behind. What happened to her after that, no one knew. No one knew anything about Harena or the weredragons who populated the world. No one even knew why they kept so much to themselves.

The muscles in Katryn shoulders drew into a rigid line. Her breath grew overloud in her ears, her heart thumping in slow throbs. She swallowed hard. Dread knotted in her belly. Her every footstep clanged against the metal flooring, ringing like a death knell. Her ears popped again as wind sucked around the lowering ramp. She squinted against the harsh sunshine that flooded the airlock. Razak fussed against her, and she

jiggled him. His rosy lips formed a moue. Sweet affection wrapped around her heart, and she smiled down at him. She wished she could see her friend's children grow up. Mahlia was as close to family as she had ever really known. Her father had never spared more than a moment for her. And now she was to be left with a planet full of people like her father, married to another man like her father. She ran her finger down Razak's silky cheek. "We're here, little prince. Let's go see, shall we?"

She glanced up and met the intense dark gaze of a tall, exotic-looking man. Her heart jolted. A weredragon. She was certain of it. Her nostrils flared to catch his scent. Hot and masculine. His scales glinted silver in the sun, but it was his eyes that caught her. Something possessive danced in their midnight depths. She took a step toward him, drawn in. Something about the man called to her. She wanted to speak to him, know him. The need shook her to the core. She drew in his scent again. How she knew the scent belonged to him, she didn't know.

"Katryn?"

Jolted from her reverie, she turned to see Mahlia standing with Varad and a slender woman. The woman's scent was foreign, unusual. Katryn's nose twitched.

"I'd like you to meet Elia, the Aquatilian ambassador on Harena. We'll be taking her back to her home world and bringing her replacement back next Turn." Mahlia wore her *Amira* smile, polite and somehow warm and distant at the same time.

Katryn let a welcoming grin tilt her lips. "Lady Elia. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"It's Ambassador. Aquatilis is a democratic republic; we do not have lords and ladies. Please, call me Elia." She tilted her head to the side, and a sheet of flaming orange hair streaked with gold and tipped with red swirled around her shoulders. Katryn had never seen a mermaid. Only the mermen came as ambassadors to Vesperi, but women didn't have much power among the weretigers. Only through their husbands could they become leaders. Like Mahlia, ruling the planet while Varad went on the trade run last Turn. Katryn was uncertain of the practices on other planets. Harenans kept to themselves, and contact with the other planets

was so new that there was little anyone knew other than who traded in what. *Amir* Varad and Ambassador Bretton Hahn of Aquatilis were the only two people to have ever visited all four colonized planets.

Katryn sighed. Adventure had never been one of her longings. Mahlia wanted that. Katryn simply wanted to belong somewhere, to someone. To fit. To be needed.

"I've never met a mermaid before."

"Yes, well. After his first Turn here, Ambassador Hahn believed a woman representative would...achieve better results."

What was that supposed to mean? She opened her mouth to ask when the mermaid turned to speak quietly to Varad. Her dragon senses allowed her to hear Elia anyway. "I am anxious to return to Aquatilis, *Amir* Varad. How long will..."

Then the weredragon's scent came to her again, closer. She whipped around and found herself staring at the most beautiful male chest she'd ever seen. He wore no shirt, simply a robe that draped from his shoulders. Tight muscles formed ridges over his abdomen and tapered to narrow hips. A wide belt hugged a pair of loose pants to his waist. A silver band of scales stretched across his forehead, and his dark hair fell in a smooth sheet to his shoulders. She'd never been so intensely aware of any man in her life. And she had lain with her fair share of them. This was different, though. Perhaps it was that he was her kind, that he was dragon. She didn't know, but she wanted to find out. Desperately.

"Who are you?"

"I am Lord Tarkesh. I am to escort you to the capital. To Lord Nadir."

To the end of her life as she knew it. Depression made her shoulders droop, and she turned away. She walked down the ramp to see what she could of her world. Deep red sand dunes stretched as far as her vision could strain. And she had the enhanced senses of a dragon, so her sight far exceeded those of her human ancestors. The harsh beauty of the land pulled at something deep within her. Some small tug of familiarity settled in her bones. She dragged in a deep breath. The desert wind didn't have the salty tang of the Dead Sea on Vesperi. It was the clean, dry scent



of pure sand. No moisture. In fact, her nose didn't catch the scent of any bodies of water. That confirmed what she'd seen of the planet from space.

That begged the question: how did dragons survive without water? She sighed. Just one more thing she didn't know about a world that was supposed to be her *home*. She choked back a bitter laugh. Home. Of course. She had all manner of experience with that, right?

To her left lay a small town of lavish tents. They spread around the massive landing platform that the ship rested on. Several dragons stood around the platform, and they glanced at her curiously before returning to the work of unloading the goods from the cargo holds. The wild colors of their scales flashed in the sun as they worked. They were beautiful. A strange emotion twisted within her. These people were her kind. She wished more than anything that this place felt like home, that she could be welcomed among weredragons. But she was a stranger, apart.

"Look, little one. Isn't it gorgeous?" She lifted Razak so that he faced the landscape. He gurgled and squealed in delight, his arms windmilling. She laughed, cuddling him close.

"Yes, it is." Tarkesh's smooth voice sent a hot shiver down her spine, snapping her back to the present.

She turned back to face him, settling Razak against her shoulder. Clearing her throat, she met his gaze. Her heart seized again, and a flood of moisture gathered in her pussy. She clenched her thighs together and tried to keep her voice calm, even. "So, how far are we from the capital? Is that where Lord Nadir lives with his *harim*?"

She tried to keep the displeasure from her voice, but some of it must have slipped through, for Lord Tarkesh's brows arched in surprise. His tone went flat, emotionless. "You are upset by a match with the son of a powerful family?"

"I am not happy to have no say in the man I must mate to."

"I see." His face showed no expression, and he folded his hands behind his back. "It is five days to the capital. We travel by Gila caravan with dune racer outriders as guards."

"We need guards?" Her stomach dipped.

"I was informed that your father died in a dune racer accident, and

I am sorry if it upsets you, but the guards are necessary. There are renegade bands that would attack a trade caravan. Especially one as richly stocked as ours will be."

"I see." Now it was her turn to keep her face clear of expression. She was the daughter of a politician. Whether she wished it or not, she knew how to hold her tongue and give little away. Her preference was to confront life head on, but the tigers didn't care for that kind of bluntness. She very much doubted dragons would be different in that respect. Any people that could keep its secrets so tightly guarded probably preferred subterfuge and guile. Sighing, she sought a more pleasant subject. She waved a hand at the hundred or more tents. "Will everyone accompany us to the capital? And who is Gila, Lord Tarkesh?"

His white teeth flashed against the swarthy complexion common to all weredragons. Dark hair, tanned skin, dark eyes. The only thing that seemed to make them each uniquely colored was their scales. "Call me Tarkesh. Please."

"And you must call me Katryn." She offered up a tentative smile.

"Come with me and I will introduce you to a Gila." He started down the ramp that led to the landing platform. When she didn't immediately follow, he turned back with an expectant expression on his face.

"I must ask *Amira* Mahlia if—"

His eyebrows contracted in a frown. "You do not answer to the weretigers."

"No, but she is my closest friend, and I am holding her son. It would be rude to walk away without a word." Her voice cracked a little. She'd soon be walking away from her only friend forever. Blinking rapidly, she tried to keep tears from her eyes. She would save her weeping for when she was alone. Breaking down in front of these strange men who shared her race was not how she wanted to make a first impression.

A quiet sympathy warmed his dark gaze, and he nodded his understanding. "Go then. I await you."

"Thank you, Lor—Tarkesh. Thank you, Tarkesh." She swept a small bow, holding Razak firm to her shoulder.

"I'll take him if you like." She turned to see Varad standing behind her. A smile creased his handsome face, and his gold eyes twinkled down at her. Concern flashed at his gaze as he glanced between her and Tarkesh. He pitched his voice low. "You are attracted to him."

She nodded, not speaking.

"Have a care. I would hate to see you hurt."

"I can enjoy my last moments of freedom, can't I? My choices have been taken away from me about who I shall mate with, but this time I have left is mine."

He sighed. "Yours is too kind a heart to be broken."

Tears welled again, but she blinked them back. "I shall miss you, Varad. Take care of Mahlia."

"I swear it." He bent and lifted Razak from her arms. He kissed Katryn's cheek "Thank you. For being there for Mahlia last Turn when she needed support. You and my brother saved her when I could not be there. I will never forget that."

"She would have done the same for me."

"Yes. She loves you dearly."

Her throat closed tight. "I love her, too. I—I need to go."

He nodded and stepped back. "Go."

She spun around and scurried down the ramp to Tarkesh. He looked over her shoulder meet Varad's gaze. Something passed between the two men. Perhaps they spoke telepathically. She didn't know, but they nodded to each other and Varad turned away to rejoin his mate and Elia. Then she faced Tarkesh and tried to smile. "Shall we go? I would like to see Gila."

### Chapter Three

"Are you well?" Tarkesh didn't turn to lead her to the Gila. Instead, he lifted his hand and brushed a lock of Katryn's hair away from her face. The attraction that had rolled over her the moment her gaze met his rose to surface. No matter what she had said to Varad, it would be unwise to engage in an affair with this man when she would soon be mated to another. She had no idea how conservative the weredragon culture was, and she didn't want to upset the family she had never met through her ignorance of her own race. Tarkesh cupped her cheek, and she allowed herself to savor the liquid fire his touch lit within her, spreading to heat her pussy. Gooseflesh broke out down her arms, and she forced herself to step away from him, away from the pleasure of his skin on hers.

"I am fine. Please, do not concern yourself with me. May we go?"

"Yes. Gila. This way." He smiled gently, and it warmed her. Had she ever received kindness from her own father? She couldn't recall any. She realized that she'd expected all dragon males to be like her father. Cold, distant, unfeeling. Katryn had simply been a hostess for the Harenan Embassy, just one more person to serve his whims. But Tarkesh seemed...different. And so appealing. It was a shame she had to mate with this Nadir instead.

Tarkesh's hand settled hot and solid against the small of her back. His touch burned her through the saltwater silk of her gown. She shuddered as longing washed over her, and swallowed back a soft moan. He guided her around the corner of the landing site and through the maze

of sand-colored tents. "Are we very far?"

"Not far. Just there." He pointed to an enormous animal a short distance away.

Katryn's mouth flapped open and closed several times before she could speak. No animal that large lived on Vesperi. She'd never even heard of such things. The huge reptile had four widely-spaced legs that barely held its belly off the sand, a long tail, a wide, fat head, and tiny eyes. The coloring was unique, though. It was intricately patterned in black with uneven stripes of orange, pink, and peach. Its scales looked like large, rough bumps. "*That* is a Gila?"

"Yes, it's a Gila beast. They are used as riding and pack animals."

"Are they native to Harena?"

He frowned. "Yes, though I do believe they got their name because they resemble an ancient Earth creature."

"Earth had reptiles so large?"

"I don't think anyone on Harena can answer that question. Certainly not I." His eyes gleamed. "Though I would love to speak to the new human women who crash landed in the werebears' laps."

She laughed. "Varad has met them. You could ask him about them."

"Perhaps I will." His fingers stroked in sensuous circles on her back as he looked down at her. Heat warmed his dark gaze. She leaned into him instinctively, tilting her face toward him. Yes. Something about this man was intoxicating. Irresistible temptation. She wanted to know more, to touch him. She shouldn't give into this desire, this unexpected passion for a man she'd only just met. Something inside her pulled toward him, this man who could never be hers. Longing twisted deep within her, and her pussy dampened.

His hand lifted to the back of her neck, threading his fingers through her hair. "Katryn."

"Yes." She closed her eyes, reveling in the feeling his simple touch elicited in her. No one had affected her this way before. His fingers on her skin were soft and gentle. Goosebumps rippled down her arms. She laid her hands on his bare chest, stroking her fingertips over his smooth skin.

He groaned and brought his palms up to cup her hands. "I need to..."

He leaned closer, and his lips brushed over hers, still soft, still gentle. She moaned into his mouth, her nipples beading tight as she pressed her breasts to his warm, wide chest. He swept his tongue out to lick her bottom lip. Shuddering, she opened for him. His mouth meshed with hers. Slow fire built within her. Seducing her. His fingers slid down her long hair, and then cupped her hips to move her against his erection. She rubbed herself on him, desire whipping through her body.

Someone behind them cleared his throat, and they jolted apart. She fought a moan as the heat of Tarkesh's body abandoned her. The man who'd interrupted them shifted uncomfortably. "Lord Tarkesh, I am sorry —"

Tarkesh straightened the robe he wore, and offered up a calm smile. "No, it's fine, Lord Baleel. Please, I'd like you to meet Lady Katryn. Katryn, this is a good friend of mine, Baleel."

He stood as tall as Tarkesh, but had a wider build. A midnight blue saltwater silk robe covered pants and a shirt in the same color. Brilliant gold scaling peeked out from his sleeves and collar. Unlike Tarkesh, he wore his hair cropped close to his head.

"Hello." She stepped forward and offered her hand. He engulfed it in his large palm and gave her an easy smile before releasing her hand. Her breath whooshed out in relief as she realized he didn't seem to be upset about her kissing Tarkesh. Perhaps dragons were as open about their sexuality as tigers were. She hoped so.

Tarkesh's hand settled on her lower back, and she fought the urge to arch into his touch. "I was just showing Katryn the Gila beasts."

Baleel's smile widened, his eyes curious as they looked her over. "You've not seen one?"

"No. Never. May I touch them?" They fascinated her with their enormity and complete foreignness. She wondered what their scales would feel like under her fingertips. Silky and smooth, like dragon scales? Or hard and rough?

"Yes, they are quite tame." Baleel gestured for her to precede him.

The Gilas didn't seem to be caged in any way. They wandered close to the tents in a large pack. There were between twenty and thirty of them. She approached the closest one with caution. Tame or not, it was a huge animal that could hurt her without meaning to. She lifted her palm and laid it against the Gila's side. This one was black with peach markings. The scales rose in high bumps that fit her hand. They were coarse and hard, but warm to the touch. "How do you ride one? The scaling would make it uncomfortable."

"If you were to ride them bareback, yes. But we have padding that we strap around their belly. Just there." Baleel pointed to an area midway down the Gila's back. Their bodies seemed to hinge in that area, their forelegs leading in one direction, their hind legs following on a disjointed parallel. She could understand that to sit too far forward or back might give the rider motion sickness from the swaying their movements would create. Every move seemed slow and cumbersome.

The Gila she was petting made a sound between a wheezing groan and a grunt. She jerked her hand back, and both men chuckled.

She flicked a glance over her shoulder at them. "I'd like to see how well either of you would react to the native flora and fauna of Vesperi."

Baleel bowed low before her with a small grin. "Such a tart tongue. That settles it; it is truly genetics."

"What nonsense is this?"

"I speak of your cousin, Adriana. She has...strong opinions about everything."

"And that is an undesirable trait in a dragon woman? Are women not allowed to speak their minds?" What a horrifying thought. Women on Vesperi could not inherit wealth or title, so they sought their power and influence through the men in their lives. However, there were many tigresses who were powerful, and none were forbidden to express an opinion.

Both men blinked at her. Tarkesh glanced at Baleel, and the man nodded and faded away into the herd of Gila. Tarkesh spoke quietly.

"I...mean no disrespect when I ask this, but...you do realize that weredragons have a matriarchal government, do you not? Women own all

property, and family loyalties run through the female line.”

She blinked. “I—I didn’t know. I don’t know much about dragons.”

“Your father was a weredragon. He told you nothing?” His dark gaze pinned her in place, searched her eyes for the truth, and invited her to tell him everything. And she wanted to. It surprised her. She wasn’t one to share too much or too soon.

She shifted, uncomfortable with how *comfortable* she felt with him less than an hour after meeting him. “No. My mother died within a Turn of my father’s appointment to Harena. He—I never knew anything but weretigers. They raised me, taught me, befriended me. Father and I were the only dragons...who else was I to associate with?”

A kind smile slid over his lips. “If you have any questions on our journey, I would be happy to answer them.”

“You won’t—you won’t think me foolish? I feel ignorant for knowing nothing about my people. Shouldn’t I know these things?” How could her father have kept this from her? Why hadn’t he told her? If women were so powerful, so needed, why was she—a woman—so unimportant to him? Despair wrapped around her. A tiny part of her longed for some warmth from her father. To belong to something more powerful than just herself—a unit, a family. No tenderness or kindness had ever been forthcoming. She straightened her spine. She didn’t need to contemplate that. It wouldn’t help anything. She didn’t miss her father; she hadn’t spent enough time around him to miss him. She missed the possibility of the connection with another being, a person connected to her by blood or love. The only people she had like that were Mahlia or Varad, and they were flying away into space in a matter of weeks. Her heart twisted. “When will we be leaving for the capital?”

His mouth had opened to answer her first question, and then closed. He arched his eyebrows at the change of subject. “Tomorrow morning, my lady.”

Icy fear slipped down her spine, and all her dread at the mating roiled inside her. She felt the blood drain from her face, and she swayed on her feet. “So soon?”

“Yes, my lady. The bonding ceremony takes place in six days time,



the day after we arrive in the capital.” His hands snapped out to catch her shoulders and pulled her close to his chest. His fingers smoothed down her hair. She leaned into him, craving the comfort his embrace seemed to give. Had she ever felt so at ease with someone so quickly? She didn’t think so, but she couldn’t force herself to step back, to step away, to give it up for the short time she had him with her. Five days. That was all she had. She would savor this small moment with him before she mated with a stranger. She pushed away the dread that welled up in her and burrowed her nose into his throat, inhaling the warm, spicy scent of his skin.

She flicked her tongue out to taste him, and his hand dropped to cup her ass. He tugged her hips forward to ride against her pussy. He spun them around and backed her against something hard. A Gila. It shifted, and the roughness of its scales abraded her through thin saltwater silk of her robes. His hard chest pressed to her front, his skin smooth beneath her fingertips as she lifted her hands to touch him. His lips brushed against hers, tentative, questioning. Sweet. Intoxicating.

Sighing, she leaned into the caress of his mouth. Slow fire built in her belly, and she wanted more. Her sex clenched on emptiness, the need to be filled more than she could bear at the moment. Stroking her fingers up his chest, she buried her fingers in his long, silken hair. She shivered as the texture of it slid against the scaling that drew to points on the back of her hands. Lust slammed into her, deep, uncontrollable. Always this happened when her scales were touched. Always she craved more.

*Yes. Please, Tarkesh.*

His answering groan reverberated in her mind, vibrated on her lips. She shuddered at the double contact. Arching against him, she rubbed her hardened nipples against his chest. Passion coursed hot and heavy through her, pooling between her legs. She wanted more. She needed—

“Katryn!” Mahlia’s call in the distance reached her ears, and she moaned a protest at the second interruption to her pleasure. Did no one wish her to enjoy her last moments of freedom? She frowned, her mouth setting in a line. Her muscles grew tense with frustrated lust. A hiss

bubbled up in her throat.

A low chuckle slipped from Tarkesh. "You sounded very much the dragon just then, my lady. I am a good influence on you."

Rolling her eyes, she let a reluctant laugh straggle out. "I refuse to incriminate myself by answering that, my lord."

"Tarkesh."

"Tarkesh." She nodded and smiled up at him, stroking a single finger down the centerline of his chest before withdrawing. His dark gaze flashed hot, but he stepped away just as Mahlia broke through the line of tents.

"There you are." A brilliant smile graced her feline features. "I was beginning to worry. You've been gone a very long time."

"Have I? I hadn't noticed." And she hadn't. Perhaps because all thoughts of time had fled her mind when Tarkesh put his hands on her. How unusual for her. She pursed her lips. It wasn't something she was willing to examine too closely. That way laid heartache. Tarkesh was here to take her to the man she was going to mate with—another man, she reminded herself with ruthless force. She could not get attached to him, no matter how attractive she found him.

"How could you not—"

"Look, Mahlia. These are Gila beasts. Harenans ride them." Katryn flashed a smile at her friend and stepped aside so she got a full view of the enormous lizard. Mahlia's blue eyes lit with interest, and she stepped forward.

Her gaze landed on Tarkesh, and Katryn watch her fascination with the new creature war with her monarchical duty. She bit the inside of her cheek when duty obviously won. Then her friend froze, her nose lifting to sniff the air delicately. She gaze cut to Katryn, and she spoke telepathically as she dropped a graceful curtsy. *I can smell you on him, Katryn. Did I interrupt anything interesting?* Her blue eyes sparkled with suppressed mischief. When she spoke aloud, she addressed Tarkesh.

"Hello, I am *Amira* Mahlia. And you are?"

He bowed before the weretigress. "*Amira*, I am Lord Tarkesh."

"It is a pleasure." She nodded to him, and glided forward over the

sand to lay a hand on the Gila. Katryn grinned. Even her duty wasn't going to prevent Mahlia from exploring. "This is a beautiful land with beautiful creatures, my lord."

"My thanks, *Amira*. We are honored that you are enjoying your stay with us."

Katryn's grin widened at the formality they used with each other. Neither used those tones with her. For a moment, she wondered at Tarkesh's automatic casualness with her. Was it because she was a dragon, or was it something else? Did he feel this strange *connection* between them? Part of her hoped so, and the more sensible part knew it would be easier to be mated to another if he did not. She reached out to lay her palm on her friend's shoulder. "Mahlia...I am leaving in the morning."

"Wh—what? But we will be here for several more weeks trading." Her blue eyes went wide and filled with tears. Her lips trembled, and she compressed them into a flat line. "I just don't see why you must go so soon."

"Tarkesh will escort me to the capital. For my mating ceremony. In six days." If she said it enough, perhaps it would feel real. As if this was her life that had taken such a horrible turn.

Mahlia turned accusing eyes on Tarkesh. "Then, if I will be here for the ceremony, I will go with you to the capital to witness it."

"No." Tarkesh shook his head, his gaze hard. "Foreigners are not permitted to leave the landing site. Not ever. Ambassadors and traders remain *here*." His wave indicated the city of tents.

"I am her best friend."

His eyebrows arched, but his voice remained adamant. "Then as her best friend, you will respect the customs of her people."

She snorted, and turned away. "Fine, but I do not have to be happy about it."

"Of course not." He bowed to her, and she swept passed to disappear into the maze of tents. He sighed and turned back to Katryn. "I don't believe I made a very favorable impression with your friend, but it is the law. I am sorry."

"Why is it the law?" That was what confused her.

"You have met people from all the colonized planets, yes?"

"Yes. My father was an ambassador. I met people from everywhere. It was my duty to serve as hostess to all of them. What does this have to do with weredragon law?"

He flashed a grin, and a sweet feeling clenched her belly at the sight. He was a beautiful man. His hand snapped out to catch her wrist and draw her against him again. His lips brushed over the sensitive flesh where her neck met her shoulder. She shivered. "I'm getting to that. All of these other people—what kinds of government do they have?"

She struggled to focus as his tongue flicked over her skin, tasting her. Her hands lifted to clench on his strong shoulders. "Ah...the tigers have a monarchy, the merpeople have a republic, and the bears have a feudal lord system. I believe that's all correct. Why?"

"Well." His wide palms slipped down her back to cup her hips. "In all of those cultures, do not the *men* have a majority of the power? Even in the supposedly equal mer republic?" He bit down of the corded muscles of her neck.

"Yes." Her voice erupted as a squeak. This was the most erotic lesson in politics she'd ever received. Her body pulsed with need, reminding her exactly how long it had been since she'd bedded a man. Too long.

His rough voice scraped over her nerves as he continued the story. She struggled to comprehend, to learn, when she wanted nothing more than to drag him into the nearest tent and quenched the need building deep within her. "When dragons came to Harena, we barely survived as a people. It was a woman who stepped forward to take control of the chaos that ensued. A woman who created laws that governed the people, a woman who established the first trade with Vesperi. Her name was Kelynn, and she found the tigers unwilling to deal with her because she was a woman, because women cannot have true power among the tigers. Thus the laws. No foreigners can leave the landing site for fear that they will contaminate our society, the balance that keeps us all alive. Weredragon men are warriors and traders—we go out and conduct

whatever relations there are with the other weredragon bands and with the other planets. Women stay on their lands. They control all property; they produce the children and therefore ensure our future. The most powerful women have properties in and around the capital."

"That's why the mermaid ambassador is the only female I have seen since landing?" She'd only just realized that this was true. No women in the tent city. Not one. Then he slid his fingertip down the scales on her arm and all thought fled her mind. Her breath tangled in her throat. She leaned forward to bite his collarbone, and sooth the sting with her tongue.

He groaned, his palm moving to cup her breast and rub his thumb over her hard nipple. "Yes. Your family is descendant of Kelynn, the most powerful matriarchy on Harena. I—"

Standing on tiptoe, she pressed a light kiss to his jaw, his chin. Her fingers fisted in his inky hair to drag him down to her mouth. "Tarkesh. Be silent and kiss me."

Dropping his forehead to hers, he gave a strained laugh. "I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because the evening meal is upon us, and if we are late Baleel and the *Amira* will come chasing after us. I prefer to savor my pleasure. For hours." She shuddered as he whispered in her ear before sucking her lobe between his teeth. He nipped at her flesh, and her pussy spasmed hard. Gods, she wanted that, too. Savor. Hours. With him. Inside her. *Yes*.

As though Tarkesh had conjured him to prove his point, Baleel stepped out from behind the Gila. "My lord. The caravan is prepared for the morrow. The dune racers have been checked, the Gila beastmasters will have them packed or saddled by dawn."

"Excellent." Tarkesh nodded to indicate they begin walking toward the tents, and they fell into step with him. An enormous fire danced in the middle of the tent city, with what looked like a Gila beast roasting on a spit. Mahlia and Varad stood on the far side talking to the mermaid ambassador and a rotund dragon with pink scales. The man looked....odd in that color. She bit the inside of her lip to keep from giggling. He laughed and his jowls shook, the movement making his scales twinkled in the firelight.

"He's very proud of his scales. As are all dragons." Tarkesh's breath brushed against her ear as he bent to speak softly to her.

"I had heard that somewhere." She shuddered as his fingers drifted down the scales on her arm. Clenching her teeth, she tried to fight the rising passion that dampened her sex. Gods, help.

She jolted when his hand closed around her elbow, her body arching at the harder contact with her sensitive flesh. Tarkesh gave her an innocent look as he guided her over to her friends. She returned a skeptical glance and snorted.

The evening passed in a blur of feasting and dancing under foreign stars to wild music that tickled her memory. She spun in Tarkesh's arms until she was breathless with laughter. Sweet, tender emotions wrapped through her that she could do nothing to stop. He passed her to Varad, Baleel, and even the pink dragon. Her feet ached and her mind swirled with too much wine when she collapsed into her bunk on board the weretiger ship.

## Chapter Four

The next morning came too soon, and Katryn had barely closed her eyes when Mahlia shook her awake. “Noo,” she moaned and curled into a ball. Tears flooded her eyes to streak down her cheeks, everything she’d been holding back for months exploding from deep within her.

“Shh, shh. We will see each other again someday. I have faith.” Mahlia crawled in next to her in bed, wrapping her arms around her. Katryn laid her forehead against her friend’s shoulder and sobbed until her throat was raw. Mahlia shook with her own crying, and they held tight to each other.

“I don’t want to go. I don’t want to do this.” Katryn met her friend’s blue gaze and balled her fists in her royal blue gown.

“I know.” Mahlia’s lips twisted, and she stroked Katryn’s hip length black hair away from her face. “I wish I could—”

Shaking her head, Katryn closed her eyes for a moment before sitting up. Her head pounded from all the alcohol the previous night. *Gods’ blessing*. She swiped at the tears on her cheeks. “You can’t...you can’t save me from this. It would ruin the trade relations between our worlds, and I’m not worth that.”

“Sad, but true.” Mahlia’s eyes had the same hard truth in them that Katryn knew. One person’s happiness was not worth the prosperity of many. Resignation filled her chest, hollowing her out.

“It’s time.” She sighed. “I have to dress. Baleel had them load my things on the Gila beasts, so...it’s just me that needs to get ready.”

Mahlia slid out of bed, shoving her blonde-and-brown striped hair back. "I know."

Bending to the floor, she scooped her traveling clothes up. She had no idea how they'd gotten down there. They had been folded neatly on her bed the day before, ready for her to wear them. She tugged on her pants, tucked the bottoms into heavy leather boots, and shrugged a layered, filmy tunic over her head. When she looked up, Mahila stood in the open doorway holding her travel pack up for her. They walked to the ramp that led down to the landing site in silence, their hands clasped tightly together. After the initial storm of tears had passed, Katryn felt numb. This was it. There was no going back, no hope of escape. Unlike her friend, she had little faith that they would ever meet again. From what Tarkesh had said, she would never be allowed to leave the capital again, and Mahlia would never be allowed to leave the landing site even if she ever made the trade run again, which wasn't likely. No. There was no hope for it. She would never see her friend again. A band of emotion cinched around her chest, cutting off her breath. Each footstep echoed in her mind, a death toll on her closest relationship.

She glanced over and saw silent tears streaking down Mahlia's cheek. She squeezed the other woman's hand tightly. Varad awaited them at the bottom of the ramp with Tarkesh and a saddled Gila beast. When they reached the men, Katryn wrapped her arms around her friend. She whispered in her ear, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Pulling back, she turned to Varad. He engulfed her in his strong arms, lifting her off the floor to squeeze her tight. "Take good care of her."

The big weretiger nodded against her temple, stroking a hand down her hair before he stepped back. Mahlia leaned against him for support, and his arm curled around her shoulder.

Tarkesh climbed aboard the Gila and twisted to offer her a hand up. She scrambled up to land in front him. His thighs flexed, and the Gila rocked to a start. Katryn leaned to the side, looking back at Mahlia and Varad to wave until they were no more than a speck on the horizon.

They merged into the middle of the long caravan, dune racers



buzzing up and down the column of Gila beasts. The sand they kicked up made her sneeze, and Tarkesh tugged a wrap up to cover her mouth and nose. Tears made tracks down her face, and her chest shook as she suppressed her sobs. He said nothing, just cradled her against his chest while she cried.

The twin suns blazed down hot and fierce upon them, and her mouth felt dry and sticky. She laid her cheek on Tarkesh's shoulder and tried not to allow her stomach to heave at the constant rocking motion of the Gila beast. After what felt like centuries, she fell asleep in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

So responsive, so fiery and passionate. Katryn held nothing back. She loved fiercely and openly, had a deep loyalty to those she cared for. Tarkesh admired that, and in so short a time, he already respected her steady resilience. No protestations, she just tucked her chin down and faced a painful loss without flinching. His gut clenched at the thought of her tears. He'd wanted to comfort her, to make it right for her, but he could do nothing. To let her go would mean losing her himself, and he couldn't do that. Her family would never allow it, and she was just what they needed. He could feel it in his bones. Perfect. Nadir would adore her. His cock hardened at the thought of his mate. At the thought of watching his mate make her scream with pleasure. He'd assumed she would complete with him for Nadir's attentions, but now that'd he met her, tasted her himself, he no longer feared this.

"Tarkesh."

He nodded a greeting to Baleel as the other man reined in his Gila beside them. Katryn still slept in his arms. He checked the scarves over her mouth to make certain she didn't inhale the sand.

"The dune racers have located a good place to camp tonight."

"Good." They could never camp in the same place twice, or take quite the same route from the landing site to the capital. To do so would leave them too open and vulnerable to renegade bands of outcast dragons. The inconvenience of new routes was worth the safety it offered them.

Baleel's gaze fell to the woman sitting before Tarkesh. "Lord Nadir will approve of her, I think. But, that is why you came along, is it not? To get the measure of her first?"

"More or less." He had wanted to get the measure of her, had he not? He'd worried about whether his presence in their bond would drive a wedge between Nadir and him. If she could be trusted, if she could *love* them both. Nadir was a man of practicality, of duty, but Tarkesh knew that wouldn't be enough for him. If he'd wanted mating to be easy, Tarkesh would have mated to a woman and been done with it. Instead, he'd mated to Nadir—a rough nobleman who challenged everything Tarkesh believed in. *Nothing* was easy with Nadir. He chuckled. Watching his mate clash with the passionate, independent Katryn would be...entertaining. He could already tell she was a woman often left to her own devices, with no matriarchs to guide her or make demands of her. If her father had neglected her to the point that she knew nothing about her heritage, her home world, then he assumed most of her decisions had been made without consulting anyone else. Life among the matriarchs would be a shock for her. Nadir and he would be there to help her where they could, but men and women had little influence in each other's affairs. He sighed, worry for her well being nagging at him. He stroked a hand down the length of her silken hair. It slid like water through his fingers. It would wrap around both he and Nadir as they fucked her from both sides. Had she ever been with two men at once? A woman as responsive as she would enjoy the experience, he was certain.

As though echoing his earlier thoughts, Baleel spoke up. "She...seems to know very little of her own people. You can have some influence there, but her family may want to take her in hand."

"True. Though she doesn't seem the kind to be easily *taken in hand*." He frowned. She seemed to think she was only mating with Nadir. He was unsure how to tell her that wasn't the case. Did she even know what a *harim* was? He didn't know. How much should he reveal, and how quickly? He feared giving her too much information would scare her. And her feelings had become vitally important to him. Something deep within him had shifted when he met her. Mate. She would be his. His and

Nadir's. He wanted to slide his cock into her wet heat and thrust until she fisted tight around him. The possibilities with all three of them were...exhilarating. He couldn't wait.

Baleel's saddle creaked as he shifted. "Adriana will love her."

"Adriana is an easy woman to love, isn't that so?" He slanted a glance at that other man, who harrumphed and remained silent. Tarkesh grinned, but said nothing more. Everyone knew Baleel had been courting Adriana for months with little success. A part of him felt sorry for the man, and another part was simply grateful he didn't have to deal with such a complicated courtship. He had Nadir, and now Katryn would be theirs soon enough. He heaved a sigh of relief.

She stirred in his arms, and he fought a groan as her sweet little ass rubbed against his cock. Dear Goddess, if he had to endure her lush curves rocking against him for the next five days, he might explode. No matter what Nadir had said, he had no intention of bedding her until after his mate had met her, and they were bound together for the rest of their lives. Ah, but he could kiss her, stroke her, tease her. He couldn't resist how quick she was to react to his touch, how hot she became in his arms. He shuddered, slipping his fingers under her tunic to rub the taut skin of her belly.

Shivering, she straightened. Her breath caught, and her fingers clamped over his. "Tarkesh," she whispered.

"You were expecting someone else, my lady?" He nuzzled the back of her neck, flicking his tongue out to taste her flesh. She moaned softly, her fingers biting into his forearm, but her head arched back on his shoulder to afford him freer access. Moving his mouth up the length of her neck, he caught her earlobe between his teeth and tugged.

*Tarkesh*, she moaned in his mind. He dipped his fingers over the fabric of her pants to rub between her thighs. Her legs parted subtly to admit him. She flicked a frantic glance around. He met Baleel's gaze, and jerked his chin down. Baleel nodded and reigned in his Gila, slowing to allow them to pass before he turned to ride back down the column of the caravan. He tugged his cape around them both so his hands could roam freely. Her hips squirmed, her ass moving against stiff cock. She froze

when she came into contact with his hard flesh.

He could feel the heat of her through her pants, and he groaned. "So hot, so sweet. If I slipped inside you, you'd be tight around my cock, wouldn't you?"

*Oh, Gods.* Her hand closed over his, guiding him deeper between her legs. He stroked one finger down the seam in her pants. She rocked against his fingers.

*Goddess. Dragons worship the female form. Like this.* His other palm lifted to cup her breast. Her hard nipple stabbed into his hand. He pinched her through the silken layers of her tunic, and she arched and twisted in his arms. He rubbed his finger against her pants, stroking over her clitoris. Low keening dragged from her throat, and his cock throbbed at the sensual sound. He rocked with the rhythm of the Gila, lifting his hips to rub himself deeper into the soft curve of her buttocks.

"Gods. Goddess. Please. I'm...I'm going to..."

"Come? Oh, yes." A dark chuckle dragged from his throat. "I'm going to make you scream, but not today. We wouldn't want everyone in the caravan to know how hot and sweet you are, would we?"

"No. Yes. I don't—I need...please, Tarkesh." She shook her head on his shoulder, and her silky hair brushed against his skin. Her light fragrance caressed his nose. He drew in the sweet scent, so exotic, different from the heavier oils worn by the women of his world. It made his blood burn to have her in his arms. Everything about her brought out the possessive dragon within him. That, more than anything, made him believe this bonding between the three of them would work. None had ever elicited this reaction from him save Nadir. The thought of both of them made his cock jerk in his pants. Heat slammed into him, made his skin feel too tight, as though he would explode from its confines. He squeezed his eyes closed, surprised that orgasm fisted tight in his gut. He'd meant to push her, but had pushed himself, too. He couldn't detach himself at all—her passion called to him, dragged him under.

"I know what you need. I'll give it to you. Now." He ground himself into her from behind, pressed down on her clit and stroked fast, and twisted her nipple hard. He froze, his muscles locking as he

shuddered and came. Her breath caught and her body bowed, arching into his harsh caresses as she came as well. She twisted in his arms, her hips jerking. He lifted one palm and clamped it over her mouth, working his other hand against her soft pussy. Her wetness had leeches through to dampen the fabric of her pants. She moaned and whimpered behind his hand, her breath panting through her nose. A tear leaked from the corner of her eye to slide down his fingers.

She collapsed in his arms, and he cradled her against his chest. Shivers wracked her body. He smoothed his hand down her hair. This couldn't happen again, not until they reached the capital. He reversed his earlier decision to toy with her until then. Goddess, she lit him on fire. If he was going to keep his promise to himself to wait until he and Nadir were mated to her, he couldn't risk touching her again. And he had four more days of her rocking up against him on the Gila beast. He bit back a groan.

She stiffened in his embrace, drawing as far away from him as she could, which wasn't far because the rolling stride of the Gila pressed her back to him. She twisted around to meet his gaze. "This can't happen again, Tarkesh."

He frowned. What had brought on this abrupt change? "Why not?"

She hissed impatiently, the fire that always simmered beneath the surface flaring to life. *Is it not obvious? We are not mated, and we barely know one another. This cannot happen again, Lord Tarkesh.*

Confusion and anger whipped through him. She wanted to deny this connection that had formed between them? What did it matter how little they knew of each other, that they weren't yet mated? He ignored the fact that he'd just made the decision not to touch her. It rankled that she wished to refuse him. He ground his teeth together, trying to reign in the dragon within him that wanted to mark her, claim her as he and Nadir had claimed each other. This wasn't like him, this kind of impatience. He let his hands fall away from her, leaning back. He shoved his temper away, forcing himself to some semblance of his normal calm. Nadir would be highly amused to see him so disgruntled about being denied by a woman, when he *agreed* with her about the need for abstinence. He

snorted an ironic laugh at his own expense.

"If that is your wish." He nodded down at her, forced an easy grin to his face. Of the two of them, Nadir was never the diplomatic one. What was wrong with him now? Katryn. She was the problem, and he wasn't certain there was a cure. Or if he even wanted one.

A tentative smile graced her full lips, and it was a punch straight to his heart. Goddess on fire, he was in so much trouble here. They needed to get to the capital fast—now wasn't too soon. She was a temptation he wasn't certain he could resist. She cleared her throat and turned let her gaze scan the endless sea of rolling sand dunes. "Well, we'll be riding this beast for a long while. What shall we talk about?"

He chuckled. There was only one thing he craved knowledge of right now. "You."

## Chapter Five

The days passed, and Katryn rode before Tarkesh on the Gila. The journey that should have been endless and monotonous, with spurts of panic over her impending nuptials was instead fascinating because of Tarkesh. They talked about everything. Her family, his family, his interests, his place in dragon society, her unique position in the weretiger political structure.

She couldn't keep a wistful note from her tone when she spoke of Vesperi. She spoke to him of things she'd never told another soul, not even Mahlia. Something in her reached out to him, *trusted* him to guide her in this foreign world that was now her home.

She stared into the fire that danced before her. They'd made camp for the fourth day. Tomorrow they would be in the capital. Fear skittered down her spine. What would she do when she mated to another man? Would she be allowed to keep male friends? She did not know. Even with all Tarkesh had told her about the planet and culture, she still knew so little.

A small, bitter sigh slid from her. Damn her father for keeping this from her, for never bothering to spare a moment of his time for her. Would she ever belong here? Would she ever get beyond the fact that she was raised in another culture, among a people that were not her own? She'd do her best; that was all she *could* do. And that was that. Despite her assurances to herself, she couldn't quiet the unease that rippled over her skin. She hated the uncertainty of it. So many variables she didn't know.

At least in the intricate dance that made up weretiger politics, she knew the steps. Here she was off balance, tentative. She clenched her jaw, frowning. Her temper was on edge this evening, and she didn't want to speak to anyone, didn't trust herself not to lash out.

She shook herself from her dark thoughts when she heard footsteps crunch against the soft sand. The camp looked like a smaller version of the tent city at the landing site, the silk sides of the tents snapping in the wind.

"We'll be in the capital at midday tomorrow." Baleel approached to kneel on the other side of the fire. He reached his hands out to warm them in the heat. Like Vesperi, night on Harena brought chilly temperatures. Tonight was especially frigid with the stiff breeze lashing through her clothing. She shivered and sank deeper into the folds of her cloak.

"Fine. I'm heartily sick of the great monster I have to ride. I'm sure it will serve as a stringy meal for some poor caravan soon enough." She winced at the tart bite in her voice. She really shouldn't associate with anyone this evening in this kind of temper, but she couldn't bring herself to close herself in with her own thoughts in her tent.

"You remind me of Adriana more every day. Not just your features, which bear a distinct family resemblance, but your bearing, your attitude."

"She is hardheaded, then?" A grudging smile tugged at her lips. Baleel had kept her company almost as much as Tarkesh these last few days. He was a calm, quiet man, but she found she liked him. She could easily see why he and Tarkesh would be friends. And at this point, it was more than obvious how much she liked Tarkesh. Another reason for her ill-humor. He had kept his hands to himself since that first day. She was grateful and frustrated about it at the same time. She wanted him. Learning more about him in the last days had only increased her attraction, and she knew she shouldn't give into it again. She could so easily lose her heart to him, and she might never recover from it. She owed it to herself to give her mating to Lord Nadir her best effort, and loving Tarkesh would help no one.

Baleel laughed, returning her attention to their conversation. "Yes,



but in the best way.”

“You are close to her? Do you know my...family well?” Just using the word family was enough to make her belly cramp. Hope pushed hard against her breast. Perhaps she wouldn’t have the happiest of marriages. Perhaps she would never have what Mahlia had, but she might know her family. She might grow to love them, become a part of them. Belong. As much as losing Mahlia hurt, as much as mating with a stranger stung, she refused to give in to despair. There *had* to be something good that came of returning to her home world. Her family might be it.

“I am working to convince Adriana that she should mate with me. And your family? Yes. They are allied to mine, but a mating between our matriarchies would benefit everyone.”

“She doesn’t want to be mated?” Or maybe she didn’t want to mate to Baleel. A pity, really. He seemed a good man.

“She will be mine. Have no doubt. She can fight forever, and I still will not relent in this.” His eyes flashed anger, hurt, steely determination. Something deeper lay between her cousin and this man than what was apparent at first glance. She didn’t want to pry, but he was upset, and she didn’t want to ignore what was so obvious.

Reaching out, she laid a hand over his for a moment. “Don’t. I don’t know her, but my dearest friend has a mate like that—one who would never give up on her, even when she had given up on herself. They needed each other. I—I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but I hope she deserves your devotion as much as my friend deserved her husband’s.”

“She does. Her life of late has not been kind to her. A man.” His fists clenched until the knuckles shown white against his dark skin. “A man who is fortunate he has never crossed paths with me.”

“I believe you.” She wanted to ask who the man was and what he had done to Adriana, but she didn’t. It wasn’t her place. And if she’d learned anything among the gossipmongers in the Vesperi court, it was to keep her own council and to guard her privacy with ferocious zealotry. Opening up to Tarkesh had been wonderful and frightening all at once. Speaking of Mahlia’s private matters was completely out of character for

her, but he'd looked so...lost and upset. She sighed. He'd reminded her of Varad after his son had died. Sad, hurting, but refusing to give in to the pain. She missed her friends. She was so homesick for Vesperi in made her heart ache at times. The smell of the Dead Sea, the cool gardens in the lower caverns, the white sands, and marble halls. It was all she had ever known, and she found herself longing for the familiarity of it.

Baleel straightened and flicked a glance over her shoulder. Her nostrils flared to catch whoever approached her from behind. A guard. She didn't know his name. He approached her to stand directly behind her, invading her personal space. She shifted, uncomfortable, but he didn't move, so she stood to face him. He flashed a friendly smile before sliding his hands up the scales on her arms. She shuddered at the unwilling pleasure that arced through her system at the contact. Rage at his arrogance slammed into her. How dare he make sexual advances on her? Jerking back, she hissed an angry warning, her hot temper from earlier resurfacing with a vengeance.

"What do you think you're doing?" She felt her control spinning away, and her scales rippled up her shoulders to spread over her body. Her mouth opened to shriek in draconic fury. The man paled beneath his dark tan and scrambled back, his hands raised in placation. Her emotions boiled up, untamable, unstoppable. Change was upon her.

Tarkesh appeared from nowhere, and his hands closed over her shoulders to hug her against his wide chest. "Shh...Katryn. Calm down; he meant no offense. It's often a greeting, a bonding between dragons to touch scales."

"Well, I was not raised among dragons, and I do not care to be touched unless I *ask*." She jerked away, rejecting his touch. He flinched.

"After that reaction, I'm certain it will not happen again."

She shook her head, unfocused terror and blind rage coursing through her as she backed away, shaking her head wildly. "I'm not trying to be difficult...I'm just not accustomed —"

"To dragon customs? I know. You are unique. Lovely. It's all right, Katryn. Everything is going to be all right." He reached for her again, and she hissed, backing away.

*"Don't touch me."*

He dropped his hands to sides, his eyebrows winging up. "Katryn, please. Be—"

"No. Just leave me be." She knew her words and actions were unreasonable, but she couldn't help it, couldn't stop now. Her fists balled at her sides, a sign of her anger at all the things she couldn't control in her life now. Of all the things she was ignorant of, all the things she should know and didn't. Spinning away, she ran as fast as her legs would carry her. She needed to escape, to be alone. Her chest felt tight, her control stripping down to nothing but animalistic urges. She dropped to her hands and knees in the sand, gasping in ragged breaths. Moaning, she fumbled with her robes, stripping them away until she lay naked on the grainy earth. Her back arched in reflex, the smooth purple scales glinting in the moonlight as the spread over her entire body. She closed her eyes, twisting in the ecstasy of change. Sucking pops sounded overloud in the quiet of the night, her bones retracted, reformed her body into the reptilian shape of her dragon side. She hissed, her voice clicking as the breath slipped passed her throat.

Digging her toes into the sand, she moved with great speed over the terrain. Her body was built to thrive in desert conditions. Away, *away*. She wanted away from everyone and everything. She didn't even want to smell the faintest trace of them on the wind. Her emotions were too raw, too painful. Tonight showed so clearly how ill prepared she was to live among dragons. Embarrassment and dread burned through her. What would they all think of her? What would they say about her actions tonight? Tigers were acutely aware of their peers and the opinions of other. Judging, jostling for position, everything counted for or against something. One wrong move could destroy a reputation forever. And she'd no doubt failed tonight. Failed as a dragon, failed as a woman, failed to keep control. Failed. She didn't want to return, didn't want to face how poorly they would think of her.

Her breath sobbed out, and still she fled from all of them, from herself. She crested a dune and collapsed, panting. She curled into herself, wrapping her tail around her body. She missed her friends, missed a

world she understood. People she understood. Would she ever fit here? Could she? Doubts flooded her mind and pressed down on her chest until she couldn't breathe. Burrowing into the sand, she let the pleasant feel of it scraping over her scales distract her from her misery. She wished she could reach to someone, connect with someone. Who would understand? She was alone, apart. Just as she'd always been. She sighed, rolling her eyes at the self-pity she was wallowing in. It wasn't like her, but how the dragons in her caravan would react to her social misstep was one more thing she didn't know. Would they gossip about it with other dragons when they reached the capital? Or would this be nothing to them, and her reaction now was simply an overreaction based on what she knew of the weretiger culture? Again, she didn't know. An impatient hiss slid passed her throat. Lying there would not make it easier for her to return.

She unfurled herself from the sand, stretched and began the long walk back. Her haste had taken her a long way from the caravan. Bending her nose close to the ground, she followed her own scent back the way she had come. It was slow going, the desert wind tried to confuse her. She had to backtrack twice before she caught the smell of the caravan—and Tarkesh. His scent called to her, and for once she followed her instincts, her heart. She had already humiliated herself publicly; she was through worrying what they would think of her. The constant strain of it weighed on her chest. For tonight, she would be free.

Following Tarkesh's enticing scent to his tent, she slipped through the delicate folds of saltwater silk at the doorway. He lay with his hands propped behind his head on a soft pile of furs and silk. His eyes were closed, and his chest rose and fell in the slow rhythm of sleep. She shuddered at the sight of his beautiful form. He was naked, all well-defined muscles and smooth dragon scales.

*Tarkesh.*

He jerked upright. His nostrils flared as he sucked in a deep breath. His gaze snapped to her, wildness in their depths. The dark irises bled out to the corners of his eyes. His lip lifted to bare his fangs. Then he blinked. His gaze dropped to her, his irises reformed. *Katryn?*

Twisting, he moved to sit on the side of the bedding. She moved

forward and with each step, shifted back into her human shape. She stretched her arms above her head, settling into the new form. His eyes widened as he took in her naked body, sliding down focus on her breasts, the thatch of hair between her legs, the glint of scales that lined her thighs. Her nipples beaded under his perusal, lust flooding her system. Heat built between her legs, and her pussy grew slick with juices. She cupped her hands around her breasts, tweaking the tight nipples. A groan slid from his throat, and she watched as his cock rose long and hard from the nest of dark curls between his thighs. She wanted him, wanted to feel that cock thrusting in her hot pussy. His eyes dropped to half-mast as her fingers dropped between her thighs to stroke the heated cream that coated her pussy lips.

He gazed up at her, awareness and passion lighting his eyes. She arched toward him, letting her feet carry her to him. "Katryn—"

She lifted her hand to his lips to stop him. "No. Touch me. I want to feel your hands on me, Tarkesh. My choice. One last time."

His tongue flicked out to suck her fingers into his mouth, licking the cream from her hands. She shivered at the feel of his soft lips closing over her fingers. When she leaned in to kiss him, he pulled back to meet her gaze. "Katryn, before we do this, you need to know—"

She cut him off; she didn't want to know. Didn't want any excuses, any deterrents. She just wanted this, with him. Now. Her lips pressed to his, and she thrust her tongue into his mouth. They came together in a hot clash of teeth and lips and tongue. He tried to lean away, so she slipped her hands down the cool smoothness of his scales. He went rigid, jerking under her touch. He groaned, his strong arms snapping around her to yank her onto his lap. She smiled against his mouth, knowing she had won. Her legs straddled the lean musculature of his thighs. The head of his cock nestled against the heat of her sex. She arched, rubbing her wetness over his hard flesh. His hands dropped to her hips, drawing her closer.

He shuddered and lay back to stretch out beneath her. His hips lifted to rub the bulbous head of his cock against the lips of her pussy. *Katryn, I think—*

*Love me tonight, Tarkesh. That's all I need. I don't want words. Please.*

Indecision showed in his eyes. Eyes that glazed with hot, hard lust. She watched his struggle to focus as she rotated her pelvis to increase the friction of his flesh on hers. *But—*

An impatient hiss bubbled up in her throat. Why could he not just do what she begged of him? Desperation raced through her. She didn't want to talk about this, didn't want logic or reason or she would stop. And she needed this, needed to *feel*. Her heart squeezed, and desperation twisted tight within her. She shoved it away. *No. Don't think, don't stop, just don't.*

Thrusting her hips forward, she seated herself fully on his cock. They both groaned. He closed his eyes and arched hard beneath her, a deep flush running under his dark tan. He groaned deep in his chest, and his hands settled on her thighs. She sucked in a hot breath as his fingers grazed the scales that ran diagonally from the outside of her thighs to the insides of her knees. Freezing in place, she waited to see what he would do with her sensitive flesh.

"Tarkesh," she breathed.

"Yesssss?" He drew the word out in a low hiss. His eyes opened to meet hers, a wicked glint in their depths. His claws extended from his fingers and he raked them lightly down her thighs. "Is something wrong?" he teased.

"Yes. Harder, faster. Please, Tarkesh." She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself to slip her hands up and down the scales on her arms. Tarkesh pressed against the scales on her thighs, caressing her flesh. One hand moved around to slip between her buttocks. He moved against her wet pussy lips, stroking her with his cock and his fingers. Her breath caught as he pulled back to press a finger against her anus. He swirled her own moisture over the tight ring of muscle. She shuddered as he pushed in, thrusting deep. His finger pressed against the head of his cock through the thin wall of flesh that separated them. She ground her hips down, exploding over the edge of orgasm.

"Katryn," he gritted her name between clenched teeth. Throwing his head back, his fangs bared and his eyes bled to black. A draconic roar

ripped from him, and she echoed the sound as another hot wave of pleasure slammed into her again, dragged her under with its force.

Her heart beat hard and fast, emotion she couldn't name banding her chest. Goddess above, this was perfection. She craved this feeling, wanted it to never end. How could she go to a loveless, lifeless marriage after knowing how sweet it could be with a man she cared about so deeply? Pain and gratitude warred for dominance within. She was so lucky to have ever known something so good, so sweet, but the pain of losing something she'd never imagined having so quickly after finding it was past bearing. The unfairness of it threatened to strangle her of breath. Life wasn't fair. She had learned that at a tender age when her mother died and her father treated her as an inconvenience. No, life was never fair, and it never would be. Duty and passion didn't often coincide, and they certainly weren't about to begin now.

Something in the way she reacted to Tarkesh was unique, special. Sweet. She needed it, needed him, needed the way he made her feel. She wanted that intense emotion forever. Her heart stuttered, realization slamming into her. She *loved* him. How it had happened so fast? How had he become so necessary to her? This was a disaster. She was to be mated in a matter of days to another man. Goddess help her. She squeezed her eyes closed over a flood of tears. How could this have happened? All the men she had known, all the Turns she had been having sex, no one had ever touched her so deeply. Why him? Why now? Why couldn't he be Lord Nadir?

Anger at herself, at her rebellious heart, at Tarkesh for being so wonderful, slammed into her. Tears welled in her eyes. Helpless, hopeless. She rolled herself away from him and curled into a ball, letting bitter words trip from her lips. "Tell me, am I to be the fourth wife or fifth in Nadir's *harim*?"

He jolted, and sat up to lean over her, but she refused to look at him. "Neither. Lady Katryn, I think you are under a misconception of what a *harim* is."

She sniffed. "Isn't it a man who is mated to many women?"

"It *can* be—"

"Ha. You see?" She flashed him a triumphant look, but she found no pleasure in being right.

He chuckled, stroking a single finger along the very edge of her scaling so that half of his touch moved on her skin, and half on her scales. She shivered. "It can be a man with two wives, or it can be a woman with two husbands."

"But only three people? Never more?" She shifted on the blankets and finally faced him.

He shook his head. "No. The point of a *harim* is to ensure a mating that can produce offspring. Dragon children are rare."

"I didn't know that." She was quiet for a long moment. "So, I am joining Lord Nadir and his current mate in a *harim*. And if he needs me to be able to breed, then he must be mated to another male or mated to a sterile female. Would I...would I be expected to bed the wife as well?"

He sucked in his cheeks, a dimple tucking into the left one. "You don't care for women?"

"I am not attracted to women, no. Only men." She folded her arms, and his gaze landed on her plumped breasts.

He cleared his throat, the smile dropping from his face as heat filtered into his dark eyes. "That is fortunate, then. Nadir is mated to a male dragon."

"And do they...do they *like* women, or are they just mating with me because they have to?" She arched under his gaze, no longer caring what the answers to her questions were. She had no choice in any of this, but she had choices tonight. And she wanted Tarkesh again, now.

He dipped his head to lick along the edge of her arm and over the curve of her breasts. The wet stroke touched both scales and sensitive flesh. Hot pleasure flooded her pussy. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sweetness of his touch. "I do not pretend to know all of Nadir's thoughts, but I do know he is physically attracted to women, though he has never—"

"Tarkesh." A cool, rough voice sounded from outside the tent. She had her mouth open to ask a question, but Tarkesh lifted a hand to still her words.



“Yes, Baleel?”

“I am sorry to interrupt, but a missive has arrived from Nadir.”

Tarkesh groaned and rolled to his feet to fetch whatever message her soon-to-be mate had sent. Cold fingers of reality stroked over her skin. Her mate. Whom she would bond with tomorrow. And she was in the bed of another man. Guilt and shame rolled over her in a suffocating wave. Goddess help her. While Tarkesh spoke to Baleel, she jerked to her feet and forced herself to exit the tent from the rear. She shivered as the chill wind hit her naked flesh. It was common for wereanimals to be nude in public—they couldn’t take their clothes with them when they shifted—but she hurried along just the same, afraid one look at her would tell anyone what they needed to know. She was betrothed to one man and in love with another. A sob caught in her throat as she threw herself into her own pallet on the floor of her tent and buried her face in the saltwater silk coverings.

She was in love, and she’d never been more miserable in her entire life.

## **Chapter Six**

Nadir paced the length of the balcony that overlooked main thoroughfare of the capital. The whole city lay deep within the red rock canyons that made up the western plains of Harena. Every dwelling had been carved into the stone by their ancestor's ancient tools. Those tools, along with most of the old Earth technology, had been long lost. The canyons provided some shelter from the constant wind that moved the sands.

He forced himself to stop and folded his hands behind his back. They would be here soon. Tarkesh and their new mate. This female with whom they had to breed. His gaze swept the winding canyon that led to the main square of the capital. How would it look to a woman raised on another world? He had never known another place, another world. What was Vesperi like? And the icy bear world? The water world? He'd never seen a body of water so large he couldn't see across it, but Aquatilis was supposed to be completely covered in liquid. And ice? It did not snow on Harena. Not with the two suns to evaporate the little rain that did fall. Water was a scarce commodity that bloody, centuries-long wars had been waged over.

He scrubbed a hand over his hair, his gaze following the road to its end at the main square had the Goddess' temple where he and Tarkesh would mate with Lady Katryn. Dragon figures served as pillars in the reliefs that were carved into the deep red stone on the cliff wall. It was modeled after an ancient Earthan temple in Jordan. Petra, he thought it

was called, but history had never been his best subject. He preferred to focus on the present and plan for the future. He wasn't a man to look back. He assessed a situation, made the best choices he could, and did whatever it took to execute his decisions. Tarkesh was the one who thought a situation through deeply before he made a change.

He was distracting himself from worry. He knew it and made himself continue. His worries wouldn't abate if he let himself dwell upon them. He focused on the temple. The main road leading through the canyons opened up into the square and took up one side. Making up the other sides of the square were the residence of the descendents of the first matriarch, Kelynn, and the massive council building where the matriarchs met deliberate on politics.

Impatience slid through him. He wanted them here now. What had Tarkesh discovered? Would he be satisfied with the new mate? They had no choice. The mating would go through whether Tarkesh approved or not, but he wished to know how difficult this would be for them until they came to a workable relationship with the woman. She only needed to breed with them; she didn't need to love them. He didn't need an emotional connection with her. He had Tarkesh for that. The woman was a means to an end. It was a political boon that Katryn happened to belong to the most powerful matriarchy on Harena.

But Tarkesh was not one to settle on necessity, and Nadir's gut knotted. His shoulders drew in a tense line. The waiting was not something he enjoyed. He leaned forward to brace his hands on the red stone balcony railing. Where were they? He shoved away a tiny thread of worry. They were supposed to be here at midday, and it was nearly evening. The last rays of the binary suns kissed the top of the high stone canyon walls. Torches would soon flicker to life up and down the main road. Nadir straightened and resumed his pacing. Many things could delay a caravan. They were, by their very nature, a slow moving procession. But...renegades could also bring a caravan to a stop. A full punch of worry hit him in the gut, and he clenched his fingers into fists. They were not yet late enough to worry. They would be fine.

"My lord, can I get you something for your evening repast?" A

servant approached him from the balcony doors.

"No. I am not hungry." Nadir didn't allow himself the luxury of snapping at the intruder, though he would have given much to vent his anger at someone. He looked back over his shoulder at a pale yellow weredragon.

The small man shifted where he stood. "You've been out here most of the day, Lord Nadir."

"And I will be out here for as long as it takes. Thank you." Nadir refocused on the main road, dismissing the servant.

"Very good, my lord."

He heard the man back away and leave him alone. He breathed deep and caught a new scent. Tarkesh. He would know his mate's smell anywhere. He narrowed his eyes and waited. They would be here soon. He could also smell the heavy musk of Gila beasts, many of them. A cloud of dust rose from the far end of the canyon as they approached. Dozens of Gila stretched in a line that filed toward the main square. He braced his hands on the railing before him and waited for his mate to pass beneath him. There. Toward the end of the procession. Tarkesh's gaze caught his, something troubled in their depths. Nadir's eyebrows rose. Interesting. His mate's attention was called away by Lord Baleel. Nadir's eyes narrowed on the woman mounted before Tarkesh.

She was lovely. Her inky hair rippled to her hips, and the scarves used to cover the face during open desert travel lay draped around her neck. Slim and elegant, her arms showed a purple scaling covered in a light film of travel dust. He would enjoy watching her bathe.

The thought took him by surprise. She turned then to look up at him, and he was caught. Her dark gaze showed pain and sorrow, and something within him wanted to ease it for her. She licked her full lips, an unconsciously sensual act. His fingers clenched around the ledge of stone before him, and his cock doubled, hardened to the point of pain. Just to look at her was a dual kick to the groin and chest. Something about the way she looked, held herself, smelled—yes, he caught a unique scent on the wind—was not quite dragon. And, yet, she was one of the most beautiful dragon women he'd ever seen. Unusual, exotic, unexpected. Her

eyes narrowed at his continued stare, her brows lifting to reprove him.

*Welcome, my lady.* He dipped his head and let his gaze run down her figure, taking in the swell of her breasts, the smooth length of her legs. He could not wait to see more. Anticipation hummed in his blood.

Shock flashed across her face at his insolence. She did not yet know who he was. He smiled tightly, possession gripping him. His. The woman would soon be his. His and Tarkesh's. Excellent.

She twisted in Tarkesh's embrace to keep him within sight as their Gila carried them towards the main square. His smile stretched wider, and he let the hot desire he'd experienced when he'd first seen her show in his expression. With her enhanced dragon senses, she would see him even from the widening distance between them. He liked the look of her already, and he wanted to know more. More, he wanted to know what his mate thought. The upset on Tarkesh's face bothered him. Well, he would find out what that was about. Now.

Spinning on a heel, he strode through his matriarchy's manor and down the stairs. His residence here was temporary. When he and Tarkesh mated with Katryn, they would move into her matriarchy's manor. Any child Katryn bore them would belong to her family, any trade agreements Nadir or Tarkesh arranged with other matriarchies would now go to benefit her matriarchy. And they were very good at negotiations. He applied pressure where it was needed, pushed hard when necessary, and Tarkesh made giving in look easy, simple. Together, they'd been very convincing on a number of occasions, which made it rewarding for the most powerful matriarchy on the planet to arrange a mating between them and one of its daughters. Goddess, he hoped Tarkesh approved of the woman. Politically, it would be suicidal to consider balking at the mating ceremony now. Tarkesh knew that; he would do as he ought to, but Nadir disliked uncertainty.

He wound through the Gila beasts until Tarkesh and Katryn were in sight. A group of women swept in and surrounded Katryn, separating her from Tarkesh. His mate stepped forward to catch her hand, but she was quickly jerked away. Tarkesh's face shadowed with a look of...guilt? He arched his brow. Interesting. The woman affected his mate. That could

be either good or bad.

"Welcome home, my mate." He settled a hand on the shorter man's shoulder.

Tarkesh whipped around to face him. His hand snapped out to fist in Nadir shirt and hauled in him forward. Their lips met in a harsh, desperate kiss. Nadir lifted his hand to grip his mate's long hair. His heart pounded in his chest, and he could feel his mate's dick hard and urgent through his pants. Their tongues slid together, battling for control of the kiss. Knowing his mate's body intimately, he dragged his nails down Tarkesh's back where his scales lay beneath his travel robes. The silver dragon hissed and bit him, drawing blood from his lip. He groaned, enjoying the sting with his pleasure. His cock was still semi-erect from his brief encounter with Katryn, and now it hardened again. Lust burned in his veins, the dragon within him shrieking for him to claim his mate. Again. Forever. Always.

As quickly as it had begun, it ended. Tarkesh jerked back, his breath bellowing out. "Nadir, I..."

He studied the silver dragon closely, but could read nothing except a troubled countenance. He tilted his head back towards his matriarchy's manor. "Walk with me."

"I...should oversee unloading the caravan."

"Baleel will take care of it. He wants to watch Adriana fawn over Katryn, and this will afford him the best vantage point." He met Baleel's gaze, and the man made a rude gesture with his hand before turning to speak to the Gila beastmasters.

Nadir started for the manor, Tarkesh falling into step beside him. He could feel the stress that radiated from his mate, drew his body into taut lines. It was unlike Tarkesh to show his upset in public. Something had changed in the past days, and he intended to find out what as soon as they reached the privacy of their chambers.

The silver dragon ran a hand through his long hair and snarled a curse when his finger caught in the windblown locks. Nadir's eyebrows rose in surprise. Yes, something was very wrong with his mate. Tarkesh flung himself into a chair when they reached their apartments. Most of

their belongings were packed in crates for the move to Katryn's matriarchy tomorrow. Only a scattered chair or two and the bed were left out. Tarkesh scowled at him.

"Alysian wine?" Nadir hefted a decanter of sweet red wine from the werebear world.

"Fine."

"Would you like to talk about it?" An interesting role reversal. Usually it was Tarkesh coaxing him out of a foul, impatient mood.

"There's nothing to tell."

He made a low, derisive noise in his throat as he handed over a large glass of wine. He still held the decanter in his hand, waiting for his mate to speak.

"There isn't!" Tarkesh's dark eyes flashed angry fire, a warning not to press, but Nadir had never been one to obey warnings like that. He pushed anyway.

"Perhaps you can start with how you took me up on my offer and slept with our new mate." He locked his gaze on Tarkesh's face, waiting for even the most nuanced response to that. There was no denying the claim; he could smell sex and the woman's exotic fragrance all over his mate.

Tarkesh paled beneath his dark tan. Torment raged in his midnight gaze. "I—I did not intend for it to happen. I—she—it was an accident...mistake...I wasn't going to touch her until we were mated to her. I swear it. But she needed...and I couldn't—" he cut himself off and dropped his forehead into his hand, scrubbing his palm down his face. "Goddess, Nadir. I don't know what I'm doing."

He was in love with her. It was obvious. Perhaps not yet to Tarkesh, but he was. And so quickly. Nadir knew better than anyone that it could take only a single look for a man to lose his soul to someone. It had been that way with him when he had seen Tarkesh. He examined his feelings on the matter. His mate loved another. Was he jealous of the new woman? No. Relief wound through him. No, he wasn't jealous. Some *harims* became a constant battle between the three members when they claimed to love each other. He would not allow that to happen with them.

It was good that Tarkesh loved her. It could only benefit them. He wondered if Katryn shared Tarkesh's feelings.

"I told you to sample her. Are you satisfied?" He set the wine decanter back down on the sideboard, settled back against it, and folded his arms.

"I...don't know. She doesn't know she is mating to both of us. Just to you. Apparently, the weretigers think a *harim* is a man with dozens of wives. I explained that they were three-way matings, but—well, our conversation was interrupted, and I didn't have a chance to tell her after that. I spent the day on a dune racer trying to keep the caravan moving after an older Gila went down. We had to redistribute the load to other Gila. I only rode with Katryn the last hour, and she was speaking to Baleel about her family the whole time. And—I didn't get a chance to tell her that she'd be mating to *me* tomorrow." His words tripped over themselves in his needed to justify his actions. Unusual for something to happen that Tarkesh did not intend. Even more unusual for him not to have three contingency plans to correct the problem.

Nadir snorted at the foolishness of tigers, but better for them to make assumptions than to impose their beliefs on the dragon culture. "Did her father not explain *harims* to her?"

Tarkesh voice grew guttural with anger. "No. Her father told her nothing. She is ignorant of all things dragon. It's criminal, his neglect of her."

"Then we will teach her what she needs to know, and the members of her matriarch will teach her the rest. You approve of her, I take it?" He had no doubts of the answer; the little desert blossom had rattled his normally unflappable mate. It would be amusing if this situation didn't have such high political stakes.

Tarkesh folded his arms and sat back. "Who wouldn't approve? She's lovely. Intelligent. Passionate."

"Excellent. I'm sure she'll be a wonderful mate." And if she wasn't, he would keep it to himself for Tarkesh's sake. This mating had just become a great deal more complicated than a political arrangement.



\* \* \* \* \*

A small woman with blood red scales that formed a delicate ridge on her forehead engulfed Katryn in a tight hug. Stunned at the exuberant welcome, she stood still for a moment before wrapping her arms the woman. Her mind was still on the heated encounter with the man on balcony who had looked at her as though he wanted to lay her out for his evening meal. She shivered at the image of what his mouth might feel like on her flesh, how his short goatee might tickle her in very interesting places. What was the matter with her? Was it not enough that she'd bedded Tarkesh, that she loved Tarkesh? Now she had to lust after some man who'd done no more than look her over.

"Hello, cousin." The woman before her flashed a smile, drawing her out of her dark thoughts. "Welcome home."

Warm spread in Katryn's belly, thawing some of the icy fear that had ridden her all day. Home. Goddess, she wanted to be home. She twisted around to try and see Tarkesh, but he was nowhere in sight. Baleel directed the unloading of the Gila beasts. He caught her gaze, dipped his head, and spoke to her telepathically. *He went home to his matriarchy. You will see him on the morrow at your bonding ceremony.*

*My thanks.* She nodded in return, but his dark eyes had locked on the red dragon in front of her. Katryn's swallowed hard. Her heart clenched at the thought of being mated to Nadir when she craved Tarkesh. Stop it, she ordered herself. She should treasure the memories she had, and be grateful for ever having known something so wonderful. Sucking in a deep breath, she grinned down at the shorter woman. "You must be Adriana."

She looked startled, her large dark eyes widening. "How did you know that?"

"Lord Baleel told me of you."

A hiss erupted from her throat, and she bared her teeth. "I'll wager he did. I hope you didn't take a word he said to heart."

How was she to respond to that? She had grown fond of Baleel during their long days of travel. She opened her mouth to redirect the

conversation when Adriana tucked her arm through Katryn's and tugged her toward a large entrance in the face of the canyon wall. Her mouth snapped shut as she tried to take in her surroundings. The capital city was stunning, beautiful, and entirely different from anything she had ever seen before. The canyon was a cool retreat from the scorching heat of the desert above, but the interior of the manor wrapped her in almost chilly air. She twisted around to try and take it all in at once. Everything was made of the same stone of the canyons, only polished to a high gleam. Here and there lay exquisite glass and metal sculptures. The home exuded ostentatious wealth. Katryn felt grubby in the beautiful surroundings, the layer of grime a heavy weight on her scales.

She turned to Adriana. "I'd like to bathe if that's possible."

"Well, you need to meet Matriarch Yola first. And you'll have to do the ceremonial bathing before your mating anyway, so it's probably best to wait."

"Ceremonial bathing?"

"Yes...the ritual cleansing before entering into a new phase in your lifeline?" Her eyebrows arched as though she was waiting for Katryn to understand her meaning.

"I—I don't know anything about dragon rituals. My father was a very busy man, and there were no other dragons on Vesperi, so..."

"Nothing?" An older woman with silver streaked through her raven hair questioned sharply. Adriana went rigid next to her, and Katryn could feel the power and authority rolling off the woman. This would be Matriarch Yola, she was certain of it.

"No, my lady. Nothing." She swept a deep, respectful curtsy.

Yola snorted in derision. "We will have to instruct you in your shortcomings. This will not do. Your father was derelict in his duties, and you'll have to make up for it now."

Katryn's back straightened. The woman's voice implied it was somehow Katryn's fault that her father had told her nothing. And she fought the urge to defend her sire. He had spent Turns working for the advancement of Harena trade; that was hardly dereliction of duty. If he was a poor father, that was no one's business except Katryn's. She fought

the wave of dislike for Yola that washed over her. She was simply tired. The woman's personality would be less grating after she'd bathed and had some sleep.

Yola spun on a heel and walked back out the main door. "Come along."

"Is she serious?" Katryn looked to Adriana for confirmation.

Adriana scurried ahead, following behind Yola. "You will find that my mother is always serious. Don't cross her. Ever. Now, come on."

Exhaustion from the past days of travel and stress slammed into her. She wanted sleep. Her eyes did not want to remain open. Couldn't they wait until tomorrow to show her whatever they wanted? What was so important that she had to wander around her new home feeling like a filthy beggar woman? A hiss slid from her throat, but she picked up her cloak and hurried to catch up with the other two women.

She saw the flash of Adriana's red scales disappear into a building to the right of the manor. It was even more ornately carved into the canyon wall. Delicate dragons wrapped around columns that bracketed the massive double doors. She tugged open the heavy, hammered metal doors and stepped inside. Matching doors directly across from her swooshed closed, so she jogged over to walk through them as well. Where were they going? Impatience raced through her as weariness dragged at her bones.

"There you are. Try to keep up. I don't have time to waste on you." Yola stood in the middle of a wide courtyard.

Katryn's teeth ground together, and she bit back a tart response. She would dearly love to vent her temper on this rude woman. This was no way to treat a newcomer. Fisting her hands tight, she strove for a politic answer. "I am sorry to keep you waiting. The capital is so beautiful; I simply wanted to savor it."

"No doubt Vesperi has nothing to offer in comparison."

"Vesperi is quite beautiful as well." The stiff words jerked from her. Thus far, she preferred the manners of Vesperi over those of Harena.

"I doubt it." Yola turned away to gesture towards two smaller doors across the courtyard. A peaceful garden took up the center of the

area with a small, gurgling fountain in the middle. Yola pointed to the door on the left, then the one on the right. "You will prepare yourself for the bonding ceremony there. Your two mates will prepare themselves there. You will enter the temple together. My daughter will serve as your attendant and witness. Are there any questions? Good. Adriana will show you to your chambers in the manor. I am expected at a council meeting now."

Katryn blinked and watched her aunt stomp away. She glanced at Adriana out of the corner of her eye, but her cousin didn't seem to think her mother's behavior was odd. A sigh slid from her lungs. "Can I bathe and eat before the next lesson to overcome my ignorance?"

Adriana blushed at the acid in her tone, a wry grin formed on her lips, and laughter danced in her wide eyes. "I suppose you're not *so* deficient that we should deny you those. After all, you'll need to keep up your strength. We're a demanding lot."

She rolled her eyes at the red dragon. "After you?"

"No. *With* me." She tucked her arm through Katryn's and escorted her back through the two sets of double doors. Stopping outside, she gestured to each of the buildings that made up a square. She pointed right. "That is the council building. The matriarchs meet there to govern Harena." She pointed left. "That is our matriarchal manor." She pointed straight ahead. "That is the statue of Kelynn, our ancestor. Beyond that is the capital, which you've already seen."

Katryn gestured behind them. "And that was the temple?"

"Yes. The Goddess' temple. You'll be mated there tomorrow morning. Any questions?"

"None just yet, but I'll let you know." Her mind was too tired to think at this point, she just wanted sleep. Days of sleep.

"Good." She led her through the manor again, introducing her to anyone they came upon. Katryn gave up trying to remember who was who after the tenth person. She was usually very good at names, but there were too many, and she was too tired to care.

They wound through long, stone hallways, passing dozens of doors and smaller hallways that led off in every imaginable direction. She would

have to explore them all later.

Adriana pushed open a set of doors that revealed an enormous suite of rooms. Plush cushions were strewn about the floor, and a wide bed dominated the main room. Sheer silk hangings framed it. It was easily twice the size of her apartments on Vesperi. She shook her head. "It's too large for just me."

Her cousin frowned and looked around. "Well, after tomorrow it won't be just you. Your mates will be here, too. I'm certain with two men in one place, this will soon seem too small."

"They'll be moving in here?" She arched an eyebrow. No man would move into his mate's home on Vesperi. A woman went to her husband's family after she was mated. Then her discussions with Tarkesh came back to her. "Ah, yes. Family is based on the female line here. Any child I have will be a member of this matriarchy, so it does not matter who fathers the babe."

"See? Not so deficient after all." Adriana's laugh tinkled out like music, and Katryn couldn't help but smile in response. Her aunt might be difficult to understand, but she very much liked her cousin. She walked forward to look into the sitting room, and then wandered out to a bright terrace. One glance upward told her they used the same light shafts covered in ancient Earthan glass to light the canyons that were used in the palace of Vesperi. Moonlight shone through the glass, and the area would be both cool and sunny during the daytime. She smiled and reentered the bedroom to run her hand along the soft coverlet, noticing as she did so that her nails were caked with sand and dirt. Drawing back, she curled her hand into a ball.

"Where is the bathing room?" She had just realized what was missing. On Vesperi, she'd had her own pool to bathe in.

"Water is scarce on Harena. We have community bathing rooms. Most dragons have to use the public ones, but our manor has its own."

"Well...at least I won't have to walk far then."

Adriana smiled and tilted her head. "You're funny, Katryn. And your accent is unusual."

"Not on Vesperi. I sound like everyone else. Werebears and

merpeople are the ones who have odd accents.”

“There is an ambassador for the merpeople at the landing site, but I’ve never been allowed to go there and meet her.”

“Why?”

“Men are the ones who travel. It’s a woman’s duty to help see to the governing of her property and ensure the future of our people. Children are precious and rare here.”

“I see.” Only she didn’t. How would traveling hurt the future of the people? Tarkesh had said there were renegade bands and other dangers inherent in desert travel, but only the men were expendable enough for travel? Her head throbbed, and her heart ached, remembering Tarkesh. Where was he now? Was he thinking about her? He’d looked upset when she’d been pulled away by her family. Why? Because she was mating to another? Because he cared? Her pulse jumped. Goddess, she wanted him with her. Her thighs tingled at the memory of his touch, her pussy dampening as she recalled the thrust of his hard cock within her. She shuddered, her heart pounding. Her nipples puckered into tight crests, and she folded her arms over them to hide them from her cousin’s sight.

Following in Adriana’s wake, she bit her tongue to keep from asking about Tarkesh. No one should know she had any interest in a man who wasn’t to be her mate. That was her secret to keep.

They entered a wide room with a huge pool in the middle. A small waterfall came out of the stone wall and fell into the pool, then a stream led away from the other side of the pool. Adriana pointed to the stream. “That leads to the other bathing pools in the capital. The running water keeps them clean and fresh.”

She nodded and wandered over to the pool to look in. It was deep and crystal clear all the way to the stone bottom. Small grooves were carved into the ledge of the pool, and bags of sweet scented bathing sand rested in them. She hadn’t had a full bath since she’d left Vesperi. The ship had only allowed for short showers once a day. Sitting down, she tugged off her boots and dragged the scarves from around her neck. She stood up and stripped quickly to dive into the water. Goddess, it felt wonderful to

be engulfed in the warm liquid. Spinning in the water, she swam to the far end and back again before she surfaced, laughing at the sheer joy of the sensation. She ran her fingers through her tangled hair.

Paddling to the side of the pool, she scooped up a handful of sweet sand and scrubbed it into her hair and over her body. She was too tired to linger, but she promised herself she would come back and enjoy herself some other time. The foaming bubbles of the sweet sand slipped down her face, and she submerged herself to rinse before it stung her eyes. Bobbing back to the surface, she noticed her cousin had knelt beside the pool and settled so her legs were curled up next to her.

"You're going to watch?" She had no problem with nudity in front of others, but she'd never known a woman to watch another bathe unless they were in a sexual relationship together. Odd. The whole planet and its culture made little sense.

"I am your witness." Adriana grinned. "All right, for the ritual to be complete, you need to dunk your head beneath the water three times."

"Should I even ask why?"

Her cousins' mouth opened and closed again. "You know, I don't know why. That's just how the ritual works."

"Then I shouldn't ask."

She chuckled. "No, I suppose you shouldn't."

Katryn ducked under the water and resurfaced three times, feeling ridiculous the whole while. Why did she need to be clean to be mated? What stain was so hideous that she needed to wash it away? Strange, all of it. So foreign. Would she ever feel as though she was part of it, or would she always question why things were the way they were? She sighed and climbed out of the pool, shoving her hair out of her face.

Her cousin handed her a towel and a clean robe. "You can wear this until we get your things unpacked. And tomorrow you'll wear your mating gown. Not to worry."

"Mating gown?"

"Yes, you have to see it. I should have thought to show you as soon as we reached your chambers." She led the way back to Katryn's chambers, where the low table was set with steaming dishes of food.

Katryn's stomach rumbled as the smell reached her nose.

Laughing, her cousin waved her to the fat pillows placed around the table. "Sit. Eat. I will get the gown."

She swirled back into the room holding a lavender gown a shade lighter than Katryn's purple scales. It was sleeveless and would show off her arm scaling. Lacing up the sides tied the gown into one piece. It would show off all of her scales, she realized. The floor length skirt was slit up each side all the way to the lacings that ended at the waist. "How did you know where my scaling is?"

Adriana took the gown back to the closet she had retrieved it from. "You were born here. Yola knew where you were marked."

"Oh. Yes. I forgot." Reaching the capital had made the experience so surreal that she lost track of the fact that she could ever have been here before. She spooned up some of the delicious soup before her. She suspected the meat was Gila beast, but she was too hungry to stop and ask. She and her cousin ate in companionable silence, but she began to droop half way through the last dish, her head nodding forward. Jerking awake, she saw Adriana rise from the table to scoop the dishes onto the tray.

"Get some sleep. I will see you in the morning."

She reached out to catch the other woman's arm. "Thank you, Adriana."

"That's what family is for, cousin." She bent and kissed her forehead. "Pleasant dreams."

Katryn curled up onto the wide bed, pulling the soft saltwater silk coverlet to her chin. Her body relaxed into the mattress. A wave of exhaustion rolled over her, dragged her under into deep, dreamless slumber. She felt as if no time had passed at all when Adriana shook her awake the next morning.

"Mmm. Just a few more moments." She burrowed deeper into the covers.

"I've already let you sleep longer than I should have. Time to rise, cousin."

"Oh, very well." She sighed and flopped over onto her back to grin



at Adriana.

"Put on your robe, and we'll go to the temple. Your gown is already there. We wouldn't want it to get dusty in the street."

"No, it's much too pretty for that." She sat up and reached for the robe she didn't even remember taking off the night before. Throwing her legs over the edge of the bed, she stood. Dread knotted in her gut. Time to face Nadir and his mate, soon to be her mates. Oh, Goddess. This was a nightmare. She desperately wanted to see Tarkesh, but feared how she would react if she did.

"We have time for a quick meal before we go."

Her belly roiled in protest, and she shook her head. "No...no, thank you."

Slipping her feet into a pair of waiting slippers, she fell into step with her cousin and wound back through manor. She nodded to the smiling faces that they passed. She couldn't remember which ones she'd already been introduced to. Most likely, some simply knew who she was.

Relief raced through her at one familiar face she saw when they stepped into the square. The golden dragon, Baleel. A wide smile formed on her lips. He grinned back. *Felicitations, Lady Katryn.*

She wished it were a moment for felicity, but she nodded in acknowledgment as they walked past. Adriana hissed low in her throat, glaring at Baleel. He arched an eyebrow, let his smile widen as he looked her over thoroughly, and swept her a bow.

They entered the temple and walked through to the empty courtyard beyond. "Lord Baleel speaks very highly of you. He seems...quite taken with you."

"That presumptuous son of a Gila beast," Adriana sneered, her voice rising with indignation. "Do you know what he did? He spoke to matriarch Yola and tried to negotiate for a mating ceremony with me. He didn't ask me, didn't speak to me about it. After the last time, he should know I..."

"The last time?" Her hand closed around the latch to the door that led to her preparation room.

"I am sorry, cousin. I should not—"

"Tell me, please. I would love some distraction from my own affairs." Like the fact that she'd finally managed to fall in love, and now she must mate with two other men. Goddess, help her. Her lips kicked up in a grin. She had picked up Tarkesh's religious turn of phrase in the past days, she realized. *Goddess* seemed to fit here among these people. The weretigers would never settle for just one of anything if they could have many. She wished Tarkesh was here to talk to about the weretigers. He had always been interested in anything she had to tell him about them. She missed him so much, and it had not even been an entire day since she had seen him.

Her cousin picked up the lavender gown while she shed her robe. "I—I was supposed to mate with another dragon last Turn, but he mated to another in secret three days before the ceremony was to take place. He mated to a woman he *loved*."

"You must have been very angry. Did you love him?" she asked when her face emerged from the top of the gown after Adriana slipped it over her head.

The red dragon sighed. "I didn't love him, and I wasn't angry. I was...sad for myself. He has was I want. Love. Who does not want love? But love is not the way of mating. Mating is for alliance, for the good of the matriarchies. Our families were shamed by his actions, and he and his mate have been cast out as renegades. He was a fool."

"To mate for love?"

Katryn lifted her arms so her cousin could lace up the sides of her gown. It was a perfect fit. "No. To mate for love *in secret*. To make his mating a shameful act. If he had spoken to me, I would have let him go. I would have convinced Matriarch Yola it was for the best. She is not unfeeling, and I am not unsympathetic."

"And how does this affect Lord Baleel?" She sat in the chair Adriana motioned her into. Her cousin ran a brush through her hair and began to braid it into an intricate style.

When she glanced over her shoulder, Adriana flushed, but Katryn couldn't tell if it was embarrassment or anger. "My shame was so public, so openly flaunted in my face, that Matriarch Yola swore that I may

choose my own mate, that I may have a love match. Baleel tried to force my hand, to take my choice away. That I cannot forgive. There...you're ready."

Adriana stepped back, and Katryn caught her hand. She squeezed tight. "I'm sorry, cousin. I like Lord Baleel, but I'm sorry you were hurt."

"Well, no matter." Her small hands fluttered. "When you mate with Lord Nadir and Lord Tarkesh—"

She felt all the blood leech from her face, and she felt the top of her head tingled with cold. She jerked to her feet. "Excuse me? I am mating with *Tarkesh*?"

Confusion showed on her cousin's face. "Well, yes...I—I assumed that you knew. You've...I could smell him on you last evening. Wait...where are you going?"

Fury erupted in her belly, blinding her. Tarkesh had *lied* to her. She didn't even care why. He had let her suffer and worry by not telling her that he was the other third of Nadir's *harim*. Her fists bunched into tight knots. She wanted to pummel him until he felt even a shred of the pain she had in the past day when she thought she'd never see him again, never touch him again. Had it been part of a game between him and Nadir to make her love him? Shame twisted tight with bitter fury. She stormed from the room, intent on getting her answers from the only man who could answer them. Now.

## Chapter Seven

Tarkesh paced the small chamber that he and Nadir were to occupy until the mating ceremony. "I should speak to her. She will be upset when she finds out."

"Calm yourself, Tark. You know they will never allow you to communicate with her in any way until the ceremony is over. It is tradition." Nadir lounged on a large floor pillow, his white mating robes draping around his dark form. The constant want Tarkesh felt for his mate kicked him, and his cock stirred. Awareness sparked in Nadir's dark eyes, and Tarkesh smiled to acknowledge the need they couldn't fulfill until that night. With Katryn. He fought a groan as his cock rose to full attention.

"It is a foolish tradition," Tarkesh barked and turned away from his mate.

Nadir sighed. "True, but that doesn't mean it will change."

"I am simply—"

"Worried. Yes, I know." The big, black dragon chuckled.

"One of us has to be," he snapped back.

A single eyebrow rose in response to that. "I worry when I must. I have you to worry the rest of the time."

"You don't know her—"

"Yet. I think you need some distraction, Tark." Nadir rolled to his feet, a wicked smile on his darkly handsome face, and had taken a step forward when the door burst open.

Katryn, stunning in a traditional mating gown, came to a stop before Tarkesh, her finger lifting to jab him in the chest. "You knew. You *knew* I was to be mated to you as well, and you kept it from me. How could you? I thought...I thought we were friends."

Goddess, he knew this would happen. He should have found some way to tell her. Fury at himself slammed into his gut. He kept his voice low and soothing. "I wanted to know you before I told you everything. You knew so little about your own people. I—"

She sliced a hand through the air. "And do you know me now? Did I pass your little test? Was sleeping with me part of the test, Tarkesh?"

He flinched. "I was not like that, Katryn. I tried to tell you before we—before you—"

"Now it's my fault you lied to me?" She deepened her voice to mimic his. "*Trust me, Katryn. Not all dragons are like your father. Trust me, Katryn. I'll answer any questions you have.* I did trust you, and you hurt me. At least my father was honest in his neglect. I was just a means to an end—for both of you."

"Please, Katryn. Don't say that. It's more than a convenience between us now. You have to see that. I'm in love with you." The words exploded from him, and he slanted an apologetic glance at his mate.

The black dragon merely lifted a brow. *I already knew. You think I don't know what you're like when you're in love?*

"I'm humiliated." Tears welled in her dark eyes, and the expression on her face ripped into Tarkesh's heart.

Nadir moved to stand beside him and placed a supporting hand on his shoulder. He didn't deserve the support. He cursed himself a hundred times over for hurting her. He didn't know what to say to mend the damage.

Nadir spoke first, "Lady Katryn—"

Her dark gaze narrowed on the larger man. "Lord Nadir, I presume? No wonder you looked me over as though you owned me yesterday." She snorted. "Well, I hope the two of you are incredibly happy together. You'll need to find some other woman to legitimize your mating. Goodbye."

The door slammed behind her after she'd raced back out of the room. Tarkesh staggered as the pain hit him square in the chest. He had ruined it, hurt someone he loved. It was over. The weight of it crushed down on his chest, and he sank onto the pillow Nadir had just abandoned. Nausea rolled through him, and he fought the need to vomit. Lost. He had lost Katryn, and with her, he would lose Nadir as well. He wouldn't accept another woman in their mating, and he and Nadir couldn't stay together without a female to breed with. Goddess above. He loved them both, and now he would lose everything. Because of his actions, his mate would lose, too. "I'm sorry, Nadir. I failed you both."

"You failed no one. I can fix this." Nadir hand cupped the back of his head, but he didn't look up. "I will fix this. Meet us outside when the bell chimes."

He angled a glance upward at the black dragon. "She's a stubborn woman. She won't go through with the mating just because you want her to."

"Have some faith in my abilities."

Opening his mouth to respond, he found he was too late. Nadir was gone, and he was alone. He shuddered, hoping it wasn't an omen for his future.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nadir saw Lady Adriana hovering around Katryn as she paced the small room that matched the one he had just left his mate in. He nodded to Baleel as the golden dragon entered the courtyard, but kept walking toward the open door to Katryn's chamber.

Adriana wrung her hands. "Katryn? Are you all right?"

Nadir pushed the door open wide and stepped through. He let a wicked grin show on his face. "I believe Lord Baleel is out in the courtyard waiting for you, Lady Adriana. He said you had scheduled a rendezvous with him."

Her expressive, dark eyes popped wide with sparking anger. Her small fists balled at her side. Two indignant women closed up in one room

were more than he knew what to do with. He stepped out of the way as she started for the door.

"Is he really? I never said I would meet him anywhere. Ever. Well, we'll just see about him presuming to..." Her voice trailed off in a string of muttered curses as she stomped out of the room.

Katryn spun around to face him, the same anger snapping in her eyes as had shown in her cousin's. Her face was flushed, and her lush breasts lifted with each breath she drew. His fingers itched to cup them, suck them. Words exploded from her full lips, tripping together to get out. "What are you doing here? Is this how you think it would be between us? You and Tarkesh teaming together to make me do whatever you want? Ha. I believe I made my position on this matter extremely clear a moment ago. Go. Away."

"No." He kicked the door shut behind him and locked it before stalking forward.

Her eyes narrowed into angry slits, and a dragon hiss ripped from her. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"And Tark claimed you were an intelligent woman." He tisked. For each step he took toward her, she took one back until the wall behind her stopped her progress. He bracketed his palms on either side of her, caging her where he wanted her. "The word *no* typically means a negative response to a question or demand, but I've heard you have problems with the translation of terms from Vespera to Harena."

"You should learn the definition yourself. I believe I said *no* to mating with you, and yet, here you still are." She widened her eyes innocently, planted her hands on her hips, and then glared up at him.

He chuckled at the direct hit. She didn't retract her claws when she fought. He liked that, respected it in an opponent. His cock grew rigid. She was beautiful when she was angry. Not that he was foolish enough to say so, but her passion made her more than he was willing to resist. He dipped down until his lips almost touched hers. She grew still, and a flush rose in her cheeks. "Yes, here I still am. And what are you going to do about it?"

Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound emerged. She drew a

deep breath, and the tips of her breasts rubbed against his chest. He glanced down and saw how her nipples thrust against the front of her bodice. His gaze lifted to meet hers. "Or do you want to do anything about it, *my lady*?"

She hissed at him, and he slammed his lips down over hers, thrusting his tongue into the warm wetness of her mouth. Moaning against his lips, she twisted in his arms, fighting to get away. His arms snapped around her, jerking her tight to his chest. She whimpered, moving with him in a duel of lips and teeth and tongues. His cock pressed against her soft belly. Goddess, he wanted to thrust into her wet pussy. She threw her head back, and he dipped down to bite the base of her throat. Crying out, she lifted one leg to wrap around his hip. His hand slid into the slit in her gown. He hissed in a breath. Her thighs were scaled. He wanted to move his tongue up her scales until he could taste her juices.

Her fingers clenched in his hair, tugging on the short strands. He rubbed his goatee against the soft skin of her neck. She shivered. "Nadir."

"Are you hot for me, Katryn?" She gasped when he slipped his tongue up her throat to suck her ear into his mouth. "Are you wet?"

"Yes. I—I don't...you can't..." Her other leg rose so that both of them wrapped around his flanks. One of his hands moved to cup her bottom, lifting her higher against the wall. He pushed his cock against her softness.

"I can. I will. I am." He pushed her gown aside with his free hand to press his fingers into the heat of her pussy. His jaw clenched at how wet she was, how responsive. Goddess, she was perfect. Tarkesh was right. They would enjoy her together for the rest of their lives if he played this right. He tried to rein in his raging need, but his fingers pushed deeper into her damp channel.

He pulled back and lowered her to the floor, stepping away from her. She swayed toward him. Her pupils expanded, and the black of her irises spread from corner to corner when he lifted his hand to lick her juices from his fingers. He hummed low in his throat. She choked, watching him. Panting, she stepped toward him, hot want for him in her dragon eyes.



He chuckled as a bell pealed overhead. "That is the chime to call us to the temple."

"You cannot force me to mate with you." Her dark eyes resumed their human form faster than he would have guessed. He cursed and tried another tack.

"Would you ruin the months of work your aunts have put into negotiating your match? Do you think Yola would appreciate your behavior now?" She blanched at that. Ah. He'd found the sensitive area, and he pressed his advantage, as he did in every negotiation he initiated. "Your irresponsibility would shame them. Stop acting like a petulant child and do your duty."

Every inch of color drained from her face. Guilt slammed into his gut as vulnerable hurt shone in her luminous eyes. Then she blinked, and it was gone, hidden behind the coolly polite expression she had worn when he first spied her the day before. The fight drained from her as though he had flipped a switch that killed the fiery light in her gaze. It shook him to the core to realize he missed that, he wanted it. What was happening to him? No one had affected him so deeply, so quickly, except Tarkesh. Certainly no woman had managed it.

She stepped around him, brushing her hand down her saltwater silk gown. It had the traditional cut of a mating robe, heavily embroidered with silver threads. Her slim hand closed around the curved door latch, and she slid open the door. He followed her out into the courtyard just as Tarkesh stepped out of the room opposite them. An anxious expression rode Tarkesh's features, and Nadir nodded to reassure him. His shoulders relaxed, and he hurried to join them at the massive, carved double doors that lead to the temple.

"Adriana," Katryn's voice rang softly through the courtyard, and Nadir turned to the scent of Katryn's cousin. She was wrapped in Baleel's embrace. The two were locked in an angry kiss. Adriana shoved Baleel back, and they stared at each other, panting hard. The she snapped around toward Katryn, a blank expression on her face.

Adriana blinked, then blushed a deep red to match her scales. Scurrying forward, she met them at the door just as Tarkesh joined them.

Baleel slipped away to enter a side door into the temple. Nadir cupped a hand around Katryn's elbow, determined not to give her a chance to change her mind. She jerked her arm out of his grasp. A cold, reptilian hiss issued from her throat. "I'm not going anywhere, Lord Nadir. You needn't try to cage me."

"Yes, my mate. Lady Katryn does not care to have anyone put their hands on her unless she asks." Tarkesh broke into the tense silence, tilting forward to smile down at Katryn.

"I am not speaking to you. Let's just do this." She tucked a stray strand of her inky hair behind her ear and faced the doors. "Adriana. Lead us in."

Adriana's gaze flicked back and forth between her cousin, Nadir, and Tarkesh. She opened her mouth to address her cousin in a tentative tone. "Katryn, you don't have to—"

Katryn cut her off. "I don't wish to speak of this. Let us go. Or we can discuss your love life, cousin."

A wild flush raced up Adriana's lovely face, and she turned for the temple doors. She pushed them wide and walked to her designated location as the family representative. He noticed Baleel's gaze follow her up the aisle as the rest of the assembly stood to face them. Tarkesh's eyes met Nadir's as they both placed a hand on the small of Katryn's back. She jolted away from their touch, which conveniently started her down the long aisle. A wicked gleam flashed in Tarkesh's eyes as he fell into step beside Nadir, and they followed a stride behind Katryn up the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yola was a nightmare. She'd spent the entire celebration contradicting anything that came out of Katryn's mouth. She was worse than Katryn's father in her dismissive attitude towards Katryn's thoughts on anything. She didn't care for Katryn to think at all; that much was obvious. The rest of the members of her matriarchy were no better. Katryn was considered *less than* simply because she was raised on Vesperi and knew very little about dragon culture. Katryn shoved an angry hand

through her hair and stomped toward her chambers. This was *not* how she had pictured any bonding night in her mind. Two mates she would happily skin alive and a matriarchal leader she'd as soon see flung over a canyon wall than speak to her. She allowed herself to enjoy that mental image for a moment before she drew up in front of her doors. They were in there; she could smell them. Which meant they could smell her out in the hall, hesitating. Good. Let them worry. They ought to know she was displeased with both of them, and she wasn't going to pretend otherwise.

*You can stay out there for an hour if you want. It won't change what will happen when you come in here.* Nadir's deep voice stroked over her mind like rough silk.

A pulse of want went through her, loosening her muscles and dampening her sex. She snorted at her own weakness, at her own attraction to her mates. She groaned at the thought. She was *mated* to two males who dragged reactions from her that she couldn't stop. She didn't let herself back down, didn't let herself run. Reaching out, she jerked one door open and stepped inside.

Her breath caught at the sight that greeted her. Both men lounged naked on her bed, waiting for her. And both men's cocks were full and hard. Moisture flooded her pussy, and she squeezed her thighs together to ease the screaming ache between them. Oh, Goddess.

Nadir rose from the bed with reptilian grace. A knowing smile curved his lips. "I can smell your desire, little desert blossom. Your nipples are hard. You can't wait for us to slide our cocks into you. Do you know how many ways we could both take you at once?"

Shock rocked her back on her heels, and the images that flashed through her mind were staggering. She could picture it. Both of them. Inside her. She swallowed the lump in her throat that threatened to squeeze the breath from her. Need so deep she shook with it rocked her to her core. Nadir circled her, and she turned to follow him with her gaze. He stepped toward her, and she scrambled back. She didn't think she could withstand him touching her. The want raging through her body was more than she could bear. If he touched her, if either of them touched her, she would shatter. The backs of her knees hit the low bed.

She stopped and glared at the enormous black dragon. "I'm not happy with you. Either of you."

"Let us make it up to you." Tarkesh's voice purred in her ear, and she jumped when his arms went around her from behind. Nadir pressed to her front. Caught. She was entangled between them, and their embrace encompassed each other as well as her.

Throwing her head back, she fought the need to lose herself in the moment. To belong to her mates. She shouldn't. She had good reason to be angry with both of them. "I don't think—"

"Don't think." Nadir dropped to his knees before her. His hands slid into the side slits of her gown, cupping her thighs—and rubbing over her scales. Sensation shot straight from there to her pussy, and her inner muscles fisted on nothingness.

"Oh, Goddess," she breathed.

*She won't save you from us.* The black dragon dragged his tongue up the pattern of her scales, kissing, sucking, and caressing her flesh with his mouth. Her body bowed, and she choked on a breath.

"Does it feel good, Katryn? Do you want Nadir to slide his tongue inside you? I can tell you from experience, he is very skilled."

Nadir chuckled, and her gaze met his. His showed triumph, possession. Defeat ripped through her. She wouldn't win; she wanted them too much. Betrayed by her own heart and body. "I hate you."

*No, desert blossom. You love Tarkesh, and soon you will love me, too.* That wicked tongue played over her scales, making the wetness that pooled between her legs slip down her thighs. He caught a drop with tongue, sucking it with relish from her skin. She had been right. The rasp of his goatee on her scales made her want to scream. It felt so good, so hot, so right. Tingles erupted over her body, and heat built fast within her. Goddess, it wouldn't take much more. She was so close to the edge of orgasm.

"Why?"

*Because I want your love. I want all you have to give and more.*

Tarkesh dipped his head to kiss her arm, to nip at the scales there. Too much, with both of them touching her sensitive flesh. She couldn't

take it all in.

*And Nadir always gets what he wants. As do I.*

Then they both bit her scales, dragon fangs extended to pierce her. She screamed, the sensation pushing her higher and faster than she'd ever gone before. Her pussy clenched wildly, and a shriek ripped from her throat. She felt her own fangs slide out, and she hissed.

Nadir moved up her thighs, jerked her knees over his shoulders, and thrust his tongue into her moist pussy. One of Tarkesh's arms caught her from behind, held her against his broad chest, and she hung weightless between them. Her body twisted in midair as she bucked against Nadir, fighting to get closer to the hot slide of his tongue. She shuddered, desperate for more. Tarkesh's free hand fondled her breasts, pinching her tight nipples while Nadir's lips closed over her clit and sucked. Her hips arched, and she came apart in their arms, another reptilian scream ripping from her.

Tarkesh kept up a wicked litany in her ear, his words pushing her orgasm farther. "We bring out the dragon in you. And we're not done. We'll make you come again and again and again tonight. You'll have no doubt when we're through about how much we want you in our *harim*. No one else will do."

"Please. I can't—" She couldn't think, couldn't stop, couldn't control any of this. Panting for breath, she watched them both extend their claws and slice through the lacings on her mating gown. Tarkesh tugged what was left of it over her head while Nadir lifted her onto the bed.

"Now you can watch us." Nadir flipped Tarkesh onto his back, and came down on top of him. They kissed each other with animalistic ferocity. She could see their cocks rubbing together, exciting each other. Tarkesh's hand slipped between them to stroke down the length of Nadir's dick. They both groaned.

"Oh, Goddess." Flames licked at her veins watching them pleasure each other. Her fingers dropped between her legs, stroking over her hot flesh. She bit her lip. She closed her eyes, but the image of them was burned into her memory. Flicking a nail over her clit, she jolted at the harsh sensation. Her hips lifted. Orgasm made her blood roar in her ears,

made the muscles in her belly tighten.

"Let us do that." Tarkesh laughed and moved her hand away from her pussy. She moaned at the loss, but want throbbled through her when he sucked the juices from her fingers. Slowly.

Nadir's hands bit into her thighs, stroking across her scales as he jerked her into his lap. She gasped as his hard, hot cock slid into her pussy. He was so big it almost hurt, but she loved it. Her eyes slid closed as his length worked inside her. She was so wet. He arched her forward, and Tarkesh's hands slid down her back, between the globes of her ass. "I have something for you. Oil that will make this even better for you."

His fingered probed the pucker of her anus, slid in easily with the oil. It only took a moment before her eyes flew open. Hot pleasure slammed into her, but with it came a burn that wouldn't ease. She whimpered.

A grin flashed across Nadir's face. "It's almost painful it's so good, isn't it?"

"Yes." Her hips twisted, grinding Nadir deeper into her pussy. Her fingers curled into his shoulders, dug into the scales on his flesh. He groaned, and his cock twitched within her. She moved faster, trying to make the burn stop. Then he froze within her. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop. I need more."

"You'll have it." He pressed against the small of her back, arching her body. Tarkesh's thick cock pushed against her anus, pressed inside her, stretched her until he was seated to the hilt within her. She was so full, so tight. Her breath dragged into her lungs. Tarkesh drew away, and Nadir ground forward. They started a hard, fast rhythm. She was always filled with one of them. Nadir sucked her nipples into his mouth, biting them gently.

Tarkesh sucked at the sensitive skin at the back of her neck. Goosebumps exploded down her body. She loved it; she loved the way the two of them could play her so well. The drag of their hard flesh in hers, filling her, made her twist in their embrace. Tarkesh dipped to the side, biting the scales on her arm. Her sex contracted reflexively, and her fingers clenched on Nadir's scales. They all groaned.

"So tight," Tarkesh breathed. "I love the feel of you."

*So hot and wet*, Nadir echoed in her mind, moving to focus his attention on her other nipple. He rotated his hips on the next thrust, grinding against her clitoris.

Then they both slammed into her at the same time, and she screamed. It was enough to tip her over the edge into orgasm. The muscles in her thighs tensed, and they each kept up a hard, bouncing rhythm that sent her spiraling higher and higher. Nadir froze, his fingers digging into her hips to pull her tight to his cock. He erupted within her as Tarkesh pushed into her from behind. He ground his pelvis against her ass, and came inside her. She sobbed as it shoved her over into orgasm again.

*Forgive us*, both of her mate's voices whispered through her mind. *I love you*, added Tarkesh.

*Yes. Don't leave me alone*. Her head bent back over Tarkesh's shoulder. *I love you, too*. Tears tracked down her face as her orgasm went on and on. Her body shuddered, twisting under the endless lash of pleasure as aftershocks rocked through her. Her breath dragged out in ragged sobs, her control slipping through her fingers, and then the world went black as unconsciousness dragged her away.

She woke to two males in dragon form curled around her. Their tails lay over her legs, twined together with each other. She didn't wake them, but took a moment to mull over the events of the day before. The deep connection that she'd experienced last night. Were all dragon matings so intense? Lucky dragon women. Her heart squeezed when both weredragons settled closer to her. Reaching out, she smoothed her palm down their scaled sides.

*More*, Nadir demanded sleepily, but he heaved a slow sigh and fell back asleep.

She gave a soft giggle. If she'd thought things progressed quickly with Tarkesh, she was woefully unprepared for Nadir. Where Tarkesh had been a slow burn of sweet need, Nadir was like throwing flames onto dry brush. Explosive, hot, irresistible. Each fed a different need within her. The need to be cherished, the need to be possessed, to belong. Oh, sweet

Goddess.

Nadir was right—she would soon lose her heart to him as well. Unlike with Tarkesh, she didn't even try to resist. It was right. It felt good. It was the only thing that had fit since she came to Harena. Joy ballooned in her chest, and anticipation of the future spread through her. When was the last time she'd looked forward to the future? Not in a very long time, if ever. Not for as long as she could remember. The future had always been so insecure, so uncertain. She slid her hands down each of their backs, a grin tugging at her lips.

*Are you going to remain there all day?* Yola's snide tones echoed inside her mind. She jerked upright, an arm crossing over her breasts.

"What are you doing in here?"

Her small black eyes narrowed. "Be careful what tone you take with me, dragonling. Get up. You are expected to be in the council chambers today. The matriarchs wish to take the measure of you. Don't disappoint me."

Careful not disturb her mates, she stood up on the bed and stepped over the silver dragon. She tugged her robe on over her nakedness. She wasn't ashamed to be nude, but she didn't want to show a scrap of vulnerability to this woman. "On Vesperi, newly mated couples are given several days to enjoy each other before reassuming their duties."

Yola harrumphed. "That is not the way of dragons. You must forget your life among the tigers. They are nothing to you now. You must strive to become a true dragon, Katryn."

She clenched her teeth to bite back a sharp retort at that. If being a true dragon meant being like Yola, she was uninterested in the position. Yes, she really disliked the matriarch of her family. That could prove a problem. She smoothed all expression from her face when Yola cast her a sharp glance. It was a game of politics. Everything was. Always negotiating, always uncertain where she stood. She'd played this game her entire life on Vesperi and excelled at it. She just had to learn the rules on Harena. "I will do my best, Matriarch."

And once she knew the rules, she'd know how to break them and get what she wanted. But curse Yola for stealing even a small part of her



bonding night. Her shoulders straightened, but she couldn't help a last glance at the two male dragons curled up on her bed. What she wouldn't give to rejoin them and wake them for more of what she'd experienced last night. Then a wide smile curled her lips. She had the rest of her life to enjoy them.

## Chapter Eight

"She is unhappy here." It had been nearly two weeks since they had mated, and Katryn seemed to like it there less and less every time she was called to the council chambers to spend time with her family. It worried Tarkesh a great deal. Their mating had been going so well; Katryn accepting them more each day, and they loved the sharing of her and each other. She trusted them; he could feel it in his bones. Everything had turned out as he'd hoped. Better. Katryn completed their union, and he loved her deeply.

"I had noticed she's having trouble adjusting." Nadir lounged across the end of the bed the three of them shared each night.

"Yola rides her too hard."

"Yola is being very lenient with her compared to others in her matriarchy. Though there is something to be said for being ridden hard." His hand slid down Tarkesh stomach to grasp his cock. His hand slid up and down the shaft.

"I just—" He hissed low and groan at the conflicting sensation. Anger at Yola, desire at Nadir's touch. "We need to take some action here. I found her crying yesterday."

"Katryn?" Nadir paused, his hand cupping the sacs at that base of Tarkesh's dick.

Tarkesh's fingers caught Nadir's and worked both their hands up the length of his cock. His hips arched into the hot caress. He gritted his teeth. "No, the other female we're mated to. Of course, Katryn. I'm telling

you she isn't happy here, and she isn't going to adjust. She'll simply learn to be silent in her unhappiness. I have no desire to see her broken."

"No. That is...an unacceptable option. What else do you have in mind?" Nadir bent to run his tongue around the head of Tarkesh's cock.

He moved down until he could take his mate's dick into his hand. "I'm not certain."

"That's helpful." Nadir groaned when Tarkesh tightened his grip on the base of his cock, the hard length darkening.

"You find a solution to the problem then." He lost track of the conversation as Nadir's skilled mouth and hands worked his flesh over. Just rough enough to push him right up against the edge of orgasm. The hot wetness of his mate's mouth on him was more than he could take for long. He loved being sucked hard, and Nadir knew it.

"Be silent, and put your mouth to better use."

He chuckled, flipping so he could take his mate's cock into his mouth, and so Nadir could suck him fully between his lips. He hummed on the length of Nadir's cock, and his mate's hips arched hard to push his dick deeper into his mouth. He groaned, raising himself to tease the head of Nadir's cock while his hand stroked the shaft in hard, fast strokes. Nadir groaned on his cock, and he couldn't hold back a hiss at the vibrating sensation. Goddess, but that was good.

Nadir's long finger swirled around his anus, toying with him, taunting him. Tarkesh pushed his hips back, forcing the finger inside his ass. Nadir pushed deep, moving in and out, faster and faster. Tarkesh sucked the black dragon's dick inside his mouth hard, just as he knew his mate liked it, shoving the head against the roof of his mouth. Nadir bucked beneath him, coming in hot spurts down Tarkesh's throat. Tarkesh groaned, his own orgasm slamming into him with the subtle force of a Gila beast. He jetted hard into his mate's mouth, sucking the last of his mate's cum from his softening cock.

He climbed off his mate to lie on the bed. Nadir rolled onto his back, propping one arm behind his head and crossing his ankles. He ran his free hand down his goatee—his usual pose for thinking. "We could take her away, become renegades from society, and never have to deal

with any of it again.”

Tarkesh snorted and sat up to face him. “And we’d also be hunted until they killed us and our fiery little desert blossom. Not to mention the fact that we would need to rob others in order to survive. Tell me that is an option you find acceptable.”

The black dragon waved that away. “Calm yourself, Tark. I was only jesting. I—”

“I am not. I do not like to see her upset.” His hands fisted against his thighs.

“Nor do I.”

He heaved a sigh. “Taking her away would be a good option if it didn’t require criminal behavior.”

Nadir sat up. “That’s it.”

“What’s it? I just said it wouldn’t work. That’s no kind of solution to anything.” He shrugged, hopeless anger welling up him. There had to be an answer to this that they could all live with, but he’d been rolling it around in his mind for days and had come to nothing.

“No, we take her away. To Vesperi. As the new ambassadors.”

Tarkesh huffed a breath and flopped back in the bed, propping himself on one elbow. “They’ve already chosen a new ambassador.”

“I can get them to change their minds, to decide we are a more suitable option. Besides, Curind has as much intelligence as the rear end of a Gila beast. He is a political appointment because of his matriarchy, nothing more.” He flashed a dark, wicked grin. Tarkesh smiled back. He knew that smile. It was the one Nadir always used before he managed to convince someone to do something that was not in their best interest. He could remember a number of matriarchies in outlying settlements that were left wondering what had happened to them when Nadir set his mind to treating with them.

Would Nadir be happy walking away from a life he had found so much success in? “Are you certain you are willing to do this? Give up everything you know and go to the tiger world? We could hate it there as much as Katryn hates it here.”

The black dragon lifted an eyebrow at him. “You know my feelings

on this, Tarkesh. They have not changed. I will do whatever it takes to keep us together, to protect my mate. That now includes Katryn, but the sentiment remains that same as it always was with you."

"And you are ruthless about it. Katryn is correct about that." He grinned.

Nadir's broad shoulder lifted in a negligent shrug. "Whatever it takes."

He laughed outright at that. "So you've said."

"The question, my mate, is whether you are willing to make such an enormous change for her."

Tarkesh plucked at the saltwater silk coverlet for a moment, thinking before he looked up and met Nadir's gaze. "I want what I have always wanted, to see my loved ones happy and near me. I will also do whatever it takes to make that happen. If Katryn needs to be on Vesperi to be happy, then so be it."

"You're certain? Once I make these arrangements, they cannot be unmade." Nadir lifted a knee and propped his elbow on it.

He held his mate's dark gaze. "I've considered this problem for days. I can find no better solution that does not leave us hunted outlaws than the one you've suggested. I would never dishonor myself or either of you by choosing the path of a renegade."

"Nor I. That's settled, then." He threw his legs over the side of the bed and rose, reaching for his pants. Tarkesh enjoyed the view of his mate's well-formed ass. He grinned.

"Shall we tell Katryn?"

Nadir glanced back at him. "Where is she?"

He rose as well and shrugged into a robe. "I'm not sure. She was visiting with Adriana before the council meeting, but that is soon to convene. Let us meet her there."

"Excellent." Nadir curved his fingers around the back of Tarkesh's neck and drew him forward for an easy kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll negotiate a new treaty with the weretiger clans." Curind, the pompous dragon who would leave with Varad and Mahlia in the next few days to take her father's position as ambassador to Vesperi, spoke in a booming whine that scraped over Katryn's already frayed nerves. Yola had been her usual obnoxious self all day. That Tarkesh and Nadir had joined her a few moments before had only served as a marginal help. These sessions were torturous. And she would have to put up with them every day for the rest of her life. Goddess above.

Her eyebrows almost lifted to her hairline at what Curind has said. The man was joking wasn't he? This was a horrible jest. She looked around to see if anyone was smiling, but no one was. She couldn't keep her tongue still. "*Prides*. The weretigers have prides; the werebears have clans. And you cannot negotiate with the prides individually."

"This is men's business, my lady. Women control the lands, but men go out to serve as emissaries to other matriarchs and ambassadors to other planets. Don't concern yourself with this matter." He cut her a dismissive glance.

"I'm afraid I cannot remain silent in this. You cannot negotiate with the prides themselves. All treaties are negotiated with *Amir* Varad only. To do otherwise will insert weredragons into weretiger politics. This can't be allowed. They are contentious to a degree you cannot even imagine. The only way to solidify yourself as a power among them is to align with the royal family. Let the *Amir* deal with the in-fighting of the prides and worry about outmaneuvering him to get what Harena needs. Nothing else is acceptable—Varad will cut ties with us before he lets any ambassador upset the balance among the prides. Trust me in this, my lord. I have spent my life on Vesperi." During her explanation, the room had grown deathly still, and every dragon's gaze turned to her as though she'd gone mad. She glanced at her mates for support—she was in the right here. Varad was far too intelligent a man, too good a king, to let an ambitious ambassador disrupt the always tenuous political structure of the tigers. But Tarkesh's face was a blank, frozen mask, and a muscle jumped in Nadir's strong jaw.

She turned to meet Yola's gaze. The matriarch's face was mottled

with rage, but Katryn didn't back down, met her stare for stare. Goddess on fire, she was right about this. They just didn't know how it was on Vesperi. She needed to make them understand that the course of action this new ambassador wanted to take could damage a trade relationship that had been centuries in the making. Her stomach churned in unease as the thick silence stretched out.

Yola's voice cut like glass across Katryn's nerves, and she looked at Katryn while she spoke to the ambassador. "Forgive my niece. She is new to her home world, and untrained in the ways of *dragons*. Her youth is showing the extent of her maturity. She lacks some knowledge about what is important to her *own* people."

Righteous indignation rushed through Katryn like a tidal wave, and her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. How *dare* anyone think she was being disloyal? She dug dragon's claws into her temper to hold on and keep from spitting out her words like a challenge. She was an ambassador's daughter, and she knew how to keep a cool head in any situation. "I *do* have my people's interest in mind. If I did not, I would have said nothing and allowed him to go blithely on his way to possibly ruin the alliances we've built that benefit our people."

Yola's fists clenched on the arms of her chair, and the black of her irises spread to the corners of her eyes. Her breath bellowed in and out. Katryn saw Adriana half rise from her seat to intercede, but she wasn't certain on whose behalf. This was a matter of pride now. Yola had all but accused of betraying her own kind when she had spent her life on another planet helping her father make every dragon's life better and more prosperous. The wound cut too deeply. She couldn't back down now without losing face, and neither could Yola.

*Apologize to her. Do it now, and be sufficiently humble.* Nadir's thought cut across her mind. Shock rippled through her, and every muscle in her body went rigid with it. *Do it, Katryn. You challenged a matriarch in public. You must make amends. Now.*

*No!* Everything in her rebelled at the mere thought.

*Trust me,* Nadir demanded.

Tarkesh's thought broke in. Nadir had been communicating with

both of them. *Trust us, my love. We can make this right if you let us. Trust us not to fail you.*

Did she? Could she? What they asked was too much, more than she could sacrifice. But did she trust them to do as they promised? Her hands trembled, and she clenched her fingers tightly. The room remained still as death, waiting to see what she would do. What Yola would do to her. Did she trust her mates in this? To save her? *Yes*, she answered herself and them at the same time.

*On your knees.*

*No, it's too much. I won't.* Her gaze met his, defiance rolling over her. Every muscle in her body went rigid. Issuing a politically necessary apology was hard, but acceptable—to debase herself in public was quite another. Bile rose to choke her, and she swallowed hard.

*You already said yes. Will you go back on your word, Katryn?* His midnight eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, demanding obedience and rejecting her position in this. *Do it!*

A sob bubbled up in her throat. No matter what she did, she would lose in this. Her pride, her respect. Agony tore at her. She held his gaze, unflinching. *I will never forgive you for this.*

He flinched, but his eyes were hard and unyielding. Tarkesh was pale, his skin stretched taunt over his sharp cheekbones. He wouldn't meet her gaze.

"I see," she whispered aloud. "I think I finally see." Cold realization rolled through her. She would never fit here. Weredragons were more foreign to her than weretigers could ever be, their unbending social structure not allowing Katryn to help in the one area she could be of use. The injustice of it cut her to the core.

Rising, she moved to kneel at Yola's feet. Disgust ripped at her deep inside that she had to do this, that she would even consider it. She despised everything about this woman who shared her blood. Lifting her hand, she placed it over her heart. Her voice rang clear, and she was proud to note there wasn't even the slightest waver to it. "Matriach Yola. My humblest apologies for speaking out of turn. Please understand I only wished to be of use to my fellow weredragons. I meant no offense."



She saw Adriana twitch out of corner of her eye, and imagined telepathic words flew hot and fast between her cousin and aunt. Finally, after an eternity that made her keenly aware of how hard the marble floor was beneath her knees, Yola nodded her acceptance of the apology. Her dark eyes reformed to solid human irises, and a nasty, triumphant smile curled her lips. "I do know that you want the best for Harena, but you have much to learn before you can truly be a dragon."

*Wrong.* She wanted to scream at them all, wanted for the first time in her life to let loose in public. She *was* a dragon; it was her birthright. Culture didn't make her a dragon. Her physiology did that for her. She wasn't a Harenan, perhaps, but no one could take her dragoness away from her. It was fact. She rose from the floor stiffly, nodded Adriana, the only person on this cursed planet she didn't wish trampled by an angry Gila beast, and walked to the doors.

She turned back to her mates before she slipped out, a part of her shattering forever. Her heart. Her eyes were dry and gritty; she was too broken to cry. *I was right, wasn't I? It's always going to be the two of you on one side and me on the other. I am such a fool.*

## Chapter Nine

"Where is she?" Nadir watched Tarkesh pace in a tight circle around the room.

Nadir breathed deep, trying to scent her. Nothing. She wasn't there. She hadn't been there in many hours, not since that morning. His and Tarkesh's scents overlaid hers, so she hadn't come back after the confrontation at the council meeting. His gut twisted. Where would she have gone? She had no close friends that he knew of. Adriana had remained with them, argued in their favor, helped them secure the ambassadorial position.

"Where might she have gone?" Tarkesh echoed his thoughts. "I don't think she was in the state of mind to make rational decisions when she left. She was upset. *We* upset her."

"It was necessary for her to apologize in order to get what we wanted."

"Do you ever stop to think that perhaps the ends don't justify the means? You make decisions and sacrifice whatever it takes to make them happen. Perhaps some things should not be sacrificed."

"You agreed that we should—"

"I know what I agreed to. I did not agree to her humiliating herself before the matriarchal council." Tarkesh's jaw flexed.

Nadir's shoulders drew into a rigid line at the implication that he had forced Tarkesh. "We would not have gotten the ambassadorship without it, not even if she had gone back and apologized later. It had to be

done then, and she was in no mood to listen to our scheme to get her away from her family—especially Yola.”

“We took that choice away from her by not telling her.”

“You are simply still upset that she was angry the last time you kept something from her. This is not the same thing. You had days to tell her that she was mating to both of us, but we had no time to tell her anything before she started an argument with Curind.”

“She wouldn’t see it that way.”

Nadir drew a deep breath in through his nose, trying to calm his temper. How had this conversation gotten so out of his control? “It. Is. Not. The. Same. Tarkesh.”

“She was not in a rational frame of mind, and I doubt she is now. You’re thinking rationally, and that’s not likely to convince her of anything.”

“What would you suggest?”

Tarkesh crossed his arms in front of him, anguish mixed with anger on his face. “I would suggest that you consider the sacrifices you expect of us—the people you love the most—before you make decisions for us. Katryn is not one to sacrifice her pride and honor without a moment’s thought.”

“I didn’t force her.” The blood rush out of his face, and his hands fisted at his side.

“You pushed her into it.” Tarkesh jabbed a finger at him.

He stared at his mate for a long moment before he spoke. “How long have you felt this way? This isn’t solely about Katryn, is it? It’s about you and me. Is this what you meant when you were afraid things would change—that she would come between us?”

The silver dragon’s eyes widened. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“I love you.”

“But do you like me right now?”

A long moment of silence stretched between them. “No. Not very much, anyway.”

“I thought not. Before you become too angry about this and blame

me for what happened, remember no matter what, she would have had to apologize anyway. If it had waited, she would have been humiliated with no reward. And you knew my nature before you mated with me. Remember that when you claim to be displeased with what your decisions have left you." Nadir whipped around, stalking toward the door. His fingers clenched and unclenched, and his shoulders drew into a taut line.

"Where are you going?" A thread of panic wound through Tarkesh's tone.

"Away. I need to go away."

"Wh—when will you return? What about Katryn? We still don't know where she is."

"You claim to know her needs better than I do; I am certain you will have no difficulty finding her by yourself."

"Nadir—"

"Leave it be, Tark. Just...leave me be." He turned back for a moment before he walked out the door. "Do you honestly think you're the only one who loves her, Tark? I would never do anything that I thought would hurt her. The worst part about all of this is that you don't trust me with her. Or with yourself, obviously."

Anger pumped through his system as he thrust through the door that led out to the street. Hadn't he given his mates everything they needed? Wasn't he willing to give up everything he had ever known to ensure their happiness? What more could he do? What more could he offer? And, yet, neither was pleased right now. Perhaps he had gone over the line this time, but it was never with the intent to hurt them. Pain sliced through him at even the thought that he had injured his mates. *Goddess*. Were they right about him? Did his very nature make his mates unhappy? Doubts rolled through him. Everything had become so confused in a matter of hours. Hadn't they lain sated together just that morning? Hadn't he and Tarkesh agreed that taking Katryn away was the right thing to do?

He stopped and looked around, becoming aware of his surroundings. How long had he been walking the streets of the city? He stood in the capital square, the Goddess' temple before him. Sighing, he scrubbed a tired hand down his face. Reaching for the massive double

doors, he pulled one open and slipped inside. Opposite him were the matching doors that led to the temple courtyard. Had it been only two weeks since he had walked through them to bond with both his mates? It felt like Turns.

Inside the temple was cool and damp, a direct contrast to the outside world of Harena. He shuddered in the cold. The temple hummed with an otherworldly reverence. Stepping forward to the halfway point between the doors, he turned up the long aisle that led to the Goddess' fountain. Pools of fire danced around the edge of the sacred water. Mist so thick it looked like smoke curled over the ground and up the aisle. Dragon's breath, it was called. He dragged in a deep lungful of moist air, struggling to calm the thoughts that plagued him.

A familiar scent filled his nostrils. Katryn. Narrowing his eyes to scan through the smoke, he caught sight of her slim figure kneeling in silence before the fountain. Her head was bowed. He sighed, steeling himself for her disappointment, her anger. He knew the reasons for what he had done, and he regretted that she had suffered for it, but it had been for her. Would she understand? Uncertainty fisted in his gut.

He approached the front of the temple on silent feet to kneel beside her. "Blossom."

"Nadir." She didn't stir, didn't look at him.

He drew a breath. "I have my reasons for what I did today."

"I know. Adriana found me. She and Baleel went to find you and Tarkesh."

"Why?"

"I did not ask."

"I never meant to hurt you, Katryn."

He heard her soft sigh, and he tensed, waiting for her reply. Her reaction now would dictate much of how their *harim* bond would be in the future.

"You push too hard sometimes, Nadir."

"Only with your best interests in mind. If I hadn't pushed you to apologize today—"

"We wouldn't be the new ambassadors to Vesperi. Yes, I know. I

understand that painful choices have to be made for politics, for duty. No one would understand that better than I."

"But?"

She shifted and met his eyes. "Sometimes you push so hard you risk pushing us away. Let us make the choices that are best for us. *Talk* to us before you push us to the breaking point. It's only because we love you that we let you push us all."

"I know." A small, tight smile curved his lips. "Tark says you think I am ruthless."

"You are. That will serve you well when dealing with tigers. Consult with us before you unleash that ruthless core on the politics of other planets. Adriana said you used my experience with the tigers as an argument to get this new position. Will you ask my opinion before you make decisions on trade matters?"

"Yes."

"Truly?"

"I can change, blossom. For you and Tarkesh. But if you're looking for a man who consults you about everything, then we may have a larger problem than politics. I'm not that man, and I never will be. I can change, but I cannot become someone else. I wouldn't ask that of you, which is why Tark and I decided to leave Harena in the first place."

Her small hand slipped into his. "I love you as you are, Nadir. As does Tarkesh. Never doubt that, no matter how much we may want to kick you for being a Gila beast's fouler cousin."

He chuckled and raised her fingers to his lips. "I love you."

"I know."

"Do you? What you said...before you left..."

"I do know. I was angry and hurt, Nadir. I said things I wish I hadn't. You aren't the only one with regrets, my love."

He closed his eyes, relief rushing through him. Something essential loosened within his chest. "So, then, you can forgive me someday?"

"No."

"Katryn—"

"I forgive you now. I know you wouldn't hurt me on purpose. I

know you and Tarkesh won't join forces against me. We are a *harim*. Together. Always. I *know* that."

"Good. No one could replace you, Katryn. We need you. You belong to us. I think...we were incomplete without you, and neither of us knew it. You balance us."

Tears welled in her wide, dark eyes. "Nadir—"

"What? What did I say now?" How had he failed her? Panic gripped his gut. He cupped both of his hands around her smaller one. "Katryn? Tell me, and I will fix it, I swear."

A watery laugh rippled from her. She sniffled and wiped a single tear from her cheek. "You already did."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know how long I've needed that? To belong? My whole life, I've been looking for that. I knew it was a fundamental part of me that was missing. I just didn't know how to get it. And with my family here...I've been so miserable. I'll never belong here."

"Your home is with us. You belong to us. It matters not what planet we are on."

A brilliant smile crossed her face, and her beautiful eyes shone bright with unshed tears. "I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, my desert blossom." He lifted his fingers to stroke along the skin of her silken jaw. "You are exactly what we needed. We will do anything to make sure you're happy. Anything."

"I love you."

"Both of us?" Nadir turned to see Tarkesh approaching from the entrance. His mate's dark eyes were stormy and troubled. His gaze flicked between Nadir and Katryn.

They stood and turned to face him. He curved his arm around Katryn's waist, pulling her soft curves against his side. She laid her cheek on his chest, and they waited for Tarkesh to reach them.

Tarkesh stopped just before them and met his gaze. "Nadir. I was wrong to—"

Nadir snapped a hand out to catch the back of his neck and haul his mate forward. Dipping down, he settled his mouth over the other man's

and thrust his tongue between his lips. Tarkesh's arm banded around his waist. *Do not apologize, my mate. I was just as much in the wrong. We will do better in the future.*

*I can handle any change but losing the two of you. Don't ever walk away from me again, Nadir. Never.* Tarkesh's words echoed fiercely in Nadir's mind while his fingers bit into his back, hauling both Katryn and him closer.

Katryn's hand slipped inside the waist of his pants to cup his sex. He groaned into Tarkesh's mouth, their tongues twining together. His hips jerked when she wrapped her slim fingers around his cock and stroked up the shaft. Her thumb rubbed over the head of his dick. Tarkesh ran a nail down the scales that bisected his chest. He shuddered under the hot flash of pleasure that exploded within him. Katryn turned her head and sank her dragon fangs into the scales on his shoulder. He threw back his head and roared, his own fangs extending.

*I love you,* both of them said. He closed his eyes tight, dragging them to him. He wanted to savor this moment with them. Perfect. A band of hot emotion wrapped around his chest. "I love you, too," he whispered.

"Ahem."

Katryn slid her hand out of his pants, and he groaned at the loss of contact. His eyes snapped open. She rose on tiptoes to kiss his throat before turning to Baleel with a small smile. He saw Adriana follow Baleel inside the room. He fought a growl and the urge to order them out of the temple so he and his mates could finish what they'd started. Both wore secretive, slightly smug grins, and he narrowed his eyes at them.

Katryn lifted her eyebrows. "Yes?"

"I'm going with you to take you to the ship," Adriana burst out, her smile nearly eclipsing her pretty face.

Baleel cocked an eyebrow at her. "You should stay here and let me take them."

Adriana folded her slim arms. "You need a fifth person to take all of their things, too. And you can't stop me. I'm going, too. I want to meet the mermaid ambassador and the weretiger monarchs before they leave."

"Be it on your head, then, when Yola finds out." He rolled his eyes



and turned back to them. "I've arranged to take dune racers to get to the ship before it takes off. Have you very many things?"

"All of it is still packed from the move into the matriarchy. I wasn't ready to call it home yet, so..." Katryn shrugged. "We are ready."

Adriana smiled at her. "You're going home, cousin."

Katryn looked up at Nadir, then at Tarkesh. Her face softened, and she leaned deeper into his embrace. Contentment wound through his chest. This was exactly how it should be. The three of them, for the rest of their days. Together. He knew it to his very bones. Then Katryn spoke the words that summed it up for all three of them.

"I'm already home."

**The End**

**Author Bio**

Crystal Jordan only began writing about a year ago, after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be consumed by homework. What started as a hobby has quickly become a new career. She now writes paranormal, futuristic, contemporary, and erotic romance. Additionally, she is a member of RWA and its erotic romance chapter, Passionate Ink. She also belongs to the award winning author's resource website and forum RomanceDivas.com, where she serves as a moderator and Paranormal Co-Liaison.

[www.crystaljordan.com](http://www.crystaljordan.com)