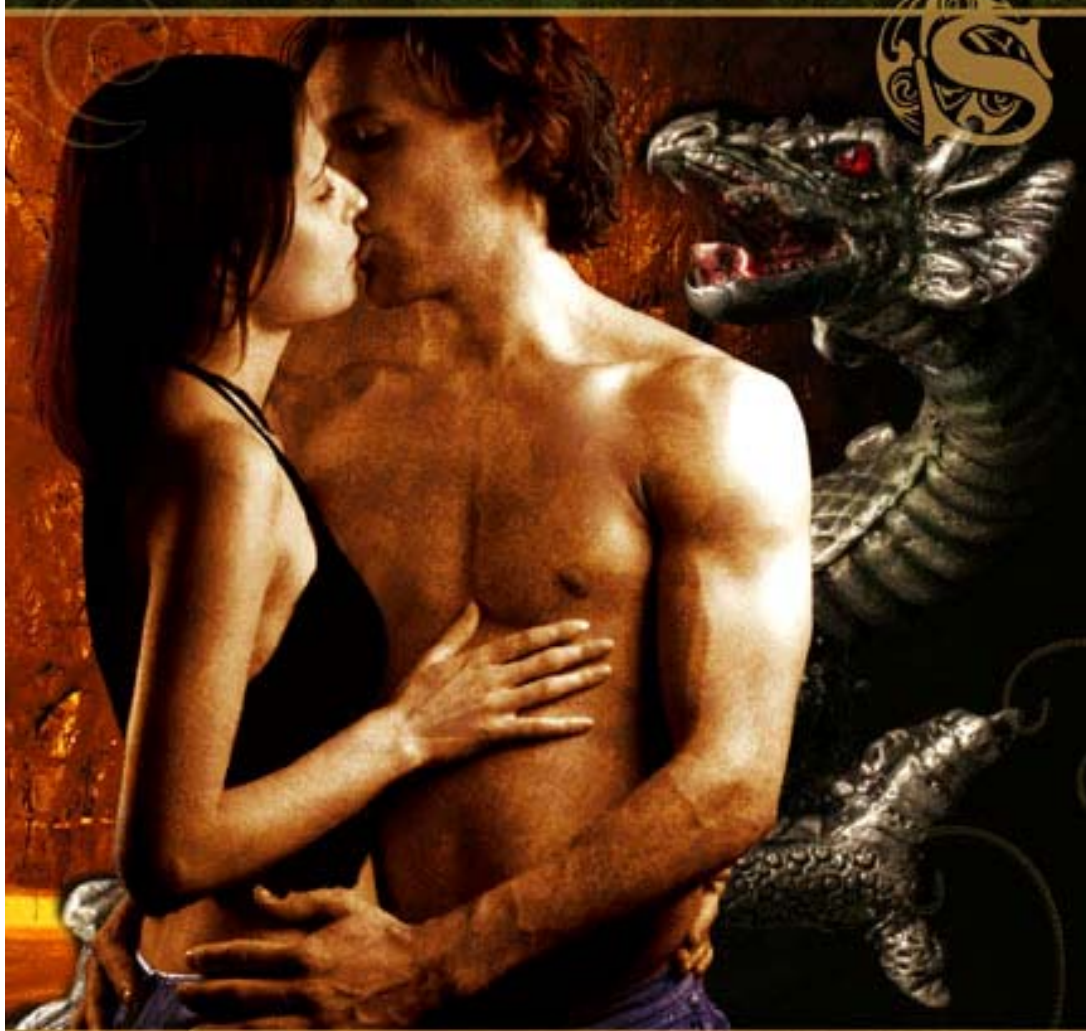


I DREAM OF DRAGONS



THE
KNIGHT'S CHALLENGE
SUMMER DEVON

SANDHAIN publishing, LLC

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The Knight's Challenge

Summer Devon

Dedication

For Laurie Adams because she deserves something for *her* dedication.

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Chapter One

Sarkany's newest assistant, Pettifer, stood at straight-backed attention, a posture left over from army days, no doubt. Pettifer coughed and the subtle pulse in his throat increased. The man must carry bad news. But when he managed to speak at last, he didn't divulge any great surprises. "She isn't willing to come see you. Sir."

"Miss Benson is a nuisance." Sarkany selected a chocolate and allowed it to melt in his palm before licking his hand clean.

Pettifer apparently didn't like Sarkany's cruder practices. He showed his discomfort now by averting his gaze and staring at the painting of a mountain range that hung on the office wall.

Sarkany didn't bother telling Pettifer that chocolate against his skin tingled. He didn't tell any of his assistants the reasons for his odd eating habits. He never explained himself to anyone.

Sarkany wiped his hand with a linen cloth. "Did she tell you why she has been buzzing around me or hunting for a way to cause me harm?"

Pettifer shifted his weight from foot to foot. "No, sir. Though I did ask. She, uh, only said she didn't need to report to you."

Sarkany was almost amused at the man's nervousness as well as the woman's defiance. He fished out another chocolate and tossed it in the air before catching it in his teeth. Rather like catching prey, or the closest he came these days. "I am her landlord. I am her employer, or close enough." He swallowed this chocolate almost whole. "What else do I need to hold over her before she understands that prodding me and then ignoring me is not in her best interest?"

"She might not know you own her building. Do you want someone to reveal your ownersh—"

"No, I don't think so. She'd find some way to weasel an advantage." Hands in the silk-lined pockets of his trousers, he walked to the window and stared down on the busy street. His realm—but he didn't feel the usual satisfying glow of surveying his possessions. Miranda was more interesting at the moment. "I imagine she'd make threats

about safety inspectors or some such rot. She is not a subtle creature, this Miss Benson. Did she say why she attacked me? Again? And do you know what her next attack will be?”

“Um. She has some idea that you are responsible for the mess at the nursing home.”

He turned around to examine Pettifer. “Interesting. I don’t even own that property.”

“She thinks you could somehow step in and solve the problem.”

“I should have more of a sense of *noblesse oblige*?”

“Yeah, that’s about it. Sir.”

Pettifer shifted from foot to foot again and took a few shallow breaths. Apparently the subject made him nervous. Sarkany made a guess. “Tell me. Did you use your looks with Miss Benson?”

“Sir?”

“Your manly wiles. You are an attractive specimen. Did you attempt to placate her with a winsome smile?”

The assistant frowned. “No, sir, it didn’t occur to me.”

He was a bad liar.

Sarkany knew Pettifer enjoyed pretty women and Miranda Benson fit any description of pretty. Her skin glowed like pearls, her eyes were bright as emeralds, though not that uninteresting color, her hair bright as gold. He considered the notion, and decided not gold. Lustrous like gold, yes, but the color was more a tarnished silver, rippling to her shoulders.

Her good looks might explain the foot-shuffling. Perhaps Pettifer’d been caught by her attractions and he’d listened to the female—and even agreed with her. Pity if he’d have to sack the man, but more than one assistant had been tossed out for going over to the other side.

Sarkany grinned at a sudden thought—and ignored Pettifer’s tiny whimper of fear.

Could the other side actually be the guild?

Miranda might be one of *them*. Silly not to have thought of the possibility right away, but he hadn’t faced one of their foolish knights for more than a hundred years. The guild kept itself quiet, just as Sarkany did.

He could easily stop the threat of Miranda Benson, but he’d been bored lately. Simply smashing her efforts wouldn’t be amusing.

"I will go to her," he announced and saw Pettifer's pulse increase again. Not guilt—lust. Strong enough to influence a weak man.

Perhaps Pettifer would eventually join her efforts to undermine Sarkany's small but sustaining hoard of buildings and wealth in this unimpressive New England town. He'd find out from Miranda Benson. She had an expressive face, incapable of hiding anything, especially from him. He'd take it upon himself to examine her very carefully.

* * *

Miranda waited.

Linus was convinced that soon the devil would come to her. If Sarkany did, well, she didn't have an enchanted sword, but she and her friends had gathered some weapons even a powerful creature like that couldn't defeat—she hoped. Linus said the creature had a propensity for illegal drugs. They all watched his kingdom carefully looking for slip-ups like drugs or zoning laws violated. They acted as gadflies and wrote indignant letters to the editor of the local rag about Sarkany's misuse of power. Linus had Miranda sign almost every letter they composed, part of a plan he didn't divulge. The guild leader enjoyed his secrets.

The letters finally had an effect. Sarkany had sent a hulking idiot, who'd first threatened her then made a come-on. Neither of Mr. Pettifer's attempts worked, and now Miranda paced her apartment. Honestly, Sarkany should hire more impressive henchmen—he could afford people nearly as dangerous as himself.

There was a sharp rap at her door and she almost reluctantly went to the peephole. What new weirdness would she find?

She had eventually expected to meet the man himself—or rather the creature. But already? It was a shock to see the tall, rangy, dark-haired figure in the slightly too formal clothing.

Miranda muttered a curse. If only Linus were here. He knew the best way to deal with Sarkany. He'd devoted his life to discovering the secrets of Sarkany's kind. *Calm the breathing*, she reminded herself and she counted to ten before she opened the door. To avoid meeting his eyes, she looked down at expensive leather boots, black and surprisingly scuffed.

"Come in, if you must," she said.

“Miranda.” He held out a hand. “So pleased to meet you at last.”

She shook his hot, dry hand. Smooth skin. No scales.

Sarkany. He didn’t even hide his nature. Hungarian for dragon. She could feel his silver eyes on her. That must be why her skin prickled and her heart stuttered. She’d always felt his attention from a distance when entering his presence at city council meetings or charity events they’d both attended, but she’d never looked into his dangerous face. Photos showed him handsome and lean, with near-black hair and sardonic brows above pale grey eyes, irises rimmed with pure black—a dragon’s spellbinding eyes.

“Miranda?” He moved to her sofa and sat, then patted the cushion next to him. She walked to the back of the couch and stood behind him.

“You are not a very good hostess,” he said.

The amusement in his voice, along with the way he treated her apartment as if it were his own, would have infuriated her if she weren’t being so very careful to not allow herself to grow angry. A knight must keep emotion at bay when battling the dragon or she forfeited any advantage.

Miranda followed Linus’s advice and immediately revealed her knowledge of Sarkany’s nature. “May I offer you some sake? I hear it was invented by the Japanese to lure your type when you were being nuisances. I won’t bother warming it. You can heat it yourself.”

He laughed, and shifted on the couch. He looked at her and she didn’t turn away in time. Disaster.

She met his gaze.

At once she forgot her mission, forgot her reason for aggravating him. She’d been using herself as bait and in that second their eyes met, she was caught. What a mistake to fall into the spell of that silver gleam—his power tugged at her. Heavy lust seized her. She gazed back, immobilized by desire. Dear Lord, he’d gotten her too easily, within a minute of entering her house.

The bottomless irises made promises.

Let me stroke you. Do you know what I can do with heat? Can you imagine? Taste me. Let me taste you. Your skin, your mouth, your sex. Heat. Miranda. Take the heat I offer. Thick honey we devour together.

Her body ached to respond and her mouth opened to answer the dragon's call. She almost leaned to him, over the couch, to that mouth. Silver eyes that created a hunger so strong it made her hands clench and her womb grow heavy.

She had to do something. Something—the sirens used music and the sailors stuffed their ears with wax.

Shut your goddamn eyes. She forced her lids closed.

He laughed. “What a pity. You don't want to flirt with me? I should feel insulted.” He spoke in a smooth rumble as seductive as those eyes. “Shall we talk business? How much do I need to pay you to stop harassing me? Ah, now I can see the indignation in your face, even with your expressive eyes closed. All right. If you are too noble to take money for yourself, then allow me to contribute to your favorite good cause in your name. Assuming, of course, it isn't one devoted to destroying me.”

“No, no pay.” She folded her arms over her breasts in case the tingling in her nipples meant they had visibly hardened. “No. We'll win. If not me, then another member of the guild.”

“Oh, heavens. The guild?” His loud laughter sounded genuine. “I suspected as much, yet still, I'm amazed. It has been so many years. I must say you are hearkening back to the worst of your primitive ancestors, young woman.”

“The guild is strong.” She felt foolish standing, arms crossed, eyes firmly shut.

“Do your members still make oaths in blood? Do you still carry shards of bone?”

She shook her head, but didn't answer. He *couldn't* know Linus insisted she keep the precious small object with her every minute of the day.

“You know it's all nonsense. The peasants stopped fornicating in the fields to bring forth good crops centuries ago.”

“Okay. Some of it might be nonsense, but I—I know you are a dragon.” Her voice cracked.

“Open your eyes. Do you see any sign of fire? Scales? Claws? You are a superstitious, silly woman. Now that I know what sort of nonsense you're up to, I can stop wasting time on you. A pity, because I thought you might be more interesting than the usual opponent. You're just a small dog yapping at my heels.”

“I'll yap until you go back to your own kind. You are a dragon and don't care about anything human. You only use us to gain wealth.”

He sniffed. “And how does that make me any different from any other businessman?”

The answer came to her, simple and perfect. A challenge. Dragons were vain creatures and hated to be bested in any contest.

“You’re right. You aren’t any different, are you?” She tried to imitate his amused indifference. “I mean, you’re just exactly like any regular old idiot of a human.”

He chuckled again. “You know, I’ve changed my mind. You are still rather intriguing.” Her heart sank at his next words. “I can see your game, of course. Baiting me is an old trick.”

The couch creaked as he stood and only a stir in the air and his voice told her he moved closer. He walked silently. “But I don’t mind playing. Tell me the terms of your challenge. If you win, I’ll vanish. Not into the hills, mind you, I’m not ready to rejoin the rocks. I enjoy life as a human too much at the moment. But I’ll leave your city.”

Life as a human. He’d admitted his real nature. She tamped down a wave of panic. A authentic dragon stood next to her and she was expected to face the danger—and not run away screaming. She exhaled carefully before asking, “And if you win?”

“If I win, you stop playing the role of nuisance ants at my happy summer picnic of a life. And you play another role for me. You’ll be my treasure.”

She held her breath as a warm hand firmly cupped her chin. A finger brushed over her cheek, sending shivers straight through her and down her spine. Horrible, delicious shivers she couldn’t hide plummeted directly to her lower belly. He gave a satisfied purr and removed his hand.

“I wish we were back in the bad old days,” she said, and the unfortunate quaver filled her voice. “I want some better weapon than the law. Something sharp and silver that I could use on you.”

He stood so close she could feel the heat radiating from his body. “You guild members always were a bloodthirsty bunch of heel-nippers. I’ll have you know it has been quite a while since I cared for a fight. A very long time since I have touched human flesh.” He leaned close and whispered, “For anything other than pleasure, of course. My pleasure and yours.”

His touch, his warm breath on her cheek, made her pussy throb. She forced her muscles to stay still and didn’t dare open her eyes. Her skin felt drawn tight. Thin-

skinned. Far too aware of the pleasure he'd promised. Oh God, desire seemed to thicken her blood.

He pulled away, and she could breathe again. His finger very lightly touched the side of her throat. Of course he could read her pulse. She cursed herself for not wearing a turtleneck.

"Perhaps you would like to reconsider your challenge?" He laughed, softly this time. No doubt all this laughter, though it sounded real enough, was to rile her. "I'll give you a day or so."

"No," she said.

Never give a dragon time to reflect, said Linus. They reached choices slowly, and knights must take advantage of a human's faster nature. "I don't need to. You accept? No matter what?"

"Miranda." He made her name sound decadent, even obscene. "My dear girl. 'No matter what' is not a very pretty oath. You guild members have lost the baroque beauty along—"

"Do you accept it?" she asked, impatient. She was tired of the dragon's playful nonsense designed to intimidate her. Impossible goal because if she'd been any more afraid, she'd faint.

He was silent a moment, then quite seriously said, "Yes, I do. I shall win you, and I'm looking forward to what I shall do to you. And with you."

She again held her breath to stop her gasp, not the sound of anger, but pure, eager response. All of the training with Linus and she could barely control her body when at last confronted with a true dragon. Still, there was some compensation for her weakness. He wouldn't win this one, no matter which course he chose.

Chapter Two

As Miranda tried to arrange the words in her head, the dragon taunted her. “You’re frightened of me. That’s why you’re not saying anything.”

She shifted her weight to lean away from him. “Yeah, of course I’m terrified of you. But I’m not going to let my fear stop me. And I won’t be seduced, either.”

“Are you issuing yet another challenge?”

“No, I’m not stupid. I know what you can do to me.” Pain, as well as more mortifying reactions. The thought of her own response to him forced her to pause so she could clamp down on the fresh wave of arousal. She knew he could smell her excitement.

Miranda opened her eyes. She wanted to watch Sarkany as she spoke, and she reminded herself not to look higher than his lips. “Sarkany. I don’t want to pick unnecessary battles with you. I have only the one challenge.” His well-defined mouth slanted into a smile when she licked her own lips. *Damn. Of course he knew how much she wanted him.*

She didn’t look away. “Listen. My test is simple. The goal is to show you’re more than a simple greedy human, okay?”

His hair brushed softly against the collar of his shirt as he nodded. She wished she could be less aware of his every motion.

“Okay, then give it all away,” she said. “As soon as possible. All of your hoard. The buildings, the jewels, the possessions, the money. It’s either be left with nothing and stay here. Or keep it all and move far away from this city. Oh, and you have to allow me to choose the administrator or manager of the properties once you go.”

He gave a low whistle. “I should be more careful,” he said, apparently unruffled. “I forget that you guild members have no pity.”

“Fine, I won’t be ruthless. You can keep five hundred dollars so you can buy a passport and plane fare.”

“No, my Miranda, that makes no sense. I will have won, and will have the right to remain here. With you. You will have room in this apartment for a very poor dragon. Or perhaps because you’ll be mine, I’ll take possession and force you onto the streets? So many choices I’ll have to make.”

Oh, damn. She should have thought of that, but he sent her thoughts into a whirl, sucked her awareness to some part of her body that shouldn’t be clamoring for attention at the moment, thank you.

He chuckled. “You should have considered what’s going to happen when I win this. This is delightful. I haven’t had a decent challenge for quite some time. Going around the world six times was tiresome.”

His wide mouth and his very white teeth showed in a grin.

“You can’t just give the money to—to one of your underlings,” she warned. “It won’t count unless you give it to someone you don’t know or someone who can’t be threatened by you.”

He idly brushed her arm with the side of his thumb. “Of course you try to add stipulations after the fact. You are an inexperienced young knight. It’s rather like playing cards with a child who tries to take back his wrong moves. But to prove I am an amenable man—”

“You are a dragon,” she interrupted, and then wondered when he could have possibly played games with a child.

“Amenable *man*,” he said firmly. “I agree to your limits. Any more?”

She was about to say no, when another scenario occurred to her. “You can’t give it to me.”

He chuckled again. “Oh my, you are good. Not good enough, of course.”

“I know your assets, dragon.”

“Really?” He sounded interested, still not alarmed. “Did you bribe one of my employees?”

“No. Taxes accounts at city hall, tax returns and your insurance policies.”

“Ah, so you bribed my accountant?”

She shook her head again and then, because she feared for the accountant’s life, said, “A guild member acted as his secretary until last month. Her name is Liddy. Check it if you don’t believe me.”

“I can see you are telling the truth, Miranda. I’m satisfied. Or as satisfied as I can be for now.”

She didn’t see him move, yet suddenly his large hands rested on her hips.

He whispered, “Close your eyes again, if you insist, but I will seal our challenge.”

“Not with blood,” she warned. Her hand went into her jeans pocket where her sliver of dragon bone lay. She didn’t know what it would do to him, but it was all she had.

“Mm, no, with a kiss.”

She couldn’t refuse—Christ, she didn’t want to. Dry, soft and passionless, his lips brushed hers, gently. The simple kiss triggered a response that seized her whole body. She groaned and couldn’t hide the sound. His mouth returned to hers, and for a moment the kiss flashed into something potent. His arms tightened around her and then he stepped away, leaving her breathless and rubber-legged.

“Oh, I am glad I came here today,” he said.

She wondered if he told the truth. No one could tell when a dragon lied. Their skill at creating lovely falsehoods was legendary. Seduction and lies until they sucked the humans dry and moved on. Or made the swooning victims into their dinners.

“I’m glad, too,” she lied. She rested one hand on the back of the couch to steady herself.

“No, you’re not. But you will be, Miranda.”

Before she opened her eyes, the door creaked and he’d left. He moved so fast and silently. But even if she hadn’t heard the soft sound of the door closing, she’d know he was gone. His presence had filled her and now his absence seemed to deflate her. Thank God.

With shaking legs, she walked around the couch and collapsed onto it. In a few minutes she’d call Linus and he’d scold her for acting without first speaking to him and the others. In the meantime, she practiced deep breathing, trying to bring her heart rate down to a reasonable speed.

Chapter Three

Sarkany usually enjoyed humans. For many years, they'd provided him with treasure, and once upon a time, the occasional snack. In the more violent confrontations, they'd entertained him by pretending they weren't afraid of him when they tried to turn him into some sort of trophy.

In the less violent encounters, he liked their malleable morals, and in bed he adored their soft skin and had been intrigued by their delicate yet rather conspicuous sexual parts. He'd transformed his semblance into one so long ago, he considered himself near-human, much of the time.

He felt a thorough alien at the moment.

Leaving the knight's apartment, he took the stairs rather than the elevator. Anything to keep moving and bring his body back into complete control.

Outside the apartment building, he dismissed his driver. The day was cold, but he didn't mind weather, and this would give him a chance to walk past many of his buildings and bid them good-bye, for now. He intended to slough them off like an old skin.

He'd try to walk off the strange mood created by his encounter with the knight. The Miranda female reminded him of how unhuman he was. Not inhumane—it took one of them to be so dreadful. She reminded him of human strength, a stirring power he'd rather admired, usually in books, rarely in the flesh.

She was the first genuine knight he'd encountered for centuries. Many men—and even a woman or two—had challenged him, called him out from the rocks in his natural form or accosted him in his human guise.

Miranda's heart was strong and true and she, unlike all the others, might bring about his defeat. She had no notion of it, of course, and it wouldn't be her silly challenge that would do it.

No, he'd had an answer to that challenge almost before she'd finished adding her addendums.

His sister, Tia, could crush him into a grease spot if he kept his present form. To fulfill the terms of the challenge, he could give Tia all of his worldly goods and expect to get many of them back.

And really, he'd only have to hand over the possessions the guild and the U.S. government had discovered. Sarkany owned much, much more, including land on his favorite mountains not far from the peak of Shisha Pagma in Tibet. The ant-like humans could toil up Shisha Pagma but no human was allowed to climb his sacred mountain.

Sarkany walked quickly. He dodged around a bike messenger then stopped in the middle of the road when he realized the truth. He'd even give away at least one of his mountain lakes, if it meant he could possess the knight Miranda.

Touching her had been a treat. Miranda was as warm and sweet as the best chocolate against his hand. He couldn't wait to taste her—and that was the core of her power over him. Dragons can always wait. Always. But when he thought of her, impatience bubbled inside him and made him wish he could roar and set something ablaze with a strong blast of fire.

When he touched her mouth with his, her unexpected power surged through him. His heart gave a strong lurch. The effect was almost as dramatic as changing skins. Exhilaration poured through him and he felt nearly as skittish and excited as any human.

He was intrigued by her manner as well as her delicious flesh. She'd admitted her fear, and she'd set him to a task though she would gain nothing from it. Refreshing. She didn't want his dragon hoard for herself. Rare, perhaps unique, in his encounters.

"Hello, Mr. Sarkany. What an unexpected pleasure to see you," someone called out to him, a man in a blue suit.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Blair." Sarkany smiled mechanically.

Blair started to cross the street, but a bus blocked his path. Sarkany walked swiftly, turning a corner so he'd be out of sight before Blair could track his progress.

He was in no mood for sycophancy, which was what most people wanted to offer him. In exchange they wanted him to give them jobs, money, prestige, homes, happiness, a reason to live.

As he strode along the sidewalk, he wished he could shed the ill-fitting clothes. No matter how carefully tailored they were, his garments never seemed to fit him comfortably.

When he stopped at the light, he realized he'd promised to get rid of the garments and the people who nagged at him when he agreed to the knight's challenge. No human would bother with him if he shed his money, properties and influence. No need to hire heavy-breathers like Pettifer.

His enemy had cleared the way for some interesting, albeit temporary, changes. The idea made him laugh aloud, startling a man who also waited for the light to change. "What's so funny, mister?" The man's grumpy question was rhetorical, but Sarkany answered anyway.

"Following rules," he said. "An intriguing idea, don't you think?"

The man took a couple of side-steps away and didn't answer. Sarkany, to amuse himself, turned and met the man's eyes. The stocky businessman went still as a statue, obedient and ready. Far too easy.

Sarkany thought of the shows he sometimes encountered on television featuring men toying with fish. They enjoyed the sport. So did he. He wanted more fight, more play.

Miranda.

Once upon a time, a beautiful maiden like her might have been chained to a rock as a sacrifice for a dragon. This method of dangling her in front of him, defying him, was far more to his taste. Give her a sporting chance.

* * *

They met in the nearly deserted boarded-up industrial area, no doubt slated to be another of Sarkany's projects. The room smelled of mold and sweat and Miranda supposed it always would. The basement remained damp, no matter how long they ran the dehumidifier, and they used the large space for their exercises. They spent hours improving what Linus called their frail human bodies, learning how to fight. All of them, even the stout Garth, were in good physical shape.

Linus pressed his mouth tight and picked a pimple on his lean cheek as he clicked through his vast store of information. At last he rolled aside so the others could see the monitor. A woman with long black hair and grey eyes stared out at them. "His sister. She

calls herself Tia. I suspect that's from Tiamat, which is a Babylonian name for dragon. She's not afraid of him. Sarkany could give it all to her and she'd return much of it to him. And if she didn't, well, she was a dragon. Therefore just as bad as he is."

He clicked on the screen and the woman slowly melted into an image of a silver serpent with the same grey eyes. Linus enjoyed dramatic effects on the computer. Miranda suspected he enjoyed drama of all kinds and that formed his early interest in dragons as well as his intense hatred of them now.

Linus drank some of his bottled water and said, "She's an even nastier specimen than Sarkany."

"Oh, damn." Miranda sighed and slumped on the beaten and lumpy brown armchair. "What have I done?"

"Delivered yourself and the city into the hands of a ruthless creature. Most of the city is already in his claws. It's you I worry about." He cast a sidelong look at her and Miranda ignored his obvious glimmer of lust. At least she wouldn't hurt his feelings. Though they both knew he had the hots for her, both of them disliked the fact.

"We are weaker when we indulge in the animal sensations," he'd told her early on. "Therefore, we shall overcome them. If I should ever attempt to seduce you, please refuse me."

She hadn't told him that she would have refused him even if sex weren't out of the question for guild members. Linus was smart, interesting, dedicated, and not even remotely her type. She could have overlooked the permanent acne, but not the permanent lack of humor.

Linus impatiently drew fingers through the strands of lank brown hair that fell across his face. He leaned back in his chair. "We'll have to find all of the weaknesses in your challenge and try to get them shored up. After the fact."

She was reminded of the dragon's remark about playing cards with a child.

Hogarth, the tallest and oldest of the small group, was sharpening a Bowie knife. His precisely cut, short gray hair and clean but dull clothes made him look like a police officer off duty, although the scars on his hands and arms gave him the look of a construction worker. Miranda could only guess, because they did not share their other lives. Too risky.

Without looking up, Hogarth said, "I think you should explain why you had to take action, Miranda. I thought we'd agreed to continue the campaign to bother him until he

did something illegal to stop us. You were the tethered goat, but you weren't in danger, right?"

Miranda had already explained, but understood that Hogarth wanted to find holes in her story. They all knew people under dragonspell were dangerous. She took the proper step of telling the same story, using different words. "He came to see me almost immediately after he sent the henchman. I thought he'd wait a day or two at least. I wasn't sure if I'd have the chance again. Have his attention."

Linus scowled at the screen. "Which is another thing. I wonder why he's moving so much faster than dragons usually operate."

She shook her head. "I think he'd been planning to see me for a while. I have had a sensation of him watching me when I go to places..."

Even Hogarth stopped scraping blade on stone to look at her.

Linus slapped the arms of his computer chair. "Aha. So what he said about making you his treasure wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment desire to teach you a lesson. He's had his eye on you." Linus sounded triumphant. "Just as I thought he would. That's why we sent you into the meetings and had you write the letters. Well, this could be good after all. See if you can spend time with him while he addresses your challenge. Dragons who are greedy for an object not yet in their grasp might expose some weaknesses."

Miranda took a deep breath and rolled her head. "This tethered goat wants to know why can't we be straightforward? Let's skip luring him out and dig for more evidence of his evil side. If even a quarter of what you've told us is true, we could find enough to have him thrown in jail. You've said again and again when it comes to trickery, no one can beat a dragon at his own game."

Linus answered with exaggerated patience. "We don't have enough weapons and we haven't found enough evidence. Ruining his image isn't going to bother him. He doesn't care what humans think of him. He's never going to run for any sort of political office, so he doesn't need to worry about his public image."

Miranda folded her arms and looked around at the others. "Why are we so certain he won't try for political office? He's on boards of directors and that's not such a huge leap. Politics might amuse him. He likes playing games with people."

"He doesn't crave power, just possessions. He just buys the politicians and lawyers," Tina said. She peered suspiciously at Miranda over her bifocals. She had a right to be annoyed—Miranda had blown one of Tina's names. The guild would have to buy Tina new identities, and she was the guild member least proficient at disguising herself.

Hogarth went back to sharpening his knife. “The only way to get him is going to be with a weakness we haven’t uncovered.” He smiled down at the blade and Miranda remembered her own longing for a good sharp sword when she’d met the dragon.

But the guild wasn’t going to attempt that sort of straightforward attack. “What if he only commits a crime because we pushed him to?” she asked. “I mean, what if we’re entrapping him? It seems so underhanded...so dragonish.” She rubbed her eyes and wished she’d kept quiet. Linus squinted at her and she knew she was still under suspicion.

“The ends justify the means. He’s a dragon and therefore his essence is evil.” Linus paused. “You’ve talked to him. Didn’t you sense that?”

“I sensed power.”

Chairs squeaked as they all leaned forward to listen. “That all?” Linus asked.

She had the urge to tell them to go visit the dragon themselves if they were so interested.

Linus must have felt her impatience. “You have to be honest about this because it would help us understand if you’ve been put under any sort of spell.”

“Okay, okay. So about the dragon. I sensed danger. And um, a basic irreverence about humans and the guild in particular. He mentioned us.”

Murmurs and smug smiles greeted this—the dragon knew them. Rather exciting to have a powerful enemy recognize your existence.

“But evil?” She shook her head. “I didn’t smell it or however you put it once, Linus. The misery he creates. I know he’s responsible,” she said and allowed her anger to show. Her old neighborhood, so many old neighborhoods and small businesses, lifestyles and jobs, gone, carelessly wiped out by the dragon’s greed. A whole town’s character destroyed. “I know. But now I think it’s just...” She tried to think of the right words. “It’s a by-product, not what he’s aiming for.”

Garth, who rarely spoke, said, “Sounds like he’s got a splinter of control over you. Not a lot, but we’ll have to watch careful. Particularly if you’re the one who’s going to be with him. Gonna have to make sure you don’t take part in bigger plans from now on. You even let slip Tina’s role.”

“I had to protect the accountant, you know that. I didn’t use her real name.” She bowed her head to hide her frustration. “I don’t like it, but I get why you’re saying that. Just don’t give spring any surprises on me if I’m involved. Fair enough?”

“Of course,” Linus said at the same time Garth responded, “Dunno.”

Garth got up and ambled over to where she sat and awkwardly put a ham-like hand on her shoulder. “We shouldn’t guarantee nothing. You know? Don’t want to lie to you, Miranda.”

She glared up at him. “So I watch my back with the dragon and with my own comrades. I get it.”

Garth frowned, his blunt Nordic face wrinkled in thought. “Sorry. But it’d be true of any of us who’d had face to face with the dragon. And you’re gonna have more contact. It’ll get worse.”

He was right. She nodded wearily.

The guild had been her friends and family ever since the neighborhood had been bulldozed under. Soon after her mother died of heartbreak, Linus had discovered Miranda weeping in the public library. Later on he’d told her he’d been watching her, knew her history.

He bought her a cup of coffee and convinced her that Sarkany was the worst kind of predator, the type with no connection to other people.

When Miranda had blurted out “it’s like he’s not even human,” Linus had slowly, masterfully, revealed the truth.

Miranda had once believed the group was her city’s best hope—before she’d met and talked to the dragon. Tonight they looked like a motley crew of misfits, barely able to organize themselves, certainly no threat to a power like Sarkany. The guild seemed almost...comical. Perhaps a shard of poison had been lodged in her thoughts by the dragon.

No doubt about that.

She didn’t admit to them the fact that every time she closed her eyes, she saw his expressive mouth quirked into a half-smile. She had memorized the lines of his lean strong body, and it had only taken that half an instant to fall victim to those grey eyes. Amused, bright eyes that almost melted the disciplined resistance she’d slaved over so long. Gone, vanished in a puff of air, his warm breath on her, his hand and mouth touching her skin.

Shit.

She couldn’t tell her friends because she suspected they’d banish her entirely if she talked about the heat he created inside her body. No way could she explain that, sure, she

might feel the effect of the dragon, but the mesmerizing attraction wouldn't stop her, any more than she'd ever allowed fear to get in her way.

Chapter Four

The next morning as she dried her hair, someone knocked on her apartment door. A man stood right outside her door, not downstairs. She guessed he had a keycard to the downstairs door, and when she saw his dark uniform, she knew who'd sent him.

Playtime with the dragon had begun.

When she opened the door, the chauffeur took off his hat and informed her that Mr. Sarkany had sent a car for her. The driver was smaller than Mr. Pettifer, more polite and probably would have taken no for her answer. But why bother? She would march right into the heart of the creature's lair.

She even allowed the chauffeur to open the car door for her and she tried not to shrink back into the leather-covered corner of the seat when Sarkany himself opened it at the destination.

She ignored his hand and climbed out of the car.

"You issue a challenge, you witness it," he said.

"I have to go to work."

"No, I'm firing you."

She shut her eyes tight. Of course, she'd forgotten he was part-owner of the crafts factory where she worked as a shipping foreman. The job she'd had to get when rising living expenses and a sick mother meant college was out of the question.

He went on, "I'm rehiring you in the capacity of special observer. That certainly sounds impressive enough to be a job? Shall we go upstairs to my apartment and get some breakfast for you?"

"No thanks."

"Don't trust me, eh? Smart."

"I'll grab something here." She swung into the coffee shop at the bottom of the building. Strong hot coffee. Linus said dragons hated the stuff, but Sarkany didn't seem put off by the scent.

He waited for her outside. They rode the elevator up to the top floor. He'd have the penthouse, of course. She sensed he watched her, so she returned his bold examination—at least up to his neck. Hands in trouser pockets, he leaned against the back of the elevator, completely at ease under her scrutiny. She quickly looked away from the swelling in his trousers that he made no move to hide.

"I do enjoy this unpredictable human form," he murmured.

When the doors slid open, she bit her lip to hold back a gasp. The huge room looked even larger with the floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides. A dizzying view.

"Being up high remind you of your mountains?" She wanted to insult him, remind him of his animal origin.

"Yes, it does. I miss them sometimes," he said, and the serious answer shook her. She recalled Linus's warning. Sarkany would try to show he had emotions, even a soul.

She sipped her paper cup of coffee and, ignoring the dizziness of acrophobia, forced herself to walk to the window. "What is on the agenda?"

"We'll work on that together. I have drawn up lists, and you look them over. You help me decide which organization or individual should get which property."

A shuffle of papers, and she turned away from the window to face the dragon. Either view felt dangerous to her, but only one truly was—the handsome creature. He held out a sheaf of paper. Manicured fingernails couldn't disguise the brutal strength of his hands. A white scar crossed the back of his knuckles. Did he carry that from his dragon days?

She took the papers. "Why are you doing this?" If only her hands didn't shake—but he already knew she was frightened of him. No point in trying to hide any secrets from a dragon. He probably even knew about the shard of bone in her pocket, the bit of a dragon Linus once mentioned had been called Flame.

"A challenge," he said, lightly. "I like to do them well. I do many things well."

"Uh-huh." She looked down at the list of assets—she'd memorized what he owned—and slowly ran her finger down one page and the next. She flipped through the whole list. It was all there. Every property and even the objects in his apartment and private office. Quite a few objects and one property were new to her.

She looked at his chin. "Who suggested the charities and organizations?"

"I knew of a few of them. My assistants gave me a list. The Internet. I'm not entirely cut off from human affairs in my realm, you know. I choose to live in this building among you, after all, when I could go inhabit some sort of country estate with a large wall around it."

"You just want to be able to look out over everything you own."

"Perhaps. Yes." He sat down at the large polished granite table that took up much of the room.

When he didn't stand so close, she breathed a little more easily, and she took the time to examine the room. The only personal touches were a few paintings on the one wall that wasn't windows, and some rugs on the polished marble floor. Otherwise there was a sense of wealth and nothing else.

"May I see the rest of your lair?" she asked politely.

"Certainly, on the condition that you look into my face occasionally. You are behaving like a shy young virgin."

"Never mind." She pulled out a heavy carved chair—an antique, she realized—and sat down to read over the list again.

"If I promise not to attempt to seduce you?"

"A dragon's promise?" She shook her head.

He leaned forward, moving more of his body into her view. Broad shoulders. "In blood, just like your guild oaths. Hey? How'd that be? I'd put the blood on a piece of white cloth and you could keep it with your bone shard. Nice little collection you'd have then. And if I broke my promise, you could burn the cloth. That would give me a terrific headache. You know that from your lore?"

She didn't look up and hoped he wouldn't notice her blush. "No, I didn't know. Why do you care so much about whether or not I look at you?"

He laughed. "I have no idea, my young knight of the guild. It amuses me. I'd like to see the true quality of your eyes, for instance."

She flipped a page of his list even though she had no idea what she'd just read. "Hazel. Not blue, not green, not brown. Bags under them from not sleeping well. I haven't for a long time. Not since you paid off city hall to have Point Green destroyed."

"Your old home, I presume? Is this the only reason you hunt me? Or has the code of the guild truly entered your heart?"

"And then when you built the overpriced condos where the affordable rental units—"

“I tire of the subject and I’m disappointed that you are acting from a sense of vengeance. Pfah, typical. And it’s ancient history, Miranda. Because of your challenge, I enter a new era. Although I do have one question. Why do you persist in blaming me when the politicians go merrily along with my plans?”

She stopped pretending to read and pushed the papers away. “You have far more wealth and power than they can resist.”

“You resist it with no difficulty. Allow them some responsibility. Why should you be the only incorruptible human?”

“They don’t know your true nature. You seduce them with—with magic.”

“Dear me. This is dull, familiar territory. I might allow you to leave after all.” He rose to his feet and paced. “The blood offer is real, you know.”

“If I don’t play your game, you’ll get tired of me and let me go?”

“Exactly. You are perceptive. But you have been told to watch me, haven’t you? Take the drops of blood. Hoist them up as a flag at your basement headquarters.”

Her heart sank. How did he know she’d been told to watch him and that they met in a basement?

“God. Is one of the guild a spy for you?”

“Yes, you. You’ve just told me all I’ve guessed is true. The guild rarely changes from generation to generation, you know. They’d meet in shabby outbuildings or even dungeons when there were no basements.”

She sighed and slowly bent forward until her forehead rested on her hands that lay on the table. A gesture of defeat. The granite was cool against her chin. Why the hell did Linus insist she do this work? She was not clever enough.

She wished she could recall if Linus had ever said anything about dragon blood or blood oaths. He remained so secretive about dragon lore and dragon lures, saying he didn’t want information to fall into the wrong hands. Still face-down, she made her decision. “Give me the blood.” She sat up again, but remained focused on her hands. “Put it in a plastic bag, please. Make that two plastic bags.”

Sarkany laughed. Unlike his usual smooth, practiced chuckles, this was a delighted, loud shout of laughter.

He went through a door and soon reappeared with a wickedly sharp silver knife, a white cloth and two plastic bags. “Watch,” he commanded. “You don’t want me to cheat, after all. I could pass off chicken blood as my own.”

She felt slightly sick as he carelessly cut a gash into the top of his elegant, long finger. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"Certainly," he said. "It'll be worth it."

The blood, deep red as her own, dripped onto the cloth. He wiped the knife and his finger, and efficiently tucked the cloth into one bag and then that bag into the next.

"You are so good at that. Do you give out your blood to every visitor?"

"I never have." He pushed the bags across the table toward her.

Her heart beat hard, and she knew that despite her turtleneck, he could see her pulse. No reason to believe his words, but she did. "Why are you giving it to me?"

"I've always been certain I'll know what the humans around me would do with the blood. You, I'm less sure of."

"I thought I would hoist it like a flag."

"I'm not entirely sure, actually."

"Less certainty means I'm more amusing?"

"Exactly. You do comprehend me, my pet."

She couldn't bring herself to touch the bag. "Ugh. Don't call me that."

"Because it will soon be the truth? Very well, Miranda. You have my blood," he said. "Now look at me."

She yanked the bag towards her, thrust it into her back pocket and looked up. After all, she'd managed to close her eyes the day before.

Grey eyes, amused, sharp and gorgeous stared back at her. No whisper of seduction, beyond the obvious and unspoken, yet she was lost, examining his thin, aristocratic face. Oh, no, the smile was kind? That was too much because, God help her, she felt herself responding only to a compelling face and a pleasant smile. *Taste his mouth, run your hands over his skin. Feel his dark hair.* That urging came from her, not him.

"Hello," he said softly. "Very nice to meet you, Miranda Benson."

She could only nod. The dragon poison filled her, she was certain of it. She would have to phone Linus, arrange to not meet guild members in person and try to forget what she knew of the guild. The attraction that filled her was far too potent to ignore.

"Damn it." She rose to her feet. "Show me what you have, please."

Chapter Five

Sarkany let the knight go first because he loved watching her walk stiffly, as if fighting every nerve in her body. She stalked from the room, into the place where he slept, the heart of his nest. No need for a bed because he didn't require much softness and he never brought back his human lovers to this spot. Should he first have her here? Not yet. He wanted to seduce her with crude, human methods, nothing easy—unless she proved too obstinate. He'd risk the headache of breaking the oath, though he'd far rather strip her and take her naturally pliant.

In the meantime, he'd play by her rules and tell her truth the, usually. Though lying had never struck him as particularly odious, she, like most real knights, seemed to dislike it, oddly enough even in herself. Sarkany would try on a new skin, see what it felt like to be a knight, without the bother of a real change.

She shifted uncomfortably as she looked around the nest. *Bedroom*, he corrected himself. Even without the bed. Was she imagining herself lying naked on the cool pile of treasure? He was.

"It doesn't feel as if anyone lives here," she said at last. "I wonder, do dragons have a personality?"

His turn to experience discomfort. In all his years, no one had asked a question like this, and an answer didn't come easily to him. Not even a lie. "I'm not sure I understand you," he said at last.

She waved a hand at his collection of objects. His treasure. "You have a lot of valuable things, but they don't seem to be important to you. They're just there in a jumble, as if it were a store, and not for looking at and enjoying, I mean." She shrugged.

Sentimental nonsense. He had more personality than any short-lived human could imagine. Personality. What the hell did that mean? Silly new-age twaddle. But far inside him the tiny spark had ignited again. The tiny part of *being human* that he admired. Was it personality? Was that the word? All part of the silly admirable bravery?

He didn't have any wish to discuss this with his opponent, for she was that, of course.

"Miranda." He put as much into the word as he could, without using magic.

She started and turned to him, even took a step closer to him. The light coming though the window shone on her hair and clear skin, and he resisted the urge to run his hand over the soft texture and feel the tingle of her. He loved human hair and wished he could bury his face in the waves. Soon.

"Do you know I have never invited anyone into this room? Not even the cleaning staff. No wonder I've kept it secret. The first woman to enter tries to tell me where I've failed as a human. Shall I show you where I excel, my dear Miranda?"

She grinned and he nearly fell over. The female had a gorgeous smile. Why on earth didn't she use it more often? She must know it held power. "Dragon. Thank you for showing me your private space. Let's finish the tour of your lair and then we will work."

She'd turned him down, and easily, too. And she'd taken charge. He'd allow it for now.

Her pulse was nearly steady now and her breathing calm. Something had caused her to relax. This could be good, but he wished he knew what had done it. His nest and its lack of... Blast, he wouldn't obsess about the word any longer.

He led her through the rest of the place. Kitchen, bathroom, nothing particularly interesting but she was fascinated, walking into the shower area, opening the cabinet over the sink.

"So you use soap? And shampoo?"

"I am as human as you are, silly woman. In fact, I believe I am growing some gray hairs. You're responsible, I'm sure."

She pulled out the bottles of cologne people had given him and, closing her eyes, inhaled each of them deeply. "No," she said at last. "None of them smell like you. They're all too sweet or fruity."

The thought that she knew his scent created a strange sense of elation and the impatient excitement deep in his belly. New sensation was always interesting, though he rather resented the fact that a human was responsible.

"Oh, and what do I smell like?"

"Your soap, of course. I thought you'd smell like a snake, but no. You've got the scent of the wind off a mountain, mountain air in winter," she answered at once.

Was she trying to seduce him? Lovely to know she'd been thinking about his scent. Bad that the fact only increased his interest...oh, foolish Sarkany. He almost laughed aloud. Of course she'd gotten that twaddle from dragon lore. He really had to be careful.

In the kitchen she opened and closed cupboards and held the dainty wineglasses and fragile china up to the light. "They're so pretty," she said. "Do you use them? Do you eat off plates?"

"I am capable of your version of good manners."

"I see chopsticks, but no silverware?"

"Yes." Sarkany decided not to tell her that the flavor of metal spoiled food for him. Wood he could tolerate. Ivory or most other bones actually lent a savory hint. But bitter, biting metal... No. He didn't need to remind her how different he was from her. He led her back to the first room and waved a hand at another door. "There is another meeting room, like this with fewer windows, and then the rooms for my assistants. They're there now. Shall I introduce you?"

"I met one of your drivers and Mr. Pettifer, and I'd probably recognize some of your other, um, servants. Not now, thanks. Maybe later."

"Yes, if you manage to destroy me, they'll be no threat."

She winced. His campaign to capture her sympathy might be working. Really, humans could be manipulated easily, even the ones with strong moral codes, though he rarely bothered with them.

In fact, this was the first time he'd attempted to seduce a female by evoking her compassion for the poor, lonely dragon. It had struck him as beneath his dignity but perhaps it could be fun. No human he'd met understood the dragon's notion of dignity, though he wondered if this one could. Perhaps once he had her firmly in his possession, he'd experiment with explanations.

She'd probably no longer interest him after he won the challenge. He'd set her up in one of his domains as a servant. It would serve her right if he put her in a lair he'd locate in her city—a lair he'd purchase later because, of course, he would win. A bitter lesson that she should not attack a power she could not comprehend.

Her back was to him as she stood examining the painting of the mountains, her hands stuffed into the back pockets of her worn jeans, one hand only partway in because of the bag with the bloodstained cloth.

He enjoyed their interactions; perhaps that's why he didn't feel the usual thrill of satisfaction to think of her conquered and added to his collection. Although then he'd dress her in fine silk or nothing at all. He'd be able to taste her and feel her naked skin, and play with that lovely moist opening to her body any time he wished. Kiss every one of those lovely moist spots of hers. Yes, that would be satisfying.

He detected her sex now and again, and her sweet muskiness of desire. The aroma had increased, even when he didn't attempt magic. Pleasant to know he'd drawn excitement from her with no real effort on his part.

He wondered if she shaved her feminine parts. A silly habit. Rough or silky, curling human hair was so delicious and held scent so—

"Mr. Sarkany? I think I'll go downstairs and get another cup of coffee if you don't mind." She'd turned from the painting and was examining him, her mouth quirked into a half smile.

He frowned back at her. "When did you start calling me 'mister'?"

"When you didn't answer me the first time I said something."

"I'll go with you."

He obviously needed fresh air.

She shoved the papers into her jacket pocket and seemed impatient to go. He waited outside while she bought her coffee and apparently some food.

"We could take a walk." She licked a dollop of cream cheese from her finger and he forgot to answer for a moment. He looked forward to the taste of her skin—he imagined her fingers against his tongue. Ah, not just fingers, no, she would be utterly delectable everywhere.

She zipped up her nylon jacket, a cheap and shabby garment, though the blue did match some of the light in her eyes. "We'll go to one of the last parts of the city you haven't bought yet. Do you want to bring a bodyguard or something?"

"Oh, I might be in danger, but I doubt it. I'm a very popular man in this city." He smiled at her scowl.

"Then why do you employ bodyguards? It's hard to imagine you'd be afraid of humans."

"I'm not afraid, but I don't want to be arrested for murder. I could get carried away."

"Oh." He could almost hear the words she didn't say. *Bloodthirsty animal.*

“I am jesting with you. I keep my assistants so I won’t have to interact with any more humans than is necessary. I’m solitary by nature, as you must know from your studies.”

She shivered, and this time he supposed it was with cold. He nudged her arm. “Let’s walk.” He couldn’t help teasing her some more. “Did you know that other cities court me? They want me to pour my money into their rotting downtowns. They beg me and offer enticing tax breaks so I can build a stadium or a project.”

“I’m not surprised.” She strode along, keeping up with him easily. “From the outside, your projects are like you. Beautiful. It’s inside that there’s...nothing.”

“Clever woman,” he said approvingly. “You would tear down my self-esteem and force me to weep confessions of my sins to you.”

“No.” Her eyes widened and she looked appalled. “I would hate it if you did that.”

He put it on his to-do list at once.

“Instead of visiting the signs of my greed, let us find one of the institutions that might get the money I’m to give away.”

“The challenge again.” She gave him a puzzled look.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I don’t understand you at all. I know you don’t operate on whims. Dragons are usually the least whimsical creatures there are. But why you took the challenge, and so quickly, and why you’re doing this...” She shrugged.

She had a point.

“Perhaps I have worn this human form so long I am one of you.”

She laughed, but the sound wasn’t ragged with dislike or mockery. He suspected she’d begun to like him. This should be a nice advantage for him until the moment she realized the fact herself. Then she’d have to punish him and herself.

“We’ll go this way,” she said, and they walked down a steep hill where single-family houses still stood, some boarded up, almost all in need of a paint job.

They passed several people and she smiled at them. This knight might contain power but she had a propensity to be warm-hearted. Not a useful habit for a warrior.

“Predictable location,” he said, already bored, as they reached the bottom of the hill and pushed through the door of the Community Life Center.

“You’ve been here?” she asked.

"Of course not."

"No, no treasure here," she said mildly.

"Precisely." The scent of ammonia and unwashed bodies was far from delectable, but he was practicing meek and sympathetic, and decided to remain quiet.

Inside, three old silent men slumped on a bench. They'd probably occupied that spot so long they'd become part of it. None of them looked up as Sarkany and Miranda walked down the hall.

A younger man, shaggy with beard and unkempt hair, shambled towards them. One of the homeless served, no doubt. The bear put out a hand and grabbed Miranda. Sarkany felt a growl gather in his throat, until he saw she returned the man's hug.

"Mira, Mira, how've you been doing?" The man snuffled on her shoulder in just the manner Sarkany wanted to. Sarkany could sense the man growing sexually excited. Miranda's body didn't change, not like it had the day before in her apartment or even during the tour of his lair. But he could imagine her radiance blossoming for this bear-man who didn't even call her by her proper name.

"It's great to see you. I'm fine, Pete." She pulled away but didn't let go of his hand and the smile on her face showed some of her glow. Sarkany felt a fierce stab of greed. He wanted that glorious smile for himself. Next time she looked in his eyes, he'd just insinuate a touch of command to get it.

No, no. He was absurd to break his own rules so quickly.

Miranda's smile vanished as she turned to Sarkany. "Pete runs the Center. He's been working here for almost ten years and he says in the last five years the numbers of homeless have tripled. They can't keep up with the numbers who need—"

The bear-man was gaping at him. "Jesus, Mira," he interrupted. "I mean, uh, sir."

Sarkany knew this wasn't a member of the guild, but the man recognized him. Plenty of people did. Sarkany extended his hand. "How do you do?"

"This is Mr. Sarkany." Miranda sounded as if she were apologizing to Pete.

Pete beamed at him and clasped his hand in both of his rather damp ones. "It's an honor, Mr. Sarkany. You've come to visit our facility at last."

"Only because of a bet," Miranda muttered under her breath so only Sarkany could hear. Clearly the bear-man's groveling annoyed her. She'd have to get used to unctuousness once she was his. She might even try a little herself. He'd enjoy watching that.

“Would you like a tour?” Pete asked. “Please, please, let me, I’ll just...I have to...” He scurried off to a cubbyhole of an office near the door they’d just come through.

“Seen enough?” Miranda said. Her hand made a generous circle above her head, indicating the walls. “So this center is number one on my list. Pete’s a great administrator. Give them, oh, a few million. And maybe half your buildings.”

He grinned at her flip tone. “You are a piece of work, Miranda Benson. How many more of these public servants do you want me to turn into...what are they called? Fat cats. That’s what happens to most of them once they taste money and power.”

He expected her to defend her large friend, insist that he couldn’t be corrupted. Instead she shot him a sidelong look and said, “Oh, yeah, speaking of cats, I thought you might give money to build a home for stray felines. Three homes.”

He gave in and played along. “What about the dogs?”

“Three for them, too, of course.”

“Miranda. I beg you to take this challenge seriously. You saw the assets I must dissolve and distribute. It will be a tremendous task. And I warn you, almost every bit of it is in private holdings, yet many people will be seriously annoyed.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Every now and then, I actually believe you’ll do this. Usually I wonder what we’re doing and why you’re playing with me.” She bit her lip and looked around. “And when you’re going to finally get tired of the game and pounce.”

“I thought I made it obvious why I’m playing.” He had to tamp down the urge to grab her and yank her against him. The shabby little hallway was not the right place. “I can’t stop the game midway through, you know. Not at all *pukka sahib*, as the Brits used to say.”

She lost the troubled frown and looked at him with curiosity. “Did you know colonial India?”

“Of course. Think of the treasure.”

Pete hurried over to them. He’d put on a crooked tie and a rumpled jacket that might have fit him when he was twenty or so pounds lighter. “Shall we start the tour? How about, um, the top floor? We have the job training unit and, um, GED classes.”

Sarkany started to refuse, but realized Miranda watched him and expected him to say no. “We have a great deal of work to do, but if Miss Benson wishes to visit a particular area?”

“The kids,” she said. “You mentioned something about kids, Sarkany.”

He did? He couldn't recall. "Very well. Lead on, Mister..."

"Oh, yes. I'm Peter Leonard, sir. I'm sorry. Right. The children. Most of them belong to the students working upstairs and some of the, ah, homeless. Who haven't been tested or, ah, placed in the right schools. Right. Okay." Leonard strode ahead and Miranda caught up with him.

Leonard leaned close to her ear and murmured quietly—probably a range humans wouldn't hear. "You shouldn't be so rude, Mira. Do you know what that man's worth?"

She didn't bother to hold her voice down. "Oh, Petey. What is it you always say? Since when does money make someone worthy of respect?"

Leonard glanced nervously over his shoulder at Sarkany. Their eyes met and Sarkany took the opportunity to send a message... *She's mine. Don't touch her with sexual intent again.* He sent it politely, of course. His smile showed all of his teeth.

Leonard pulled away from her and almost broke into a run.

Miranda sniffed and allowed Sarkany to take her arm. "Known him long?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Sarkany went back to composing his list of confessions he'd pour into her ear while he wept. Maybe she'd take his head in her lap and stroke his hair.

"You look satisfied with yourself. Like you've just pillaged a surprisingly rich village," she said.

"Mm," he agreed and felt her shiver just a little bit. Exquisite hunger coursed through him. This was more fun than pillaging two villages.

The room full of children fell silent when they walked in the door. Bright light streamed through large wire-covered windows. *Not such a bad space*, he thought. *Perhaps too many little imps and not enough keepers.*

They walked through the room, stepping over plastic toys. The noise level slowly rose. One of the young ones whined. An older one snickered, at the out-of-place adults, no doubt.

The stench of ammonia and false pine was gradually drowned out by one almost as obnoxious. Sarkany smelled disease and wondered which of them was ill. He'd long ago learned that young humans tended to spread ailments quickly but this was a particularly strong, abhorrent scent. He looked around the room and picked out the likely suspect, a listless creature sitting at a table with a picture book propped up in front of her.

"That scrawny one in the hideous pink nylon sweater. Yes, the one with the upside-down book. Why isn't she in a hospital?" he asked quietly.

Leonard and Miranda stared at him, and he realized he shouldn't know this sort of thing. All the more reason to avoid humans and suffering.

"Why do you ask?" Miranda whispered.

"She's sick. Surely even you can see it." The child's skin was yellow and pinched, her face too small or her eyes too large, and something worse than the usual infection lurked in her.

"She goes in for treatments," Leonard said, too loud, though the girl didn't appear to notice him as he went on about kidneys, livers, insurance and her expensive care. Sarkany had heard the sort of story before and paid no attention.

The book slid to the floor. The girl sat and stared at nothing. Sarkany made a disgusted click of the tongue. "They obviously don't even bother with enough medicine to drown the pain. And you call me inhuman," he muttered at Miranda, who didn't answer.

Leonard, too nervous to remain still, had moved onto another subject. He hustled over to another part of the room to point out some cracks in the wall. *More bleating for his aid*, Sarkany thought sourly. His life had been filled with meaningless cawing for his attention.

He gave a polite cough to attract the girl's notice, and the pain-blurred eyes met his. *Strength, you little bag of flesh and bones, don't let the bastard illness wear you away. Claw back. Wear vigor like a dragon's heart. You will be strong.*

The girl didn't smile, but her mouth twitched and perhaps some of the lines relaxed. "You said bastard," she told Sarkany in a sing-song voice. "That's a bad word."

"Is it? So sorry." He gave her a clipped nod and walked across the room to look at Leonard's dripping sink.

When he glanced back, the girl had reached for the book that lay at her feet. She propped it on the table and leaned her thin arms on the pages.

"I didn't hear you say 'bastard,'" Miranda murmured as he caught up with her. "What did you do to her?"

"None of your business," he said, annoyed by the whole thing. "I'll write a check and we'll go elsewhere."

A boy tossed a ball and, without thinking, Sarkany caught the object flying in the air in front of him. Too hard. It popped in his hand. "Damn," he said under his breath. He held up the flaccid blue object between two fingers. "Sorry, kid."

At once the boy began to howl and the other kids started talking excitedly.

Sarkany turned to Leonard. "Look, I need to get going, but let me just leave you with something."

Miranda had gone to the sobbing boy. An attendant hurried over, too, and the two women sank to their knees to talk to the boy.

Sarkany watched their useless efforts as he pulled out a checkbook. What had she said? Half of it? He grinned at the thought, but knew that the cash wasn't there. Yet. He could write something large enough to make Leonard scream like a little girl—or like the little boy who was still sobbing, although with less strength, now that Miranda was doing something clever with a hand puppet.

He ripped out the check and handed it to Leonard, who went pale.

"Two million dollars?" Leonard didn't scream. He tugged at his tie and seemed unable to get a good breath. "Two million? Oh, God. Sir. But. Ah, do you. I can't take this without some planning. The board. Oh. God. Earmarked. Where do you want it to go?"

"Get the boy a new ball and get that skinny one something for her pain. She needs it. Let's go, Miranda." Sarkany wanted away from this surfeit of gratitude. Often he'd enjoyed and even basked in creatures' delight, but he was not in the mood at the moment.

Leonard hurried along beside him, his voice still coming in little pants. "I have to call the papers. This is amazing and we can use the publicity for our halfway homes for—"

Sarkany stopped. "No," he said. "Don't."

"We shouldn't use it for the homes? Okay, sure. I understand. How about—"

"Don't call the press. Just spend the damn money anywhere you want."

Chapter Six

“That was very odd,” Miranda said as they went out into the fresh air. “Why did you do that?”

Sarkany purposefully misunderstood her. “You’re the one who set the challenge.”

“No, I suppose you wrote the check to show me you’re serious. I mean with the ball. And the girl.”

“The ball was pure instinct, and I did nothing to the girl.” He should have told her. No doubt she’d approve, but he didn’t want to allow her to see too much. She was his enemy, he reminded himself. He’d learned not to underestimate enemies.

“Do you know, I’ve heard that dragons are excellent liars, so there must be some reason you’re trying to pretend you don’t want me to know.”

“Now, that is hard to follow.”

“Liar.”

“Miss Benson, I believe you’re flirting with me.”

She pondered this for a moment. “You might be right. I think I’m less afraid of you, too. I wonder why.”

“My charm?”

She laughed—a raucous sound, not even close to the practiced polite titter of the polished women he interacted with. “I think it has to do with the way you looked so appalled after you popped that boy’s ball. Not your charm. Your charm is one of the most frightening things I’ve ever run across. Especially that thing you do with your eyes.”

Damn it. “You have nothing to fear. Remember? You hold the blood oath in your back pocket.”

“I have to look up that oath thing,” she said, sober again. “On the walk over here I remembered reading that dragon blood would burn me, so I know you didn’t give that cloth to me for my sake.”

He smiled and grasped her arm again. "Smart girl," he said approvingly. "Do look it up, though. I'm sure there's something about blood oaths. Very common habit between serious enemies like the guild and my kind."

She wrinkled her nose. "Surely you have other things you should be doing instead of telling me this nonsense."

She liked plain speaking so he decided to indulge in some. "Yes. Let's go to your apartment," he said. "I'll make phone calls and send faxes to start the process of giving it all away and then we can make love in any room you wish."

"Make love?"

"Certainly. I just gave your favorite cause two million dollars. I deserve a kiss or two. I would love to taste your body. Kisses everywhere you like. It doesn't have to be flat-out fucking, you know, though that would be exquisite. I'm very amenable when it comes to making love. I'd be content with feeling your sweet flesh under my hand."

She made a squeak he knew was supposed to register disgust, but it was unconvincing. He'd have her soon.

"Have you lain awake and wondered what a dragon as man's body looks like? What it feels like?" he asked, delighted by the red that had risen to her face. "My skin is warmer than yours. I possess less hair than your friend Pete. Is he hirsute all over?"

She pulled her arm away and managed to turn businesslike. "Sarkany. I am not interested in discussing this with you. We'll return to your apartment and you can do your—your work or whatever you have to do there. Unless you want to see the other locations I have in mind."

He wrinkled his nose. "One reason I enjoy high altitudes is that I can avoid crowds. I can still watch the interesting creatures but I don't have to shove my way through them."

"A pity not everyone has that choice."

He wished she didn't wear such a high-collared shirt, but still, he could rest his hand on the nape of her neck. "Yes, indeed a pity."

Under the cloth, her pulse quickened nicely at his touch.

"I know," he said. "Let's get the car and drive to your old neighborhood. You can tell me all about what a scoundrel I've been."

She stopped dead on the sidewalk. "It's not funny," she said, sounding almost apologetic. "You have no idea what it was like, fighting against the tide of your machine. Heartless. Useless changes."

“Why do you say that?”

“Our city was fine.” She tucked her arms tight around herself as if sealing out the cold or the awareness of him. “Not grand or beautiful. But it wasn’t dying. And then you killed it.”

He laughed. “You make it sound like the inhabitants are my prey.”

“Believe me, trying to survive here has felt like that sometimes. Come on, I’ll show you.” She grabbed his hand, no doubt to give him an impatient tug, but she clearly felt the sudden burst of sensation. His blood fired, too, as fingers and palms touched, wrapped together.

Miranda froze. She looked down at their clasped hands and then into his eyes.

“Yes, you are showing me.” He inhaled deeply and looked away from her wide, startled gaze because he wasn’t sure he’d be able to stop himself from mesmerizing her. “Very nice.”

Miranda and Sarkany walked next to the several-acre site that was to be a multiplex and shopping area with lovely tall structures of arching glass. Who wouldn’t admire such buildings? He didn’t bother asking Miranda.

She told a good story. She talked in a quiet voice about the dead neighborhood, pictures of human activity that Sarkany had never witnessed. He found the descriptions amusing—block parties, bike races, people washing cars on sunny days.

“Over in that deep pit with the big pipes—” she waved a hand, “—that was my best friend’s house. Her parents had to leave the area when their furniture store closed down. They couldn’t afford the rental prices you charged—and everyone else charged when they saw what you got away with.”

She grabbed the wire fence and stared through at nothing. “You did nothing to help the people who’d spent generations here. The money they got was pathetic. I don’t know how much you paid the politicians. Every one of your projects is eminent domain abuse at its worst. And the newspaper? Your puppets own that, too, so there’s no one left to protest.”

He nodded and listened. He even felt a twinge of her sorrow as she described the way her mother had desperately tried to find ways to hold onto their life. But at last she was silent.

His turn.

And he suspected that because she'd been overburdened with a sense of fairness, this would be easy. "Do you know what was here before your row houses?"

She looked out of the corners of her eyes. He did enjoy those sidelong examinations of hers—Miranda trying to hide her fascination with him. She thrust her hands into her pockets and continued to stroll next to the wire fence. "What?"

"I find it interesting to learn the history of my domains."

"Tell me," she said. Her shoulders hunched as if she knew what was coming and tensed herself against it.

He assumed the manner of a lecturer. "We shall start with the first humans. Indian tribes that showed up, oh, about eight thousand BC. The later natives who lived here and left their trails and records called the area the Meadows, although much of the land a few blocks north was swamp."

"Yeah, I remember this stuff from fourth grade." Her back relaxed slightly.

Not for long.

"Do you, then? Perhaps you recall how the wetlands were destroyed, and the creatures that lived there were driven out. Did your teacher tell you if the settlers did anything to help the other humans adjust to the huge changes? The people who'd lived here for generations?"

She stopped walking, and looked up at him. Something like panic filled her eyes as he continued, "The human tribe died out. Most of them died in the winter of 1670 when they were driven off their lands without enough supplies to last the winter. From what I understand, the squirrels and raccoons are really the only creatures remaining that thrived once your people took up residence. And dragons flourished, of course."

He smiled at her and waited. She opened her mouth. Then closed it. "Forget it," she said. "Forget the whole thing. I can't do it. Someone else will have to go hand-to-hand with you." She blinked and looked away again, over at a huge pile of dirt and an empty bulldozer.

He frowned. "What? You're talking nonsense."

“You win. It’s that easy. Damn it, just give it all away and move into my life or don’t give any more of it to anyone and whatever you do is fucking fine. Forget the stupid challenge.” She strode quickly away from him. He scowled after her for a moment, then went to the construction site, where he found her leaning against a wall, her face buried in her crossed arms.

“What kind of weakness is this?” he said, disgusted.

She wasn’t crying, but her face was drawn tight when she looked up at him. Despair. “Sarkany. It was bad enough when you used the dragonspell of attraction. And then when you did whatever you did with the girl at the center. It made me think you had actual feelings. But this is the worst of all.”

“What?”

“You’re right.” Tears came into her eyes. “The creatures, the people who lived here before. No one cared about them. We are just as bad as you. We are as ruthless. Worse. We destroy our own species.”

He gave a click of impatience and pulled her away from the wall, into his arms. She wrapped her arms around him and leaned against him. Her embrace felt even better than he’d imagined, but he was too irritated to enjoy it at the moment.

“Fight, dammit,” he said. “You’re no fun if you don’t fight.”

She stiffened. “Perhaps being fun for you isn’t the main goal of my life.”

“That’s it.” He patted her on the back. “Get angry again.”

She sniffed and rubbed her face against his shirt. “You’re being nice,” she said, and he was glad to hear the note of surprised laughter.

“Am I?”

“Yes, you’re hugging me and you’re being nice.”

“I like holding you. You’re a perfect size for this shape of mine.” He pulled her a little closer. “See?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Hell if I know how you do it. I was so determined. Focused. And you’ve reduced me to this.” Her arms around him tightened. He forgot his irritation.

He put his face in her hair and breathed in the enchanting scent. He pressed his hands up and under her shirt. Ahh, the flesh he found at her waist was sweet to touch.

Once, long ago, he’d discovered swimming, and the first time he’d dived into the icy lake and felt the ambrosial water surround him he’d wanted to swoon with pleasure—though dragons don’t swoon.

The feel and scent of her reminded him of that experience. He hadn't dived in yet. Oh, he couldn't wait. But he wasn't entirely satisfied. This part was too effortless. She was something of a disappointment, how easily she caved in.

What had she said? Her kind was just as ruthless and horrible as he was? This wasn't really a conquest, yet. Ha, he'd rid himself of this realm and show her how considerate he could be—without showing his secrets. He wanted her to worship him, to look at him with the same light she'd looked at Pete Leonard and those children.

But first he'd take her home and turn her into his wanton creature. He wondered how much sexual experience she had, though he didn't particularly care as long as she'd regain some of that strength of hers. He longed for a more strenuous battle with this knight.

Her apartment, he decided. He'd only take her in his lair after he had a proper mat to protect her fragile human form from the hard marble of his nest—and once she really had been properly defeated. This didn't count. This couldn't because he wasn't done playing.

He tore himself away from the delight of her skin. They both sighed.

"I offer another challenge," he murmured. "There are still people you care about who're displaced, yes?"

She nodded slowly. The spark in her eye had returned.

"You allow me in your home and allow me to touch you any way I wish, and I will stop construction on the Meadowglen."

"You have to give it up anyway. The original challenge stands."

"I'll build something first and use my considerable influence to change the project into whatever you please. No stalling around, the way another developer might have to. And then I'll hand it over. Such a generous move to allow your old neighbors to prosper, and all because you allowed me access to your lovely body. No pain. No trickery. Just a sweet exploration of you. I gave the blood oath."

She rubbed her face with the palms of her hands. "You're giving me an excuse, aren't you? Because you know I want to."

He grinned. She would surprise him again and again with her lack of guile. "If that's so, why don't you give in?"

A slight breeze ruffled her hair. "I don't want your dragon poison."

"Nonsense, I won't put poison in you, but I fully intend to put something of mine in you." He had to pause as sharp desire roiled through him. "Oh, you will enjoy it, my

Miranda. And so will I. I'm sure your guild members would tell you that you must appease me and my harmless whims."

She snorted. "Harmless? They would tell me to run—or run you through with something sharp."

He smoothed his hand over her hair and allowed his palm to brush her cheek at the same time. "What will you do?"

She closed her eyes. "I can't think when you're near me."

"Don't think, then. Just let yourself enjoy."

"Sarkany," she whispered, and he knew this battle was nearly won, too, though he couldn't bring himself to regret this easy win.

They walked in silence to her apartment. For once the dragon didn't push, didn't touch her or tease.

She excused herself and made a call on her cell, hidden in her bedroom.

"Linus, I need help." Without going into any other details, she described the blood oath.

She could barely stand the glee in his voice. "He gave you one? God, this is better than I expected, and I had faith in you and the...well, anyway. Don't touch the cloth. It'll burn you."

"I remembered that."

"Keep it hidden, Miranda. In a dark place. Oh, fantastic work. Anything he links to that blood oath will cause him pain to break. You're doing great."

She went to the living room where he waited, no sign of impatience on his unreadable face.

With a trembling hand she unzipped her jacket. "The apartments. Low income." He took a step toward her and she held up a hand. "Not yet. Make the calls. Promise on your blood oath. And..." Her voice trailed away. "Yes. I'll let you touch me."

Chapter Seven

A half hour later, Sarkany put down the phone, and across the room, Miranda clicked the extension off, too. "They think you've lost your mind," she said without dropping her steady gaze.

"I have." He stood and walked to her, slow careful movements. A predator trying to keep the prey from starting and running. Her heart thumped hard but not just with fear. God, at last. At last.

For an hour, she'd said.

"An hour with the blood oath not to cast any sort of spell on me or harm me."

"Nothing more than you've done to me," he whispered in her ear. "My sweet knight." He slid his flattened hand along her spine. His voice died away as she found his mouth and pulled him into a kiss, greedy hot followed by more kisses. Hands explored and each touch brought a gasp.

She ran her fingertips along his muscular side, over his belly, pulling out his crisp shirt. No hair, silk over the iron muscles. "You were right. So warm. I love the feel of you, Sarkany. More."

He tightened his hold, pressing her so close she couldn't breathe. She squirmed in his grip. He loosened his hands at once and mumbled, "Sorry."

She even believed he meant it. Grabbing his hand, she hauled him to her bedroom. "I want you. No more clothes."

"Miranda." He reached for her shirt and yanked it off her body. She lifted her feet one at a time as her shoes, her jeans, were all shucked expertly.

She sprawled naked on the bed. He lay next to her still fully dressed except for jacket and tie, which had gotten lost somewhere near the couch.

"Time for you to get naked," she said, unbuckling his belt. "Please."

Sarkany pulled away. He smiled, but his eyes glittered dangerously. “You don’t honestly think I’d expose myself to a member of the guild, do you? The scale remains secret.”

She was confused for a moment then recalled the lore. Another bit of information that Linus had right, apparently. The single scale he retained for his power. “I forgot.” She laughed without humor. “Unbelievable, Sarkany. I only thought of this and this.” She touched his mouth with her fingers, and reached to stroke his belly and through his trousers his long, extremely hard cock.

He groaned and pushed against her fingers.

She moved closer to him, impatient to feel the heat and shape of his body. “Touch me, then. Your skin on mine where you want. Anything you want.” She closed her eyes, moved in for another kiss, only pausing to sadly smile and ask, “Have you ever in all your long years met a worse knight?”

“Never.” His kiss was almost tender. The next tasted more demanding. And then he slid down her naked body. Swift, relentless and determined in his apparent goal to savor every inch of her with his fingers, and mouth.

He licked her belly. “Hold still,” he commanded

She twisted from his loose grip on her thighs. “No. I can’t. I don’t want to. Dragon, come up here.”

He ignored her pleas and grabbed her legs again. She relented when his warm hands coaxed her legs apart and he flicked his tongue over her clitoris. “I’ve dreamed of this, my morsel,” he said and went to work, sucking and licking with relish. “I’ve promised myself a feast of knight. So rich. Yes, curls.”

The tingle of his stroking tongue added to growing waves of relentless pleasure. “Dragon,” she cried out. “Here.”

He kissed her knee. “Oh, very well. I obey.”

And the kisses worked slowly back up to her mouth.

He’d managed unfasten his trousers, and his hard cock grazed along the trail left by his mouth.

He rested much of his weight on her, and their kisses began again, saltier and wet now. Her eager writhing had turned serious. She pushed against him, growling with need.

“Now.” She reached down and grabbed his thick, unyielding cock to put it where she needed him. He slid over her, teasing, but not into her pussy.

“Beg,” he whispered.

“I have, dammit.”

“Give yourself to me.”

“Sarkany.” She reached between their warm bodies and squeezed him tight. His cock throbbed and swelled in her hand, grew warmer.

His eyes staring into hers narrowed. She whispered, “You beg me.”

He said nothing but gently, persistently pushed. She wanted him too much, so she moved her hand and he sank slowly into her. Her breath went ragged as he pushed so far inside her. Lord. She would never be able to escape. “Never. Oh. Never. Beg. Please.” Nonsense words she barely noticed speaking poured from her, as she writhed, impaled, skewered, penetrated by solid heat.

He cupped her butt, his large hands holding her as he relentlessly pressed deeper, filling her. He stopped at last. Each made tiny tentative motions that made the other moan. Inside her he seemed to grow, pushing her to the verge of too much again. She opened her mouth to bellow against his cloth-covered shoulder. But then she tilted her hips. More.

“Wait,” he commanded, and then something shifted, no, a tangible shiver passed between them, warmth rising from where he lay unmoving, buried deep inside her. As if he’d orgasmed and the heat from his come spread. But he hadn’t. This must be something different.

The tingling in her skin grew, and every inch he’d kissed felt the touch of him again. More than tactile sensation, her body opened to something more. Taste? Scent?

“Oh, it’s perfect,” she moaned, greedy. If he moved again, the sensation would throb through her. She craved it. Greedy as a dragon, clutching for it, she hitched her body up and down as far as his hands holding her firmly would allow her to move. Just out of reach.

“Dragon, dragon. Give more to me.”

Sarkany couldn’t believe it. The first and only time he’d allowed his natural urges full rein with a human, the seasoned whore had screamed and passed out.

He hadn’t made that mistake again. When he kept his senses restrained, his cock wouldn’t grow too large or release the dragon’s essence of *vishaya* that sharpened the pleasure for him and his partner.

He'd intended to intimidate his delicious knight, make her feel the taste of his power, only a hint of the *vishaya* that could be poison. He craved her heat around him, but he also wanted to push her to a swoon, watch her weakness. When she reawoke, he'd gloat and they'd retreat to the pleasant, less passionate or punishing love play he enjoyed with humans. But she wanted more?

He hauled himself up on his arms and pushed tighter. Harder. Not checking his motion. Her cry was nearly a shriek, but instead of passing out, she wrapped her legs around his, wiggled around him, even thrust up to meet him.

He cursed in an almost forgotten language. Not since Flame had he allowed his body such lease. With one hand, he reached down and pushed off the trousers that hampered him. The sensation of skin to fragile skin was too irresistible and he fumbled with the shirt and yanked it over his head, ripping the cuff-linked sleeves.

Her heart thudded against him, throbbed from her body straight into his.

They rolled, writhed and cursed as if locked in battle. Her arms tightened around his torso, so hard he exhaled with a grunt. He rubbed his face against her neck and bit the tender spot at her shoulder. She cried out and he felt her pussy spasm.

He shuddered as her sheathe tightened around his cock and her thighs gripped his human form harder. But he still held back, and the tension made him tremble with the need for release.

"Sarkany, oh God." Tears streamed down her cheek.

He slowed to a more gentle pulse in and out of her.

"I hurt you? Miranda?" He was dismayed to discover true concern that he might have harmed her. He began to pull out of her. Slowly, carefully, though all he wanted was to drive into her, bury himself in her flesh.

"No, no. Stay," she gasped and her heels pounded against his ass. She arched up again. He must move deep inside her.

Less than a minute later he wouldn't have been able to stop even if she begged him.

He gripped a handful of her lush hair and devoured her mouth, to stop his roar of triumph.

"I feel it," she yelped and then babbled. "You're coming. It's wonderful, hot. I didn't know. I didn't know."

He didn't, either.

She murmured something about “wonderful” and tucked her head against his chest. Her body seemed to fall into a swoon. Still deep inside her, he could feel the throb of her heartbeat around his cock.

“I love your skin. I worship your lovely body, your sweet cunny. You have won this round,” he crooned, but so quietly she couldn’t hear. When he managed to untangle his limbs from hers, he revisited his favorite discoveries of her body.

Sweat-slicked skin tasted sweet beneath the salt, he decided as he sampled her nipple, which hardened against his tongue. Such a charming shrinking of the areole into hardness, he had to play with those nipples until she moaned and moved, restless again.

Her fingers curled through his hair. “I did this to get over you,” she said. “I wanted to satiate the hunger and move along. It hasn’t worked. Dragon, I can’t be lost this easily.”

“Why not? I have been captivated by you, too. Turnabout.”

“I vowed to defeat you. I can’t believe I’m that—that vulnerable.”

She sat up and he rested his head on her thigh, close to the darker curls covering her pussy. He breathed in the feminine musk of arousal and completion. And now arousal again. The scent he left in her only added to the best of cycles.

“You vowed to rid your city of a nuisance. I’ve agreed to go.”

“Why?” She put her hand in front of his questing mouth, but he thrust his tongue between her fingers. She giggled but he hadn’t distracted her. “Why has this been so easy?” she persisted.

Very well, he’d allow his hands to taste her. She leaned over him, her eyes wide. “I feel that now. It’s as if I can feel you touch me. It’s—it’s...” She groaned. “You put a dragonspell on me. Either that or I’m a poor excuse of a knight to give in just for a little pleasure.”

“Why should you be any different from any other mortal creature? We appreciate our pleasure and those who provide it.” At last he managed to nose past her fingers to her slick opening, the sweet flesh of her thighs. “You have also pleased me with your power. You are the best of knights, my Miranda.”

He tasted and smelled her delicate flesh again. Ambrosia.

She whimpered and shifted to reach her hands under his arms. He allowed her to distract him again. He forgot to worry about his scale or his enemy. He only wanted more.

They explored each other's bodies at a slower pace. She licked and sucked his cock then stopped to stare at him. She stroked her fingers over the round head.

"Am I too exotic for you?" he asked.

"Large, but not abnormal." She licked again. "Very tasty, but I wonder if you'd mind—"

"Please. Be my guest." He held his impatience at bay as she slowly climbed his body. The wonderful female could do this again—obviously she possessed a rare strength. He would allow her to take the initiative because he didn't want to use her up—yet.

Gingerly she held his cock and lowered her swollen pussy onto it.

He could feel her pain almost the second she did and her pleasure as she did. The sweet, slight human body was filled with sensation, and he wanted to explore each shiver and throb with her until the desire was too much and he forgot himself, plunging so hard they cried out together.

Chapter Eight

Sarkany seemed to doze, so Miranda took the opportunity to sit up and examine his body in the gathering gloom, a stealthy exploration at first.

She wasn't even sure what the scale looked like.

Why did the guild care about the dragon's scale? She suddenly understood she wouldn't tell Linus even if she knew where it lay on Sarkany's body. She'd say nothing—at least until she knew what kind of weapon it meant against Sarkany.

Her goals had shifted. She didn't really have any, other than revenge for the end of the life she'd known. Her loyalty to the guild had melted away as if it had never existed. No, it was more she could not allow them to kill the dragon—even if he proved capricious and tricky, as she supposed he would, even if he managed to hurt her, as she knew he planned. She had made her vow to destroy him back when she thought of him as a mindless hoarder and nothing more.

She had her doubts about her vow as they visited the center and had abandoned it when he'd murmured that he worshipped her body. She knew he hadn't intended her to hear, he didn't understand what he'd created inside her. Every part of her, every nerve had soaked up the startling heat. Now the sparks had died to a warm glow but she felt changed. Renewed.

Giving up the hunt for his scale, she leaned back to admire the long lean limbs, and wondered if his strength and muscles came from this form or his true one.

"My heel," he said without opening his eyes. "Take a look."

She didn't bother to pretend not to understand. Instead she moved to him and ran her hand along his hard thigh, kissed his calf and, sure enough, a blue scale lay flat, yet jewel-like, on his heel. She traced the skin and the smooth surface of the scale. He watched and shuddered.

With a smile at his response, she rubbed the scale, tapped it, even put the tip of her tongue to it. It tasted of him and was only slightly warmer than his human skin, though harder.

She lay back down and snuggled into his arms. "I like the way it feels."

"While I'm alive, only I can take it off," he said in a warning tone.

She suspected that wasn't true, but she wasn't interested in stealing it. "In your other form? You're covered with that?"

He nodded. "Various shades of colors, but yes."

And you're larger?

"Much."

"I wish I could see that."

"No more challenges."

She sighed. "You must be lovely, though."

He frowned at her. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "No. I lost. I'm lost. Filled with dragonspell. You better go, Sarkany. We'll meet again tomorrow."

"No," he said. "I'll let you sleep and make some calls. We have our work to do."

She rolled onto her back and stretched her arms overhead, enjoying the ache of her well-used body. "It's late. Nearly nine p.m. We played for hours."

"I will reassure my people. They're not used to my unexplained absence. And I do business when I wish, Miranda. I am not a slave to the clock."

"Why do you want to stay?"

A small smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I enjoy this new game of human lover. Why should I stop?"

He put his hand on the curve of her breast, and rubbed his thumb over her nipple. She arched her back in invitation, and his clever mouth was on her breast, greedily tasting her, swirling and sucking.

He didn't start work until ten.

With a computer and the phone line, and a visit from a couple of his assistants, he had no need to leave. And apparently no desire.

Pettifer brought over fresh clothes in the morning and some documents to sign.

He glared outright at Miranda, who refused to look away.

Only Sarkany's cough flustered Pettifer, who left a thick folder along with the laptop.

Sarkany opened the laptop but watched her instead. "This is like existing in the back recesses of a cave. No windows, no views. Ah, wait." He leered at her breasts under a T-shirt. "I am wrong about the view."

She saw the direction of his attention and pulled off the thin white shirt. Closing the laptop, he stood and walked into her bedroom.

He slipped under the covers and lay on his back, his hands behind his head. "I rather like it. 'Cozy' is the word, isn't it? I hadn't comprehended the appeal, but with you in here, I appreciate the soft nest you make."

"You wouldn't fit in my bed, would you? In your proper form."

He gave her a sideways look. "You do seem to dwell on the subject, my pet. I suppose there's no reason I can't show you."

Panic filled her, and she sat on the edge of the bed. "No, please, I didn't mean it."

"I'm not going to transform, Miranda. But I can show you. If you'll allow me to access your mind."

"Huh. What you did that first day." She touched his muscular arm. "And what you did to that little girl, I'll bet. You put thoughts straight into our heads and we have no way to keep you out."

"Do you want me to stay out?"

She closed her eyes. "I don't know. But I'm a fool so..." She lay down next to him. "Yes. Show me what you look like. Hypnotize me. More than you already have, I mean."

"You have no faith in me," he said.

"Are you kidding? I'm such an idiot, I even trust you." She moved over him and kissed him, a slow and lingering kiss. A loving kiss. She couldn't help it. "Show me."

Clear and bright as glass, his silver eyes caught and held her gaze easily. She didn't fight him and stared back—but thoughts didn't worm their way into her mind. Then she realized the body next to hers was growing, changing form and color. The bed didn't shift, so she understood it was only an illusion. Otherwise the strange and terrible change seemed too real.

She looked at the large haunches near her shoulder—and the form melted back into a human body.

“You can’t look away. You can only catch glimpses.” His hand brushed her cheek to turn her face to his again.

“More than enough,” she breathed, but stared into his face again.

Almost at once he grew and filled the space, the room, her whole vision. A monster and the most beautiful creature she’d ever seen. She reached out to touch him and felt soft human skin. The hunger for him sliced through her, and she closed her eyes and reached for the whole of Sarkany, dragon in human form.

For the next couple of hours, he worked. Sarkany hadn’t lied when he said people would protest his plans to divest himself of his property.

“You owe me more of that luscious thing you do with your mouth,” he said after he got off the phone at last. “There is some balking at changing the plans for Meadowglen. I had to promise exorbitant sums of money to all sorts of corrupt politicians. You are not a popular person with my assistants.”

“I’ll survive,” she said and wondered how she would.

For two days they did nothing but make love, rest and eat. Sarkany turned off his phone, and then her answering machine filled up with messages for him, so she turned that off, too. She only left to pick up some food and, without telling Sarkany, she went to talk to Linus.

They met at a coffee shop. Linus bought her a cup of decaf, and even before they’d sat down at the rickety table, began asking questions about the dragon’s scale and if she’d seen any special powers at work.

She bit her lip when a sudden image of the huge aroused dragon came to her mind. “I don’t know where the scale is,” she said. “Why do you want to know?”

He frowned at her. “You do know where it is. You’ve been poisoned by him.”

She doubted he could read her face, but she’d decided to be honest. “I am probably under the dragon’s spell, but that’s why we’re meeting here and not at the headquarters.”

He didn’t answer and she went on. “I know about the important goals. You probably do, too, if you read the public records. Heck, even the newspapers are reporting that he’s divesting himself of local properties. He will leave, I’m more certain of it every day.” She wondered if he’d drag her with him. And how she’d feel if he didn’t.

"How much time do you spend with him? There are rumors that he's disappeared from sight."

"Getting rid of his worldly goods in this domain takes a lot of time. He's busy." And kissing every inch of her skin and screwing her brains out. And allowing her to sleep in his arms.

"Look," he said. "You be careful. You know he tried to burn you with his blood."

He's burned me with worse than that. She nodded. "I know he's a creature filled with tricks. He likes deception."

"Just keep that bone close to you and he'll be less likely to harm you, okay?"

"What does it do?"

Linus picked at a pimple. "It's a charm. I'll recite a poem." Very softly and with careful pronunciation of the strange old words, he spoke, "*The skinnne scales of a dragon holds all brand of power for its kin and kind*

"The blud burns enemies of his yet binds his oath

"The bone beckons to its proper mate and acts as a charm

"The tough flesh is of no earthly use to any one"

She sniffed and picked up her coffee. "Not much of a poem. More like a guide to uses of a dead dragon."

"It's proven true. From what I can figure out, anyway."

The tough flesh was more than useful to her. She ached for it now. She swallowed the coffee and put a hand on Linus's shoulder, an affectionate farewell. "I'll be okay." She rose to her feet. "I promise. And if I'm not, at least I know the city will be."

He glared after her but didn't try to stop her.

She walked away quickly, fingering the smooth bone in her pocket, wondering what it did to Sarkany.

He'd never had a proper mate, Sarkany'd said grudgingly, giving into her questions one night. "I've come close," he'd added. "But no one remained in my blood." His smile had distracted her from that conversation.

She wished she could comb through Linus's files. She wasn't safe or sure enough to ask Sarkany. Not yet.

* * *

Sarkany didn't need as much rest as his human did and he watched her sleep, greedily admiring her body. The curves, the marvelous soft skin. He stroked her hip and she burrowed toward him.

He eased away from her and got up. Instead of going to work, he took his time to look carefully at her belongings. Perhaps clutter wasn't to her taste, but she'd grow used to it. A dragon felt secure with his objects. Like her. She'd be one of his prized objects. He waited for the thrill of possession, but it wasn't as strong. She didn't fit the lists he drew up to gloat over.

He had to find where she fit, because he was on the edge of winning her challenge. Only two more buildings and few hundred thousand dollars remained to his name.

He'd appeased his advisors by transferring much of his property and treasure to Tia, who, he promised, would be as greedy as they were—and wealthy in her own right.

Was Tiamat an American citizen? They needed to know.

Of course. Just like Sarkany, Tia was a citizen of wherever she landed.

Miranda had rolled her eyes when she learned of that transfer, and he pointed out that he hadn't broken the rules of the challenge.

"I'd expected this," she'd only said. "I'm glad you gave the most to people like Pete."

For some reason he was glad, too. After all this time, humans and their concerns had gotten farther under his scales. He'd examine the reasons another time. Just now, he'd take a closer look at Miranda's *personality*.

He found photos on Miranda's shelves and on her computer. Smiling people, usually posed outside a shabby row house—no doubt the place his construction company had knocked down. He stared at the photos of people, laughing together. Humans were pack animals. He'd occasionally envied such creatures. Dogs, lions, humans. When he saw them at play he envied them most.

He clicked on Miranda's computer and easily accessed her privacy code. She'd kept notes on him for her guild, but then it had turned into a sort of journal. His body expanded with ridiculous joy when he read how she adored every self-important bit of him, Sarkany. He restrained himself from going to her and demanding she say the words aloud to him.

He scrolled back to the earlier entries and read more. And then he found entries about the bone—not a sheep's shank after all. An honest dragon's bone, that Linus insisted she carry. She had thought it nonsense—perhaps Sarkany had put that thought in her mind at their first meeting—but now she wondered what charm the bone held.

He read it again, his joy dissolving.

He only skimmed the rest. She was reassured that her love, her dragon, her Sarkany could not be susceptible to such a spell. The binding of what? He'd had no mate.

He sighed and clicked off the computer. And went to wake her up.

"Miranda. We have been tricked," he said as he slid down next to her. "The things you say about me aren't true. I'm not a pure-hearted lover."

She smiled at him. "You are a snoop, Sarkany. I love you anyway. And I don't care if love is an illusion because it makes me happier than I've ever been."

"It's like the drugs you humans seem to enjoy," he grumbled, but the sorrow in his heart was real enough.

"Yes, exhilarating like drugs. Like the tingle you enjoy when you eat chocolate. Or when you touch me or I touch you. It's the view from your mountaintop. It's all love but, oh, love with more. Another layer. So many more layers."

She kissed his neck. "So. You've gotten me to admit it and I like to say it aloud. I hadn't before, you know, to anyone else. I love you. I love you, my dragon."

"You are my knight?" he couldn't help asking.

"Of course." She studied his face and must have seen the pain. In a low voice she said, "I'd die to protect you."

"I've paid people to defend me. Lawyers, usually. My assistants. I don't want their love, just their protection."

"Too bad, I love you."

He wanted to talk her out of this, but had no idea where to start. "I don't want one of my possessions to love me."

This seemed to lighten her mood, not make her angry. "Possession. Ha. I looked through your list, but you don't have living possessions. Servants, yes. Minions, I'd believe. But you don't know what to do with me."

He started to speak but she interrupted, "And I certainly don't need your permission to love you." She stretched and yawned. "Why are you so afraid of this?"

“Chemicals,” he said sadly. “Spells. It’s the same thing, really.”

“Is it because you’ve never had a mate? Sarkany, you needn’t worry. I would never be so silly as to ask for promises. I am content to be your knight.”

He didn’t answer. Now was the time to end it. “I didn’t tell the entire truth. I nearly had a mate,” he said at last, watching her. “A dragon who called herself Flame.”

A simple name.

Miranda went entirely still. All color drained from her face. Her lips parted but no sound emerged.

He understood the truth and now, apparently she did, too. He merely watched as he waited for her to speak, though he wanted to weep and rage like any human lover. Demand the truth from her.

In a faint voice, Miranda asked, “I—I am not sure how your kind bond. Why weren’t you formally mates?”

“She died.”

A whisper now. “How?”

“In the Alps she grew fond of domesticated mutton and raided the herds once too often. An enterprising shepherd with dreams of knighthood muddled the story of the wise man of Krakow. He dressed up as a sheep. She swallowed him, they both died when he set about her insides with a sword.”

“Oh, Sarkany.” She sat up and searched his face, frantic. “You loved her?”

“We planned to make hatchlings together. I treasured her company. There was none of this desperation that seems to accompany your version of love.” He knew the answer but asked anyway, “Why do you look as if you’re going to be sick, my pet?”

“Would something like a bone from her have power over you?”

He didn’t answer. She studied his eyes for a long minute and was the first to look away.

“Shit.” She sat up and her hair slid from her shoulders. “I’ve entrapped you. Sarkany, I must have. I didn’t know. Truly, I hadn’t understood. You are right. You—you haven’t been attracted to me. I think. It hasn’t been me after all.” Honest and straight to the point.

He half-smiled. “Yes, I know.”

She went to her drawer and pulled it open groped around for something. In her hand lay the gleaming white shard. “Flame,” she said simply. “Linus once mentioned the name

of the dragon this was from. Do you see? It hasn't been me. He knew your history. He knew you'd be attracted to her."

His laughter hurt his throat. "I never imagined I could be manipulated so easily."

"Why should you be any different from any other mortal creature?" she quoted his words back at him. "Oh, God, Sarkany. I didn't know. Please believe me, I didn't. He wouldn't tell me a plan like that because he knew I wouldn't allow myself to be a part of it."

She walked across the room to him, and he knew what would come next. He hated it.

Lifting his hand, she opened his clenched fingers and put the bone of his ex-lover into his palm.

"It is disgraceful, all of it. I'm sorry." She stood shivering, but her chin was high. "Tell me what you want from me and I'll be glad to perform it. Even treachery for you, Sarkany. I meant it when I said I love you. Every part of you, especially your dragon heart. Your, um, affection for me has been forced from you, so I see why you'd renounce it." She reddened and murmured. "I hope you won't harm me."

She dropped to one knee, elegant and naked. She bowed her head. "Dragon, I pledge myself, my heart, my soul to you."

Once long ago, days ago, he'd imagined her groveling to him. The reality felt nightmarish. He supposed this meant he'd won the game. Without any magic—on his part at any rate. Only at the moment, he didn't remotely care for the entertainment of the challenge.

He pulled her to her feet and brushed his fingers across her forehead. When he touched the tear on her cheek, it burned even hotter than the bone in his hand, the bone that had created this interesting brief obsession with a human female.

Deep inside him lay the essence his dragon nature. He couldn't call it up without burning off his human form.

He couldn't do such a thing in her apartment. Outside, then. Time to be going. He had almost nothing left here, thanks to his own stupidity.

She gave a low moan but didn't follow him as he walked away from her.

He walked slowly down the stairs and outside clutching the last of Flame. He could almost picture her flexible dragon form. But in his imagination, as she turned towards him, she didn't have round silver eyes. They were blue-green and oval. Human.

"Blasted spell," he growled.

He realized he couldn't go far, nearly naked, so he walked to the alley behind Miranda's apartment. The scale on his heel stung briefly as he pulled it from his skin. He slid it over his throat, and his dragon blood scalded his tender near-human skin.

With a roar he sent out the blaze deep in his gut, and before the agony drove him mad, fire burned away his human form. His dragon self rose, dizzy from the pain and delight of freeing himself. The fresh scales covered him, hardening almost as soon as the heat died.

He still held the last of Flame. It took the strongest fire to burn a dragon's bone. He had enough of the human left in him to care about not setting the building ablaze, and he put the bone inside a large metal dumpster before loosing that heat. He blew hard. The bone flamed up, and the dumpster glowed orange and slowly collapsed in on itself.

He waited to feel the release from an enchantment—he'd been under them before—but still the ache remained where there had been something important. Hazel eyes looked at him with something he hadn't seen before. The radiance.

Enough. The end of Flame's bone should have brought about the end of the knight's hold on him.

No, not her spell. Linus was the name she'd mentioned more than once. If he weren't so tired and hollow, he would have visited the misbegotten Linus and reduced him to ashes.

He spread his wings and gave a tentative beat. The wind puffed around him as he raised and lowered his wings again.

From far away he heard the strange siren call of fire engines. Time to go. Past time.

But he wanted to shout his farewell to the realm he'd owned. He'd say good-bye to the strange victor, the only one who'd beaten him. Linus's second-rate scam? No, not him—the knight who'd made a mark on Sarkany. She deserved a farewell keen.

A few slow flaps took him to the top of the tallest building he could find. He roared his finest song to the woman. And then he left these haunts, beating lazy measures against the air, for it would take a long time to cross the world to his mountain, especially in his weakened state. He might have been newly hatched. His full strength would not return for weeks.

As he flew he remembered the truth. He'd actually won that encounter. She'd pledged herself to him.

If he'd won, why hadn't he punished her?

He flapped too hard and flew too high as he thought of his pet, his knight. She'd given herself to him, providing him a feast of passion. He couldn't recall exactly why he'd left her behind.

The answer was dragon pride, of course; he'd been caught by deception. Not that he minded a few lies, but these had nearly undone him and he didn't want to be reminded of that ignoble event. She was a pawn, yet so was the mighty and foolish Sarkany. Made silly by the madness of love, created by an old bone. Flame would have been extremely annoyed by the whole thing.

He stopped often on his flight back to his mountain the peak near Xixabangma in the Himalayas.

For a day he visited Flame's old haunts in the Alps. A crowded place now. Humans everywhere, pushing all other creatures out of their way. Why shouldn't he have pushed them around a bit, too? He argued with Miranda in his mind.

As he started again the next night, his thoughts still dwelt on the knight. The fever she'd caused should die away. The magic spell had been broken.

Then why did the image of her naked human form fill him with longing and a most embarrassing erection? She didn't even hold a form he should desire in his present skin.

Love, she'd said. And he'd been on the edge of believing until he understood the truth, that he'd been a moth to the flame, his long-dead Flame.

More than a hundred years ago, he'd swooped down and given his lost mate a proper end—except for the one tiny bone from her claw he'd missed, damn his careless scales. The mourning period for Flame had been long and painful, but it had faded. The spell of her bone should break far more quickly. Yet he still craved the female knight, and not as a snack.

Home on the lovely cold cliff, he relaxed his aching wings. He looked out over his favorite domain and recited words from his favorite human poet: “‘Madam, you have bereft me of all words. Only my blood speaks to you in my veins; And there is such confusion in my powers.’”

He wasn't sure if he addressed Flame or Miranda, but he thought of the sweet pliant lips of a human on his mouth. The heat hadn't come only from Flame's bone, then. And

he'd held Miranda afterwards. The one time he'd had the urge to stay and sleep and breathe with a mate, it had been her, not Flame.

Ah, well. He'd had won and lost treasures before. He still had the fine pile of possessions in his mountain realms where the sharp, thin air would cleanse human concerns from his mind and body.

The anger remained lodged next to the longing. Both of them were deep aches he wished he could heal by ripping off a scale or two and rubbing on the afflicted area. His groin or his chest or his head? But despite his morose mood, he didn't look for a cure. He told himself that would be as lazy as using magic in the wooing of his knight. That blasted bone was a bitter lesson to learn that deception in love created pain. He'd recover using his own strength.

And if he created a small nest of cloth and pillows in his lair, it was only a way to say farewell to that short, interesting episode.

Chapter Nine

He'd arrived at the start of summer, when the rainy season pushed over the Jugal Himal. Nights and days of rain fell, turning his favorite meadows lush.

Within a month his sister tracked him down. She came to him as he lay sunning and brooding on the rocks by a lake far below his cliff dwelling.

Tia wore the form of a moth-eaten wolf. "No, not mange, merely shedding," she informed him with hauteur. She dug at her ear with a back paw and changed the subject. "You're sulking. That's a new unpleasant habit."

With her bothersome teasing, Tia soon infuriated Sarkany enough to reveal most of the story. He hoped he didn't say much more than a knight had gotten the better of him and he'd behaved like an idiot. He changed the subject from the knight to complain how he'd once been content as a dragon. The piling of possessions, the occasional flight and admiring the lake. He'd been happy.

Tia shook herself until the fur flew. "Nonsense. If you loved this life so much, why'd you grow restless enough to take on the human form? And then why, when human, did you take such a ridiculous challenge?"

And so he explained Flame's bone.

She laid her ears back in disgust. "Oh, you are as blind as a troll. Blaming poor lazy Flame's bone for your own stupidity. And the bone couldn't have caused such craving all these years later."

"Blast your fire." He sighed and rolled onto his back. His sister padded near him, circled and settled. He scratched behind her ears gently with his dagger-sharp claws.

"Not so hard," she barked. "You forget your strength. What will you do with yourself now?"

The wretch wasn't done plaguing him after all. He snorted a plume of smoke. "Remain here. Watch the sunset. Collect and steal treasure whenever I can. I'll be glad to

abandon that frantic speed of the humans. Really, the whole rushing life. No wonder they die so soon.”

She stood, circled again and rested closer to his warm belly. “Perhaps your foul mood is a sign you should find another mate. Did you ever think of that?”

“The process makes one into such a fool.”

“I hardly recall you behaving like such a fool when you and Flame flew together. There was no indignity in that courtship. Besides, she was far too indolent for drama. Never mind arguing, Sarkany. Just tell me what your excuse is for your behavior now that you’ve destroyed the bone?”

He shrugged his wings.

The wolf showed her teeth and growled. “You are dull as lead. Do you believe that passionate love can occasionally be a permanent or at least serious condition?”

He yawned. “Love is fiction.”

“So are dragons. You might be doomed. From what I know of you, my formerly chatty brother, you have been changed. Go and seize your treasure and retrieve your tattered soul.”

“Do you suggest I destroy her?” He forced back a gust of insane and angry fire.

Tia only panted at him, a smirk on her doggie face.

Every scale on his body shivered, as he understood the truth. “Tia, oh, Tiamat. I couldn’t kill her. I think I’d rather kill you. Or myself. Dear skies above, I must love her.”

“Huh. Did you honestly believe any thinking, living creature could escape the trap? I mean any living creature, since *thinking* obviously isn’t necessary.”

He rolled away from her and plunged into the lake for a swim. When he came back, the wolf stood dewclaw deep in the water, a fish flapping in her sharp white teeth. An indignant crane watched from across the water.

She carried the fish to shore, ripped and gulped it down. After her meal, she drank some of the cold lake water, then continued her harangue.

“We might not run in packs in our usual form, but our kind isn’t as solitary as we like to think. I’m delighted a soft little creature like a human has snared you.” Water dripped from her muzzle as she looked up at him. “I’m tired of fur, and the pack is tired of me. Do you know their alpha male has driven me out twice? He’s smart enough to know my real nature. A wolf guild member. Tell me more about your human female.”

“No. You are annoying me.”

"I see. You are clutching her as tight as any favored treasure." Her ears perked. "You've never been so reticent. What was her name?"

She must give up pestering him. A few more questions and he'd turn her into a charred wolf. "Miranda," he growled.

She scratched at a flea, then bit at the base of her tail. "I expected as much. It's a familiar name. It's appeared in an official human letter or two. Or were they emails?"

He forgot to be annoyed. "What are you talking about?"

"The property you insisted on giving me. They've tried to pull me into some sort of mess you left behind. My human assistants tracked me down and said I had to answer questions about your disappearance. And the main suspect is a female named Miranda Beesom or something. Why else would I escape to wolf form?" She yawned.

He resisted the urge to swat her, dagger claws out. "Miranda Benson. She's a *suspect*?"

"Yes, in your murder. I told them, nonsense, you're not dead. But they persist in believing you dead. Some sort of fire."

"They think Miranda killed me?"

"You are repeating yourself. Yes. That's what they think. But she's since vanished, too."

He loped across the lush meadow to the highest point and spread his wings.

"Going immediately?" His sister's tail wagged furiously. "This is interesting."

"Feel free to steal from my cave, although I've hidden the best from you." He pointed his face to the sun and tested the breezes that always blew this time of year.

"You still have the ring of Eustace?" she shouted, bounding after him.

"Yes, I'll fetch it first. But not for my knight."

He took to the sky and flew, pushing through the nights, and days, too, until he arrived at his old human realm on the other side of the earth, the small, shabby city in New England.

Weary from constant flight, he rested, then changed form in the barren wasteland next to the highway, hunched among the beer cans and other debris. He'd forgotten

humans were such messy creatures. As he painfully peeled off each scale, he thought about his knight and hoped she wasn't a slob, but it hardly mattered. He'd been tamed and collared and tagged by her. He wondered if she still felt bound to him.

Pity if she didn't. To distract himself from the pain, he thought of possible challenges she'd pose for him and he'd pose right back for her. Nothing simple this time, he hoped.

At long last only the two scales remained on his bloodstained, healing body. They lay on his belly this time, where a sharp-eyed guild member might detect a scale. Ha, he'd go see about that Linus.

After he recovered from the change, he looped Eustace's arm ring over his wrist and found some clothes outside a gas station.

The fresh bare skin prickled and stung and itched with the touch of the rough cloth. He cheered himself with the idea of the sleek, usually well-dressed human Sarkany showing up barefoot and dressed in a mechanic's coveralls. At least they didn't reek of gasoline and other hideous automotive products.

He didn't have any of the proper key cards for his lair, but it only took one roar of anger before the chauffeur came rushing out to open the front door.

"It's you! Thank God, sir. It's been almost two months and—"

Sarkany pushed past him and jabbed at the elevator button. His feet ached from the transformation and from the long walk into the city.

The questions wouldn't stop, though. "Where did you go, sir?" Two other assistants remained. Apparently everyone else on staff had gone in search of other work. Only three had been retained to maintain his home.

"Your sister didn't know where you'd gone. Were you kidnapped, sir?"

That seemed as good an answer as any. He nodded. "I escaped."

Pettifer said, "That Benson woman. She was part of it."

He stopped and turned to face them. "Miranda Benson had nothing whatsoever to do with my disappearance."

The three men went on babbling and interrupting each other.

"The fire—"

"But she admitted she'd seen you—"

"We have to call the police at once and—"

He held up a hand and they fell quiet at once. "Call whomever you want but leave me alone for the rest of the night."

"What do you plan to do, sir?" They'd lost some of their training after all, the way they kept prodding after he'd silenced them.

"I will take a shower. Good night."

After a half hour under hot water and a reexamination of his human skin, he went to his office, where an astounding pile of mail covered the large desk. Opened and neatly stacked by subject, most of it appeared to be invitations to gala dinners in his honor. He was used to the pleading notes—he'd rarely seen the happy results of pleading rewarded. Giving away buildings and money had made him the most popular creature in the city.

The other stack was all about his disappearance.

He found Pettifer and told him to throw most of it away and to inform the mayor he most certainly did not want a street, a bridge or a park named after him.

At last he allowed himself to ask, "And what has happened to Miss Benson?"

A flicker of triumph in Pettifer's face. The assistant's thoughts were obvious: Sarkany didn't know and so Sarkany was stupid to protest her innocence.

"She disappeared, sir, soon after you did. And the group she'd been associated with turned out to be dedicated to destroying you. The leader disappeared at the same time she did." Pettifer did a poor job of hiding his disdain for the boss who'd been seduced by a hot female.

Sarkany ignored Pettifer. He understood at once: Linus had Miranda. He wondered if the dragon-hater was protecting her because she was some sort of suspect or if he was holding her prisoner.

His tender human feet already ached, but he wouldn't order the car to go explore the battered area near one of his projects. She'd mentioned a few details of this place to him—not on purpose, of course. During their brief time together she had eventually given every part of herself to him, but nothing of her fellow guild members. Not consciously, at any rate.

It didn't take long for him to discover the guild's headquarters. The unpleasant room was abandoned, empty, but he still had his sense of smell and he used it, hoping no one would see him occasionally kneel and try to pick up the scent. Just the smallest hint of her fragrance. He allowed himself a moment of dizzying lust as the vivid memories poured into his body along with her scent.

Back to the search. He squatted again. Linus was the sort who would stay close by—perhaps the man was even waiting for Sarkany.

He hunted until daylight, and then decided he'd best not be seen prowling the area.

At his lair, his assistants, lawyers and accountants wouldn't leave him in peace, so he was exhausted when night fell again. At least the calm, windless weather meant the scents stayed strong.

He'd rest and then pay a visit to the old triple-decker apartments where he suspected Linus lurked. Fresh scent of the man, not so new of Miranda. Damn.

Unfortunately, Linus would probably have learned of Sarkany's reappearance. The spokesman for the police department had accepted his bribe—the promise of a generous gift to the retirement fund so the authorities stayed quiet.

Someone else, however, didn't keep his or her mouth shut and alerted the local press. The newspaper decided to put his triumphant return on the front page.

Sarkany slipped from his lair early and went to the apartment house where he'd traced Linus. The first two floors were empty. The third. He pressed an ear to it and heard voices, a man and a woman. Miranda's angry shout.

He knocked and put his face next to the flimsy door. "I'm here. You've been expecting me?"

A sudden racket broke out inside the room. Shouts, rattling, clinking. Sarkany kicked the hollow door, which gave way with a giant crack.

Miranda.

He wanted to shout with relief. And then with anger. She wore nothing but a large man's dress shirt. Shackles on her ankles and wrists were attached to chains bound to the wall.

The cause of the noise was immediately obvious. One of Miranda's arm chains was wrapped around the throat of a thin, well-built young man.

"I came to rescue you, Miranda, but I should have known you wouldn't need me." Sarkany moved closer to the struggling pair.

The man snarled, though his face was red and he looked like he was on the verge of passing out from the pressure of the chains.

Miranda stumbled, and the man, who had to be Linus, whipped out of her grasp. He lunged for a huge sword and hauled it up over his head.

“Sarkany!” The man roared an impressive war cry. The silver gleamed as he raised the sword high overhead.

The clatter of chains against sword was startlingly loud.

Miranda wrapped her chains around the sword and yanked down. Judging from her agility with the chains, she'd been held prisoner for too long.

Linus swiveled to face her, swearing. “Miranda. Stop! You're still under the dragon's spell. Don't fight me.”

Sarkany picked up a wooden chair and brought it down hard on the guild member's head.

Miranda dropped the sword—an even louder clatter—and she fell into Sarkany's arms. “You came,” she sobbed against his neck.

The chains that touched him were clammy and burned against his skin, but she felt like heaven. He gently pushed her away.

He squatted and pushed Linus over to search his pockets. The room and the man reeked of male arousal and human sperm. No scent of female excitement, however.

Sarkany froze and looked up at Miranda. “Has he... Did he assault you?”

Jingling and crashing, she slowly slumped to the floor. “That's the first thing you ask?” she whispered, then shook her head. “No. He is a pure knight. He wouldn't touch me. Made me wear this stupid shirt though and stared at me until my skin crawled.”

Sarkany continued the search. “Must wank off frequently then.”

She sighed and stretched her legs. Small bruises patterned them. “I suppose it was to keep from touching me.”

Sarkany found a ring of keys. Miranda wearily held her arm up so he could try the different keys, and he eventually discovered the one to unlock her shackles.

“I regret your troubles,” he said as he released her legs from the chains. “My disappearance has proved a nuisance.”

“It's your reappearance that made him do this.” She waved a hand at the pile of chains on the linoleum floor and the crude restraints attached to the wall. “Before that, I was fine. Hiding, yes, but that felt more like a vacation than anything else.”

She rubbed her wrists and ankles. Then to his dismay, she crawled over to Linus and pushed the lank hair from his eyes, far too caring a gesture to waste on such a fool.

She pressed her fingers to his neck, then felt the back of his head. “Good. His skull is okay. And his heart’s strong.”

“That’s good?”

“I don’t you to be a murderer.”

He rose and dusted his hands on his trousers. “Would you turn me in?”

She stood and with wobbly steps walked to Sarkany. With a quiet sigh she sank to the floor by his feet. “No, never.”

He thought about pulling her into his arms but dismissed the plan because he suspected her touch would prove distracting. Later. “How did you end up chained to the wall?”

“Linus showed up the night you left, when he heard about the fire. For once he didn’t ask any questions. I guess the smoldering mess of the dumpster was enough and he thought you were...gone. The police wanted to take me in for questioning but Linus found a lawyer who pointed out there were no charges filed. And then he took me to a place in the country. He left me there and went off for a few days at a time. I think he was making plans to trap your sister if she came here.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Tiamat can take care of herself. Why didn’t you leave? It seems to me you allowed the idiot to decide your fate for you.”

“After you left I was, uh, sad. And well, actually, I’d never spent time outside this city, and I loved it there in the woods.”

That explained the golden skin, the sense of the outdoors that clung to her, despite the clammy apartment.

“After a while I was tired of hiding and wanted to come back to the city. We had an argument about it. Two nights ago, Linus must have put something in my food, and I woke up to find myself here and in chains. I suppose he discovered you were alive and back here and didn’t want me to find out.”

“You are all right?”

“I’m pissed off at myself for being careless. But yes, I am okay.”

She rose to her feet again, collected some clothes from a plastic garbage bag on the floor and disappeared into the bathroom.

He considered following her, but decided to keep an eye on his captive.

Sarkany pulled the thin golden circle from his arm and slipped it onto Linus’s. He waited and watched, though it would take hours.

She came out of the bathroom, brushing her hair. Color had returned to her face, which was thinner than he recalled.

The sight of her in shorts and a thin T-shirt that molded to her curves made his breath catch, but all he asked was, "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Where will you take me?"

He didn't like this passive female. "I must deal with him."

"Oh." She went pale and her eyes widened. "Don't kill him."

Ugh. Perhaps she'd beg for the useless Linus's life. That would be repulsive. "Of course not. I have far worse plans for him."

"Please, no." She bit her lower lip and glanced at the sword. Perhaps she contemplated doing something to defy him. He supposed he should be pleased at any show of strength.

"It's too late." Sarkany pointed at the circlet on Linus's arm. "He's going to feel how it is to be hunted by the guild."

Miranda moved close to the unconscious man. She frowned and skimmed a finger over the circlet but didn't ask Sarkany what he meant. Instead, she went to three computers lined up on the wall. Calmly and methodically she lifted up each machine and smashed it against the floor.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked.

"He had hundreds of files about dragons and a bunch about you in particular. I wish I had a good magnet or at least a screwdriver," she said.

She wasn't so weak after all. He wondered if she was putting on the show to impress him.

When the computers lay in pieces on the floor, Sarkany gathered Linus up and easily slung him over his shoulder. "No point in waiting for him to wake. He'll be out for a while longer. Go ahead of me and see if anyone's around. There's a deserted warehouse near here that will do nicely."

She nodded and bounded down the stairs. Whatever Linus had done to her hadn't sapped her physical strength for long.

"Okay." Her voice echoed up the stairwell.

They walked quickly, almost trotting. Sarkany shrugged the weight of the young man further up his shoulder and shifted him so Linus's unconscious grunts didn't sound in his ear.

Miranda ran ahead to look around the corner towards the block of warehouses. She nodded and jogged back. “No one in sight. How long will Linus’s transformation take?”

“Ah. You’ve heard of Eustace’s ring. I wondered why you didn’t ask.”

“The last couple of days, whenever Linus went out, I looked at his computers. He didn’t have a connection to the Internet but he still had a lot of information. I saw the story of the ring on there. He won’t be a true dragon, will he?”

Sarkany slowed his walk. The dead weight on his shoulders was making them ache. Go through a transformation, miss a couple of nights’ sleep and the human body went weak. “Semblance only. No fun powers.”

The knight’s face reddened—she was obviously was thinking of some of the fun they’d had with his powers.

Sarkany hid a grin. “If he’s strong enough he’ll be able to fly, and if he gets the ring off, he’ll revert to human. Not such a terrible punishment, really. I restrain myself for your sake, of course.”

Her step faltered and she glanced into his face—though she looked away again at once as if afraid of his eyes. “Oh, Sarkany. Thank you. Does that mean you’ve forgiven me for the deception?” Her tone was too eager.

He wondered if he disliked her groveling for her ridiculous friend even more than her passivity. “I didn’t say that.”

He tightened his grip on the unconscious man’s ankle. Good. It was already thickening. Sarkany would be glad to leave Linus to his fate.

Chapter Ten

Miranda couldn't stand another second of this wintry Sarkany. She jogged ahead again to the building he'd described. "There," she said, pointing into the narrow, weed-choked passageway between two old buildings. "If we go around back it should be easy to get in the building."

The side door was halfway off its hinges. Inside the echoing, empty corrugated walls, Sarkany dumped the sleeping Linus on the damp concrete floor. After a hesitant glance at Sarkany, Miranda found some old newspapers and shoved them under Linus's head.

"I'm only staying here until I see he can't get the ring off," Sarkany said. "I have no interest in lingering with this fool."

"May I stay with him?"

He looked as if he were about to say no, but instead gave her a cool glance with a trace of disgust in the set of his mouth. "You do whatever you wish. I am nearly done."

"You need the cloth with your blood." She stood and wiped her hands on her shorts. "I hid it in the floorboard my apartment. I'm sorry, I wasn't sure how to get rid of it so it wouldn't cause you pain."

"I'll find it and destroy it." His arms folded, Sarkany leaned over Linus. "I see his arm is swelling. Shouldn't be long, and then I'll be on my way."

She wanted to howl and beg and shake him, challenge him to a real fight. With his superior strength he'd knock her flat, but she longed to at least attempt to turn this bored creature into something more like the passionate man she recalled. Instead, he matched the file on Linus's computer. The one that described dragons in human form as cold, unmovable creatures.

The spell of the bone had been broken and the heat had died. But she'd felt his fire and wouldn't forget it. No one who'd had a chance to taste love with a dragon would regret the experience.

He was beyond her reach now, literally and emotionally, so she decided not to make a fool of herself after all. *Let him go.*

“Good-bye, Sarkany,” she said quietly. “Thank you for helping me. I am grateful. I am sorry all of this had to happen to you.”

The door slammed. She blinked to erase the useless sorrow that blurred her eyesight. She settled cross-legged near the now-snoring form of Linus.

“I don’t want your gratitude.”

She jumped up. “I—I thought you’d left.”

“I changed my mind. I wanted to tell you that if you say thank you again, or apologize again, I’m going to rip that ring off his arm and jam it on yours.”

“But I have to say thank you. You did me an enormous favor coming back and helping me.”

He scowled at her as he moved closer, obviously hostile. Better that than indifferent.

She gave a helpless shrug and went on, “And saying I’m sorry makes sense, too. I caught you in a spell that destroyed your plans for your future.”

“You *wanted* to destroy my plans.”

“No. Maybe. But not like that.”

She realized she was backing away from him, into a dark corner of the warehouse.

“Fight me. Raise your voice.”

She tilted her head back and tried to read his glittering eyes. “Why should I fight?”

“Because you’re a warrior woman.”

“Please, Sarkany,” she said. “I’ve shown I’m anything but. Please. Don’t mock me.”

“There’s another one, no more saying please. Don’t be such a cringing blob. You look like you’re going to faint, Miranda. Where is the knight?”

“Sarkany,” she said sharply, trying not to sound desperate. “Ple—I mean, enough. I don’t want your scorn.”

“Tell me why I should listen to you.”

She swallowed. His contempt stung and she said the first thing that came to her. “Do you know that you lost my challenge?”

He stopped his steady approach and put his hands on his hips. “I did?”

“Yes. You still own two buildings at least and a substantial bank account. Linus said the papers reported that. Today. ”

"You're right," he said. "I didn't finish my part of your challenge. Well, well. Such a shame we dragons rarely hold up our end of such agreements."

Anger flooded her. Her heart felt as if it lay in pieces, and he was still insisting on playing cold and deceitful. "You're lying now," she said in a steady voice. "Linus's files said dragons' pride wouldn't allow them to renege on any challenge."

His brow furrowed. The corner of his mouth twitched. She wasn't sure if he smiled or sneered. "I am glad you destroyed those files. Stupid to have the information lying around where anyone can access it. Very well, if I agree I lost, I will allow you to assign a manager to my remaining properties and I'll leave. What will you do?"

She studied his silver eyes but still could read nothing in them. He'd come back to save her, but he hadn't allowed her to embrace him. His manner had been a strange mix of off-hand and formal.

She gave up trying to figure out Sarkany's response and told him the truth. "I've fulfilled my oath to protect my city from you. I have no reason to stay here. You didn't win the challenge but then again, I made a vow to you and...and no, it's because I want to. I'll follow you."

"Ah." He rocked back on his heels. "To the ends of the earth? That's where I often go."

"Yes. To the ends of the earth."

"Well, then, I shall have to go more slowly than usual so you can keep up."

Her heart, suddenly whole again, leaped. "You're serious. Yes. You want me." She clamped down on her pure joy. "After all that happened?" Perhaps he was toying with her, and would crush her hopes. She watched him carefully as she asked, "What do you want to do, Sarkany?"

He showed every one of his white teeth in a smile. "I shall eat you."

"What?" She backed away.

"You will enter my lair, and I will lay you down and do what I want with you."

"Oh, my," she said softly. "Yes."

At long last he opened his arms and she went to him, breathing in the crisp scent of him. She never wanted to move again.

"You smell like autumn," she murmured. "Clean and perfect."

"You smell like sweat and fear. Earthy."

“Ugh,” she said but didn’t move from his embrace.

He kissed her hair and then gave a small chuckle. “Ah, but now I detect something a little more interesting in your scent.”

“That’s because of you, and you know it.” She pushed even closer to him, soaking in his heat, enjoying the reawakening of craving flowing through her body. “You are a conceited dragon.”

“You sound fairly self-satisfied yourself, Miranda.”

“Yup, I am. The only bones I have are my own and you still want them. You want me.” She circled her tummy against the growing bulge in his trousers and inhaled at the lovely ache of awakening lust that coursed through her. “Mmm.”

In the corner, the lumpy shape that had been Linus groaned. Miranda sighed and pulled from Sarkany’s arms. She walked to Linus.

The guild leader glared up at her from strange rounded eyes. “Traitor.”

“Yes,” she said sadly. “I suppose I am.”

He rolled onto his back and writhed. “What did he do to me? I’m on fire.” He didn’t appear to notice the strange low quality of his voice, but he must have spotted the circlet on his arm. Linus gave a shriek that was no longer entirely human. “Eustace’s bracelet! I’m doomed.” He gave another shriek that ended in a hiss.

“Nonsense,” Sarkany said. She hadn’t heard his footsteps, but he stood beside her now.

“I’ll send along some keepers—assistants, I should say—and they’ll find you a pleasant garden where you can spend your days contemplating your bizarre desire to destroy my kind.”

Linus opened his mouth and a lower growl came out.

Sarkany appeared to understand him. “It will probably be less than a year, but to be honest, I’ve never employed the circlet before. You won’t stay that way forever, I’m almost certain.”

Another hiss.

“I believe a strictly vegetarian diet will make you sick but you do what you feel is best. Good-bye, Linus.” Sarkany turned away from the animal that had been Linus and gave Miranda a nod and the flash of a smile. “Miranda, you know where to find me.”

He strolled away without looking back.

Miranda squatted and touched Linus's swelling arm. It felt hot under her fingers. "Are you in pain?" she asked.

He twitched away.

"Would you like something to drink, or um, maybe an ice pack?"

He growled and she stood. "Linus, I won the challenge after all. Sarkany will leave the city."

She gave a nervous laugh then kept talking, mostly to drown out the strange sounds coming from Linus. "I'm not sure what will happen. Since he still owns some property, I suppose that will make him an absentee landlord."

He twitched and tried to climb to his feet.

She readied herself for an attack, but after a second he crumpled into a moaning heap.

Miranda resisted the urge to lay a comforting hand on him. "Making Sarkany leave this area or even leaving human habitation wasn't really your aim, though, was it? You want to kill him—and I won't let you do that."

He didn't move.

She backed away. "Good-bye, Linus. I'll make sure Sarkany doesn't break his promise to keep you safe."

His final snarl sounded like an obscenity.

She turned and went out into the bright sunshine.

Chapter Eleven

He hadn't waited outside the warehouse. He wouldn't, of course. She would return to her home and then go seek him, a knight's errand to enter the dragon's lair. She wondered which weapons she should bring and decided a shower and her favorite short red dress would be enough—and the cloth with his blood.

Sarkany met her at the door of his lair. "What have you got there?"

Miranda swung the knapsack off her shoulder. "My favorite worldly possessions. And here." She pulled out the plastic bag. "Your blood oath. I don't need it any more."

"You are confident, aren't you?"

"Yes. You came back for me."

"Maybe I was hungry."

"I'm counting on that." She pushed past him and dropped the backpack on the floor. "So what end of the earth are we visiting first? I'm suddenly filled with wanderlust and can't wait to travel."

He eyed her for a long minute, then pulled off his shirt. She admired his lithe muscular torso, the line of his collarbone and his throat, and then she noticed the shimmer.

"Two scales," she said and reached to touch the faint blue against his belly. "And they're right there." Her mouth went dry as she brushed her fingertips over his skin again. Her dragon. How could her body have forgotten this astonishing contact?

He grabbed her hand. "I was feeling reckless. One scale was for you, but I think not. Flying takes some practice, and your precious, crowded city isn't the spot to learn."

"A scale for me? I don't understand." This wasn't in any of the files she'd read.

"You are one of my kith and kin now, you would be transformed and not burned."

"Kith, I guess. Whatever that is. Not kin."

“No,” he agreed. “Not kin. But when we touch, you feel it. To the center of your body.”

She remembered and grew dizzy with the flood of lust. “Yes.”

“You want to see my lair.” He smiled and the silver eyes were warm. “I made a place there for you, soft with cloth and pillows. I’ve thought of you naked on those pillows. Pettifer will deal with Linus. Let’s go.”

He unbuckled his trousers and a few seconds later stood naked before her. She moved close to touch the tall sinewy figure. Tentative at first, she ran her fingertips over his skin and scales and rising cock.

He pulled her into a kiss, rough and full of demanding appetite.

He backed her slowly to the wall, tugging up the hem of her dress, massaging her belly with his other hand then cupping her breast, sliding his fingers around to hold her bottom.

At the wall, he bent his knees until his erection pressed to her flimsy, wet underwear. He rocked against her. She instinctively spread her legs and, with a grunt of satisfaction, he straightened and hauled her up in his arms, his hands molded to her ass. The length of his powerful body against hers and his cock nudging at her swollen sex made her breathe a sigh of momentary satisfaction, but a heartbeat later she wanted more.

Bracing her against the wall, he supported her with one hand and with the other fumbled with the scrap of silk clinging to her wet pussy. He hooked his finger in it and ripped the fabric.

She gasped. “Here?”

“Yes.” He found her clit and gently strummed it with his thumb. “Yes, here.” His palm curved over her sex, and his fingers sank deep into her slit.

She panted and whimpered against his neck, and he growled in her ear. “Here and now.”

He leaned over, his erection still pressed firmly against her, and he teased at her nipple, nibbling until it stiffened. She arched her back, offering up her breast, an invitation he understood because he sucked greedily, pulling at the nipple with his mouth and clever tongue.

“Now.” Her turn to be demanding. He nudged and pushed and thrust home. With a trembling gasp he waited as their racing pulses calmed. Wedged against the wall, unable

to move except around the cock that impaled her, she could only writhe, trying to release her frustrated craving.

“Now.” She licked the tender satin of his neck then nipped him. He flinched and grunted, but she knew it was with desire, not pain. And he pushed until their bellies met. He sighed and the spreading sensation of Sarkany filled her. She teetered on the edge of elation, drunk on sex and love and the strange dragon essence. But the tension and need still thrummed through her.

He plunged hard then, in and out so hard he pushed the air from her lungs in little huffs.

His eyes grew unfocussed and dark silver, and she caught a glimpse of the creature beneath the civilized surface. The vision pushed her close to fear, and danger sharpened that thick desire seizing her lower belly. She grabbed handfuls of his dark hair and pulled him down to her face.

A kiss with the remembered taste of him would reassure her. His tongue met hers. He shifted his hips where she straddled him. The slight motion chafed her clit as well as swelling something deep inside. That stroke and the kiss—familiar but still laced with danger—broke the agonizing, wonderful tension at last. A few more tiny movements and...

She came, falling into an orgasm as astonishing and as fierce as their fucking. As the raw sensation crashed through her, she squealed, twisting in his arms and on his cock. He reached for her ass again, his fingers held her tight and still as he thrust into her. His head went back, and his throat worked. She wiggled free of his tight grip on her and undulated around him, still savoring the thick heat inside her, but, oh, she wanted to push him to the same desperate edge she felt. Yes. She was winning. He shuddered deep inside her. She loved the moment of his helplessness and squeezed tight around him.

He shouted her name and convulsed. Hot pleasure, the flashes of lightning, pulsed through her. His weight pinned her to the wall and he panted against her neck.

A few moments later, still clutching her in his arms, he crouched, then lay flat on his back. She gave a squeak at the chill of the marble floor that touched her legs and her palms. He gathered her onto his front, his penis stiff and deep inside her.

Another battle, and they’d both won. He kissed her forehead and she wrapped herself in his body as if she could somehow merge into him.

She rested her head on his chest, listening to his breath and the slight gurgles of his human body.

"You're relaxed?" His voice rumbled beneath her.

"I am a cooked noodle," she told him. "You're on the cold floor. Want to move to that bed you promised?"

"No. I'm happy here for now."

"Good," she murmured. "Me too," and dozed off but not before she heard him say, "We'll both rest. And then, yes, certainly we'll move to my bed."

The sound of the assistants' voices in the adjoining chamber woke her. Before the men could come in and discover her sprawled on their naked employer, her dress up around her armpits, she climbed to her feet. Sarkany grinned as if he read her embarrassment, but he too stood and reached for his trousers.

"Be right back." She dragged her backpack into the bathroom and cleaned up. She considered the sad remains of her panties and tossed them into the trash. No need to change her rumpled red dress. Soon, she hoped, she'd be naked.

He waited for her in the large room, staring out the windows. He wore only his trousers, unbelted. The door to the assistants' area was partially open. They had been through. She wondered what he'd said to them about her.

"Come on," he said and held out a hand. "Let's go look at the bed. Or rather, pillows."

She expected him to pull her to the main bedroom, but he led her to some dusty stairs instead.

"Where is this bed of yours?" she asked as she followed him up the steps.

"Near Tibet." He pushed open a door, and they were out on the roof. A wall hid them from neighboring buildings. He slipped out of the trousers and stood naked again. He stretched his arms high over his head and bent from side to side as if warming up for some sort of exercise.

She glanced back at the door that she suspected had locked behind them. "But you said you wanted—"

"I want to take you in my favorite lair. No need to look so stubborn—you won't be trapped there. Not for long at any rate. Once you learn to fly, you'll be able to come and go as you please."

“I’ll be a dragon?”

He shook his head. “No, no more than I’m a man. You’ll have your human essence.”

“But the skin? The semblance? Do you mean I’ll be like Linus?”

“No, not Linus. He’s a poor imitation.” He looked up at the nearly cloudless sky, gradually turning the purple of a late summer evening. “Are you ready?”

She folded her arms. He wasn’t explaining this change very well and she wasn’t sure she should give in. Even if going after him was her idea. “Sarkany. Wait. I’m not your possession.”

“Of course not. I lost your challenge.” The corner of his mouth went up. “Since I lost, I shan’t give up any more of my possessions here to your causes, by the way. We’ll want to visit your home now and again, and this building will provide a place to stay.”

“And who will you leave in charge?”

He shrugged. “I gave instructions to Pettifer for now. Don’t frown at me, woman. I know his weaknesses, so he’s a good choice. He likes animals, so he’ll treat your friend Linus well enough. You may select another supervisor, but later.”

She couldn’t resist putting her palm flat on his chest, then she had to move near so his heat mingled with hers.

After a long sweet kiss, he pulled away and rubbed his fingertips over his belly and the flexing muscles of his upper arms, as if testing his own skin—or saying good-bye to it.

She wet her lips. “You’re going to transform now, aren’t you?”

He put his hands on her shoulders and nuzzled her neck. She reached for him, suddenly anxious. “Let’s go downstairs again. I like this lair.”

He shook his head. “I want to show you my mountain and my lake. You said you wanted to see the ends of the earth.” He pointed to a corner. “Wait there. Don’t stand too close for a few minutes.”

She walked to the wall, peeked over the top to see the far too small cars and people below. With a groan, she huddled down. Craziness. She was scared of heights, and she was considering flight on the back of a dragon?

A loud curse distracted her. With strong fingers, Sarkany tore at himself. The scale pulled free with a ripping sound.

She gasped as the blood trickled down his bare belly through the scant hair to his penis. Some dark blood dribbled down his thigh.

"The worst of it comes now," he said calmly. And a moment later he followed the path of the blood with the scale. His face squeezed tight with pain and she had to stop herself from running to him. Smoke rose from his skin and he gave a roar of pain and something more as the flash of flame burst around him, so bright she had to look away.

When she looked back he was in his true form, the shimmering scales slowly deepening in color, iridescent blues, aquamarine, shimmering jades, midnight sapphire.

"Sarkany," she whispered.

"Yes." Stronger, deeper, almost too vibrant, but it was his voice, and she went straight to him. His scales were hot to the touch.

"They'll cool," he said. She looked into his eyes and saw the man—or rather, the being she knew—smiling back. "I have done this quite a bit lately. All because of you, Miranda."

She walked around him and admired the gleaming scales and large, lithe form. His claws were tipped with opalescent blue talons, almost too beautiful to be frightening. The curve of his belly sloped to massive thighs—and an impressive organ. She tilted her head and considered it. A cock? A penis? He was altogether too imposing for the words she knew.

He stretched huge dark wings, also tipped with talons.

After a time, she tentatively stroked his side. Beneath the lingering heat was something more. The shivering that soaked through her skin and aroused her again. She pressed her cheek to his side.

"If you are ready," he said. "We won't go far today."

She raised her head. "Ready?"

"Climb onto me."

The breeze caressed her bare legs and reminded her she wore nothing under the little red dress. "Oh. I'm not dressed for it. I should put on jeans or something."

"On the contrary, your bare legs will stimulate us both. "

She pressed her lips tight. "Sarkany, this is crazy."

"Mmm?" The splendid creature bent low. She gave up protesting and slid a leg over his back, where his neck met his shoulders.

"Oh God," she moaned as her entire inside leg made contact with the scales of the dragon. "I thought you'd feel like a snake but it's more like...like gold. Living gorgeous gold."

Very carefully, like a woman entering a hot bath, she spread her legs to straddle him. Her curls brushed him. Desire sparked through her. And when she sat, her wide-open sex abruptly pressed to him.

She gasped, flooded with need. “Oh, wait, oh God,” she panted and ground convulsively against him.

He growled. “Curse it, I didn’t know you had no undergarments.”

She collapsed against his neck and clutched him. “Whoa. You feel so wonderful. Everywhere.”

“Yes.” His voice was rasping and thick. “I didn’t know. It’s because we haven’t touched after so long.” He growled again. “I can control the air rushing at you—so we’ll fly fast. I want you too much.”

“Couldn’t we try? I might be able to use my hands, for your...uh. To help you come.” That wouldn’t be much help, she thought, considering his enormous form. She had stared at that part of him for quite a while.

“I’d kill you. Don’t laugh. I’m serious. But please, my little morsel of pleasure. You feel free to enjoy my body. I can wait. I am a dragon, so I have patience.”

She laughed again and wrapped her arms tight around his neck. Her laughter turned into a screech as the wings spread and he beat the air and swooped high.

The rooftop dropped away too quickly. “I thought you had patience. Must we go so fast?”

“I lied about patience. I dislike having to wait to touch you.”

“Did I mention I’m afraid of heights?” she yelled as her city dropped away beneath them.

“Lie as flat as you can. Yes, your legs wrapped like that. Yes, good.”

She pressed every part of her body to him, holding tight, and listening to his dragon crooning.

Eyes shut. And the thrumming infected her body again. Her breasts, tight against him, were caressed as his muscles stretched and contracted. She shifted in her seat, and the contact with him caused her pussy to swell. Her slick moisture must have touched Sarkany, for his rumble grew even deeper and his wings beat faster.

She teased him by grinding small circles with her pelvis. It occurred to her she couldn’t stop—she had to move. “Dragon dancing, pole dancing, about the same,” she said into the wind.

She'd forgotten about his superb hearing.

"When we land," he said. "I want to be able to see this dance of yours. What is it called? Dry-humping, but aha, I don't think it is so dry."

She gave a snort of laughter and tried to keep her body still.

"Don't stop," he ordered. "You are making this the best of all possible flights."

"Sarkany." She pressed her face to the hot, smooth scales of his neck. "You smell like wild thunderstorms."

"Poet," he mocked, but affectionately.

The muscles of his back rippled under her, stroking her in just the right spot, and she shouted with surprise at the force of her response and the growing hunger.

Her body rocked as, groaning, he moved the muscles beneath her slowly and deliberately. She stopped clamping down on her hunger and twisted and rubbed her swollen clit against the warm flesh of her dragon.

She leaned forward and put her mouth on him and tasted the windy flavor of wild dragon. She enjoyed his scales but craved more. "I wish you could kiss me. I want you. I want you inside me again. All over me."

She'd have to do with plastering herself to him. Her bare arms around his neck squeezed tight, she kneaded him with the tender skin inside her thighs, her legs, her clit, her bare soles, all of her skin—and then the orgasm washed through her at last, and almost made her lose her grip. Heavy spasms of pleasure dragged another scream from her and an answering moan from him.

She opened her eyes again when something jarred her. They'd landed on a field with a thump. He stopped and twisted so she rolled off his back. He caught her on the velvet of his wing and slid her to the ground.

"I've changed my mind." His claws feverishly raked along the scales on his side.

She sat on the damp earth, ignoring the tall stalks of grass tickling her legs. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for a scale for you to transform. I need to be inside you."

"You said you are a patient dragon." She stood up on rubbery legs and supported herself with a hand on his neck. "I saw how much heat you gave off. I want to be near water for my first transformation. What if it goes wrong?"

"It won't go wrong, silly female." He sighed, blinked and, craning his elegant neck, looked around. "I see rooftops. Ugh, and telephone poles. I suppose we should wait until

we're in a less human inhabited area. Climb back on." He brought his nose around and deftly pushed it between her legs. "Yes, that's a sweet scent." His dexterous dragon tongue licked her once, twice. She stumbled and groaned, still dazed and inflamed from so much stimulation and her orgasm.

"Lie down with your legs apart," he suggested.

She leaned against his side. "Inhabited area," she reminded him.

"All right. Get on, then," he grumbled.

She hauled herself onto his back and lay face down on his scales. Gradually she slid her legs around him, enjoying the rush of physical pleasure brought on by direct contact with her dragon. A little adjustment and "Whoa," she squeaked as her swollen sex brushed and settled on him again.

"Mmm," he purred and rolled his shoulders. Teasing her again. Once she had her dragon form, payback would be wonderful, she reflected.

Her breath hissed through her teeth and she closed her eyes. "We're traveling for days?" she said, faintly.

"Yes."

"Don't use me up."

A laugh rumbled through him as he took to the air again. Her head didn't swirl as they reached the clouds and her body grew accustomed to the strange passion the touch of his true body evoked. A good start. Her own transformation would be a terrifying, wonderful climax. No, she corrected herself. Making love in midair with her dragon would be the best peak. She held on for the long ride.

About the Author

Summer Devon is the alter ego of writer Kate Rothwell. To learn more about *Summer or Kate*, please visit www.summerdevon.com or www.katerothwell.com or her blog at <http://katerothwell.blogspot.com>. She loves to hear from readers—you can write to her at summerdevon@comcast.net.

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When Gilrohan, shapeshifter and king's man, is thrown into a dank prison cell, his only option is clear—turn himself into a rat and escape. But fleeing the iron bars is easier than escaping the quick hands of the woman who captures him—and undoes his magic. Her undiscovered power is a rare gift, and unknown even to her.

Tabica lives as a slave to her oversexed overlord. Life seems grim until the furry tesslerat shifts into a sleek, naked man beneath her hands. Gilrohan wants to explore her power, and she wants to explore him. Together, they discover that magic can actually work between two people whose lives and love should never have intertwined. But her awakened skills land her into a new existence that threatens to be as dreary as her old one.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Revealing Skills:

Gilrohan's mouth lightly brushed over hers then settled onto hers. His hands stroked circles over her back, cupped her bottom and squeezed it, gently.

"Now," he whispered. "We lock the door, take off all of our clothing and discover what sort of magic we perform together. And pray that we don't kill each other."

She could only whimper as he pulled her to him. Across the room, the rat that had been her master languished in a box. They had to do something about it. Gods she had to find out what she *could* do and... Gilrohan sighed and pressed his mouth against hers.

The rat would wait. She must touch Gilrohan. Now.

Their kisses deepened. His hand, so strong and large, slid up her thigh and squeezed her bottom, pressing her hard against his erection.

"Carefully," he whispered. "We will do this so that no one shall die of pleasure."

She gave a nervous giggle. "Do you think we would die? Surely one of us would pass out. But die?"

He didn't answer right away, for he was nibbling on her shoulder and unlacing her gown to lick his way to her breast. "I must force myself to slow," he muttered, mostly to himself. "It is not a race. A leisurely feast of you. Nothing like a peasant's fast, starved fucking. This morning with you was not my finest moment with a woman, we went at each other like animals." He glanced up at her face and grinned. "No need to glare at me."

Hard to act indignant as his skillful fingers stroked and plucked her nipple. The sensation traveled deep into her, causing her to lose track of her thoughts again. She managed to draw in a shaky breath. "I think...this morning. No wonder I enjoyed it then. I am a peasant, after all."

"Ha to you, Tabica. I'm most definitely not a peasant and I more than enjoyed it," he whispered. "I want more. Give it to me."

She pulled away from him, sat on the bed. "No. We must do something."

"That is precisely what I am suggesting."

"You're absurd. I-I mean his lordship is a *rat*."

He shrugged. "And if he transforms again, he will be most uncomfortable, jammed in that box."

Tabica fought back the urge to reach for those shoulders that made even a shrug an invitation. She groaned. "Strange to think of mating at such a time."

"Yes." He bared his teeth in a devilish smile.

She couldn't look away. "I don't understand why I am so hungry for you."

His smile faded. "It's baffling, isn't it? But we are trapped here in this room for a time. Allow me to fulfill the first of your conditions for helping me escape. Oh, and we will also explore more of your education."

She held open her arms. "Show me how the civilized world makes love."

He came to her. Tenderly, too slowly, he began to remove her clothes.

Still dressed in her skirts, she squirmed away to lie flat on her back, waiting. He knelt next to her, kissed her neck and spoke in her ear. "I know many secrets about your body, any woman's body, I'd like to show you. I know how to coax you into pleasure that will last and push you so far you would come close to fainting."

His clever hands stroked her and reached up and under her petticoat to the tingling bare flesh of her cunt and lightly fingered her.

“Don’t want pain,” she said, breathless from his skilled touch and his lazy low voice. “Tell me, why do you know all these things?”

He kissed down to her naked breast. He licked it, nibbled and sucked hard.

She arched her back off the bed. The intimate throbbing between her legs transformed into demanding need.

He whispered, “We had many lessons and I learned from the best of my king’s courtesans. Love play, they call it.”

“You like playing with women?”

“Mmmm.” His fingers stroked her, unmercifully building the pressure. A thick finger twisted up and into her. Even as he stroked her, he picked up her hand and deliberately, carefully, one by one, inserted each finger into his mouth and sucked. The hot rich feel of his mouth thoroughly encompassing each sensitive fingertip made her belly flutter.

“Yes,” she whispered as he kissed her knuckles. “I like this love play. I want you to show me how it ends. Where you come from, how do I tell a man to...ohh.” Her belly clenched. “To get inside me as soon as possible.”

He groaned. He cursed. He pulled off his garments and tossed it over the edge of the bed, cloth and scrolls tumbling to a heap.

“You, naked,” he ordered. “Now.”

Her turn to torture him. Although the torment was mutual. Awareness of his intense concentration gave her goose bumps as she carefully removed and folded the remaining garments she wore. Teasing him with her slow movements.

She peeled off her last petticoat and knelt naked before him.

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