



ANY ORDINARY DAY

Laura Bacchi

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Dedication

To Jasmine Rowe and Mat Twassel. Thank you both for your time, feedback, and most importantly your friendship.

Chapter One

“Get that piece of shit outta the way! Schmuck...”

Fuck you too, buddy, I wanted to scream, but I wasn't the screaming type. If I was, my throat would've given out long ago, screaming at my asshole boss, my unethical mechanic, my string of shitty exes... The list went on and on, so I kept it all inside. Let it roll off me like I was rolling my Yugo right now through Monday morning rush hour on the Williamsburg Bridge -- uphill -- toward Manhattan while passing cars honked and their drivers mocked my choice of vehicles. Trust me -- the Yugo was a last resort, not a choice. I tried to push the crappy hunk of metal out of the way as fast as I could, but most people wouldn't let me move to the next lane. By the time I reached the far right, the pits of my work shirt were dripping wet.

I looked at my watch. It would be at least an hour before anyone bothered to stop and offer me a ride. Even the cabbies ignored me. I'd call a tow, but, with two days till payday, that wasn't exactly an option. No, the best I could hope for was a New Yorker with an actual heart to give me a lift, and pray he or she wasn't a freak or an axe murderer. I dug through the trash on the passenger seat for my cell phone, but it was nowhere in sight. It wasn't anywhere, not under the floor mats, not in the back. I checked my watch again and forced

myself to relax against the lumpy head cushion. My dickhead supervisor would be calling soon -- once I heard the ringtone, I'd find it. Until then, I turned on the radio. At least that still worked.

A few minutes later, the familiar beat of Beck's *Loser* filled the air. The air outside the car. I looked out the open window. The phone was ringing away two lanes over. Must've dropped from my pocket while I pushed the car... I could've gotten out and risked weaving through the slow-moving traffic, but I knew better. With my luck I'd be down within seconds, broken pelvis, fractured skull, you name it. So I sat there and watched while the cars made their way across the bridge and over my phone. It rang until a vegetable truck changed lanes, flattening it into the road with a barely audible crunch.

I had to laugh, mostly because I kept picturing my boss under the truck instead. I also laughed because I'd just bought that damn phone, and had decided to save a few bucks by not getting any insurance with the plan. When your name is Paul Murray, you should always buy the fucking insurance.

Some other unfortunate bastard was getting honked at now. I checked him out in my rearview mirror, held in place by duct tape, and did a double take. The guy pulled in behind me. I checked my watch. Twenty-one minutes -- a new record. The guy walking toward me had a Jag. A goddamn Jag. His eyes met mine in the mirror. I'd never seen irises that green. He smiled.

I was too stunned to smile back. My cock filled my khakis. I tore my eyes from the mirror to be sure this wasn't a mirage of some sort. He was real. He leaned down to rest his arms on the car door. We were close enough to kiss. When his hand reached in to shake mine, I took it.

"Darrien Avanti," he said. "Need a ride?"

With you? Hell, yeah. "Paul Murray," I replied. "And yes, a ride would be nice."

I didn't let go of his hand. As sappy as it sounds, the touch was electric. I pressed my palm closer...

"We should go," he said, and pulled his hand away.

I grabbed my sack lunch as he opened my door then led me to his ride. The Jag smelled like heaven. I inhaled and buckled up.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

To your place, I wanted to say. But I behaved. "My work's right off of Allen."

He started the engine. "What do you do, Paul?"

"Inventory management for a restaurant-supply place. Not too exciting, I know. You?"

"I'm just here on business."

He didn't say what kind of business, and I didn't probe. Probably a hit man, knowing my luck, with a dead body or two wrapped up nice and tight in the trunk. I took another long look at him. The suit, the tie... All of it top drawer. His dark brown hair, cut short and perfectly in place like the rest of him, refused to wilt in the summer heat, and he hadn't broken a sweat while outside getting me. He grinned under my scrutiny. His teeth were so damn white they glowed. He seemed dangerous. And I don't do dangerous. I do safe, because anytime I've hooked up with a bad boy, well, things get bad.

"Why'd you stop?" I asked.

"Because you needed help."

Yeah, right. He stopped because he was here on business and he'd seen the ragged sticker with the yellow equals sign on blue clinging to my bumper for dear life. He stopped because he wanted something easy, with no strings.

We finally crossed the bridge, and he turned onto Allen Street. A car left a space just as we eased up to my work.

"Wow," he said. "Must be my lucky day."

Mine too, I thought, because when I rose up out of the car, he asked when I got off and if he could take me to dinner. I glanced down to meet those eyes. My cock grew another inch.

“Six,” I told him, because bad boy or not, he could take me anywhere.

Chapter Two

If you must approach a surface dweller, please use extreme caution; they are aggressive creatures, and they often smell.

-- from "Survival Above Ground" in *The Book of Palia*

I patted the book in my jacket pocket and smiled. Paul did smell...incredible. And he didn't appear to have an aggressive bone in his tall, well-made body. I couldn't help but wonder what else the text flush against my pounding heart had gotten wrong while I drove through streets choked with cars and pedestrians in this thriving surface city called New York.

Technically it was against the rules to get involved with Top Landers. There have always been breaches in the Earth's surface that lead from our world to theirs up above, but we're not supposed to make contact. Not if we can help it. But the damn breaches were my reason for being here in the first place. I'd been sent to do a job and do it cleanly with no Top Landers the wiser to our existence in the sweltering depths of the Palian Middle Lands below.

I knew I shouldn't have stopped, but when I saw him get out and push I knew he needed some help. Not with the car, and not because assholes were giving him shit as he tried to get over and out of their way. As I inched closer to his vehicle, I had a feeling he could use a friend, and when I leaned down to shake his hand, his skin on mine told me he needed a little taking care of. Maybe even a lot, because he didn't want to let go.

I liked his voice, too: soft, almost apologetic as he spoke. His sky-colored gaze stayed locked on mine, on me, while the line of his jaw alternated between clenched and slack, like he knew he shouldn't be staring but couldn't help himself. And if he thought I hadn't noticed the hard cock in his pants, well, he was sorely mistaken.

Shaum's words of warning came back to me. *Keep focused, Darrien. No trifling with Top Landers.* But my leader's gaze had stayed on his lover, Zhang Wei, as he spoke. *And trust me, they're damn hard to resist.*

I remembered nodding, completely confident that I could keep my dick in the annoying garments these surface dwellers wore as I hunted down renegade dragons hiding out in the Top Lander's abandoned subway tunnels. The Jorgenis, or "small greens" as we called them, were looking for their own space outside the Middle Lands. Zhang Wei, who hailed from some place named the Middle Kingdom -- obviously a misnomer -- chuckled as I pledged to do the job quickly and return home as soon as possible.

"I have a feeling he's going to find one," Zhang Wei had said to Shaum. "I'll bet you twenty *zakras* that Darrien falls for one, turns him, and brings the guy back here to Palia."

Twenty blowjobs, eh? Both Shaum and Zhang Wei hated to suck cock, so I knew he was serious. Which scared me. And fascinated me too. Shaum had wrinkled his nose at the wager, then spat onto his cavern floor as I thought about how I had yet to meet my mate down here in the steamy underrealms.

The story of how Shaum and Zhang Wei met was the stuff of legends. An earthquake had split the boundaries between our kingdom and that of the Top Landers, and a very

young Shaum had defied the elders to explore the world now open to him. When the sunlight hit his scales, they turned crimson, and a group of men repairing a temple of some sort stopped their work. Some ran away, others knelt in awe, but one brave young man stepped closer. Shaum easily took Zhang Wei as his lover, not the most difficult task when all of China practically worshipped dragons to begin with...

I had seen my fair share of dragon worship here in New York as well. We were printed on shirts, embroidered on jeans, and inked onto arms, thighs, you name it. After watching Paul walk away, I pulled back into traffic and wondered if Paul had any tattoos. Then I wondered what his lean but muscular body would look like without clothes. His skin was pale, like the cream poured into the wretched Earth drink called coffee. His longish hair was as dark as the beans that made the bitter liquid. I pictured him naked and sated in the silken nest of my bed. My cock roared to life in my trousers.

The hotel was close, but not close enough. And it was sterile. Crisp white sheets neatly made. Generic art on the walls pretending to be elegant -- nothing like the murals painted on the cavern homesteads of Palia. My fingers went for my cock. I hadn't had a lover since Torin, and although he was here hunting the Jorgenis with me, he was too high maintenance to deal with right now. I was still recuperating from the way he liked to fight-fuck. Scratches, bruises... I was getting too old for that shit -- I needed a man who knew how to stay still and take it. To let me love him and not struggle for the fun of it.

Paul knew how to take it. Everything about him told me this.

When I got to my room, I was ready to mess up those tidy sheets, give them my sweat and seed before finally falling asleep. Last night had been rough, trudging through garbage to track down the little green fuckers and not finding them till dawn. They'd been drunk and rowdy, which I thought would make for an easy termination.

It had been anything but easy.

I tended to some leftover scrapes that hadn't healed on their own, then dropped my body onto the bed. My cock, still full of blood, snaked up my abdomen. I grabbed it and tugged. Paul's mouth would be soft, his throat pliant and hot. I spat into my palm and slicked my shaft before choking it with both hands. His ass would be tight, especially with a dick like mine... I pumped harder with my arms, Paul's face turning over his shoulder in my fantasy, his gaze peering deep into mine. I forgot my dick. Hell, I forgot myself. All I could think of were those beautiful blue eyes staying with me forever.

I rolled over and groaned into the pile of stiff pillows. Most dragons were mated by their second cycle. This was my third. The urge to make him mine -- in every way -- overwhelmed me. Because he wasn't just a fuck. He was the one. And a Top Lander, no less.

Tread carefully, I told myself. *This is no ordinary mating...*

No, I had a feeling making Paul mine would be anything but ordinary.

I made a mental note to pick up some Earth mouthwash for Shaum. He'd agreed to the wager, and, the way he hated the taste of cum, he was going to need it.

Chapter Three

“Dinner was great. Thanks.”

We’d eaten like kings, a cliché I know, but there was no other way to describe the spread still laid out in front of us. Spices infused my mouth, taste buds exploding with each tangy morsel of vindaloo and every cool bite of mango ice cream afterwards.

“You’re welcome, Paul. How was your day?”

Back down to Earth. I set down my spoon and sighed. “We don’t want to talk about that. The boss, he’s a prick. I’m looking for a new job, if I don’t get fired first.”

Darrien laughed softly, and the small talk faded after that. We sat there, his features unmoving while candlelight licked over his face. He stared at me, took in every detail. I just gulped as quietly as I could while he studied every visible inch of me. What was he looking for? Flaws? I had plenty of those. My gaze faltered. He reached out and caught my wrist.

“I want to go back to your place tonight, Paul. For a little while.”

The strength of his grip undid me. “Sure,” I said. *If I can get up and walk.* My legs had been wobbly all night, and this latest disclosure had turned them completely liquid.

I couldn’t wait -- if the restaurant had been empty, I’d be on my hands and knees begging him to fuck me. I could feel his cock pressing into the split of my ass already, and I

had a feeling he'd take me hard, fast, and dirty. My hole locked up tight then loosened with anticipation. My dick was in agony.

He flagged down a waiter and asked for the bill. I offered to pay my half but was relieved when he told me to put my wallet away. My credit card would be maxed out once I got my car-repair bill unless, like the tow, Darrien had arranged to pay for that too. When we arrived at his car, I hesitated.

He noticed. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I...I want you to know I'm not looking for someone to take care of me."

"Understood."

I was slow to get into the car. I'd heard stories, some rich fucker with a life somewhere else that didn't include you. Maybe even a wife. I'd heard rough stories too. Two guys hook up and one of them ends up battered and torn. He didn't turn on the ignition. He was waiting for me to talk about whatever was on my mind.

I took a deep breath. "I'm usually not a rush-into-things kinda guy. I'm also not a risk taker." I turned to see his reaction. "You know what I mean?"

He didn't answer at first. He just smiled. My questions, or hints of questions, hung between us.

Finally, he spoke. "I did a little research on your car."

This was definitely not the response I expected. "And?"

Darrien laughed. "Anyone who drives a Yugo has a little bit of risk taker in him."

Touché.

"Why don't you ride the bus or subway?" he asked. "You're not claustrophobic or else you wouldn't drive what you do. Is it a control thing? You behind the wheel, leaving for work whenever you want?" His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "You don't strike me as the controlling type."

"I'm not," I whispered back. But he was. I could smell it all over him. Once he got me back to my place, he'd take what he wanted from me.

And I would love every second of it.

His hand touched my temple, then cheek, his fingertips petal soft yet determined as he traced the landscape of my face. I actually shivered. His finger trailed over my lips. I opened for him and lapped at the pad of it with my tongue. The finger went deeper.

"No, you're not the controlling type at all." He forced my head back and added another finger to my mouth. His lips brushed my hair, his words hot mist on my ear and neck. "Show me how you're going to suck me, Paul."

I leaned toward the hand twisting in and out of my mouth. His other hand pressed into my forehead and held me tight. Another finger inside now, all three splaying wide and pushing against my tongue. My right hand snuck down to my dick. I had to unzip, had to relieve my erection from the confinement of my jeans before the zipper became permanently etched into the base of my cock.

His hands retreated. "Let's get you home. The Jag's a rental."

"Don't worry," I whispered. "I'd lick it off the upholstery. For you."

He seemed in control up to that point. Those last words? They got him. They got him good. His gaze burned into mine before he fired up the engine and peeled out of the parking garage. We made it back to my place in record time. Our clothes came off in record time too -- hell, I didn't even stop to turn on a light -- and my cat narrowly missed being hit by a flying jacket, Armani by the looks of it.

"Oh, shit," he said. He let go of me to check on Priscilla. "Sorry, little one."

Priscilla hopped up out of harm's way and settled on the kitchen counter to watch.

"Don't worry," I said. "She's got nine lives."

"Nine lives? Lucky fucker." Darrien chuckled. "We only get seven..."

“Whatever you say,” I whispered. He probably could’ve said anything at that point and I wouldn’t have cared because we were back to the business of getting naked. I led him, stumbling, to my tiny bedroom and let him push me facedown onto the unmade bed. He held me there, one hand circling my wrists above my head like steel, the other exploring the crevice of my ass. I spread my legs as best I could with his leg trapping both of mine. He shifted and the weight of his cock pressed against my ass cheek. The heat of it was like molten velvet on my skin.

“Lube’s in the nightstand. Condoms too.” If they weren’t dry-rotted by now. I hadn’t seen any action in quite a while and prayed I wouldn’t embarrass myself with a one-minute-wonder come...

He reached over to switch on the lamp but said, “I’m not going to fuck you. Not yet.”

Tease. I was ready, more than ready. “Don’t make me wait too long,” I said between gasps.

His teeth nipped at my shoulders, my back, then lower. They sank into the fleshy part of my ass and the tops of my thighs. After his mouth left me, he lifted me, pulling my lower half flush against him before raising my hips toward the ceiling. His tongue, his glorious tongue, flailed over my hole then pressed against it seeking entrance. I nearly splattered the bedspread with cum. The hot slide of that tongue made my cock throb and seep with juice. I went for the liquid pouring out of me. Spread it over the tip of my dick and jerked with abandon. He grabbed my arm.

“Nope. Not yet.” He flipped me over. “What the...?”

“Sorry.” I looked down and covered the scar with my hand and arm as best I could. “Most guys don’t mind,” I said, my voice trailing off when his piercing gaze darted up to mine. He moved my arm away.

“I don’t want to think about you and other guys right now. Not ever.”

Okay, so he was the possessive type. I could deal with that. “I guess I should’ve warned you...”

His eyes went back to the scar, stayed glued to it, his hand hovering above it like he was afraid to touch it.

“I can turn the light off if it bothers you,” I offered. I usually wasn’t too sensitive about it, at least not anymore, but his reaction churned up feelings I hadn’t felt in a long time. I fought the urge to hide it with my hand again.

“How did you come to get this mark?” he asked.

“A bus accident. A bad one. That’s why I drive now. After you’ve been trapped under dozens of bleeding bodies while a chunk of metal rips through your flesh, well, driving seems like a better alternative. Even if it is in a Yugo.”

He ran a finger from right below my ribs to the middle of my thigh, following the almost perfectly straight line there.

“Why the red dragon?” he asked, his thumb lightly caressing the tattoo I’d gotten about a year after the accident.

“I thought it would look cool like that. Like the dragon was popping out from a cloud or hiding behind a rock.”

“Or like a dragon emerging from the earth,” he whispered.

I nodded in agreement. He kept staring. Kept running his finger up and down the length of the scar so tenderly I wanted to cry. I had to do something to lighten the mood. So I kept talking.

“Actually I ran short on cash and couldn’t afford to finish the job.” I laughed but he didn’t. I rambled some more... “I was going to have a front leg stretch up here to cover this part, then let the rest of the body and tail run down my thigh. But the scar tissue is kind of tough, so the ink wouldn’t really hide it anyway. Just camouflage it a bit.”

He still didn't speak. I gently pushed him away and covered myself with the sheet. "Sorry," I said again. "I know it's not a pretty sight."

Darrien started to tug the covers away, but I held them tight. He was stronger than me, though, and in the end I lost. He looked back down at the scar. I felt like a freak. My erection flopped to the side and faded away. Then he kissed the angry red ridge of scar tissue. Kissed it and kissed it until my cock perked back up. *Any second now*, I thought. Any second and he'd be kissing a little to the left, a little lower, until his lips found my shaft.

He gave the gash a few more pecks and rolled off me. His magnificent erection was no more.

"Is it that bad?" I asked. He had to know by now that I wasn't the most self-confident guy. His rejection, or whatever it was, stung like hell.

He turned back to me. Pulled me close. "No, Paul. It's not bad at all. I just..."

Then he kissed me, mouth open wide, tongue probing, lips wet and demanding. He wanted me. I knew he did. But he didn't take it any further than a kiss. When his lips left mine, he glanced at the clock on my nightstand.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go now."

Now? Right now? "You just got here," I protested. "I know you want to fuck me, Darrien. Please stay." I wasn't past begging. Hell, I'd do anything to keep him here.

He left the bed to dress. "I'll be back."

I listened as the sounds of clothes covering up his body broke the uneasy quiet between us. I wanted to get to know that body, touch it and learn it and find out all its secrets. Tonight. And more than just tonight.

"You're special, Paul," he called from the other room. "And I don't want to rush this."

I watched from the bedroom as he found his shoes and gave Priscilla a few good strokes. Wish I could've said the same about me...

"Can I come back tomorrow night?" he asked. "We'll talk, eat dinner."

In another words, we wouldn't have sex. "Sure," I said weakly. If it meant being near him, I wanted it.

He kissed me again and left. I stayed in the bed, sniffed the lingering scent of him on the bedding, and let the dampness slide from my eyes. I cried until Priss came to cheer me up. She purred against my hair and curled into the crook of my arm.

"You cold? Or hungry?"

Her amber eyes revealed nothing. She seemed content just being with me, so I didn't find the wallet until about an hour later when I finally dragged my sorry ass out of bed. It must've fallen from his jacket as it whipped through the air earlier in the evening.

It was a strange-looking thing, more like a pouch really. I was too curious not to snoop, but couldn't make much of the contents: a scroll of some sort and flat chunks of metal in silver and gold, as if he'd bunched up several empty Hershey's Kisses wrappers -- both the plain kind and the almond. I opened the scroll. It was a map that resembled the city subway lines. Green dots speckled the paper, which was thick like parchment. He also had over a grand in cash and a small book bound by hand and filled with a script I couldn't understand.

When I stuffed the things back in the pouch, a bit of string hooked around my finger. I lifted it out and at the end was a small medallion. I held it up to the light. Blue glass in the shape of a dragon sparkled like a stained-glass window. Bright green eyes glimmered in the head of the dragon. I rubbed a finger over the stones. The blue slowly changed colors, turning to a dazzling scarlet as I brushed my thumb over it.

I wasn't sure if I'd ruined it or if it was supposed to do that. I stroked the dragon peeking out from my scar, then put the necklace on. Darrien wouldn't be the wiser, and I'd have it back in the pouch before I saw him next. I guess I wanted a memento of him to keep close to me, to make me feel like I belonged to him.

"God, you're pathetic," I muttered to myself.

I fed Priss, brushed my teeth, and crawled back into bed. Was it pathetic to want to belong to this stranger? I'd known him, what, twelve hours tops? Pathetic, check. Desperate, check. I clutched the medallion around my neck and inspected the color. The dragon was still red. I didn't let go.

I kept it tight in my fist as I cried my pathetic, desperate self to sleep.

Chapter Four

When seeking a mate, avoid the Jorgenis. They are a brutal lot with no respect for Palian laws. Avoid humans as well -- few can understand our ways or want to live below ground. But if you cannot resist, please follow the proper procedures listed below...

-- from "A Guide to Mating" in *The Book of Palia*

"You're late."

"Sorry, Torin. I lost track of time." What the hell had I been thinking, going back to Paul's like that? The minutes seemed to fly by when I was with him -- a good sign -- but I'd forgotten all about meeting my ex to take down the greens. If it hadn't been for the clock by Paul's bed, I would never have left him.

It stunk like shit here in the bowels of a tunnel Torin had discovered last night. He and I walked together, but we didn't keep talking. Not because the Jorgenis might hear us, but because I was too obsessed with Paul, his tattoo, and the sinking feeling that I'd hurt him tonight with my strange reaction to his scar. The first oath of Palian mate-taking was a promise to look out for each other's feelings, to be considerate and loving. I could blame my reaction on being stunned, but frankly that was the easy way out.

I'd hurt him, and for this I would have to apologize.

Torin broke the silence. "What's up? You sense something?"

"No."

Torin wouldn't be jealous if I told him -- we were way past that -- so I blurted it out.

"I met someone today."

"Me, too. Actually, I met a few 'someones' today." His low laugh filled the dank space around us. "There's a bar over on --"

"I don't mean in a casual way, Torin."

The crunch of his boots on the debris below stopped echoing through the tunnel. "You found a mate? A Top Lander?"

I nodded.

"Shit, Darrien." He turned me to face him. "Are you sure about this? Think of the risks. You'd be taking him away from everything he knows. That is, if you can turn him."

"I can turn him." *If he wants to be turned.* I'd been memorizing the steps outlined in *The Book of Palia* and one thing was for sure -- I had a lot of explaining to do the next time I saw Paul.

Torin released my shoulders, a good thing because I suddenly sensed we weren't alone in the tunnel.

"You feel 'em too?" he whispered.

"Yep." *And smell them.* Jorgenis were stinky little fuckers.

"I count three," he said. "About forty *gher* measures up ahead."

I nodded and began to strip. Torin did the same. This time my heart didn't pound when I saw his nakedness. And the upcoming battle had nothing to do with my frantic heartbeat either.

It had everything to do with Paul.

I said a quick prayer to the forefather gods and dug around in my jacket pocket for my amulet. It wasn't there.

"Shit. It must've fallen out..." I'd be okay without the amulet's protection but I was used to it. I took comfort in wearing it around my neck while I fought, in seeing it change colors as the medallion made contact with my skin.

Torin leaned in close, his words barely audible. "What's wrong?"

"My coin keeper is missing. I took off my jacket at the Top Lander's place and --"

"Ah, so you've sampled him!" He laughed softly. "How was he?"

I ignored him and found the plastic bag nestled deeper in my pocket. We stuffed our clothes inside the bag, then did what we do best -- became dragons. The shifting was fast, probably due to the fear and battle-lust pumping through our bodies, but I held back for a moment and studied my changing form in the darkness. How much of the real me could Paul handle? Right now, I was half man, half dragon and it would be the most humanlike I could be while I turned him. Would he be frightened? Would he hate me? The fact that he'd decorated his body with one of my kind meant he could deal with what I truly was... Right?

"Come on, man." Torin nudged me in the ribs. "What are you waiting for?"

I pushed myself into final form, and we trudged onward, the talons of my feet puncturing plastic bottles and who knew what else down below. Dragon skin was supposed to be impenetrable, and I prayed this was true given all the syringes littering the path. Our wings stayed furled -- flying would keep our feet clean but make too much noise. We'd save the airborne acrobatics for the fight up ahead.

The foul odor of the Jorgenis overpowered me -- they were near. Torin grabbed my arm as three pairs of glittery green eyes flickered open in the darkness. We all began to breathe, fast and heavy, stoking up our lungs to burn each other whenever possible during battle. When the heat inside me warmed my throat, I stepped forward.

"On behalf of the elders of Palia, I offer you this one chance to come back peacefully."

“Fuck the elders,” one of them hissed.

“I’ll take it that’s a no.”

A line of flame went straight for my head. I ducked. Young dragons these days had no sense of humor.

They lunged for us, and Torin and I gave as good as we got. Soon the passageway was thick with gray smoke and the unmistakable smell of burning scales and whiskers. Even numbering three, the Jorgenis were no match for two older dragons. We brawled for what seemed like hours amid the ruins of the old tunnel, scorching walls and each other.

It wasn’t until near the end that I realized their advantage over us: they wanted this. We were just doing our jobs, but they wanted to be on their own, and their craving for human flesh was apparently out of control. I could smell the half-dozen fresh carcasses dotting the ground as we fought.

A green lashed out with his tail, catching Torin off-guard and slamming him into the wall. I heard the crack of bones and the soft moan that signaled the start of our retreat. Pulling in every bit of air I could, I shot it all back out and shook my head back and forth, spraying the greens with the best defense I had -- a wall of flame. They scrambled back. Lost their footing. I advanced with careful steps in case more waited in the darkness beyond.

Torin roused and joined me, but his breathing was labored. His tail, however, still worked fine. He gave them his ass, then an ass-whipping they wouldn’t forget in the few brief moments of life they had left. When we got close enough, I grabbed one around the neck. The snap of bone and the ping of scales flying into the walls reverberated through the tunnel. I dropped the lifeless green and ran for the next one, and the next.

Then Torin hugged me from behind as best he could considering the spiked tail there. “Three more down,” he panted.

I wasn’t a particularly religious being, but I said a silent burial prayer for the trio.

“Why do they risk it all?” Torin asked. “Jorgenis only have one life. It’s just not worth it.”

I clasped him on the shoulder. “I have no clue.” I scanned the dead humans around us. “Maybe these Top Landers are tasty critters.”

A naughty gleam shone in Torin’s eyes. “Well, I ate one today, and I must say he was delicious.”

I shook my head. “You’re so bad.”

“You didn’t answer me earlier. Have you tasted yours yet?”

“No,” I answered. “But I intend to soon.”

We walked toward the tunnel’s entrance as silently as we’d come in. After shifting back to human form, we found our bag of clothes and dressed. But before I zipped up my trousers, Torin pushed me to the wall. His tongue bathed my neck with long, seductive strokes. Licking the soot from my skin? No, he wanted something else.

“One last time?” he asked.

“I can’t,” I said and pushed him gently away.

“He’s really the one then?”

“I hope so.”

Torin caught my arm. “You *hope*? You’d better know for fucking sure, Darrien. This isn’t some decision you can make half-assed.”

I shrugged off his arm. “I know. See you in a few hours.” Fights before sunrise were the worst, but they had to be done.

I left him standing there and headed for the surface. I told Paul I wouldn’t see him until tomorrow, but I had to see him now. I had to see him and hold him and tell him the truth about what I was, because tonight I had to know for sure.

Chapter Five

When I heard my door squeak open, I could've gotten up and grabbed the baseball bat under my bed, but my limbs refused to move. Both sleep and misery weighed them down like concrete. *Take what you want*, I thought. *There's nothing worth anything in here*. And I guess after my experience with Darrien, that included me.

The intruder shut the door. Seconds later I recognized the tap of his shoes on the wood floor and opened my eyes. My heart accelerated its pumping. "Darrien?"

"Sorry. I had to come back. I didn't mean to wake you."

I could hear the clothes slipping from his body in the darkness.

"And I'm sorry about..."

"About what?" I asked. Leaving me alone? Not finishing what we started? I couldn't feel anger, though, not when he slid into the bed. He went straight for my tat. His lips weren't tender this time. They were rough and demanding, the heat of his mouth searing my skin like a brand. I remembered the pain of the accident, the hot throbbing there. This was different. His tongue drew a moist line along the ridge.

My hand searched for his shoulder, then his short dark hair. The glow of the streetlights outside gave me enough light to see his eyes when he looked up.

“My reaction to your mark upset you,” he said.

“It’s okay.”

His hand rested on my thigh and crept up closer to my balls. The small circles he made with his fingers had me shifting my hips in the sheets. His hand moved away and his palm pressed deep into my hipbone as he kissed lower. His soft hair brushed against my shaft.

Hands, hair -- I didn’t care which, but I needed touching. He ignored my erection and climbed up my body, his mouth seeking mine. I pulled him close, then let him take the lead. The kiss was gentle. I opened wider and savored the slide of his engorged cock against mine. Our balls met, their furriness teasing and tangling. His sac was as tight as mine, but when it bumped against me it was all softness and rolling and I opened my thighs to invite his legs inside. He lifted the sheet over us and the sweet musk of his scent fanned over me. I closed my mouth to breathe through my nose. To burn that smell into my brain. His palm cupped my cheek, then swept down my neck.

That’s when I remembered the necklace. He broke the kiss.

“This is new.” He lifted the medallion in the dim light.

Not to you. “My turn to be sorry,” I mumbled. “It’s yours. I found it.”

He held the small circle of colored glass to the window.

“I think I messed it up when I touched it --”

“So you looked through my things?”

“It was rude, I know, and I shouldn’t have...”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “What did you think?”

“I...I’m not sure. I just wanted to find out more about you.” With a sheepish grin, I added, “Don’t worry, you’re still a mystery.” I reached back to unhook the necklace, to give it back. But he stopped me.

“It’s yours now. Keep it.”

I felt guilty, but his next kiss shoved the guilt aside. The kiss was fierce, him claiming me with teeth and tongue and breath. He sucked in my bottom lip, gave it a nip, and his crotch rocked over mine, the tip of his cock getting hung up on my belly button. It stretched me there, just like his mouth stretched mine. Made the corners of my lips sting with the pressure. I wanted him to fuck the little dent in my stomach and eased my torso up to keep him caught there. He laughed and wriggled away, then back, to grab both of our cocks. I held still while he slipped his length back and forth along mine, the surfaces pliant, the steel beneath ready blow at any moment.

My hands fingered each rib in his well-toned body before reaching around to his back and higher, until he stiffened. I wanted to grab his shoulders and press harder into him, but he lifted away from me. *Not again...* The sheet brought a rush of cool air over me, chilling the damp spots on my stomach we'd both made. My hand shot out to grasp his enormous cock.

He was faster. His fingers dug into my wrist until I cried out. He let go and moved away from me before leaving the bed completely.

I ran my hand over the warmth he left behind, then balled up the empty sheets in my fist. Maybe I just wasn't his type. Maybe I wasn't anybody's type. But why did he kiss me in the first place? He made the move, not me. Probably because I looked lonely. The way he looked at me, like he could see clean down into my soul. He must've picked up on how needy I felt around him, how badly I wanted him.

Self-pity and I were well acquainted, but this time the sadness hit a little harder. A little deeper. The optimist in me wondered if maybe he wanted to wait -- save the fucking for when we knew each other better. I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow to inhale more of his scent. My cock throbbed, but I didn't dare touch it for fear of exploding all over his side of the bed. Then again, he may not come back. Still, I didn't touch it. I just let the slippery head rub into the sheet and press into my abdomen. That's when I heard the groan in the room beyond. I sat up.

He was panting. I heard a second groan, this one louder, more guttural and needy. My balls drew up into tight nuggets as the sound continued, its sensual echo building into a roar that I swore vibrated the walls and my bed frame and the two-day-old glass of water on my nightstand.

“Are you okay?”

“Paul.”

I heard the command in his voice. And the edge. The lust and the need. I jumped out of the bed, my rock-solid dick leading the way to the kitchen where he stood waiting, his back against the small fridge. His head tipped backward and collided with boxes of stale cereal that spilled to the floor in a symphony of snaps, crackles, and pops. It was dark, but I could see his silhouette. His cock was as hard as mine. He cupped it as if he were proud. And with a tool like that, he should be. I gulped. That monster was now at least twelve inches long, maybe more, and almost as thick as my forearm. I stepped closer. My fingers trembled as they trailed over what he offered. I felt every ridge, every vein, tracing the upward curve of his crown before dropping back down to the shaft.

I got on my knees and touched the slit at the tip of his cock. When pre-cum seeped onto my fingertips, I worshipped him with a lighter touch over the head. His panting was the only sign of his pleasure. I wanted to make him want it. To want me. I nuzzled his sac and kissed it. Then I went lower and kissed his thighs.

My hands grasped his ankles and slowly worked their way up. His calves were taut and muscular with hardly any hair. I massaged the backs of his knees and the contours of his strong thighs hoping to get more of a reaction from him.

When he offered none, I whispered, “Please fuck me.”

He’d been holding back, because when I stood up he grabbed me. Turned me around and pushed me face-first against the fridge door. Not hard enough to hurt but enough to scare me. My heart thundered in my chest. Hell, every pulse point in me throbbed in time

with my heartbeat. The awareness of it heightened my fear, but soon my blood was singing with want as he yanked my hips back toward him.

His thumbs went deeper into my flesh. I opened my mouth to speak, to say “Ease up” or maybe even “Stop.” But I didn’t really want him to stop. I wanted the fucking to be fierce. Sweaty and rough. I wanted the kind of guy-on-guy sex that would leave me aching for days and my ass sore for a whole goddamn month. I had a feeling Darrien wouldn’t disappoint.

“Don’t turn around,” he said.

Fear coiled up inside me again. We hadn’t talked about our pasts or condoms. I didn’t want to kill the mood, but I wasn’t stupid.

“In my bathroom,” I squeaked out. “Second drawer on the --”

“Did I say you could talk?”

I grinned against the freezer door. “You didn’t say I couldn’t.”

That earned me a pop on the ass. The sound and the sting made me gasp, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.

His hand caressed the skin he’d slapped. I gripped the top of the fridge and wiggled into his touch. That got me another swat. My cock lifted higher in ecstasy as his nails raked into my tender skin. The nails seemed...longer. And pointy. The sensation was exquisite. “Don’t move,” he said, and walked away.

I sighed with both relief and longing when I heard him open a bathroom drawer. Hopefully he’d see the lube there with the rubbers. Christ, with his giant cock I’d need every drop in the tube.

He came back and dumped the stuff on the table, then pressed up against me, his cheek to mine, his erection spearing between my legs.

“I have something for that sweet ass of yours, Paul. You want it?”

“Yes.”

I heard him grab the lube, uncap it and squirt some out. The cool, silky liquid coated...my cock. Then my balls. He went back for more and slicked the crevice of my ass over and over -- not inside yet -- just sliding around over my asshole until my knees lost their rigidity. He caught me around the waist and held me tight.

“Ready, Paul?”

“Maybe I should lie down.”

“Not yet. Maybe not ever.” He leaned in close again. “I like you standing up, your ass all tilted up like you’re begging for it. How bad do you want it, baby?”

“Bad. So fucking bad.”

His finger tickled my wet hole. “Show me.”

He held the finger steady as I writhed against him. The long point was gone, thank goodness. He laughed at my efforts. “You can do better than that.”

I pushed backward. The finger danced away. *Such a tease*. But, God, was I loving every second of it.

The next time I tried, he held it still. I pushed harder and felt the ring of muscle there yield. I forced the finger deeper, but decided to torment myself by pulling away, only the slightest bit so I didn’t lose contact. After a few unbearable seconds, I went back for more, impaling myself on his finger until my ass hit his hand.

A finger from his free hand brushed against my nuts. At least I thought it was a finger -- when it reached my cock, it wrapped around my shaft and didn’t stop coiling around me. I looked down, but Darrien gently forced my head back up so I couldn’t see.

“What is it?” I asked. “Some kind of toy?”

He didn’t answer and added another finger to the one thrusting in and out of my ass in a slow grind. His teeth bit into my shoulder, and whatever the hell was curling around my dick kept going, snaking around me until it strangled the entire length like ivy growing out of the ground. It wound up past the tip and I snuck a peek. The freaky thing looked like an

arrow and had a life of its own, flailing around blindly as if searching for something. It nudged my swollen cockhead, then dipped into the pre-cum bubbling from my slit. Went further in. *Holy shit.*

“Stop,” I yelped.

The toy retreated. “Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head.

“Do you trust me?” he asked. I couldn’t answer. Part of me did trust him, and the other part was so on edge I couldn’t think.

“Can you see it in this light?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then watch.”

I willed my heart not to explode and bent lower for a better look. The arrow shape collapsed into a narrow point. It would fit going in, but coming out?

“I would never hurt you,” he whispered. Of course he said this right before biting my other shoulder. But the pain was exquisite. Sweet.

“I want you for my own, Paul. Forever.”

His free hand found my nipple and pinched it. I felt myself falling, getting weaker. Was it the bites?

“Are you some kind of vampire?”

He chuckled. “Not exactly.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. The sleek tip probed my cock once more, but this time I didn’t stop him. It slithered deep inside. I fell backwards. He caught me, and I melted into his body. When the thing filling my urethra slid back out, I groaned in bliss. It went in again, fucking my cock, bringing me right to the edge. His fingers left my ass.

“Please let me come,” I begged.

“I will, but not yet.” The thing responsible for my pleasure squeezed tighter around my cock to choke back any orgasm. “I need to tell you something, Paul.”

“I’m all ears.” Actually, I was all dick at this point... “Just hurry. I’m about to burst.”

A sharp fingernail scraped into the contour of my left shoulder blade, then my right. The scratches drew blood, which dripped down in sticky lines along my back. He lapped it up. I closed my eyes and listened to the soft, liquid sound of his mouth. His finger went lower and stopped right above my ass. Another deep, deliberate scrape there and he was on his knees, licking me dry. The thing on my cock was tugged downward as he cleaned me with his tongue, and my erection strained to break free. I opened my eyes again but my vision was too blurred to see a damn thing. I simply stared into a white nothingness while he consumed me, or little parts of me. And in that moment, I became his, felt myself slipping...as if he were making me whole by doing this.

Just then, a porch light from the building next door blinked on. Darrien hissed with aggravation. That’s when I saw it. Or them, rather. Wings. Big wings, like on a devil, with angular lines and spikes at the bottom of each one. Their shadows covered the entire width of my fridge and parts of the wall behind.

He leaned forward to meet my eyes from his place on the floor. My heart hit the floor too, because his face now had two small horns at each temple. They curved back then stayed flush against his hair and, other than a few zigzags, were straight. He tilted his head as we stared at each other. Another set of horns had erupted from his jaw near his ears. They curved almost to his chin. They were red.

I squinted to see more. All of him seemed red, a shiny iridescent red that made him glow all over. His beautiful green eyes flickered with an eerie luminous sheen; I couldn’t tear my gaze away. When he exhaled, tendrils of faint smoke curled into the space between us. The free hand holding him steady on the ground as he knelt had changed too. Long black talons had replaced fingernails, and his hands were larger.

"I have a confession to make," he said.

No shit. "You're a...demon?" I figured out a long time ago that, given my luck, I'd end up in hell one day, but I didn't think the devil would send someone early...

"Close." He stood up and wrapped his arms around me from behind. "I'm a dragon."

"And you weren't going to tell me this until after we fucked?"

He kissed the back of my neck. As he spoke, his lips grazed my nape and goose bumps scattered over my limbs. "I was trying to. It's hard to say the right thing. I didn't think you'd believe me."

"Um, seeing sure as hell is believing."

He forced a laugh. "Ready?"

For what? I wondered. I glanced down at my erection, still there and waiting. I spread my legs to offer him my ass. His cock nestled between my cheeks and pressed into the back of my balls. He gave a small thrust and I pushed back. Soon his slippery cockhead stroked my balls and rubbed along the stretch of skin between sac and anus. It was heaven.

"Yeah, I'm ready." I waited for him to grab a rubber. If one would even fit...

He threaded his claws or whatever they were through my hair and tenderly pulled back my head. "That comes later. First, I need to ask you something."

"Anything."

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, desperate even. "Have you ever met someone and known that he was the one -- the only one -- for the rest of your days?"

Not until yesterday, I wanted to say. I nodded, my heart full of hope.

"You were meant to be mine, Paul. I need to know, before we take this further, before I make a fool of myself, if you want me as badly as I want you."

"I do..."

His fingers silenced my lips. "Giving yourself to me isn't just about words. In my world, we call it surrendering. I'll take all of you. Your body. Your heart." He kissed my temple. "You'll have to surrender completely to my way of life."

The thing I now assumed was his tail loosened its grip and began to pump my cock on the outside and inside, making me blind with need and unable to stand.

"How can I say no while you're doing that?"

He laughed. "Sorry. Not trying to influence you or anything."

Yeah, right. His fingers returned to my ass as I tried to deal with his revelation and began fucking me again.

"If you accept me, you'll join my kind and come back with me to Palia when my work here on the surface of Earth is done."

"You live underground?"

"Yes."

"Will I like it there?" I asked.

"We don't have cars there," he said. We both laughed. "No shitty jobs either."

I didn't need much more convincing than that, but I still had questions. "What exactly is your 'work' here?"

"Rebel dragons. They don't respect the old ways and the Palian Council. They found an opening in the Earth's surface and apparently like New Yorkers."

"New Yorkers aren't as bad as people think. They --"

"Um, they like them for lunch."

"Ah."

"Your fellow citizens are worried about some crazy serial killer on the loose. If they had any idea..."

I'd seen the headlines. Some maniac slaughtering homeless people. Bodies found in old subway tunnels... A shudder ran through me. "So your business is to take them back and bring them to justice or something?"

"No. My business is to kill them."

My heart lurched. "Like, fight them?"

He nodded against my back.

"You could die, Darrien." I reached back to touch his face.

He placed kisses over my palm between words. "Hell, you can die in rush hour traffic or choke on a Coney Island hot dog, or be killed any number of ways. Just getting out of bed every day is a risk, but one worth taking." He sucked my middle finger into his mouth, then let it go. "If it hadn't been for the renegade Jorgenis, I never would've met you."

"So you want me to do this thing? To surrender?"

"Yes, Paul. More than anything."

The tail inside my cock grew thick. It didn't hurt -- it felt erotic as hell. His fingers left my ass. I heard the rip of foil, the unrolling. I felt the hesitant press of his huge penis against my quivering hole. I opened up, let myself trust and belong to someone.

"Then I surrender."

His cock surged into my ass, and the friction tore at me in the most delicious of ways. He filled me and I rocked into him, with him, while his tail worked its magic on my captive dick. Soon his was pressing in deeper, lifting me up until my feet left the floor. He held me there, with his strong arms and legs keeping me impaled on his cock as he rotated his hips in a steady, sensual roll. But he could only hold me up for so long. I felt him shaking, both from pleasure and the exertion. He worked us down to the floor as he continued to work my ass. To punish it with that amazing cock and plunge farther in. I bumped back into his hips and opened my legs wider.

"More," I begged.

“Oh, sweet, sweet Paul.”

I didn't want him to come, but I knew he'd blow any second the way we were going at it. He collapsed onto my back and sought my balls. Squeezed 'em and stroked. His tail tightened at the base of my cock, probably to delay my climax. I reveled in the wanting of it, and in the sensation of sweat running freely over my body. I wanted to drown in it. And in Darrien and his cum. He reared back into an upright position and sat. I rolled along with him and dropped onto his lap. His cock stabbed up higher inside me.

His talons slashed out at my chest before finding my nipples with the soft pads of his fingertips. When he replaced them with his claws, a jolt of pure carnal heat shot to my groin. I screamed and squirmed and went limp as he bumped his pelvis into my ass.

“I'm the only one who can truly fuck you, Paul. I'm inside your head now. Inside you. Can you feel it? I'm gonna fuck you so raw, baby.”

Gonna? We were way past raw, I wanted to say. And, yes, I was certain he was the only one who could make me feel this way, fuck me this way, but speaking was impossible so I bobbed my head along with his thrusts. He lay back, but didn't take me with him. Instead he held me in place and forced me to do all the work, up and down, side to side... I leaned forward and grabbed his legs for leverage and did the best I could.

His talons scored a path around my ribs to my back, where he'd cut me before. I could feel the puncture. His fingers left my flesh but quickly returned, still moist and probing. Then, instead of emptying his balls inside me as I'd wanted, he pulled out, ripped off the condom, and covered my back with hot spurts of cum.

He put his fingers in it. In me. The claws punctured my skin again. Pierced muscle and bone, but I didn't feel any pain. When the talons retreated, he smeared his juice all over my back. Pressed it into the hole he'd made at the base of my spine. I slid from his lap -- and began to cry.

Darrien covered me with his body. With kisses. His tail retreated.

“Shit. Oh, shit,” he whispered over and over... “You should’ve stopped me.”

I wasn’t sure why the tears came out. Maybe because my back was bloody and his semen was now inside me? I’d always played it safe, and that was the one bit of bad luck I had somehow avoided. Maybe dragons didn’t get HIV. Or maybe that wasn’t why I cried -- perhaps it was the beauty of our joining. I’d never been fucked so thoroughly. Within seconds, fever coursed through me, flushing my face, burning in my joints. It was as if my bones were swelling. Turning inside out. I cringed as bile rose up my parched throat and threatened to leave my body. Somehow I managed to hold back. The most perfect fuck ever, and here I was, doubled over with pain and crying like crazy.

“Something’s wrong, Darrien.” I could barely get the words out.

He didn’t say a thing. He simply kissed my eyelids closed, my lips shut. Then his kisses went south and revived my fading erection. A fever built up in that too. He sucked my cock tenderly at first, letting me recover a bit before taking it in to the base. My cockhead dragged along the back of his scorching hot throat and pressed into the spongy tissue there. His tongue licked around and under. Pushed me back out and started all over again. He breathed. Exhaled on my throbbing helmet and shaft. Breath was hot but not like this. Smoke rose up from his flaring nostrils and curled out from his lips. His palms pinned my hips to the floor. His breath grew hotter.

Panic filled me once more, but the licks, his sweet little loving licks, reassured me. Told me everything would be okay. His steamy sucks grew almost violent as he tugged me with the slightest grip of his teeth or slapped me with his tongue.

“Oh, God!” I cried.

“Your god has nothing to do with this,” he replied between licks. He grabbed my cock and forced it to lie flat against my stomach. “I want you to say *my* name.”

In that moment, I wondered if he really was a demon but I was too ready to come to care. So I said his name. Repeatedly. With all the reverence assigned to God and the angels and the whole heavenly host...

He rewarded me with the tip of his tongue on the underside of my crown. Small circles massaged the spot until I squirmed in a pool of sweat and what was left of his semen. The tongue went higher. His hand collected my tight balls and gave a squeeze. Then his nails grazed my sac. I couldn't hold back. My cock jumped from his grip and quivered as a rope of white shot out like a fountain between us before splashing over my gut.

His fingers ran through the cum, then he tasted me. He sucked every drop from his fingertips like he was loving it, or maybe loving me. After cleaning me off completely, we lay there still as stones -- until the shaking began. Mine. He carried me to the bed and swaddled me with covers. I heard him curse under his breath and looked up. He was staring at my clock.

"Sorry," I said, teeth chattering, body convulsing with both heat and something ice cold.

"Shhhh," he whispered. "I shouldn't have... No, I definitely should have. Oh, hell. I don't know... I just pray you can handle what I've done to you."

He crawled into bed with me and rubbed me down with feathery caresses. His body heat took away the icy tingles prickling my lungs and skin. Hanging on to consciousness was a fight I couldn't win, so I let sleep take me. Dreams of flying, of dark tunnels and others like Darrien filled my mind. In these visions, I could see fire and rocky earth and the sparkle of gems embedded in the walls of a deep chasm.

"What do you see, Paul?"

Was he speaking in the dream, or in real life? I couldn't know for sure, so I told him about the pictures feeding my mind and the rich scent of compacted soil. And fire, I could smell that too, and feel the burn and taste it... I grunted when a cramp lurched tight in my

abdomen and refused to uncoil. A hiss escaped my lips. I blinked. Small ribbons of smoke curled over us. My mouth tasted the sulfur. Practically chewed on it, the stench was so thick. But Darrien's lips covered mine and took away the taste. A field of bright yellow flashed before my eyes, and then nothing. No awareness at all.

* * * * *

"I don't want to leave, but I have to go. My work..." He made to get up, and I found the strength to grab his arm, which had returned to normal size. "I want to stay. You have no idea," he said. "Bad timing on my part. You're all right now. Really." He sighed and stood before finding his clothes. When he was dressed, he came back and kissed me, the kiss of old, familiar lovers. I grabbed for his neck, but he backed away. "I'm late," he said. "I need to hunt the greens."

I glanced at the clock. It was almost three.

"Okay," I mumbled. My words were groggy. Far away. "But you'll be back?"

"Before you leave for work. I promise. Keep the bed warm for me."

I laughed weakly. He didn't seem like the bed type. The kitchen linoleum as he had a few minutes ago, up against the wall, yeah. I had a feeling that getting fucked by him on my crappy mattress and rails would have us on the floor in no time, sheets torn to shreds.

"Let me come with you, Darrien. I'm worried about you."

"This isn't your battle to fight. And I'm good at what I do. Everything will be fine."

Him or me, I wanted to asked, but he kissed me, one last kiss then he shut the door quietly on his way out. As I listened to his steps in the outside hallway, I knew I had to follow. My strength was returning, or maybe the need to keep him safe forced me to get up, throw on my clothes, and hit my neighbor up for a ride. Thad wasn't too thrilled with my request but he did it anyway -- and in record time. We hauled ass outside to his car and caught up to Darrien's Jag, always careful to stay a half a block behind until it stopped.

I opened the door. "Thanks, man."

“You owe me, muthafucker.” Thad sounded gruff, but he was smiling. “Bout time you got some.”

Some? How about the fuck to end all fucks? “If you only knew...”

I hopped out and took off running to catch up. The whine of machinery sounded in the distance; that and the grinding of metal near the docks to the east masked my footfalls. Except for the occasional cluster of winos, the streets were deserted. And in a place like the Big Apple, the relative quiet and the lack of people were downright creepy.

Darrien took a left. I struggled to catch up so I wouldn’t lose him, but was too late. When I turned the corner, he was nowhere in sight. Warehouses and industrial buildings lined the road. Rows of darkened windows stared back at me blankly. No answers there.

So I listened, really listened. My heartbeats and pulse grew louder; they matched the tempo of a hydraulic machine somewhere in the distance, but I ignored all this and went deeper. Then I sniffed the night air. Oil. Old brick and mortar. The ashy scent of cobwebs and the dank stink of mildew assaulted my senses. I could pick up on the smell of concrete underfoot and the rubber of my well-worn sneakers. The night seemed alive with the stirrings of crickets. The growl of a dog at least three blocks away rumbled in my chest.

Incredible. My whole being was on high alert with an awareness that threatened to overwhelm me, swallow me up, and never spit me back out. I caught a shadow to my right, low to the ground but ominous nonetheless. It was the shadow of an ant. I studied it for what seemed like an eternity, watching its little legs move, stop, move some more. Its antennae whirled around. Seeking food?

Seeking... I didn’t have time for this. I needed to find Darrien.

The ping of glass hitting the sidewalk had me running again. I turned the corner heading for the source of the sound and dropped back as an entire story of windows shattered before me, releasing cries and flames to the outside. I scrambled back as a spray of green and orange fire hooked back in on itself and nearly caught me in the process.

Apparently I wasn't as alone as I'd thought out here -- three men came running out of an abandoned building for a closer look.

The tallest one asked, "What the fuck was that?"

"I dunno," I said and backed away, hoping they'd take the hint. Whatever was going on in there was dangerous, plus I didn't want them to see Darrien. I could just see the headlines: "Deadly Demon Creature on the Loose!" Shit like that would have the authorities combing the city, which they were probably doing anyway because of the deaths caused by the other dragons Darrien had talked about.

Instead of moving away, the men crept up to the window.

"You don't want to go in there." My words sounded calm, although I was anything but. *Get out of here, you idiots*, I wanted to scream. Because I needed to be in there, to see what was happening for myself.

"I can't see anything," one said.

The three of them turned my way and slowly walked toward me. It didn't feel right, their harsh stares on me. Knuckles cracked, sleeves were pushed up... I could run, but where to? I was lost in a maze of empty streets filled with buildings that all looked the same.

When the tall one reached me, he punched me in the gut. "Gotta wallet, fucker?"

I shook my head and got more punches. I'd never been the fighting type; I'd be the first to run away from the slightest whiff of conflict -- and a chicken-shit guy like me made for a bully magnet in high school. But I didn't turn tail and get the hell out of Dodge.

"You don't want to do this," I said.

A fist struck my jaw. They weren't going to listen, and I didn't have time for this bullshit. Adrenaline raced through me, and the sickly feeling I'd experienced earlier tonight followed on its heels. Yellow light flashed before me again as hands and legs pummeled me, knocked me to the ground. I rolled over to protect myself, but pain in my muscles -- not

from the blows -- raged through me. My lungs burned, and the sensation of my toenails being too long for my shoes confused me. The boot upside my head didn't help either...

The weirdness inside my body began to show on the outside; when my hand shot out to cover my head, it collided with a bump on my jaw bone. And the throbbing in my temple wasn't from a boot. I wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but I knew what was happening -- I just needed it to happen faster, before I got my ass kicked in triplicate.

I got to my knees. My jeans were tight as hell, and the steady pop of my shirt seams sounded like a roar in my sensitive ears. I kicked off my shoes.

"There goes his stash!" one guy yelled. "Grab the other one!"

While the pricks tore apart my shoes in search of money I didn't have, I took a kick to the chest from the remaining attacker. *Asshole!* I yelled. But the words didn't come out. Not as words. They came in a rush of heat and fire. The guy's crotch lit up in flames.

I shouldn't have felt guilty, but I did. "Sorry, man," I tried to say, but another stream of flames shot out of my mouth. This time I torched his hair and face as he doubled over in agony. He slumped to the ground.

Instead of helping their friend, the other two thought it was a good idea to start wailing on my ass again, so I stood to defend myself. When I turned to face them, I could see the horror in their expressions. They didn't move. My head got that seasick feeling as my equilibrium tried to kick in, tried to make sense of the shifting of bones and the stretching of muscle inside my skin. I was a good three feet taller than they were now, and getting bigger by the second. My clothes slipped to the ground in tatters. Finally, the two men ran away, leaving their buddy in a fetal position on the road. I scooped up his shuddering body and said another apology -- silently this time -- and stashed him in a narrow alley. He reached out for me. Like a cowboy with a lame horse in an old western, I wondered if putting him out of his misery was the most humane thing to do.

Just a soft whisper, I thought as I bent to where he lay. Smoke floated out from my nostrils. He gasped. I pried his mouth open wider and whispered again. He coughed and gagged, but I kept my trembling hands in place and breathed into the now-featureless face. I'd melted him like plastic.

I whispered apologies now, and prayers. A tear slipped down my elongated nose and disappeared into the gray mist with a hiss. The man's grip loosened, and when his form went limp, I let go.

But I didn't have time to dwell on my regret -- a crash shook the building, and I ran to find an entrance. The broken glass beneath my feet crunched but didn't hurt. I scaled the façade of the building with ease, my talons holding tight to chinks in the mortar and part of an archway over the doorway. Looking down, I saw the swing of a tail. My tail. It was fucking huge, with spikes along the top of it and a cluster of vicious points at the end. Darrien hadn't looked anything like this... The panic in my brain reached an all-time high.

I returned to climbing until I reached the floor where the action was. That's when I heard the sound of a radio -- a police radio -- and the purr of an engine. I couldn't tell how far away the car was, and the chunks of glass below would be a dead giveaway that something was up. *Time to see what these lungs can do*. I huffed and I puffed. The glass disintegrated, and only a line of soot remained where I'd done the cleanup. Hopefully the cops wouldn't notice the busted out windows; there were plenty around on other buildings, so I was optimistic.

The car turned the corner. Headlights flashed in the road -- they were closer than I'd thought. I glanced up. Scrambling up ten stories to the roof wasn't an option, and by the looks of the blown-out windows, my new body wouldn't make it through one even with a bucket of lube. My claws tightened on the building.

Then it came to me... I scrambled back downward, crowding my massive legs together until I could fit on the curved archway over the door. The headlight beams illuminated the

street below and rolled closer. Slower. I struck a pose, held my breath, and hoped for the best.

The car stopped, and the whirl of a window coming down buzzed in my ears. Not good. A breeze hit my scales -- also not good. I heard flapping behind me. Wings. Slower than Memorial Day traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike, I clenched the muscles in my back to gradually lower them flat against me.

"You can't smell that?" asked one cop.

His partner sniffed, then snorted out a laugh. "Buddy, when you gonna learn that no alarm means no problem?" His window went back up.

But the other officer wasn't ready to leave. From the corner of one eye, I could see him inspecting the place. He pointed at me. "You remember that?"

His partner leaned over. "No."

My heart pumped harder. If my lungs didn't get relief soon, I might exhale like a flamethrower. *Go on, guys. Go get some damn doughnuts and leave me alone.*

Then the cop stopped pointing. "Kinda neat," he said.

The other one nodded. "Probably one of those Chinese importers."

"Yeah." They stared at me for another few seconds, then, "Want some coffee?"

"You know it. Let's roll."

The car began to move. So did my feet. Sweat coated my paws or whatever the hell they were called, causing my feet to slip down the rounded arch. I held on as best I could until the car reached a few blocks away -- then I fell to the ground with a thud.

The doors of the building opened. My heart slammed in my chest with joy when Darrien stepped out naked, a plastic trash bag in hand. A second later, my heartbeat skidded to a cold, hard stop. Darrien didn't come out alone. The man beside him had his arm around my lover in an intimate embrace, and his lips grazed Darrien's temple.

"You were great," said the man. They both stopped.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked.

I ignored him and waited for Darrien to say something. He stood there, slack-jawed and still. Maybe he didn’t realize who I was...

“What did you do to me?” I asked, my voice low to keep the fire under control. I got to my feet -- make that hind legs. My fall had dented the concrete and part of the road.

Finally, Darrien spoke. “When I talked about surrendering to my way of life... Oh, fuck.” Darrien covered his face and swayed backwards until his body collided with brick in an audible thump. Then he crumpled to the floor. “I thought you understood,” he whispered through his half-sheathed talons.

The stranger crouched down to give him comfort. “Hey, it’s okay. It’ll be okay.”

Darrien peeked at me through his fingers.

“See.” The man pointed at me and smiled. “You turned him. It was meant to be.”

I looked down to examine myself. I felt stronger, bigger than life. “It *is* pretty cool,” I said -- with my head turned away.

I crawled up the wide stairs to be near Darrien. Afraid to speak at such close range, I nudged my head into his lap like a dog. He petted my nose and laughed.

Then I turned to the other man and hissed.

“Hey!” they both yelled.

I narrowed my eyes at the guy and forced a rumble from my chest. He backed away into the building.

“Get him under control,” he called from inside. “Now!”

Darrien’s fingers trailed over my head and down my long, long neck. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered. “Absolutely beautiful.”

I blinked, still too scared to talk.

“Are you ready to change back?”

I nodded.

He stroked my ears, then ran his hands over my horns and the tusky things at my jaw. “Relax, babe. Take a deep breath...” He turned my head toward the street. “And let it all out. Feel your muscles contract...”

It was working. Thousands of tiny scales shimmied and rattled like dry leaves in the wind. I could feel their hardness become supple and soft as they tickled the flesh beneath and slowly retracted. My bones began to compact. The sensation was strange, like a huge stretch in reverse. The glorious tail behind me shriveled up like a spent erection and disappeared into a prickly patch of skin above my ass. When I became the same size as Darrien, I finally trusted myself to speak.

“Who the hell is he?” I spat. Cloudy gray steam flared out of my nose, but no fire.

A gentle *tsk tsk* left his lips. “You didn’t strike me as the jealous type, Paul.” Then he kissed me soft and quick. “He’s just an old friend. His name’s Torin -- and you have nothing to worry about.”

Torin peeked out from behind the door, and a grin grew wide between his tusks. He joined us on the steps. “You have excellent taste, Darrien.”

My face went red at his compliment. Well, redder than it already was. His eyes stayed on me, though, long after my blush went away. I watched as he and Darrien shifted completely into human form, rifled through the plastic bag, which held their clothes, and dressed. I became human too and found my keys in what was left of my jeans. Darrien gave me his silk boxers to wear, and his suit jacket. I watched Torin watching me. *Old friends, my ass. This one’s trouble.* Torin grinned as if he could read my mind.

“We need to get out of here,” I said and took Darrien’s hand. Led him to the alley. “I didn’t mean to... He and two others jumped me and --”

“You guys go.” Torin nodded down the street. “I’ll take care of it.”

A few steps later, I heard the blaze rip through the narrow alleyway where the dead man lay. Tears blinded me, and Darrien held me tighter as we walked.

“You’ll get over this,” he said. I wasn’t so sure about that. Maybe in time...

When we reached the spot where he’d parked the Jag, I wasn’t surprised to find it gone. But he slipped his hand into the jacket pocket and found his key fob. One press of a button, and a large black panther -- no, make that jaguar -- emerged from an alley with a half yawn, half growl.

What the hell? I turned to Darrien.

He grinned. “Dragons aren’t the only things that shift.”

Chapter Six

Should you, by some unfortunate turn of events, end up with a Top Lander for a mate, be prepared for violent relations. Humans rarely like to give up control in their pairings.

-- from "A Guide to Mating" in *The Book of Palia*

I put the Jag into first and saw Torin racing toward us. He opened Paul's door and crammed his body into the seat, then rearranged my mate on top of his lap.

"Behave, Torin," I warned. "Don't you have a bar to go to or something?"

He chuckled. "Tonight I thought I'd stay in, get to know Paul, that kind of thing."

"Dvastins mne gonnaversa," I hissed. *He's all mine. No sharing.*

Torin clucked his tongue, the Palian words slipping from his mouth like the syrupy nectar of bees. "Come on, Darrien. He's so sweet. So tender. It would be fun for him, I can tell."

"Back off, Torin."

His hand crept up Paul's thigh. Paul looked at me with wide eyes.

“Um...” He stopped Torin’s hand before it slid any higher. I admired his resistance, but it was hard to miss the pink tip of his erection thrusting out of my boxers.

Torin hadn’t missed that either. “Maybe he wants to play,” he said. In English.

Paul squirmed -- adorably, I might add -- in Torin’s lap. “No offense,” he mumbled, “but I’m tired. I’ve had a helluva night.”

Was he being polite or telling the truth? Paul’s place was only a few blocks away -- I’d find out soon enough.

“Want the Jag tonight?” I asked Torin. He nodded, and Paul and I left him to his own devices a little while later.

I hustled Paul up to his apartment and locked the door behind us. “I’m not too tired,” I said.

He laughed, and I was on him, shifting so fast I could barely feel my body change. He was a quick study, and he shifted along with me until we reached the point of half human, half dragon. It was my favorite form -- big cock, a hint of a tail, and plenty of muscle to get a little rough without hurting him. With him my size, I knew he could take a little biting, a tight grip... And his ass? This time, I wouldn’t hold back. Not a damn bit.

I grabbed the *gvechis* at his temples, gripped ’em tight and forced him to his knees. His talons scraped at me, needy and frantic, as he started to draw my cock into his merged-out jaw. It was roomy and hot, just how I liked it. I pulled him closer to me, his lower *gvechis* jabbing me in the crease between torso and thigh. I bent forward in an arc to force myself deeper. He took me in to the base, his talented tongue never stopping as it writhed around the sides of my shaft and bathed me in a mix of hot saliva and steam. I let him go and held tight to the counter behind me. To many of my kind, sucking cock was a weakness, something to wager as Shaum and Zhang Wei had. I stroked his head and studied its bobbing. Our gazes met. No, this wasn’t a weakness; it was gift. Whoever wrote the chapter

on mating in *The Book of Palia* obviously never had sex with a Top Lander -- at least not one like Paul.

His eyelids lifted, not all the way, but as if he were mesmerized. I saw the love there, his desire to please me. He startled at my growl, then smiled, his lips curling up from my erection before clamping down on me. Suction tugged at my cock, and he swallowed. My cockhead grazed the slick ridges at the back of his throat. He made sounds now, low groans of pleasure, but kept his hands on my legs. His whole body joined in the worship of my phallus with twists of his neck and a wriggling ass on his ankles. His breath caressed my flesh in ever-increasing gusts. To see him getting off on getting me off brought me to the edge of release. I pushed him away, pushed him down to the floor where I spun him round to pin him there with my weight.

My teeth sank into his shoulder in a primal show of dominance. The sparse scattering of scales along his back dripped with moisture. He didn't dare move. He didn't want to. I released him, pressed my mouth to his ear and asked, "Who do you belong to, Paul?"

When he didn't answer, I spread his legs with mine and slid my half-formed tail between his ass cheeks, around his balls.

"Who, Paul?"

"You. Only you," he whimpered.

My tail teased his sac with a few quick lashes. He cried out. I leaned over him to meet his gaze and let my tail flail the thick pouch of his balls like a whip. He looked at me as if in a daze and moaned. Torin would never let me do this.

I had picked well.

I sent my tail to the base of his balls and coiled it around the sac. His balls were drawn up tight against his groin, but I managed to succeed. My tail reeled in its bounty, stretching him, making him thrash with indecision about whether to feel the slow burn of elongation or follow the tugging with his body to get some relief. I relaxed my tail, listened to his sigh,

and brought his hips up as I knelt behind him. The scent of his balls made me heady. I pried his bottom wide open, positioned my cockhead at the rippling pink rim of his ass, and tugged on his sac again. The tip of my cock, slippery with juices, pressed in at the surface. His hole contracted, kissing the spike quickly before I gave my tail a firm yank. He opened up to me, the heat of his ass crashing in on my fleshy spike like a vise warmed by fire. The tight walls squeezed my erection, choked it, made me never want to leave. But Paul was grinding now, without my tail to guide him. His brazen ass impaled itself on my cock again and again, the compacted balls buffeting mine in a call to action I couldn't ignore.

I pressed forward. "Almost there," I whispered. "Another inch and you'll have all of me."

I jerked his hips back roughly. His moans grew louder, and I watched as his ass swallowed all of me. Paul began to gyrate, pumping me greedily. I tapped his taut ass.

"Trying to steal control, eh?" I teased. "I'll teach you."

Yeah, right. With me packed completely in his ass, control was the last thing I had at the moment.

My tail uncurled from his scrotum, grabbed his cock, and held him still. He grunted in frustration.

I laughed. "What's wrong, baby? You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes. Please, yes."

He was begging now. I could hear it in his voice. He clenched the circle of muscle tight around me in an attempt to keep the action going. The sheath of his ass worked my length, milked it, until I nearly gave in.

"I think *you're* fucking *me*, Paul. Don't move, and let me show you how it's done."

With that, I released his cock and rammed into his sheath with all my strength. He slid forward on the floor covered in our perspiration. I slammed into him again.

"Oh, Christ in heaven," he groaned.

“He can’t help you now. It’s just my cock and your ass.” I reared back until the very end of my rounded knob lay inside him. “And what an ass it is, Paul. So hot and tight...”

I looked down at our joining, at myself disappearing into him, making us one. My tail doubled back to capture both our sacs. It looped around us and held us together. Then there was only rocking, and our slow, steady rhythm propelled us forward and back. The tunnel of his flesh contracted around me, keeping me in place, marking time with our heartbeats. Pushing me over the edge. He must have felt my spasms, because he increased the flexing to give me more pleasure. I fell onto him, filled him with my cum, then took him flat and sprawling to the floor. But I didn’t take my leave of his body; instead I flipped onto my back and cradled him snug against me. My hands sought his erection and cradled that too. I used the same languid tempo to stroke his cock, and when he finally came, I turned his face to mine.

His eyes left me breathless. Like my first memory of ocean water, they were clear and warm, pulling me in deeper.

“*Dvastins mne*,” I whispered for the second time that night, right before the sun came up. *All mine*.

Chapter Seven

“Isn’t that, like, your fifth cup, Paul?”

Too exhausted to speak, I nodded at Sherice, my boss’s secretary, and fumbled with the sugar packets. Between all the sex, excitement, and lack of sleep last night, I’d barely kept my eyes open this morning, and when I did, all I saw was Darrien’s face. I must’ve covered the fatigue pretty well, because Sherice and a few coworkers said I looked happy -- happier than they’d seen me in a long while. I’d smile and blush, then the teasing would begin.

Back at my cubicle, Sherice’s head popped out of nowhere. “So how big was he?” She held up a stapler. Then a ruler.

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” I answered.

“You’re blushing, baby.” Her fingers moved along the ruler, stopping at eight inches, then nine. “I bet he’s got a ten-inch dick thick as my wrist.”

She studied my cheeks, now flame hot. The slow burn scorched me from ear to ear and chin to forehead. I shook my head and pointed upward. Her eyebrows shot up.

“Eleven inches?”

I nodded -- because she wouldn’t believe me if I told her the truth. And the questions didn’t end there. She wanted to know all about him. What was his name? How did I meet

him? What did he do for a living? Did he have a brother -- a straight one? I kept the details as vague as possible.

Until Darrien surprised me by showing up to take me out to lunch. He charmed them all. Well, except my boss, Dickhead Dawson. The prick didn't even bother to say hi; he simply reminded me that lunch was thirty minutes whether I ate by myself or with my butt buddy. I clamped my hand down on Darrien's mouth to keep him from saying something I'd have to pay for later -- and to stop him from torching Dawson's ass.

After kissing Sherice's hand, he took mine. "Indian okay again?" Darrien grinned. "It's my favorite, if you haven't noticed."

I grinned back. "Oh, I noticed. I'd love to. And that reminds me..." I pulled out the crumpled list I'd been working on all morning when not daydreaming about last night.

"What's that?" he asked.

"My questions."

"Ah."

We left the office, and he led me to a restaurant. After we ordered, he leaned back in the booth. I knew the answer but asked anyway. "We're not going to make it out of here in a half an hour, are we?"

"Not if I can help it. First question."

I took a sip of tea and fired away. "How many are there of you?"

"A few hundred."

"How did you come to be?"

He bent forward and lowered his voice. "I was hatched. From the Queen herself." He sensed that his answer stirred up more questions. "Palia does have male-female matings, but most pairings are either like us or female-female. The Queen will brood -- for a fee. Think of it like a queen ant."

"Got it." I wondered if he wanted children. He beat me to the punch.

“How do you feel about the pitter-patter of little dragon feet?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe one day.”

He nodded. “I’m content without them, but would like to. If you agree, of course.”

I smiled. For something done on a whim, at least one major thing was settled.

“And how old are you?” I asked.

He had to think about that one. “I’m not sure exactly.” Our waiter brought our *naan*, so he mulled the question over as he nibbled. “Maybe this will help... I was around when our leader took a lover from China. The Tang dynasty, I believe.”

The list of questions drifted from my hands. He retrieved it, his fingers brushing over mine as he handed it back. My cock twitched at his touch. I wondered if anyone would notice if we both disappeared into the bathroom. Then again, the way we had sex, people would notice.

I pulled on my pants to give my cock some relief. *Moving on...* “How long do you typically live?”

“Some dragons live forever. It all depends.”

“What about me?”

I wasn’t born this way. What if I only had fifty years and he’d have to go on without me for centuries more?

“You’re the real deal now.” He leaned farther across the table. “Remember what I said that first night? About knowing you were the one -- the only one -- for the rest of my days?”

“Yes.” *How could I forget?*

He smiled. “We’re in it for the long haul, babe.”

My insides went warm -- and it wasn’t from the curry. But another question nagged at my brain. “And Torin?”

His smile vanished. “What about him?”

“You two seem pretty close.”

“We were. We still are. But not like that. Why?” His smile returned, and relief washed through me. “And here I thought you were going to ask him to fool around with us.”

The possibility had entered my mind, but I shook my head. “Wow, this dish is hot.” I gulped down half my tea to kill the flush heating up my face.

He chuckled, his gaze never leaving my blushing cheeks. “Someone’s changing the subject.”

“That transparent, eh?”

“Sometimes, Paul, with those beautiful blue eyes, I swear I can see straight down into your soul.” He clasped my hand. “No worries. I’m sure Torin would jump at the chance to play with you. But I’m warning you -- be careful what you wish for. You may not be able to sit down for a week after he’s done.”

After his words, my cock could’ve drilled through stone. The diners around us were staring, which only added to my embarrassment. I checked my watch.

“I’ve got more questions, but I guess they’ll have to wait.”

“Screw the job, Paul. You’ll be coming back to Palia with me when my work here is done. I say you take the rest of the day off.” His shoe slid up my pant leg. “Come back to your apartment with me.”

“Tempting, but others depend on my work. There’s a big project and...” Then it struck me, a horrible thought. But I had to ask. “What if you die here, fighting the Jorgenis?”

“Those little hybrids? They’re small and they’re not like you or me. It’s hard to explain, but after this is all over --”

“I trust you. I just... I have to be honest here and say the past two days haven’t been very real at all. They’re like a dream, and you don’t know me, but I swear I’m the unluckiest bastard in the world. I’m scared shitless you’re going to be fighting one of those green guys and something bad will happen.”

He got up, threw a few bills on the table, and pulled me into his arms.

“I promise you, nothing will happen to me. I’m an old dragon and --” There was a gasp. Darrien turned to his right, where a table of women stared at us, mouths hanging wide. He raised his voice. “And according to Chinese mythology that means...”

I was laughing too hard to hear the rest. “Good save,” I told him as we arrived back at my work. No one was in the hallway. I leaned in for a kiss, expecting a quick peck. I got his tongue.

The rest of the workday couldn’t go fast enough.

Chapter Eight

We must live in our world, in the depths and shadows, and keep any interaction with humans peaceable. Should a dragon cause harm to others, the Council will send its emissaries to restore order. And they have permission to do so by any means necessary.

-- from "Preserving Order" in *The Book of Palia*

Dusk faded into night as I eased the car against the curb.

"Where are we going?" asked Paul.

"Underground," I told him. "I'm going to teach you a few things."

"Dragon things?"

"Yes."

He was ready. Hell, I'd never seen anyone shift as fast as he had yesterday. And the fact that he figured out how to shift on his own? Fucking incredible.

We got out of the Jag and she quickly changed into a sleek creature of the night. Paul kept his distance as she padded silently past us.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “She’s on the hunt for small prey. Rats, other cats, and a Chihuahua or two.”

“Just keep her away from Priscilla.”

We laughed as I wondered how his pet would adjust to life under the Earth. Paul assured me that she’d enjoy the darkness and the warmth. Then I grasped his hand to lead him past the punks gathered near the entrance of my favorite abandoned subway station. I studied him as we made our way down crumbling stairs flanked by mistreated walls. He sniffed, probably smelling the spray-paint fumes, filth, and decay that stunk up what was once a thriving hub. When he inhaled the second time, I could see the subtle flaring of his nostrils. They widened, hinting at the change to come.

“Anxious?” I asked.

“Excited.”

“Good.”

I took the neatly folded plastic bag from inside my suit pocket. We jumped down to where the trains once ran and went deeper into the tunnel. Then, when I was satisfied that most of the other intruders would keep their distance, I tugged at his shirt. He rolled it slowly up from his torso while I admired the view. The muscles of his abs contracted as he lifted the tee over his head. He dropped it in the bag, and I grabbed the waistband of his jeans. The button popped free and landed on the dusty ground below.

“Hey!” He caught my hand before I could yank down the zipper. “I thought the whole bag idea was to keep our clothes from getting messed up.”

He grinned, so I fought him for the zipper. He was already hard for me.

I ignored both our erections and took off my clothes -- we would play later.

“Watch this,” I said and crouched forward, one leg in front of the other. After a few deep, grumbly roars, I shifted as fast as possible to full form. “Your turn.”

He copied my stance, but his attempts at roaring came out as smoke, not sound. Still, the shifting was fast for a beginner.

“Not bad. Not bad at all. Now bring yourself back.”

He closed his eyes.

“Nope.” I gave him a playful swat on his thigh with the underside of my tail. “Never let your guard down while shifting. Eyes forward, blur your vision a little to look alert even though you’re really focusing on what’s happening on the inside.”

He did as I asked, but without the desired result. I laughed. “You look a little constipated, babe.”

That loosened him up a bit. He chuckled and tried again.

“There you go,” I said. “Just feel it. Shifting down isn’t quite as physical. Think spiritual, internal.”

One last grunt and he was back in human form. Time to take it slow.

“Next lesson. Controlling the whole process. That first night we fucked?”

Paul bit his lip. His cock began to point to the pitted ceiling. I waved my hand in front of his face. “Not that part, silly. How I looked when I took you -- half man, half dragon?”

“How do you know when to stop?” he asked.

“It feels right somehow, like you’re at a stopping point.”

“I’ll try...”

His first attempt took too long. “You’re thinking about it too much. Relax.”

He gave a sexy little stretch, forcing his erection to jut out and bob eagerly. I couldn’t resist. My hand whipped out and captured the purple head. It was juicy. My thumb played in the fluid, then spread it over the thick, spongy tip.

“Um, how can I relax when you’re feeling me up?”

His engorged shaft begged to be tasted. I checked out the ground. No way was I putting my knees down there. *Time to get creative.*

“See if you can get just your wings out,” I told him. If he concentrated on that, maybe the shifting would be slower. “Feel the itch along your shoulder blades? Curve your shoulders forward and shimmy the muscles in your back, like if you were rubbing up against something to scratch that itch.”

It worked. Translucent, veiny wings appeared behind him.

“Good. Now use them. And stay in one place as if you were treading water.”

He got the hang of it a few minutes later and fluttered up several inches from the ground, his wings beating steadily. I held his stiff cock as he rose before me. Soon he was at the perfect height for me to deep-throat his satiny erection, but I didn’t let him come. Not yet.

I stepped back and released him with a long, liquid slurp. Then I sucked him back in once more for good measure before wiping his scent across my face. I could smell the salt on him, and the metallic smell that only a man can give off when he’s horny. I used his cock to pull him back down to the ground. The shadows in the subway offered us the cover to do whatever we wanted. I pushed back on his chest with both hands and pointed to the ledge above us.

“Get your ass up there.” After helping him up, I held him still. “Get on your stomach and drop your legs back down.”

When he did, I stuck my face between his ass cheeks to inhale his musk and tongue his balls. I dug into those taut cheeks to keep him from falling, then opened him wide. Wider. I licked all along the parted muscles to paint him warmly with my spit. He whimpered and squirmed. That only made me go slower.

I circled the opening of his ass with my tongue before probing it with swift, teasing strokes. He was panting now. I dipped down to take a ball in my mouth -- and would've taken the other as well if someone hadn't grabbed me by the waist.

"Seems I'm just in time for dessert."

It was Torin.

I gently released the firm nugget from my lips. "I'm busy. Go away."

But I didn't shove his hand away. He pressed into me.

"You never did that for me, Darrien. He must be very special."

I removed my face from the warmth of Paul's backside. "What are you doing here? I thought we had the night off."

Somewhere in the city, the Jorgenis would be partying hard in celebration of their "Night of Origin," probably marking their so-called independence from Palian rule with rape, brutal murders, and who knew what else. Hunting them tonight would be a mistake, and chances were they'd screw up somehow. Maybe meet up with one of New York's finest or someone who could defend himself.

"I was bored." He stared at Paul's nicely exposed bottom. "I tracked the greens for a while with no luck. They must be lying low. So I thought I'd seek out a few of my kind tonight."

Paul watched from over his shoulder. Having Torin there certainly piqued his interest.

"Want a taste?" I asked, knowing full well Torin would never, ever, in a million years...

He nudged me aside and put his lips on the soft swell between Paul's sac and anus. The balls were next, then the pucker above. Paul's jaw dropped, and his eyes glided up behind half-closed lids.

"Are you okay with this, Paul?" I asked.

I sensed his hesitation. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

“Are you?” he asked.

I grinned, pleased that he’d been worried about my feelings on the matter. “If this is what you want, I’ll gladly give it to you.”

“But you said I was your mate.”

“You are. But we can still enjoy the company of others...if that’s what you truly want.”

After what seemed like an eternity, he nodded, leaving Torin and me to fight over who got which part of him. Neither of us won, though, so we slid Paul back down with us. We spun him to face us and took turns bruising his mouth with savage kisses and laving the rapid pulse of his jugular. Cock brushed against cock -- we didn’t care whose -- until Torin sucked and licked his way around to Paul’s back.

“Bend over,” he said.

Paul bent low, but possessiveness reared up in me. “No penetration,” I warned.

Torin sighed, then nodded. He pressed his shaft between Paul’s cheeks and began to thrust, the shiny head of his cock poking out at the top with each push of his hips. Paul leaned in closer to me and waited for me to make use of his mouth. I surprised him by kneeling. Filthy ground or not, the taste I had earlier made me want more. He filled my mouth hesitantly, so I surged forward to take him inside. When I began to fuck him in earnest with my lips, tongue, and throat, his cock began to pulse and jerk.

I reared back. “You’re making this too easy for me.”

He smiled and reached for my head. I sucked him back in and moved on him without mercy. *Come for me, babe. Just come...*

I felt his tap of warning on my shoulder. I ignored it and ran my lips up and down his length until they buzzed with numbness. Another tap. I brushed his fingers away. *Don’t deny me the fruits of my labor*, I wanted to tell him. *Give me every drop*.

He doused the back of my throat with thick ropes of cum. I kept sucking, sucked him dry and soft, then let him loose. His glistening erection went slack, like his body. I caught

him in my arms and held him still for Torin, who came seconds later, grinding and panting, all across Paul's wings. Torin staggered back and pointed.

"I know," I said. "My turn."

He shook his head and pointed with both hands now. Paul followed Torin's fingers with wide, anxious eyes.

Shit. I took a deep breath before I turned around. We'd been so caught up in our fucking that I hadn't smelled them, hadn't smelled anything but Paul. *How many of them were there?* I wondered. Part of me didn't want to know.

I turned around slowly and braced myself for the worse.

Chapter Nine

Little greens? I think that's what he'd called them.

They weren't that little. Dozens of gleaming eyes moved toward us from beneath the cover of deep shadows. Torin pushed me backwards, told me to get the fuck out. I couldn't move. He and Darrien shifted fast, but the Jorgenis had the jump on us. I started to shift too, but this wasn't like the other night, when I had no idea what was happening to my body. Tonight, with the pressure on, it took forever.

We were surrounded. Flames filled the air. The dense, rolling lines of fire shot through the space and curled back onto other blazing chunks of orange and red. Yellow spheres of heat burst out from the collisions. The balls gathered on the ground between our feet. They singed my scaly toes and had me scrambling in circles to avoid the burn.

I was way out of my league here. After the third time Darrien's tail accidentally nailed me in the calf, I flew backwards to take it all in -- to see how I could help and how Darrien and Torin moved. I didn't want friendly fire to take on a whole new meaning...

They took to the air as well, tails flailing, waves of fire crackling through space to strike an opponent. The beat of their wings echoed in the tunnel like thousands of fleeing bats. The greens skittered around low to the ground for the most part. They dodged the fading fireballs

and aimed for Darrien's legs. He deflected their offense with glowing sprays of orange as Torin launched his own assault.

I tried to mimic their moves. A green lunged in my direction, then held back. I spat out the fire churning up from deep inside my chest. The little shit darted away before I could hurt him, so I tried again. When the flames died down, I saw the charred patch of skin on his torso. I bellowed again, but a little to the right this time. He smacked into my attack and lost the better part of his face. As he retreated to a corner with a whimper, I sought out my next victim. I couldn't fight them all at once like Darrien, but I could sure as hell try to pick 'em off one at a time.

Torin's claws flew into the stomach of one green and the face of another. The rules were changing. I backed away -- I'd been the punchee many times growing up, but never on the other side of the knuckles. The flames from Darrien's mouth dwindled to smoke. Everyone seemed to be losing steam, so to speak, as if they needed time to refuel. I stirred up more fire and released it with a snarl.

Torin glanced back at me and nodded. "Do it!" he yelled.

I sprayed fire until I became hoarse. My aim was dead-on, but the fight wouldn't stay still. Scales flashed in the darkness as bodies snaked around each other, pummeling weak spots. Ribs cracked. Horns were broken and ears ripped from heads. I tackled a green. Sank my teeth into his shoulder. He wriggled beneath me, but, like a slimy fish, he escaped. When I grabbed his ankle, his tail punctured my thigh. Pain seared the wound. I dropped to my knees.

"Watch out!" Torin screamed.

I ducked before a fresh flame sliced through the tunnel in search of my head. Two greens, no three, came for me. Grabbed my limbs. They yanked and scraped at my body. I made more fire, let it swirl from my throat and reach out for them, but the Jorgenis were too fast. They spun away. When the fire cleared, they went back to beating me. One took hold of

the dragon medallion and pulled. *Fucking scavenger.* I torched his hand, leaving only a smoking stump behind.

Darrien started making fire again. I fought off the two greens still on me as a dozen more closed in on my lover. Torin doused the four swiping at his body with thin blue fire. The flame was weak. He shook his head in defeat and returned to brawling.

Bones crunched beneath my hind legs. I started stomping, rolling, anything to keep them preoccupied with me and away from Darrien. The others were swarming now, lashing out with a vengeance. He clutched his side as they pounded him then pushed him to the ground. Torin broke free to help. I toasted a few more body parts before the guys fighting me joined the others. Grimy nostrils disappeared behind plumes of red. The fire-breathing had returned. Torin got hung up in the new flames, his body whirling and thrashing as the greens poured more fire into his path. He flew up, but it was too late.

The force of the action below sent a pulse of air into Torin's scarred body. He crashed into the tunnel ceiling, then helplessly returned to the firestorm waiting below to eat him alive. I head-butted a green in my way as I headed for Torin. Unbelievably, he rose up and defended himself with a couple of rapid fire bursts. I grabbed a green, then another, and crushed their skulls with only my hands. A rush of adrenaline urged me on. I killed without mercy, without remorse. The body count tallied ten before I reached Torin. He staggered back, eyes dazed and mouth gasping for breath, as I tried to pull him to safety.

He wouldn't budge. I couldn't help Torin without Darrien -- strength ebbed from my muscles and sucked out the bloodlust raging within me. A crowd of greens surrounded my lover. Closed in on him, just as more shot fire at Torin.

Torin went down.

Darrien rallied to reach him, but failed. Flames hurled Torin in every direction, then slammed him into the wall behind us. Three greens ganged up on him, pooling their efforts

to blast him with a giant wave of white-hot fire. They melted him. Melted him right into the subway wall.

“Run, Paul!”

I grabbed Darrien’s arm. “Not without you.”

He lunged at me with his tail, never making contact, but forcing me back all the same.

“Now!” he screamed.

Not without you, I repeated inside my head, the strength of the words so fierce they hummed throughout my bones. He finally gave up on me then sent a steady stream of fire toward the greens. The bastards weren’t even fazed -- a few would go down only to be replaced by several more behind. They just wouldn’t die.

Darrien shook his head in defeat. I expected him to retreat with me, but he stayed put, the shaking of his head violent now. A green ran past him, searching for me. I did my best to strike him, but he was too fucking fast. Another one joined him. I rolled my head from side to side too, spitting flames, showering them with sparks.

“It’ll be okay, Paul. Just go!”

When the words reached me, I knew it was over. He faced me, his body ablaze, his features a blur of moving colors and heat. A screech tore at my eardrums. My lover embraced the flames on his body and doubled over. Then he became those flames completely and exploded into an inferno that knocked everyone down. The greens broke apart one by one, most of their bodies turning into heaps of gray flakes.

And there, in the center, was a perfect circle of reddish-black ash. I slumped to the ground. Why hadn’t he run with me? We could’ve come back and finished this another night after I’d learned more.

“I’m so sorry, Darrien. So sorry...” I should’ve done more -- done anything -- I just didn’t know how.

In a daze of disbelief, I looked up. Two greens were left, with wounds that looked deadly to me. One waved me off. Was it a trick? I crept forward, not to attack but to put my hand on Darrien's ashes. To feel his warmth one last time and grab a handful of what remained to take back home. My eyes dared the greens to stop me.

The pair of greens didn't stir. Not that I trusted this; I'd seen how resilient they could be. I moved forward anyway. A tendril of smoke reached out to me, or maybe it was my imagination. I watched it curl around my wrist, then higher.

It was Darrien, saying goodbye.

The smoke slipped between my fingers and disappeared. I dampened the pile of ash with my tears. I screamed at it. Nothing made any difference. Nothing would bring him back. One of the greens slumped over, but his eyes met mine. I drew back.

"You have nothing to fear," he said.

"Like I'd believe you," I muttered through my tears.

He tilted his head toward me. "The medallion. It protects you." His teeth gleamed when he grinned. "Had you experience, you could've defeated us all."

My hand trailed up to the little dragon around my neck. Darrien could've taken it. Could've used it to beat them all down with whatever magic this amulet held. But he'd kept that knowledge to himself to make sure I stayed safe. Regret pumped through me. If only I'd known...

I could sense the green studying me. Memorizing my features, perhaps, or preparing for battle, for another day. I should've killed them both right then and there, but there was no more fight left inside my spirit. I wanted to go home.

I gathered more ash in my hand and left, looking back at Darrien's remains with every step toward the outside. I didn't know how to call the jaguar, and I didn't really care at that point. I just kept moving, dragging my legs one in front of the other, letting the dragon part of me fade into human. In the fog of my grieving brain, I managed to grab my jeans and put

them on without spilling the ashes in my hand. I shoved the black dust my lover left behind into my pocket, for now, and found my wallet. But no taxi would pick up a half-dressed man covered in soot, at least not for a while...

When the cabbie who'd finally stopped left me at my building, I stumbled up to my apartment and wondered if the greens would come looking for me later. I didn't want to lock the door. Maybe they'd track me down. If they did, I wouldn't fight them. Death would be welcome now that Darrien was no longer alive.

My bed was cold. The ashes in my pocket were cold too. I smeared them onto my face, tasting him, making him part of me once more, then placed my hand over my chest. Sleep stayed elusive, hiding in the shadows like the Jorgenis had, and I cried until exhaustion overtook me.

* * * * *

The next morning, I picked up the phone but didn't know what the hell to say. Mr. Dawson was the kind of bastard who made his employees bring in doctors' notes or obituaries when they called in. Plus, I was out of leave time thanks to my lemon of a car. I rang him anyway. Sherice answered the phone.

"The asshole's out today," she said. "His mom died last night. Want me to punch in for you?"

I couldn't believe it -- that prick hadn't taken a day off in the five years I'd been there. Although I knew it would catch up with me later, I needed the kindness. "Would you?"

Sherice giggled. "After my nails dry, baby. You enjoy yourself, you hear?"

Enjoy myself? I thanked her, then crawled right back into bed to saturate my pillowcase with more tears.

Chapter Ten

My alarm went off. I rubbed my face.

Same shit, different day.

Actually, today's shit was a little different now that Darrien was out of my life. Out of my life? That made it sound like a breakup. No, he was dead. Burned to cinders. Gone.

Sherice had called last night to warn me that Mr. Dawson would be in today. I owed her big for clocking in for me the past few days while I tried to make sense of everything that had happened.

I dragged my ass out of bed. The things I picked up -- my mug, a can of cat food, even my own dick when I took my morning piss -- seemed like they were weighted down with cement. My heart felt like a cinderblock. I got in my car anyway but, as usual, didn't make it across the bridge. I silently wondered if the Yugo would fit up my mechanic's worthless ass...

The smoke escaping from beneath the hood of my car looked just like the kind that had risen from Darrien's ashes, only darker. Wind and the rush of passing cars pushed it this way and that until the gray billows obscured my windshield and invaded the vents. I rolled down a window to keep from choking or maybe I rolled it down to distract myself from the tears

streaming down my face. Darrien had gotten closer to me than any other guy I'd known. And that scared me. I was thirty-four fucking years old. I had a total net worth of forty-nine dollars and sixty cents. A loser like me had this one shot, this one fucking fantastic chance at a future with someone amazing, and he gets charred to a crisp over some crazy war no one on Earth even knew existed. How goddamn crazy was that? Maybe it was crazy enough to get out of the car and jump off this fucking bridge. To join the hundreds of losers before me who had taken the plunge. I told my body to get out of the car, but it didn't listen. My bones were heavy.

So I sat, too depressed to move, for what seemed like hours. When I checked my watch, it had only been five minutes. Everything felt slow, quieter somehow, and the muscles of my face felt sore from all the crying I did last night.

I heard the car roll up behind me, or rather I heard the honks of the people the driver had pissed off in the process, but I didn't bother to look up. I heard him or her get out, probably a him by the sound of his footsteps, the irritating crunch of neglected asphalt under what sounded like expensive smooth-soled shoes. He worked the door handle. More fresh air streamed in. I knew I should sit up, make eye contact, tell him my story and get out of the car. Ask to use a cell phone so I could call work and grovel to my boss. But the tears were flowing like a river now -- my hands were drenched and I knew if I grabbed the wheel to help myself up they'd just slide right off.

He seemed to understand. A hand touched my hair. Slid over my shoulders and my left arm. I managed to wrench out some sort of apology.

"I'm so sorry, man. Thanks for stopping."

He bent down. "No. I'm sorry."

Everything inside me locked up and stopped. My heart. My lungs. I looked up, and crouching by my side as the cars whizzed by was Darrien. My beautiful Darrien.

"You're here."

"Yes."

"But you're dead. I saw it." I rubbed my eyes. The whole thing was like a wonderful dream or maybe one twisted, horrible nightmare. Was anything real anymore?

"I'm very much alive, Paul." He pulled my face to his. "Remember when I met your cat?"

It took me a minute. I remembered Indian food and the promise of sex, but not all of the conversation. At least not at first... Then his words came rushing back to me: *Nine lives? Lucky fucker. We only get seven.*

"I've got four left," he said. "And I want to spend them all with you."

"But you... They reduced you to nothing. Ashes..."

"It takes a little time to regenerate. To cycle through to the next life." He kissed my cheek. "Listen, I can explain this later. I found you as fast as I could. I knew you'd be upset."

"Devastated," I whispered. "And Torin?"

"He'll be fine."

He pulled me out of the smoking shit-mobile. I didn't even look back; it was like a dead shell -- a past life to me -- and I didn't need it, like I didn't need the baggage of my past life anymore. All I needed was him. And as he pulled me into the Jag, kissed me, made me whole again, I had a feeling this life was going to be different.

He broke the kiss. I didn't want to let him, but he forced my head back gently. I lost myself in those gorgeous green eyes.

"I love you so much, Paul. I just hope you feel the same way."

Oh God, yes. I barely had the chance to nod before he smiled at me wide, earnest and sexy as hell. I craned my neck to taste his lips.

This time he didn't stop me.

 THE END 

Laura Bacchi

Award-winning multi-published author Laura Bacchi can usually be found at the computer maniacally typing out plots before they evaporate from her brain or bribing the muses to please, please come back so she can finish what she starts. When not writing, she enjoys looking for four-leaf clovers, wearing toe rings under her socks, and hearing from readers. For more about Laura and her work, visit www.laurabacchi.com.