



The Seven Deadly Sins  
and Virtues

# WARDSTONE ANGER

VIOLA  
GRACE



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Wardstone

Seven Sins and Virtues Series

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WARDSTONE

SEVEN SINS AND VIRTUES SERIES

ANGER

BY

VIOLA GRACE

## PROLOGUE

Altira Warder lay still in the cot given to her by the sisters. Her blond hair spilled over the pillow and to the floor; her blue eyes were sunken and dull with fatigue.

"Orala, you have to take my daughter to my parents. They will train her, and raise her as their own." She gripped her companion's hand, and almost crushed it as a wave of pain rolled over her. One arm clutched her tiny child to her breast, the rosebud mouth pursing in confusion and tiny fingers twitching in agitation.

"I will take her, I promise. Now you have to rest and get better. You are not yet recovered from childbirth." Altira had tried not to show her growing weakness to her friend and the worry on Orala's face tore at her heart.

"I am not getting better." Her body arched in a spasm that left her gasping. Her baby started the coughing wail of the newborn. The midwife had pronounced everything fine, but she didn't realize her patient had no life left to save.

Months earlier, Altira had poured her life energy into the wards surrounding a tiny village tormented by seasonal migrations. What little she had left had

gone into her child. Her body was empty...it just didn't know it yet.

Her friend had begun to sob in panic, and Altira had no ability left to comfort her.

"Orala! Promise me. She has to go to my parents. Please." Her voice rose in a hoarse whisper to drown out the wailing of her tiny daughter. Her free hand gripped Orala's as she tried to get the agreement that she sought.

She never heard the answer.

## CHAPTER 1

A shrouded figure wove through the marketplace, heading for the great stone obelisk in the center. Looking neither left nor right, it continued in a straight line to the base of the amethyst monument. One hand extended and the villagers began to laugh at the stranger who thought it could touch the Wardstone of Talleth.

As her hand contacted the obelisk, the laughter stopped. Murmurs began as energy pulsed from the stone and wrapped lovingly around the stranger. Her hand retracted into the cloak and she turned to address the crowd.

“People of Talleth! You have one month to leave this village and find refuge elsewhere.”

The statement caused a ripple of laughter to flow through the crowd once again.

A wealthy merchant, by the cut of his clothes, stepped forward and spoke with great authority.

“Why? There is nothing that can harm us. We are protected by the Wardstone.”

The woman stood motionless. Behind her, the obelisk began to pulse and shimmer.

The crowd shifted nervously and looked to the

merchant for assistance.

The woman broke the silence. "The Wardstone was set in place to protect the village from the annual migrations of the great oxen, to save the dragon Mostyn the trouble of driving them away for two months of the year."

"Yes, so what of it?"

Her voice from the depths of the cloak was filled with cold venom, the hatred and fury in it chilling the villagers to the bone. "I have come to reclaim the power Altira Warder left behind."

The muttered whisper of "What?" drifted through the marketplace. One urchin ran to the house of Mostyn and tried desperately to get past the buxom maid and in to see the dragon. He was unsuccessful.

"Villagers of Talleth, you have been warned. You have one month. Then the wards come down. It is your choice." With a final caress of the energy reaching out of the stone to enfold her, she strode through the crowd, crackling blue energy forcing a path through them and keeping any of them from stopping her.

She reached the boundary of the ward and disappeared into the forest.

The crowd broke into nervous laughter everyone in the main marketplace discussing the odd creature who had just visited.

Then Mostyn made his appearance.

The prosperous nature of his village had made him a little soft. While most of the dragons stayed in shape by regular shifting form, he had not had any reason to shift for so many years his paunch currently

overlapped his trousers and distended his tunic.

"What? What is it? What has happened?" His bass rumble pierced the silence that followed his appearance.

"Begging your pardon, Lord Mostyn." The officious merchant took on quite a different manner now that he was confronted by a known quantity. "A stranger just told us the ward is coming down one month from now."

"And you believed this stranger?" Mostyn threw back his head and laughed.

The crowd murmured in disapproval. This was not a laughing matter.

"There is reason to suspect it might be possible, my lord."

"And why is that? No one can take the wards down except the one who laid them, and she is dead." He smirked confidently at the merchant.

"The stranger touched the Wardstone, my lord. And its power wrapped around the hand that caressed it. A wonderful blue flame."

A murmur of confirmation rippled through the crowd.

Mostyn's face darkened in anger. "Nonsense! It must have been some sort of a trick."

"But, my lord, the stranger gave us only a month to leave. What are we to do?"

"Nothing! You will do nothing. Any man, woman or child who leaves this village will answer to me. So do I swear!"

With a flourish he left the market, though only after taking a long look at the wardstone. Despite his



bravado, he was worried it was possible to take down its protection and he was not up to defending them against the vagaries of nature. It had been far too long.

He had only to stop the stranger from re-entering the village, he decided, and all would be well. He sent a page for his men and paced impatiently until they arrived.

When they were arrayed before him, he told them what he wanted.

"I need you to scour the forests for the stranger who touched the wardstone. Capture the creature, and bring it to me." As an afterthought he added, "and watch the villagers to see if any try to leave."

\* \* \* \*

*One hundred-thirty miles away...*

"Kesler! Kesler! We've found her!" Celestyn Warder skidded into her husband's workshop, waving a map.

"What?" Bemused, he let the glass he was blowing collapse under its own weight. "Damn."

She waved the map at him once again. "We have found Altira's daughter! She is just outside Talleth."

He brushed his green-and-silver hair behind one pointed ear. "Talleth. Wasn't that where...?"

"Yes. But for whatever reason, she is there now. And too damned close to that bastard Mostyn. You need to contact the council and arrange for her protection."

"Of course. I'll leave immediately."

Celestyn crossed her arms over her chest. "We will leave immediately. I am leaving nothing to chance. Our horses are ready, and our bags are packed. Your apprentice can clean up."

"Fine, let's go get our granddaughter."

Kesler followed his mostly human wife out of the workshop, but shook his head at all the work that now lay in ruins. This was not the first time they had spotted their granddaughter, but she always disappeared just before they arrived. This time they would take no chances; and though she wouldn't thank them for it, they would throw her to the Dragon Council.

His wife was already in her saddle, looking back at him impatiently.

"C'mon, Kes. We don't have a moment to lose."

"I'm coming." He swung up onto the horse then looked more closely at what he was riding. "How in the name of the Nine Hells did you get horses from the Wild Hunt?"

"By trading some of your glassware, dear."

That was the last he heard as she spurred her horse to a run, and he had to follow her.

The villages blurred as they rode through sunset and into the night, their magical mounts requiring neither rest nor water. The only stops they had to make were to rest themselves.

Seven days after they left their cozy home, they arrived at the Citadel of the Dragon Council. Kesler's bloodlines got them immediately before the councilors, and a course of action was plotted.

The dragons were extremely interested in the

proposition. They agreed to the terms as set forth by Kesler and his wife, provided the elf and warder chose from the Council's candidates. The couple agreed.

They would have to remain at the citadel for ten days, until all of the candidates could be assembled. In the meantime, a scout was to be sent to the area where they had last sighted her.

If they didn't chase after her, Celestyn hoped she would not shift her position beyond tracking. If she hadn't used a burst of warding energy, they might never have found her at all.

\* \* \* \*

### *Outside the village of Talleth*

Damn, why had she touched the Wardstone? For that matter, why had she given them a warning and one month to run?

*Because, you idiot, you can't just let them be slaughtered. They didn't kill your mother directly, just drove her to her death. They deserve a choice. Before all that they know is destroyed.*

She sighed heavily. This served no purpose. The offer had been made, and to date, she had seen no one leave the village on anything other than daily tasks. Hunters had been deployed to find her, but the wards she was maintaining around her campsite kept out all eyes and stopped them from stumbling into her fire.

She could actually see them scouring the shrubs for her. She smirked every time. They were powerless,

and no amount of human vision could pierce the wards. The dragon that was circling the area two weeks after she had entered the village did have her slightly worried.

The funny thing was, now that she was ready and able to take her revenge she was no longer as furious as she had been before leaving Orala's care.

When Orala had begun training her for this, the righteous rage that burned within her had been all-consuming. Mostyn needed to be humiliated then killed. The people of the village did not deserve to live under Altira's blessing. They had to be made to pay.

It was her destiny to be the instrument of revenge for her dead mother.

Only one more week until she achieved it.

## CHAPTER 2

Rhys and Devon had been visiting their brother and his family when the council contacted them. A mate of mixed blood was available. They were to present themselves at the Citadel as soon as they were able, if they were interested.

They looked at each other and smiled.

"What are you two smirking about?" Lia demanded. She was their brother's mate, and currently was trying to ride herd on her two daughters while giving instructions on poultice-making to an eager acolyte of the Hospice.

"The council is alerting us there may be a mate available for one of us. A woman of mixed blood." Devon scooped up one of his nieces and twirled her around. Mala saw her twin swinging and jumped up, demanding her uncle spin her, too.

Marcus eyed his brothers and scooped up Mia as Devon took her sister for a spin.

"So, what is wrong with mixed blood?"

"Yeah, what is wrong with mixed blood?" Lia's eyebrows rose over her golden eyes, and she flipped her hair over her shoulder.

The acolyte looked both delighted and horrified—

everyone knew the lady of the keep had had a part-human mother, but rubbing that fact in her in-laws' faces was scandalous. No doubt he could hardly wait to tell the rest of his class.

"Absolutely nothing. In fact, I believe we will leave in the morning." He looked over at Rhys, and grinned at his solemn nod.

The following morning, the hunters took their leave of the two sniveling toddlers and climbed to the top of the keep.

"Hey, Rhys – first one to the Citadel gets first crack at the woman."

"Are you sure? You had a lot of breakfast." Rhys' mouth twisted in a smirk. Devon's eyes were always bigger than his stomach.

"I'm sure. Let's go!" His voice ringing in the air, Devon flung himself off the wall, changing into his dark-green dragon form and growing to forty feet in length.

"Ah, shit!" Rhys shifted to jet-black scales. His powerful hindquarters shoved him off the roof of the keep and airborne.

They fought for supremacy of the sky, each driving harder and higher. Rhys, though, had a plan; and as they approached the Citadel, he folded his wings, dropping like a stone.

Devon had already begun a spiral descent, and was far too slow to react when Rhys shot past him. Rhys' wings boomed out to break his dive, and he shifted to warrior form as he touched down, his great wings folding tight as he rolled to get out of his brother's way, tail tucked.

As Devon shifted, Rhys folded his arms across his chest.

"I win. I am first in line."

"Actually, you are fifth and sixth in line." Their father Sirius stood at the entrance to the receiving hall. "What kept you?"

"We were at Marcus' when the courier found us, playing with the girls. Keeping them out of Lia's hair."

"And flirting with the servants."

"Only Dev. I was busy helping Marcus plan the valley's crop rotation." Rhys felt smug as they walked through the halls. He smoothly shifted back to fully human form—and was glad that he had.

Beyond the entry hall was the audience hall, and within the audience hall were an elf and his wife. Those not familiar with dragonkind occasionally reacted badly to the wings and tail.

"Rhys and Devon, this is Kesler and his wife Celestyn. She is a warder, and it is her granddaughter we are here to discuss." Thoran was stone-faced. He was trying not to play favorites, but being their brother-in-law made him slightly biased.

"They are also candidates for your granddaughter to consider." He bowed gracefully and left the room.

"Sir, madam, I wish to ask why you are arranging for your granddaughter's mate and not her father?"

Sirius was all business.

"Her father will not acknowledge her, and she is in danger. I don't want to see her fall prey to a dishonorable match," Kesler answered, but his eyes did not stray from the younger dragons.

Rhys could have sworn those leaf-green eyes were tearing him apart and seeing what he was made of. He met the gaze, and it was like falling into a cool green forest. Music and light were all around him. He blinked—and was back in the audience chamber, shaking his head.

“What is it?” Devon’s whisper was harsh in the silence.

“Did you just feel...? Never mind.” Rhys shook his head and looked at the couple once again. Kesler was smiling.

“Sirius, I believe I have chosen one of your children for my granddaughter.”

Devon’s chest puffed up—he was by far the more handsome so he probably figured he was the logical choice.

Rhys knew he had the features of a born scholar. The harsh planes of his face were a surprise given the usual pleasing appearance of his family. The silk of his black hair and his dark-brown eyes were the only softness in his features.

Their father nodded and left the room to retrieve the councilor. Thoran returned looking surprised.

Kesler stepped forward. “Councilor Thoran, I have made my choice. It is Rhys. Will he abide by the conditions?”

He seemed oddly concerned, and Rhys began to suspect this was not a typical matchmaking.

“I think you need to explain to him, and if he agrees, you have our word we will enforce the bond in order to retrieve her.” Thoran’s voice was solemn.

Celestyn stepped forward.



"I think it would be better if I explain. In part, it was my fault." She took her husband's hand, and as the dragons waited patiently, she began.

"I am a Warder. My clan has existed for centuries, as you may know." At their nods, she continued. "I married Kesler, and we had a daughter. A beautiful girl. Altira." Her eyes grew distant, seeing the past.

"I trained her as my mother trained me, and she became one of the great powers of our time. She could anchor her wards with a piece of her soul, and nothing could penetrate them."

"When she was old enough to be on her own, she left us, stating she had to find her own destiny. We heard nothing more from her. One year later, I felt her die, and my heart ripped in two." A tear shimmered on her cheek, and she took a deep breath to continue. "Kesler and I traced her energy to a small village called Talleth. There was no sign of her, save for the great wardstone in the center of the village. It contained enough of my darling girl to have ended her life if she was parted from it. She obviously had meant to stay there."

"It took some doing, but we found out she had been driven from the village when she became pregnant. The father refused to admit his responsibility, and the village already had a permanent wardstone, so they didn't need her anymore.

"The dragon in charge of the village was her lover."

Sirius's face was contorting with fury. "What was his name?"

"Mostyn. The bastard's name is Mostyn. He had her thrown out of the village once he had what he wanted." Another shuddering breath.

Kesler squeezed her hands and continued for her.

"My daughter left the village, her soul literally bleeding to death as she got farther and farther from the ward. She was headed home, but must have needed medical help—a local abbey remembered her as a patient. She and a friend entered and stayed for several months until her baby was delivered. A healthy girl."

"My daughter died that same day. All of her remaining energy had gone into her daughter, and she had none left."

"One of the nuns overheard Altira begging her friend Orala to bring the child to us. That was the last anyone saw of Orala, or our granddaughter. We don't even know her name."

Thoran asked the question they were all thinking. "How do you know she still lives?"

Celestyn looked at him with teary eyes. "Because, I can feel her—it is the gift of the Warders. She is part of me."

Her husband continued again. "Every time she casts a ward we trace her. Always arriving too late—she moves swiftly. But we have seen the traces of training implements at the sites. She is preparing to break her mother's ward on Talleth. She is the only one who can."

"As the ward has not yet been broken, the village remains intact, but not for much longer. They are in the middle of a migratory path. The wild oxen will

trample anything that gets in their way, and the packs of wolves that follow will take care of anyone who's left."

Thoran spoke again. "It was Mostyn's duty to protect the village. He latched onto the Warder as the easy way out—it saved him driving off the oxen for two months of the year. Taking her as a lover was just a bonus for him. The council will deal with him.

"Rhys, after you have secured the girl, send a message to the council. We don't want Mostyn to know he has a daughter he can use to barter with."

\* \* \* \*

"I believe Rhys has yet to agree to this—he has not said anything since he arrived." Kesler was almost amused. The young dragon was perfect for her—her energy and his would blend seamlessly.

Rhys pondered for a moment. "So, I have to find my mate, who is hidden by wards, stop her from destroying an entire village and make sure her father doesn't figure it out. Is that it?"

"If you find her, use this."

Kesler handed him a small bundle.

\* \* \* \*

Rhys lifted it to his nose. Ah, aphrodisiacs for elves. He could smell the magic in them.

"Do you think I will need them?"

"There are five amulets there. She has sufficient sensitivity to be susceptible to them. You need to

make sure she is fully attached to you before you return here. If you are not fully mates, Mostyn will know and assert his rights as her father. We cannot allow that."

"Is that how you caught your wife?" Rhys wanted to set them at ease—the banter was a little stilted, but well-meant.

"No, she caught me." Kesler and Celestyn smiled at one another. "Now, bring me my Altira's child."

Then Celestyn's smile faltered, and she clutched at her husband for support.

"Kesler! She's dropping the ward!"

## CHAPTER 3

With one week to go before their deadline, there was still no sign of anyone evacuating the village, and the first of the oxen herds had trampled by. She sighed heavily. This was going to be harder than she had thought.

She heard a rustle in the shrubs near her camp and looked up, expecting to see another hunter. She was surprised to see Orala. With a flick of her thoughts, she opened the ward to let her guardian in then flicked them back into place.

"You have become proficient at that." Orala complimented her. "I never even suspected you were here." An unhappy grimace at the level of ability Alethea possessed crossed her features.

"Thank you. Can I offer you some tea?" Politeness was always something to fall back on. She reached for the pot she had just prepared and dug another cup from her pack.

Orala took a seat across the fire from her and settled her skirts with another grimace of distaste.

"Yes. Please." She was obviously not happy to be there.

"Orala, why have you come? With the migration

underway, this is not a safe place to be."

"I checked the village, and it is a very safe place to be right now."

"I gave them a month to clear out."

"Why? They didn't give your mother any time." A cold tone had entered her voice. Alethea shuddered — she knew what was coming.

"No, but they didn't kill her, either. I want revenge, but I will take it by removing their safety, not by killing them."

"Do you need a reminder of what they did?" Orala reached into her tunic and withdrew a small black stone.

"No!" Alethea drew back and jumped to her feet. Keeping distance between herself and her guardian, she circled the fire. She hated the stone—the lack of control...and what happened after.

Orala stood and advanced on her. "I do think you need to be reminded. And there is no time like the present."

The stone flew, tendrils of dark energy expanding from it, to land over her heart.

Memories of her childhood came rushing back.

Then they took over.

Alethea screamed. Anger, powerful and overwhelming, flowed into her, finding the resentments and the memories of insults heaped upon her during her lifetime and blossoming them into full flowering rage.

She kicked the wardstones around the camp out of the way, striding through the woods wrapped in energy.

The hunters had been nearby. She made no effort to silence her steps. They came running. The first one who tried to touch her drew back hands covered in blue flame. The flames engulfed him, and the energy surrounding her flared in response.

It was consuming him, body and soul. She drew it in and used it to strengthen her protective shields.

The next one to touch her flared even more quickly, his energy joining hers. She heard his screams dimly and smiled. For working with that bastard Mostyn, they deserved a more painful and lengthy death.

She continued on to the center of the village. The Wardstone of Talleth pulsed gently in greeting. She caressed it, matching its pulse with her own. She could feel the energy in the stone calling to her, and heard the villagers yelling in horror. Absently, she surveyed the swath of destruction that had followed her. Fires broke out as her energy sparked and flared.

She snuggled up to the wardstone, drawing its energy into her body.

She heard the thunder of hooves coming for the village—the oxen were arriving, and just in time. She smiled, a chilling display to any close enough to see it.

She shut the ward down, drawing the protection into a solid core of magic in the palm of her hand. She chipped off a segment of the stone with her fist and put the energy into it then held it in her hand. This was something she had to do—the ward power should not be lost.

Alethea sat at the base of the stone, still wreathed in bright blue flame. She herself was now a ward, her

body completely protected.

Detached, she watched the wave of oxen wander into the village. *They are really quite destructive.* The merchants and farmers tried rouse the dragon. Tried to gain his assistance.

But Mostyn was drunk, could barely stagger out of his house. Alethea giggled as she watched him try to change. *He can't do it. The bastard who killed my mother is impotent against the force of nature that sweeps through the village.*

The village was only hours from being rubble, and Alethea intended to watch it all.

It is all that she lives for, this revenge. This punishment for those who abused her mother and those who drove her out.

She will stay until it is finished, and then her body will burn itself out. The flames of the wards will tear her body apart, and she will turn to ash, just like the rest of them.

\* \* \* \*

The villagers stopped their screams and ran for their lives. A tiny part of her rejoiced that there would be survivors and was quickly quashed by the rage.

"No!"

Dragons. There were dragons in the air. They landed and drove off the oxen, doing Mostyn's job. One took point to separate the herd, and two others flanked him to drive them around the village.

One more flew into the ruin of the market and landed.



It assessed her carefully. One step at a time, it moved closer and closer to the wardstone. Finally, its gaze met her empty one, and it changed shape. A warrior now approached her.

The village was still spotted with flames, and more dragons were pouring in to help rescue and evacuate the villagers.

"My name is Rhys. I have been sent here by both the Dragon Council, and your grandparents. You are remanded into my guardianship for the rest of your natural life." His craggy face was gentle, and he continued to advance on her.

His voice reached her as if from a great distance. She responded absently.

"Grandparents? They are dead."

"No, they are very much alive, and waiting for news of you. You have your grandfather's hair, you know. Brilliant green with silver streaks."

He drew closer. She could see her flames reflected in his soft, brown eyes. Funny, her hands had turned red. She looked down and saw the reddening of the flame crawling up her arms.

She was dying.

"Well, my natural life will not be much longer, so you don't have to worry about me." A grimace of acceptance crossed her face. She could feel her energy leaking out, draining the depths of her soul, oozing out of the wounds torn open by Orala's black stone.

"Ah, I am afraid not. I do have to worry about you." With a swift move of his arm, he punched her in the jaw, effectively cutting off the flow of energy by knocking her out. His knuckles received superficial

burns, but his affinity for fire protected him from most of the ward's effect.

As she slumped to the ground and the flames died out, he got his first good look at his new bride. He was right about her hair—it matched Kesler's to the strand. If nothing else, it confirmed this was, indeed, his grandchild.

He lifted her and took to the sky, holding her closely. He knew just where to take her. The others could handle Mostyn. He had a new task ahead of him.

Taming the Warder.

## CHAPTER 4

Morning light teased across her lids, tickling and demanding she open her eyes. Waking up was hard. Alethea's whole body ached, but her jaw was especially sore.

She stretched out her arms and was shocked to find someone in her bed. Except this was not her bed. Her bed did not have men in it. Come to think of it, she didn't own a bed.

"Good morning," his husky voice greeted her.

She squeaked in surprise and rolled to escape. He stopped her with one casually flung arm.

"Where do you think you are going?"

Her head was still fuzzy, but she replied, "Anywhere but here."

"No. Not until we have a nice little talk." He sat up, and the sheets slid off his torso to pool at his hips. He kept a grip on one of her wrists. It was the dragon from the village.

She swallowed hard. She could tell he was naked, and she realized she was as well. She scooted down, and wrapped the sheets around her.

"What is your name, by the way?"

She grimaced, "Alethea. Do you often sleep with

women you don't know?"

"Not usually, but you are a special case." He smiled at her.

"Uh, how did I come to be here? I don't remember anything." That was not strictly true. Bits and pieces of the days before were coming back to her. His name was Rhys, and he was the dragon who knocked her out. How had he done that?

He sighed and scratched his chest with his free hand. She watched his fingers and traced the line of dark hair on that chest to where it disappeared beneath the sheet.

She blushed.

"You dropped the ward and waited for your powers to burn you out," he said. "I punched you in the head and took you to a safe place."

"That explains the pain in my jaw. How did you get through my personal wards?"

"One quick hit and a bit of blistering. Fortunately my sister-in-law is a healer of great renown, she fixed me right up."

"You left my jaw to heal on its own?"

"She tried to heal you, but you took a swing at her. You will recover."

"Fine, whatever." She thought about the wards for a moment. "Were there many killed?" She fought hard to keep her composure as the impact of her actions began to flood back to her. People had run for their lives and it was all her fault.

"Only two hunters that I am aware of. Several villagers were burned in the ensuing fires, but they have received healing and are being relocated.

Mostyn is in custody at the Citadel, pending an inquiry." He was watching her face, and when her distress crossed her features, part of him relaxed.

"Two dead. Oh, gods."

She put her head in her hands and sobbed. It was just like the last time Orala had used the stone on her, only then it had been a brothel that was destroyed, one guard burned to death in the fire. Every time she let the anger overtake her, someone died.

She had cried after that death, too.

But this time, something was different.

The dragon pulled her into his arms and cradled her against his chest, letting her sob her grief into his shoulder. She had never had someone try to comfort her before. For the first few moments, she held her body stiff against his. Then, as the warmth and calm of his embrace warmed her, she slowly relaxed. Her sobs quieted after a few minutes, and she went limp against him.

She felt his fingers under her chin, and he tilted her head back to meet his gaze. Compassion was in his eyes, then something else moved within them. She jerked in surprise as lust flared through him and she felt him hardening under her thighs.

Alethea was suddenly very aware of her naked body against his, and his was obviously aware as well. Still holding her chin, he dipped his mouth to hers and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. He did nothing else, only teased her lips with his then withdrew and smiled at her.

"Why did you do that?" She was astonished. She had had men force themselves on her before she had

gotten control of her wards. Orala had told her it was a lesson in control—when she could defend herself she would be worthy of the power she had.

This was nothing like that.

He cuddled her close. "Because I wished to. And you looked like you needed comforting. And you didn't stop me."

"But, I—"

"Shh. Just relax and rest. Breakfast will be delivered soon." He reached one long arm and yanked the bell pull next to the bed.

"I would like to get dressed." She sat quiescent, his erection still straining against her. He did not seem to be forcing the issue, and he was extremely warm.

"There are no clothes here for you. Or for me."

"What?" That got her out of her comfortable reverie. She bolted off his lap, accidentally putting her hand on his engorged cock as she levered herself off him.

"Ow, be careful!" He curled up and firmly set her on the other side of the bed.

She froze. Once before she had injured a man's private area and it had taken her weeks to heal him. Rhys was much larger than that man...

She prepared to flee quickly if he made a move toward her.

He shifted slightly to give his lightly bruised flesh a little more room.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have startled you like that, given your position." His voice was strained, a light sheen of sweat on his brow.

She blinked in astonishment. "Wait. You are

apologizing to me? I just injured you."

"Yes, because I gave you a nasty surprise. Being unclothed in a room with a strange man cannot be a normal occurrence for you. But it would be nice if you expressed some remorse for the injury. Not that I mind your hand on me, but next time use a little less force."

He grinned, and his face was transformed.

"I am sorry to have, uh..."

"Crushed my balls, bruised my cock?"

Her face was a furious red. "Yes. Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Apology accepted."

A knock at the door caused her to jump in surprise. Fortunately, he was a safe distance away.

"Ah, that would be breakfast." He slid out of the bed and sauntered over to open the door. An elf in a scarlet tunic carried a massive tray before him. He set it on a table in the corner, in front of the only chair.

Rhys lounged against the wall, completely at ease with his nudity.

"Thank you, Rifal. It was kind of you to agree to assist us."

"Lord Marcus is making it worth my while, be assured of that. Hauling food up to the tower is too much for any of the maids, let alone the scandalous sight of you running around naked."

Rifal turned to Alethea who sat with the sheets clutched to her. "Good morning to you, Lady. I bring the respects of the Lady and Lord of the Keep."

A graceful bow, and then he was gone.

"I don't know about you, but I am starving. The

last meal I had was breakfast two days ago." Rhys sat in the chair and beckoned her to join him.

She was ravenous. "But I am not wearing anything."

"Neither am I."

She tucked the sheet around her and crossed to the table with it trailing on the floor.

"Alethea, in this room we are equal, and that means no cheating." He tugged the fabric out of her white-knuckled grip and tossed it back to the bed then seated her by the expedient of pulling her onto his lap.

She locked her fingers together and kept her gaze on them. She could feel the erection that had not diminished with her earlier assault.

He held a piece of fruit to her lips, and she opened her mouth to take it. She chewed slowly, her blush covering her upper chest and arms.

She heard him eating then another tidbit was put in her mouth. This time he gently traced her lips with his fingers before putting the berry in her mouth. She looked at him and was mesmerized by the focus of his gaze on her mouth.

She slowly opened her lips to take the berry then snaked her tongue out to lick the juice.

His face flushed, and the skin seemed to draw tight over his cheeks; she felt a tiny flare of power.

Alethea looked over at the tray and selected a piece of meat. She began to feed herself, under his fixed attention.

\* \* \* \*



When it was clear she was eating enough to replace the energy she had lost, Rhys resumed his own breakfast. He paused occasionally to watch her tongue dart out to capture a drop of juice or a crumb.

He stifled a groan, closing his eyes and imagining that tongue darting out to taste him. He shuddered with the effort to keep from taking her.

"Well, I am finished. Do you still want more?"

She asked the question innocently, unaware he was fighting the image of her beneath him as he thrust into her.

"Yes, gods, yes." He held her still for his kiss. His mouth devoured hers, tasting the sweetness of the fruit she had just consumed. His tongue swept inside to duel with hers, and she raised one hand hesitantly to his jaw drawing her tongue along the inside of his upper lip, tasting him in return.

Rhys rose to his feet, striding to the bed and pulling her to the mattress as he fell back, keeping his grip on her. She followed him down with a sudden aggressive lust that startled them both. Her hands ran over his chest, plucking at the nipples and scraping them with the edges of her nails. She learned his textures, and then she began to taste.

Rhys smelled her rising lust, her scent that of female dragon in heat. He felt the strength in her hands as the pounding in her blood began to drive out all thought. She shuddered at his grip on her breasts, stroking and plucking gently at the rose-red nipples.

\* \* \* \*

Alethea shuddered and moaned as he stroked the creamy white flesh that firmed lightly under his touch, pressing gently against the grasping hands. Darts of heat flew between her breasts and belly, swelling the small bud between her thighs and sending out a slick messenger of her arousal.

Her head drew down to his neck, she breathed deeply of his musky scent and smiled as her lips touched the warm muscle of his throat, licking and nipping at a jaw clenched with his effort to restrain himself. She smiled. There was nothing in her now but an urge to make him lose that control.

The cords of his neck were distended. She licked at them next, biting gently and moving down his chest. With every touch of her lips he shuddered and bucked beneath her, each moan he gave up building her feeling of control, of power.

The petals between her thighs were slick now – she could smell her own heat mixed with his. It was a heady combination.

She followed the line of hair across his chest and down to his belly, flicked her tongue into his navell and his whole body arched in reaction. His breath rattled out of him in a guttural groan, and then his hands were on her, pulling her up to straddle his hips, his cock weeping in desperation to enter her snug passage.

\* \* \* \*

He cupped her hips and rubbed her against him, their

moans combining into a passionate note that echoed in the chamber. He gripped her hip with one hand to keep her in place and slid the other through the hair that crowned her sex and lower. The wetness that greeted him relieved him—though he could smell her heat, and she definitely wasn't shy with his body, he didn't want to hurt her on their first time together.

He slipped one finger inside her, then two. He curled them and gently teased her inner passage. She rocked her hips against his hand, but he held her still plunging his fingers slowly until she mewled for satisfaction. With his thumb, he pushed back the tiny hood and rubbed insistently at her clit. She fought him, and he laughed.

He let go. She gripped his cock in long slender fingers and lodged him in her entrance. Gasping and trembling, she slowly dropped onto him, his arching back thrusting him to the hilt as he took her weight on his hips.

"Oh, gods!" Just like that she went over, her body clenching around him, a voluptuous pulsing around him as his own release slammed into him. His hands bruised her hips as he stayed deep inside her, pouring his seed into her.

\* \* \* \*

Alethea widened her eyes at the feeling of the jetting within her, and her own release continued for endless moments while she held him within her. Finally, sated, she slumped forward onto his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her, one

hand on her hip to stay within her. He chuckled, each movement of his chest moving her on him. And him within her. Aftershocks rippled through her, and she twitched.

"Why are you laughing?" She mumbled it into his chest, but he understood it anyway.

"That was the fastest I have spilled myself since I was a teenager."

"Ah. That was a first for me. I haven't...um, before."

He tugged her head up and kissed her. "I'm glad."

Insecurity crept in,

"So, it was all right?" She refused to meet his eyes.

He began to laugh again. Fury swept through her. How dare he laugh at her? She pushed at him with both hands, shoving off of him, feeling him slide from within her. Her hands fisted, and she punched him in the jaw.

Seconds later, she was in the bathing chamber with the door bolted. She was shaking, part from fury, part from fear. She backed against the far wall and kept a wary eye on the door.

There was no sound from the outer room. How hard had she hit him?

Minutes crawled by as she waited, huddled in a small ball on the floor. Still no sound. She crept back to the door, slid the bolt back silently and opened it.

The bedroom was empty.

Had he left her? She walked hesitantly into the room, looking for anyplace he might be hiding.

"What are you looking for?" A whisper in her ear from right behind her.

She jumped a foot into the air. "Holy hells!"

Arms wrapped around her from behind. She fought, kicking and yelling.

"Let me go! Let me go, you bastard!"

"Bastard? Don't let my mother hear you say that. She might take offense." He was still naked. She could feel him rising against her back as she struggled to free herself.

\* \* \* \*

He held her until she slumped against him, exhausted. She started up again—less shouting, more squirming. Then relaxed. Then started again.

Finally, she was exhausted. Did she realize she didn't want to get away from him? She could have quite easily. She only had to use her warding talents. She hadn't even tried.

## CHAPTER 5

Alethea woke when a knock sounded at the door. She was alone in the bed, still nude, and tired. Very tired.

Rhys was at the door, and he blushed copper under his bronze skin as a woman calmly walked into the room. She had a tray of food she set on the table.

"You can wait outside, Rhys. This will take as long as it takes." She tossed a towel to him then shoved him out and closed the door in his face.

"I guess I had better introduce myself. My name is Lia, and I am your new sister-in-law."

Alethea stared at her in shock. "But I'm not married."

"According to the laws of the Dragon Council, you are. May I explain?" Lia sat at the edge of the bed and kept her eyes on Alethea, who drew the covers up to her chin.

"I guess so. But I won't believe you."

Lia sighed heavily. "Your father is a dragon, and one of your mother's ancestors was a dragon. You can therefore breed true."

"Breed true?"

"Have children who are completely in possession

of the talents and abilities of dragonkind. By the laws of the council, your father has the right to choose a husband for you. Usually, several candidates selected by the father are provided, and the daughter chooses one. In your case, your father did not acknowledge you. This allowed your grandfather, Kesler, to make the decision for you. He chose Rhys."

"He chose for me?"

"Yep, that gentleman in the hall wearing nothing but a towel is your husband, by council decree."

"What if I don't want a husband? What if I just want to live alone for the rest of my life?"

Lia sighed again. "If your father figures out who you are, he will offer you to suitors who will track you down and force you."

"As opposed to being held against my will here?"

"Did Rhys force you?" She looked shocked. "If he did, Marcus will kick his..."

Alethea blushed. "No! I mean, I...he...he kissed me then, I..." She trailed off as she realized she had taken him. He had done nothing more than kiss her to trigger her passion.

"I know he isn't the most handsome of men, but he is even-tempered. Kind, and has a great mind for schemes." Lia took her hand and a gentle, tingling warmth spread through her.

"What? What are you doing?"

"I'm a healer. I am taking care of your aches and pains."

Her smile flickered then firmed as the warmth spread through every inch of Alethea's body. When she removed her hand there was nothing left of the

tiny cuts and bruises that had been left by the events of the last few days.

"How do you feel?"

"Better, thank you. But I don't know about the whole Dragon Council thing. I am going to have to think about this in detail."

"All right, but think quickly. The council will convene in five days. You will be expected to attend."

"Me? Why?"

"Because of the destruction of Talleth." She patted Alethea's hand. "Now for some better news. Your grandparents are coming to visit you. Before you get excited, clothing will be provided." Lia winked at her. "Kesler has sent you something as a gift." She reached into a pouch hanging from her belt and withdrew a pendant. "It's quite beautiful. Let me put it on you."

Moments later, the silver locket hung between Alethea's breasts.

"It looks lovely on you. I am sure Rhys will be terribly impressed by it."

"Um. What happens if I do decide to stay with him? Just in case."

"Then you will go and live in his house in the forest of Neolynx. You will be able to take jobs as a Warder if you wish, and you can visit here as much as you like."

Despite the disconcerting directness of Lia's golden eyes, there was genuine warmth there that Alethea had never seen in another being's eyes before. Well, come to think of it, Rhys had the same look of warmth and acceptance in his eyes.

"I think your grandparents would like to get to



know you as well, if you allow it." She rose gracefully to her feet. Her gown flowed around her as she walked to the door. "If you need me, just ring the bell four times. I'll get the message.

"Now, remember. No one under this roof will ever hurt you. We all wish you the best and will put ourselves between you and harm. You are safe here." With a final smile and a small wave, Lia let Rhys back in, and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Take care of her. You almost lost her."

\* \* \* \*

Lia's whisper widened his eyes. He looked over at his bride, and his heart jumped in his chest. He turned to see Lia turn the corner to the stairs; tears tracked down her cheeks.

## CHAPTER 6

Slowly, he closed and bolted the door. Pasting a pleasant expression on his face, he asked, "So, what did you talk about?"

"Oh, this. That. The Dragon Council handing me over to you." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. The bedding had fallen to her waist and she didn't even seem to notice.

Her breasts rose and fell in agitation. He watched them carefully, and noted the pendant hanging between them.

"Where did that come from?"

"Lia gave it to me. She said it came from my grandfather. It was a gift. Do you like it?" She trailed her fingers down the chain, caressing the filigree work.

Her fingers delicately traced circles on the surface, and he felt himself respond instantly. As he watched her stroke the pendant, her eyelids became heavy, and her lips parted to let her tongue lave across them.

Kesler had sent her a damned aphrodisiac. The other pendants were safely locked in a wardrobe hidden in the wall – this had to be a backup.

She rose out of the bed and came toward him, hips

swaying and smoldering eyes meeting his. With every step, his heart pounded faster. Her fingers had now left the pendant and were caressing her breasts, trailing over her stiff nipples and kneading the mounds of creamy flesh. He suspected she had no idea the level of heat she was generating within him. He would have to show her.

A husky tone he had never heard before broke free of her flushed lips, "So, do you like the pendant? You didn't say."

Striding forward he gripped her arms and lifted her breasts to his mouth. As he lapped at one nipple then the next, he moved until her back was against the stone wall.

She squealed, and the sharp jerk at her neck went unnoticed because his suckling at her breast was driving her mad. Another high cry as his teeth scraped her flesh. She raised her legs and wrapped them around him to draw him to her.

The odor of her arousal intoxicated him. It was a wild scent, combining the unmistakable fragrance of Alethea with the tangy musk of dragon. He moved forward and positioned the head of his erection in the heat of her core. As he released her, she slid down onto his cock, and they both groaned in relief. He wove his fingers with hers, pinning her arms above her head.

His hips pushed against hers with a relentless rhythm, shoving her against the smooth stone of the wall. Her body was completely supported by their union, and her hungry lips sought his. He pounded into her, grunting as sweat dripped from his brow,

her breathy cries swallowed by his mouth as they writhed against each other.

He came inside her, shuddering with a groan as his hips drove into her and pinned her to the wall. He held her there for an endless moment then raised his head. Meeting her eyes, he could tell his satisfaction had flown before hers.

With his hips bracing her against the wall, He snaked one hand between them to rub circles around her clit. The other took over the task of restraining her hands. He gently explored the petals of her sex where his cock still throbbed within her. The movement of his fingers caused her eyes to flutter shut, to focus on the sensations he was heaping on her.

He paused. "Look at me. I want your eyes on me when you come."

Her midnight eyes widened in surprise, and despite her frenzy, she blushed. Nevertheless, she watched him watching her as he stroked.

\* \* \* \*

His breath was coming faster, and she felt him swell within her as cries of pleasure broke from her throat. His slick fingers slid over her clit one more time, and she shattered into a thousand pieces. Her body arched against the cold stone and thrust hard against him, impaling herself on his re-energized member.

Her eyes locked to his, she saw the satisfaction and pleasure her pleasure had brought him. As the fluttering subsided, she flexed her hands trying to obtain her freedom.

The slight movement brought him out of a bemused examination of her features. He released her hands and helped her unlock her legs to stand on her own feet, slipping from her in the process.

When her weight hit her knees, she buckled. He caught her and carried her to the bed.

“Wait right here.” The husky tone of his voice told her he was ready for her again. His balls hung against his thighs, relaxed after his climax, but his cock was hard, still slick with her moisture.

He disappeared into the bathing chamber and was gone for several minutes.

Alethea’s nose wrinkled at the scent filling the room. She hadn’t realized before that a woman’s climax had its own smell. The aroma of her body’s heat had mingled with Rhys’s to create a potent musk that still hovered in the air.

She let her hands trail over her body. Her breasts were slightly sore from his attentions—she could still feel his teeth against her skin. She moved her hands lower and gingerly touched the damp curls between her thighs. His seed had begun to seep out of her, and she drew a finger through her petals and brought it to her lips.

The salty-sweet flavor of his body mixed with the tang of hers was not unpleasant. Unbidden, her fingers returned to her core and stroked within. She flinched slightly at the soreness and sensitivity then brought them to her lips again.

“Hmmm...” Her tongue darted out to lick the results of their union from her fingers. She jumped with surprise when a masculine hand covered hers.

His eyes burning with hunger once again, he drew her fingers to his mouth and sucked them clean. He swirled his tongue around each one, causing an answering tug low in her belly.

“Touch yourself again.” He brooked no argument, and trailed his own fingers across her belly. She drew her hand across her breasts once again, reveling in his rapt attention. Her hand retraced the same path as before, drawing across her belly and down between the thighs he had spread so he could watch her progress.

She dipped her fingers in and circled her core, and she watched his own hand cover his cock and began to stroke in time with her. Every time she drew her fingers across the lips of her sex, he stroked his cock and cupped his balls. Her breathing became deeper. Her lungs fought for air as with every stroke of her hand her body’s flames climbed higher.

After endless minutes of stroking herself under his watchful eye, she arched her back and keened her release, one hand viciously twisting her nipple as her thighs tried to lock around her hand. As spots flew behind her eyes she heard him grunt, and felt the sticky jet of his cum on her arm.

She gasped for breath, willing her heartbeat to resume its normal pace.

He did not allow her time to recover. Reaching over her limp, sweaty body, he grabbed the bell pull and yanked twice.

## CHAPTER 7

Scooping her off the bed, he made his way into the bathing chamber. He gave her a wicked smile and dropped her into a hot foaming bath. The water flowed over the sides and lapped against his feet. He watched the surface carefully, waiting for her to emerge from the frothy bubbles.

She came to the surface with a sputter and a smile. It was the first one that he had seen. He carefully moved her aside and scooted in behind her.

“Do you like this surprise?”

She trailed her hands through the bubbles, and she giggled.

“Yes, very much.” She turned, sloshing water over the sides of the sunken tub. “Thank you.”

Keeping her eyes on his, she moved against him then gave him a sweet kiss. It was not a passionate kiss, but rather one given from the heart. Her lips were soft against his as she gently sucked his lower lip into her mouth, running her tongue over it. With soft sigh, she broke away then snuggled against his chest.

Rhys blinked in surprise—she was progressing faster than he had thought possible. He began to

suspect Lia had helped with the rage that had been forced on her by her guardian. He wet a washcloth and began to clean her delicate skin; he frowned at the marks on her back and resolved not to take her against the wall again unless she was wearing something.

She was asleep. Her breath came steady and even against his neck.

He bathed them both then sat in the warm water with her cradled against him. She began to squirm as she struggled into the waking world. He ran his hand up and down her back, easing her back to consciousness.

Her midnight eyes blinked open, a sleepy smile crossing her lips. "Hi."

He kissed her forehead gently. "Hi. Did you have a nice nap?"

"Yes. Very. Did you hold me the whole time?" She sat up and floated away from him.

"Yes. Otherwise you would have drowned." He relaxed against the edge of the tub and admired the way her green-and-silver tresses floated on the water. She looked very much like a mermaid he had met once.

"The water is getting cold. Should we get out?"

"If you like. There are towels over there. The maids should have made the bed and tidied up the room by now."

He watched her climb the marble steps with lithe elegance, putting on a show she didn't know she was enacting as she dried her shoulders, her breasts and her arms. As if in a dream she bent easily from the



waist and began to dry her calves and thighs.

\* \* \* \*

The rush of water was the only warning she had as he gripped her hips and held her bent over as he drove into her. The wet sound of their bodies connecting was a heady beat. She had nothing to do but let him take her, so she closed her eyes and enjoyed every thrust of his cock inside her. The flared head spread her wide, and the thick shaft filled her to the core. His balls swung against her and slapped against her clit with every shove of his hips.

She was moaning helplessly; then her voice rose in surprise as one of his thumbs rubbed against the small bud of her ass. It wiggled ever so slightly, and she felt it slip inside. Her body clenched around it, and it triggered her climax. She squealed in pleasure as she spasmed around his invading cock. She clamped down as hard as she could, and heard his answering grunt as he began to move frantically, driving for his own release.

He slammed her hips tight against his, and she felt him pulse and spurt his seed into her once more. He held them joined for a few minutes then detached from her and retrieved another towel, which he dampened in the tub.

\* \* \* \*

He cleaned the remains of their mating from her flesh and wrapped her in another, dry towel to carry her

into the bedroom. He stopped short at the figure lounging on the bed.

"Devon. What the hell are you doing here?"

"No need to ask what you are doing. You must be the Lady Alethea I have been hearing so much about. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Devon, son of Sirius. Brother to that oaf who is carrying you."

"I repeat...why are you here?" Rhys detoured to the table and chair and took a seat with her in his arms. Once again, she was on his lap, his erection against the backs of her thighs.

"Your presence is requested at dinner. The council has moved the hearing up to the day after tomorrow. We need to come up with a plan of attack."

"Damn it to the Nine Hells! Sorry, Alethea." Rhys thought for a moment, his face blank. "Are her grandparents here yet?"

"Yes, they arrived hours ago."

"Good. How soon is dinner?"

"Under an hour. If you hadn't come out of the bathing room, I was going to go in."

\* \* \* \*

Devon smiled, and she could see why Rhys was not considered the most handsome in the family. But Devon's good looks did not stir her like Rhys's solemn features.

"Is there clothing for me?" She felt it was time to enter the conversation.

"Yes, of course," Rhys told her. "As soon as my brother leaves I will fetch them for you."

"And when do you want me to leave, brother?"

"Now! Get your ass out of here before I take offense to the way you are ogling my bride."

Devon left, laughing madly. They heard it grow faint, then disappear.

Rhys dumped her on the floor then raced for a panel that was almost invisible on the wall. He pressed down, and a wardrobe slid out of the wall. He grabbed at the clothing hanging there and began to sort through the gowns that had been provided for her.

Bemused, she rose slowly to her feet, tightening the towel across her torso. She padded up behind him and said in his ear, "I like the dark-blue one." She giggled as he jumped and began to laugh in earnest when she saw the panicked look in his eyes. "What is it, Rhys?"

"I really wanted a few more days with you. I needed it, before facing the council."

She gripped one of his shoulders and turned him around. "If you are worried about my choice, I am satisfied with you as my mate. You don't need to keep me naked in a tower to insure my cooperation."

He searched her face, looking for any sign of doubt. He found none. She knew affection was in her gaze. Not love, not yet. It was far too soon.

"You are right, the dark-blue will favor your eyes and make your hair glow against it."

"I am glad we agree, now hand it over. I want to get dressed." She grabbed it out of his hands and pulled it over her head. Just in time.

Outside the window, a dragon with Devon's eyes

was hovering and watching her avidly. She grabbed some food off the table and threw it at his head; it made a satisfying splat as it connected.

"Hah! Now stay away from the window, you pervert!"

She brushed crumbs and fruit from her fingers then turned to look at Rhys's astonished face.

"What? He was trying to catch me naked. I defended myself."

He smiled then began to laugh as he picked through the tunics and trousers there for his use. He settled for a black tunic and brown trousers. Black boots completed his outfit.

"Hey! Where are my shoes?"

"Oh, sorry." He dug around in the bottom of the wardrobe and came out with a set of lace-up boots that looked like they would fit.

They did, lacing tightly to her calves and hugging her trim ankles. She dropped the folds of her skirt down around her ankles. It was exactly the right length.

"Do you have a brush or a comb? My hair is going to get a little out of control if you don't."

"Here you go. There is a mirror in the bathing room."

"Yes, I remember. I was watching you watch me dry myself. Then I watched you taking me in the mirror. I remember where it is." She smiled at him and trailed her fingers across his chest as she walked with a hip-swaying gait into the bathing room with the brush in one hand.

Long minutes passed while he waited for her. It

was only when he had risen to his feet to open the door that she emerge with another mysterious smile on her face. Her hair was a green wave of silk flowing down her back; two tiny braids at each temple kept it off of her face.

“I am ready. Shall we go?” She gestured to the door.

Hell, yes, he was ready. He had been since she had drawn her hand across his chest. “Yes, let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 8

He opened the door and held his arm out to escort her through the keep. She looked startled at the courtesy, but took it with an uncertain smile. Together, they walked down the spiral stairs, then through the endless corridors to the private dining hall.

When they arrived, Rhys groaned — all of his male siblings were present.

The instant the twins spotted him, the four-year-olds hiked up their skirts and ran to embrace their uncle.

A second before they hit, he murmured, “Excuse me.” Then the tiny dragonesses were scaling him in an effort to kiss his face and tug at the black silk of his hair.

“Alethea! Please join us. The girls will keep him busy for a few minutes.” Lia waved her over and stood to introduce her to the others seated around the table.

“I believe you have met Devon.”

“Yes, did you enjoy your pie?”

“It was well-aimed, Lady, thank you.”

“This is my husband Marcus.”

"Pleased to meet you, Lady."

"And you as well, thank you for your hospitality. Your home is lovely, and you must be very proud of your wife. Not to mention your children."

She smiled—he seemed older than his siblings, much older. "More than you could imagine. They are a trial and a delight to me each and every day."

"Oh, good answer!" Lia applauded.

"Now I have the pleasure of introducing you to two most special guests. Kesler, Celestyn, this is your granddaughter Alethea. Alethea, these are your mother's parents."

With trembling hands and stunned eyes, she surveyed her mother's only living relatives.

"Oh, so that is where the hair comes from. I did wonder." It was all that she could blurt out, even though Rhys had told her as much.

She was gratified to see Kesler smile at her. A thousand words were in his gaze, but all that he said was, "Yes, it is a family trait. I didn't know that you took after me."

"Apparently I do. I never knew." Tears welled at the corner of her eyes and tracked down her face.

"Neither did I." She watched the tracks that his own tears made across his finely chiseled features. They made quite a pair, her grandfather and herself, both silently crying at the loss of years.

"I was told my mother was the image of her mother. I can only hope that she was as beautiful then as you are today, Celestyn." It took every amount of control she had to keep from breaking into sobs. She drew a deep breath and looked to Rhys for help. He

had moved closer as she spoke with her family, and was now near enough for her to hear every chattering sentence of the little dragons.

He caught her look and made his way to her side, then handed the giggling little girls over to their parents.

Celestyn stood and ran to her granddaughter's side. With a sob, she flung herself into her arms. Alethea caught her in reflex but was unable to react in any other way. She stood helplessly as her grandmother sobbed in her embrace.

Rhys was about to gesture to Kesler, but the elf was already retrieving his wife gently. "She doesn't know us, Cely. Give her some time."

Rhys took his bride's hand and tugged her into a chair. The others took their seats, and with Celestyn looking wistfully at Alethea, dinner commenced.

Mia and Mala had a hundred questions for their new aunty. Why was her hair green? was the most repeated one. Was she taking Uncle Rhys away? He'd just got there. Was that pale lady her grandma? Was she going to have a baby? Uncle Rhys liked babies. They hoped it was a girl. They wanted to play with another girl. Boys were stupid.

She answered them as best she could. Her hair was green because Kesler's was green and he was her grandpa. Uncle Rhys could stay wherever he wanted. Yes, that pale lady was her grandma. No, she didn't think she was going to have a baby anytime soon. And yes, boys were stupid.

All in all, fascinating dinner conversation. After the girls were sent off to bed, the real discussion began.



It centered around her being Questioned by the council. What did they think the questions would be? Could the council be stalled? Had Mostyn been informed of his child's status? They thought not.

Would the bond between Rhys and Alethea be strong enough for the council, or would they demand a pregnancy to prove the match?

Kesler looked closely at the couple.

"They are true mates, and I will testify to it under Question if I have to."

After that, there was nothing left to be said. Rhys and Alethea took their leave, and Lia promised to send a seamstress up to her in the morning. After breakfast.

They climbed the tower steps arm-in-arm once again. She had to remember to lift her skirt out of the way, or she would trip on the step. The trousers that she usually wore were so much easier to manage. She stumbled twice and was not surprised when Rhys caught her. A slow warmth began to replace the parts of her that the icy rage had previously filled.

Meeting her grandparents had shocked her to her toes. To see people that she was bound to by ties of blood was more than she had ever expected.

They reached the tower room with no further mishaps, and sitting down, she slowly dropped one boot at a time on the floor. With another sigh, she peeled the dress off over her head, ignoring her rapt audience.

She climbed into bed and curled onto her side, studying Rhys. She was on top of the covers, her whole body exposed to his gaze. He undid the toggles

of his tunic, and his hands trembled with eagerness as he unbuttoned his trousers.

Hunger flared in her body as he slowly peeled away his clothing for her enjoyment. She savored each bronzed inch of flesh that came into view.

His flat nipples were drawn tight against the hard planes of his chest. The arrow of curling black hair pulled her gaze to the opening of his trousers and the hard, hungry bulge within. A shiver ran across her flesh, causing a smile to light his features. Her own nipples were tight buds crowning her breasts with deep pink crests. Her thighs shifted together, moisture beginning to glisten in the folds and seeping onto the light furring of hair covering her secrets.

With a slow hiss of fabric, his trousers hit the floor. He stepped out of their tangle and walked forward to his waiting bride. She watched him come to her, waiting impatiently. Her pulse was sounding in her ears insistent and rapid. With a crooked finger she beckoned him imperiously, then patted the bed beside her.

Slowly, his erect cock bouncing and pulling her gaze like a lodestone, he walked to the foot of the bed and crept onto it. He lowered his head to her instep, and snaking his tongue out to lick it. She giggled and pulled her foot away. He grinned and gripped both of her ankles in his hands, spreading them wide.

He settled on his belly between her thighs and began to nibble at the inside of her knee, working his way up her thigh. Just when his mouth had laid a trail of fire to her core, he switched sides and began on the other side.

He had wrapped his hands around the outside of her thighs to hold her still, and it was a good thing. When his tongue finally spread her petals and tasted the slick juices from her source she threw her head back and screamed her pleasure.

His eyes burned with satisfaction, but he persisted in worrying at her weeping flesh until her hips were once again straining against his grip. He flowed up her body and buried himself to the hilt within her in one smooth thrust.

A groaning cry of pleasure erupted from her throat as she felt the heavy fullness of him moving within her. He kept his weight from her, their only contact his throbbing cock within her tight warmth. Her hips welcomed each assault, twisting and arching to deepen the contact.

Rhys's breathing suddenly changed pitch, growing ragged and urgent. His hips lost their rhythm then broke into a frantic staccato of plunging thrusts. His cock erupted within her, spurting in a steady pulse that echoed his pounding heartbeat.

Slowly, he lowered his sweating body onto her, still buried deep inside her slick walls. He rolled to his back, one hand on her hips to keep him within her.

"I want to stay inside you while we sleep. I want to wake up within you."

Her eyelids were heavy, the pulsing in her unsatisfied, but she knew he would see to her in the morning.

## CHAPTER 9

He did, indeed, see to her the next morning, taking her from behind and bringing her to satisfaction twice to make up for his laxity the night before. After that, she was taken to Lia's seamstress to be properly attired for the visit to the Council. They stayed away from black, as the color of mourning would bring to mind the deaths she had caused, and they kept away from burgundy, the color of blood, for the same reason.

Alethea was amazed. Not just by Rhys's sister-in-law, but at the easy familiarity the family members had with each other. No one took offense, no matter how rude the comment. Mia and Mala were also always underfoot—every time she stayed still they were playing with her hair, making tiny braids in the thick stuff. Mia got the idea to get some flowers and weave them in her hair. Alethea was sure that the petals that were mashed into the strands were never going to come out. Four-year-old dexterity was never that advanced, the braids came undone as soon as the girls let go.

Her first impulse had been to shove the children away—they caused her black thoughts to rise to the

surface. Reining in her reaction, she sat quietly under their ministrations. After the first few minutes, she actually began to enjoy herself.

\* \* \* \*

As Alethea talked with the chatty little girls, Lia was able to relax. Her mind had touched Alethea's while healing her, and there was the mark of magic upon her. A curse laid to her very soul. It went beyond her power to heal, but she had provided what protection from the darkness she could.

The curse had been laid upon her emotions, feeding darkness and pain. Alethea needed a Mind Healer, and those were very rare. Marcus was going to ask Thoran about getting one for her when they went before the Council.

She shook her head and looked at her new sister.

"Just be thankful that Ki isn't here."

"Ki?"

"Yes, Rhys's mother. She has somewhat frivolous taste in clothing. Not practical at all." She smiled, remembering the frilly concoction Ki had had made for her the first time they met. It had made her look like a child's doll.

She had destroyed it within a week—her work in the forge had caused it to catch fire. Fortunate that her body was impervious to fire.

"Uh, how large a family is there? Devon and Marcus I have met." She looked worried.

"You haven't met Sirius, their father, Ki, their mother, and Shayr, their sister. Shayr is married to

Councilor Thoran. An extremely large family for a dragon clan." Lia grinned ruefully. "And Marcus is planning as many kids as we can have."

\* \* \* \*

"Do you want to have more? These two seem quite a handful." Alethea was beginning to think of having her own children, a thought that chilled her to the bone.

"Yes, the children have to be five years apart, but that time is almost up. I don't look forward to that damned bite, though." Lia winced in memory.

"What bite? What the hell are you talking about?"

Lia turned to the maid hovering nearby. "Dora, please take the little imps to Marcus. He needs the exercise." She turned and gave Alethea a very searching look. "What do you know of dragon reproduction?"

"I thought they just did it the regular way. Having sex."

"Not quite. There is a little more to it." She stared at the ceiling as she searched for the words. "When a female dragon comes into heat, her mate can tell. If they wish children, he will take her while in his warrior form. While in that form, he will bite her where the neck meets the shoulder. He has a venom sac in his mouth that pumps a toxin into his mate and also causes a ring of blue to trace around her neck."

"It is thought that the venom and his seed are both needed to facilitate the conception. Once he has bitten you, you will feel a stimulation of your senses you

couldn't imagine. And once you are pregnant, your power will be at its peak."

Alethea was stunned. Rhys had not bitten her, yet.

"What happens if he bites and impregnates a woman not a dragon."

"In that case, usually the pregnancy is fine, but the woman usually is unable to have more children. She does not have enough energy left." Lia sat for a moment then said, "My own mother was a normal human woman, but she had dragon blood at least a generation back. She lived until my twentieth year."

"How did she die?"

"In a raider attack spurred on by a rival dragon lord. He only wanted my father, but he also wanted to raze the village to the ground. My mother would have saved my father, but they killed her and him. Mala is named after her grandmother." Lia smiled. "And every time I look at her, I see my mother's eyes."

Alethea blurted out, "I never knew my mother."

Compassion filled Lia. "I know. Your grandmother told me. She was very beautiful and very kind. It was horrible, what was done to her. But the past only shapes the future, it does not set it in stone."

They sat in silence for minutes that stretched into hours, each woman lost in a world of her own thoughts.

Rhys arrived and found them. He cleared his throat.

"It is time for dinner, you missed lunch."

They shook themselves and turned to him, smiles lighting their faces.

"It was thoughtful of you to come get us," Alethea said.

"Is that your new dress?" He gestured to the alluring gown of jewel blue wrapping her lovingly from breast to hip. The sleeves flowed wide, and the skirt swept the floor.

"I guess it is." She turned to Lia. "When did they put this on me?"

"Three hours ago. Don't worry, they are used to dressing women in trances. They do it all the time to me." She grinned and swept out of the room, heading for the dining hall.

"I should change before I go to dinner. What time are we leaving tomorrow?" She stepped behind the privacy screen and began to remove her new gown, only to realize that she couldn't. "Rhys? Could you help me with this?"

"Of course." His voice was far too close for him to have been on the other side of the screen. She turned in a swirl of skirts and found herself caught in his arms.

Her lips parted in a gasp, and while she stared into his dark-brown orbs, he slowly undid the rear hooks and laces that kept the fitted bodice in place. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, and that contact was all that held the fabric up.

"We are leaving for the council at daybreak. You will need all of your strength for tomorrow, so I will sleep in a separate room tonight."

"But, I...all right." She was bewildered. She had thought he wanted her. Just as tears began to form in her eyes, his mouth took possession of hers.



The gown slid to the floor, and her hungry hands made quick work of the buttons on his trousers. She felt a table under her hips, and his fingers between her thighs. Two fingers their way into her, then three. She leaned back on her arms as his lips caressed her breasts, suckling, biting and licking in a frantic manner.

He pulled her hips to his, and she felt him slide within her. Once, twice, and his third thrust took him to the hilt. Time slowed. There was only the heat, the motion of bodies and his eyes locked with hers. Then she felt the coil in her belly wind tight and snap as she heaved and arched against him. Every muscle in her body was taut, trying to take him deeper.

Her orgasm started his, or perhaps it was her legs lashing around him to pull him into her with savage ferocity that caused his cock to pump with violent force.

He shuddered as his body emptied into her, his energy flying out the tip of his cock. Then he pulled out, and slumped against her.

"I think we need to get some clothes on you." The weary tone in his voice made her smile. It seemed he did just want her to rest after all.

## CHAPTER 10

She tugged her old gown on, wincing at the pressure of the fabric over her sensitive breasts as she worked up the courage to express her need for his presence.

Her chin against her chest, she mumbled, "I don't want you to sleep elsewhere. I want you in our bed. We just won't do anything." She thought it was a simple solution. "I like it when you hold me when I sleep."

He closed his eyes and groaned in frustration.

"There is nothing I would like better, except waking up inside you with your hair across your breasts. But, darling, there are quite a few things Marcus and I need to discuss before tomorrow. The council usually favors the dragon in its decisions, but the addition of the Mind Healer Orala adds some unexpected difficulties."

"Orala? What does she have to do with this? She isn't a Mind Healer." Now Alethea was really confused. The heat of fury had ignited in the depths of her mind, triggered by his attack on her mentor. She pushed against his chest. "How dare you involve her in this?!"

He flew back and fetched up against the wall. Surprised, she looked down and found her hands wreathed in red flames.

Her mind reeled in shock. Her power was never red – blue had always been the tone of her powers. As she wondered what the hell was happening, the scarlet flames began to crawl up her arms.

“Rhys! Help me!” It was a wail of torment from the depths of her soul.

“What the hells is taking you so long? We are going to start without you.” Lia came through the door with a cheerful wave and a hesitant look that broadcast the assumption she was going to catch them mating. “Oh, gods! Rifa! Get Celestyn. Now!”

Rhys had come up behind Alethea and was trying to calm her. She stumbled away from him, afraid of damaging him again. Everything she touched burst into flame on impact. His hands gently cupped her shoulders and soothing noises came from his throat.

Her grandmother was suddenly in front of her.

“Breathe deeply, child. That’s it.” She reached for Alethea’s hands.

Alethea jerked them out of her reach.

“No. I’ll hurt you, too.”

“Ah, no, child, just let me touch you.” She reached again, and as she gripped Alethea’s hands, the flames reached Rhys’s fingers. He cursed and stumbled back, his hands scorched but intact.

A bright green flame began to shimmer in Celestyn’s clear blue eyes. It spread through her in an even glow and out through her hands.

Alethea cried out as the ward energy touched her;

she whimpered and sobbed as her grandmother held her hands fast and continued to cast the ward *within* her.

She didn't know how long they stood there, conjoined by the green pulse of energy, but when her grandmother finally released her, they were both exhausted and sank to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

A crowd had gathered, including spouses and servants. They were all astonished at the spectacle of raw power loose in the room. Well, not loose, precisely.

Celestyn had arranged a collection of stones on the floor before she attempted to help. Within the area they encircled was a swirling black-and-red cloud of magic. Marcus eyed it and whistled sharply. Then he looked over at his new sister-in-law.

A lot had suddenly become clear to him. Anyone with that much dark magic in them should have been driven completely insane. They would have been able to track her then, by the path of bodies left in her wake.

Alethea was a lot stronger than she looked.

\* \* \* \*

Kesler was attending to Celestyn, and Lia was healing Rhys. Alethea sat alone on the floor and looked at him with eyes so empty and lost his heart nearly split in half. It was the look of an innocent who didn't

understand why she was being hurt.

"It's all right, Alethea," he reassured her. "Celestyn has it contained."

"But what is it? Why was it in me?"

"That we don't know, but tomorrow we are going to find out." He met her gaze with sure confidence, trying with all his might to infuse his look with security and calm.

"Are we going to take it with us?"

"Yes. We are going to use it to prove your mind has been tampered with. Your guardian Orala *was* a Mind Healer. She had good standing with the guild until she disappeared more than twenty years ago."

"So, she did this to me? Made me a killer, made me hurt people?" Sudden realization came to her face, "Oh, God! Rhys!"

\* \* \* \*

She whirled to see the last of the burns fade from his flesh. His eyes were full of concern, and they were directed at her.

"Alethea, are you all right?"

"I think so. Celestyn's power is different from mine, and the ward isn't sticking that well, but it should keep that...whatever it is, out of me." A half-smile was all she could manage. She was so tired.

"Celestyn, can you bind that magic so we can transport it?"

Kesler had her on her feet, and they both looked at Marcus as he spoke.

"Yes. I need to put it into something, though. Metal works best—a sword or a dagger, perhaps?"

She blinked in surprise when Lia flipped a dagger into the floor at her feet. The surprise was that the dagger stuck in the floor; the blink was because the floor was stone.

"That will do." She laid the dagger on top of the warding stones and herded the dark magic into it. It didn't want to go. Sweat broke out on her brow as she forced it into the unyielding metal.

Finally, she sat back on the floor gasping for breath.

"Whomever touches that metal must have pure thoughts. The slightest hostile or evil thought could loose the magic."


"Since no one here qualifies, I will take care of it." Kesler tore off the lower section of his tunic and wrapped it around the dagger, then thrust it into a bolt of fabric the seamstress had left behind. "I'll keep it with me."

Rhys had recovered enough to gently fold Alethea in his arms. She buried her face against his chest, and trickles of tears began to flow.

"Send something for dinner up to our room. Alethea needs to rest."

She kept her face against him, afraid to see the looks of disgust and horror on the faces around her. She had caused all this trouble—if only Rhys had let her die at the Wardstone.

He tucked her into bed, fed her some choice tidbits from the tray that was sent up then curled up behind her to hold her as she slept. With all of the turmoil of



her thoughts she doubted she would sleep, and yet she did.

## CHAPTER 11

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Their little group however, was in the air before dawn. Before they left, Rhys removed a tiny leather pouch from the wardrobe. Alethea knew instantly what was inside, and she gave him a grim nod then followed him to the roof.

Marcus and her grandparents were already there; Devon stood to one side dangling the twins upside down, laughing at their squealing giggles. As they arrived, he flipped the girls through the air to their mother and she caught them handily, setting them on their feet. They immediately ran to Marcus for hugs goodbye.

"Now, you girls behave and take care of your mother. Don't let her catch her dress on fire again." He gave each one a smacking peck on the cheek and set them down.

Lia, meanwhile, had joined her husband, a smoldering look in her golden eyes.

"Send a messenger if you are going to be delayed, and watch your back." She thrust her hands through his hair and pulled his head down to hers in a ravenous kiss that made Alethea blush just to watch.



“Hurry home, my love.”

Marcus stood blinking when she released him, a foolish smile on his face that he fought to subdue as he turned to his brothers and their soon-to-be passengers.

“Let’s go.”

Their transformations were swift, the human clothing shivering into a magical halo to be stored for their return to bipedal form. Marcus’s dragon form was black, Devon’s was deep green, and Rhys was a the same metallic black as his brother. Each took on a rider—Marcus had Celestyn; Devon tried to walk in front of Alethea to take her, but Rhys shoved his brother off the keep before she climbed laughing onto his back. So, Devon had to take Kesler.

Once everyone was seated, the dragons were away. They climbed high into the sky, circling the keep in widening spirals, then shot in a direct line for the rising sun. Hours passed with the ground blurring beneath them before the Citadel of the Dragon Council, an impressive edifice carved into the side of the mountain, loomed before them. Watchers called out a greeting as the trio came in for a landing.

Kesler leaped lithely off Devon’s back then ran to Marcus’s side to help Celestyn gain her footing. Alethea knew why—her thighs were stiff with the effort of holding herself in place, and as she swung her leg over Rhys’s neck and slid to the ground, her traitorous legs wouldn’t hold her. She fell to the ground in a heap. He swiftly shifted back into human form and picked her up.

An acolyte of the council ran out to give them a

formal greeting, Rhys cut him off with a curt, "Are there quarters set aside for us?"

"Yes, Lord Rhys, of course. This way."

Bowing low, he led them to rooms given to visitors to the council who were awaiting decision. There was food set out for them, and beds aligned along one wall. There was no privacy with the exception of the facility chamber.

Rhys put her on one of the beds and began to rub the feeling back into her legs in a gentle but thorough manner.

"It's okay. The strength will come back soon. Just relax," he murmured as she stiffened in protest at the audience. "It's all right, Alethea. Lia had the same problem the first time she flew as a rider, and your grandmother is also experiencing the same difficulty."

He gestured to one of the other pallets where Kesler was giving Celestyn the same treatment.

"Why doesn't he have a problem?" She muttered into the pillow to hide her flaming face.

"Because the elves are a lot more limber than any of us. It is how they manage to thrive in the depths of the forests." Devon was lounging nearby, munching an apple as he watched Rhys treat her stiffness.

Her embarrassment faded as her clothing stayed in place. A prickling sensation began then turned to a stampede of fire in her thighs and buttocks as the muscles flared to awareness. She mewled in discomfort and clutched the bedding so hard it.

"Shh, it's all right. It's almost over." She felt a hand in her hair and concentrated on that. The gentle

stroking from the crown of her head down to her spine. Over and over.

Gradually, she relaxed and was able to sit up. Rhys pulled her into his lap and continued to stroke her hair. With a start, she realized he was brushing it.

"Your hair got a little windblown on the trip, but the dress still looks amazing." His lips at her ear gave her a tiny shiver of heat; the soothing stroke of the brush almost put her to sleep.

A knock sounded at the door. Marcus opened it.

"Alethea, this is our brother-in-law, Councilor Thoran—he is wed to my sister Shayr. He will be your advocate at the hearing."

\* \* \* \*

Thoran strode into the room and blinked. Whatever he had expected Alethea to look like, it was not this. Mostyn had coarse features, and a rough sort of charm. His daughter did not resemble him in feature or form.

Until he saw her eyes.

Mostyn had hypnotic, midnight-blue eyes, and his daughter had that same distinctive feature. The rest of her, though, was all Kesler's hair and coloring and Celestyn's features.

"I am pleased to meet you, sister. Rhys was a wise choice for you. And you for him." He bowed gracefully and came to embrace her. She stood on shaking legs and remained motionless as he hugged her. He then turned to address the room.

"We meet with the council within the hour.

Marcus, your messenger arrived last night, and both of the items you mentioned have been taken care of. Alethea, you will be put to the Question. Whatever you do, don't lie. Each lie is registered by the charms that the Questioner will put upon you, and the result is pain. There have been those who died under Questioning. The truth cannot hurt you, no matter how vile you think it is."

He waited until she nodded then continued.

"Kesler and Celestyn, you must not disrupt the proceedings, no matter what happens. Nor you, Rhys. You must let Alethea give her account of things in the most accurate manner she can, without considering your feelings in the matter. This is of utmost importance.

"I can assure you, however, that there is sufficient evidence to provide her with leniency. She will not lose her life in the sentencing."

Kesler and Celestyn clung to each other in relief. He knew it had been their greatest worry that her destruction of the village would cause the death clause to be enacted.

Another knock on the door brought them to attention.

"It's time." He led them to the door, where the acolyte appeared to guide them to the main council chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Trembling, Alethea entered to face the council. Rhys took one of her hands and gave it a gentle squeeze.

She squeezed back—no matter what the council decided, she was ready for it.

The council consisted of seven members, five male and two female. This was a representation of the population of the dragon race, and the reason why even mixed-blood females were protected and valued. It was also the reason Kesler and Celestyn had been able to gain assistance in tracking her.

To one side of the hall stood an assemblage of mages and healers—all of the guilds and councils had representatives here. On the other side of the hall were two people she recognized, one by sight, the other by his midnight-blue eyes she saw in the mirror. Orala and Mostyn, both restrained by guards.

One of the females stood, "Greetings to all assembled. I am Councilor Virik and will be conducting these proceedings."

"Alethea Warder. You are charged by this council with the deaths of two hunters assigned to locate you by Dragon Lord Mostyn of the Village of Talleth. He has also requested that you be charged with the destruction of the wardstone that guarded the village."

"While there is no question the village was destroyed, we need to hear from you the circumstances of these events. Councilor Thoran, if you would proceed?"

"Thank you, Councilor Virik. In an effort at expediency, we have asked a member of the Mind Healers Guild here to administer Questioning. Will you accept that testimony?"

"We will."

"Then, Questioner Phailin, would you proceed?"

A thin woman emerged from the crowd, a Questioner's smoke-blue robes billowing around her.

"Thank you, Councilor Thoran." She removed a pendant from the pocket of her robe and approached Alethea.

"Please kneel, Alethea. It will keep you from being injured should you collapse if the Questions become to difficult."

She obeyed, and the Questioner draped the cord of the pendant around her neck, settling it to rest over her heart.

"Answer all questions put to you honestly, and this will be painless." Phailin smiled at the grip Rhys still had on Alethea's hand and said nothing about it.

She closed her eyes and drew herself straight.

"I will now begin." Shimmering energy pulsed outward from her body, centering on the pendant Alethea was wearing. Alethea felt a lightness, a distance occurring in her mind. She was firmly inside her body, but detached and relaxed.

"Alethea, the Questioning has begun." Phailin's voice had a soothing, hypnotic tone, "What is the first memory that you have?"

"The farm, collecting eggs."

"What farm?"

"Minya and Alec's farm."

"Who were these people?"

"They raised me until I was fifteen."

"Then what happened to you?"

"Orala came for me. She took me from them."

"Why did she take you?"

"To train me."

"To do what?"

"To break the Wards at Talleth."

Orala jumped to her feet. "Stop it!" she screamed. "She lies! The dragon's spawn lies! She wanted to destroy the village that took her mother's life! She lies!"

The guards restrained her, and Questioner Phailin looked surprised. She turned once again to address the council.

"As you are aware, if Alethea were to lie under questioning it would be evident."

Virik spoke in response to the murmurs of the council.

"Yes, we understand. Continue."

"After the training, what did you do?"

"I went to Talleth."

"What did you intend when you went into Talleth the first time?"

"To warn the villagers to evacuate the town."

"Why?"

"So they could save their lives and some of their property."

"Why did you return early?"

"To destroy the village."

"Why did you move your plan up a week?"

"To destroy the village and everyone in it."

Celestyn and Kesler gasped in dismay, but the Questioning continued.

"What caused the sudden change of heart?"

"Orala. She met me in the forest."

Orala jumped to her feet in fury and had to be

restrained once again.

"Lies, she lies! The dragon's bastard was the only one responsible for the razing of Talleth."

The Questioner continued unfazed. "What did she do?"

"She used her stone to remind me of my duty."

Phailin blinked. "What stone?"

"The stone she says my mother gave her. It holds all the rage of her expulsion from Talleth."

"How does it work?"

"She strikes you with it, and every petty insult is made worse. Every slight becomes mortal insult. It fills your mind with all the rage and frustration you have ever felt."

"Has she used it before?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"She had me ward a brothel, then use my energy to light it on fire. One man died."

"Why did she do this?"

"She said I needed the practice for Talleth."

"Why was she set on using you for the destruction of Talleth?"

"I don't know!" Alethea wailed and unable to answer the Question, fainted.

\* \* \* \*

She woke in the room they were quartered in; no one else was there except Rhys, wiping her face with a damp cloth.

She felt tears seeping from beneath her lids. She



grasped his wrist and stopped his ministrations.

"What happened?"

"Do you want something to drink? Something to eat?" He jumped up and fetched a tray from a nearby table.

"Something to drink, please." Her throat was sore, as if she had been shouting. The Questioning was a blur—she only remembered the soothing tones of the Questioner.

She sat up and sipped at the watered wine he held to her lips then waved him away.

"What happened?" she repeated.

"The Questioning is over. You won't have to go through that again. But we have to get back to the main chamber as soon as you feel up to it."

"Why?"

His jaw set. "We need to be there when they Question Orala."

\* \* \* \*

The Questioner approached the woman kneeling on the floor; this time, the witness was restrained by two guards. As Phailin approached, she began to scream and struggle, swearing that her guild would not stand for this.

Phailin quietly readied her pendant. "Yes, they will, for they have already ejected you for your crime. No Mind Healer should have done what you did, and it sickens them. The dagger containing the malevolent magic you created will remain in the custody of the Warders, as they have the means to protect it."

"I will not submit to this! It is an affront to my Clan to drag me here."

She protested to no avail. The Questioner merely gestured for the two guards to hold her still then dropped the pendant over her head.

"Remember, if you lie, you will feel pain. If you do not give us the whole truth, you will feel pain. And if you deliberately withhold the truth, you will feel pain. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Her voice was a vicious hiss.

"Why did you take Alethea?"

"Altira gave her to me – ahhhh!" Her back arched in agony. Across the room, Alethea shivered.

"Why did you take Alethea?"

"To exact my revenge on Talleth."

"Why take the baby?"

"She could take down the wards, and make the village vulnerable."

"Why did you use her?"

A spasm of pain crossed her face; then she groaned.

"To avoid putting myself at risk and to punish her."

"Her? Alethea?"

"Yes."

"Why punish her?"

"She stole the last vestiges of Altira's soul. She deserved to die."

"So, you sent her to live with farmers until she was old enough?"

"Yes!"

"Why did you reclaim her?"

"To train her."

"To kill?"

"Yes. They needed to die, and Alethea with them!"

"Why did she need to die? She was an innocent in all of this."

"She took Altira from me. She has to die!" Shaking with fury, she launched herself at Alethea.

## CHAPTER 12

Alethea responded the only way she could—she flung herself and burst into flames. Orala screamed in fury, unable to injure her enemy.

With the control Rhys had helped her find, she didn't kill Orala outright, but she did drain enough energy from her to render her unconscious.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she remembered the years with Orala. The harsh, spare years of minimal sustenance designed to make her more self-sufficient. The pain, degradation and endless insults administered to fuel the rage and hatred in her. All for nothing. All that pain and hatred, with nothing to show for it.

"It's all right, Alethea."

She felt arms come around her through the haze of blue flame. Rhys hugged her tight as she stared at the woman at her feet. She slowly relaxed against him; the flames diminished as his scent calmed her. She felt the twitch of his erection against her back, and was amazed simple contact with her caused his arousal. But what the hell, his scent did the same for her.

Her emotions switched with lightning speed. She went from grief to anger to lust in a heartbeat. Her

head whirled, but she tried to focus on the council hall. All the dragons in the room were smirking at the contact between them. All except one.

Mostyn had finally caught on that this was actually his daughter, and his gaze circled the room, looking for support for his case.

"Councilor! I claim a Father's Right for Alethea. I will mate her to a dragon of my choosing." He smiled as he made his announcement, a smile that died as Virik turned to glare at him.

"Mostyn, you have no right to her. You refused to acknowledge her when her mother was pregnant. You never sought her out as she grew. Her grandparents came to this council and asked for a decision on her viability as a mate. We gave it. She is a ward of the council, and we have made our decision.

"Now, Mostyn, as to your treatment of her mother, we have no sentence for that. But you did defraud a Warder, promising a home in lieu of payment. For that you must pay her heir. Thirty thousand silver marks—half of all revenue in Talleth's coffers acquired since the Wardstone was placed. A council guard will help you to collect it."

"What? That isn't fair!"

"Of course, it's fair. Altira's wards enabled you to live a life of leisure. Your village prospered without the fear of being wiped out every migration season. You owed her. And now, you owe her heir." The chairwoman turned to Alethea. "There is still the matter of the dead hunters to be addressed. We find that you were not in your right mind, but under the

influence of a mad Mind Healer. You did not act with forethought, but you did, nevertheless, kill two men in self-defense." She waited.

"If I may, Councilor?" Alethea spoke hesitantly. "Did these men have families? Children?"

Everyone turned to Mostyn, and he responded reluctantly.

"No. Neither of them had a wife, or children—that they knew about."

"Then let the money that Mostyn is to give me be equally dispersed among the surviving villagers, to help them start new lives elsewhere."

She leaned heavily against Rhys but felt oddly lightened by her decision. It was right. She had taken their homes; they needed new ones.

"Very well, and very generous of you. Now, there is one final matter to take care of, if you will all follow me?"

Curious, the entire crowd in the assembly hall filed out into an open courtyard. Above them, a dragon was waiting for a signal.

Orala had been dragged out with the rest of them and was beginning to stir. A touch from Phailin, and she suddenly stood straight, her guards on either side. A whispered "No" came from her as she looked up with the rest of them.

There was the Wardstone of Talleth, a twelve-foot pillar of amethyst gripped in the claws of a dragon.

Virik took a deep breath and announced, "The Wardstone of Talleth is the largest wardstone ever created. It kept a three-mile radius free of wildlife and bandits. It caused a woman to lose her life, and

another to lose her mind. It ends here." At a signal from her, the dragon above dropped the stone.

A wail of anguish broke from Orala. She tried to lunge forward, perhaps to throw herself beneath the stone, but her guards caught her.

Celestyn sobbed into her husband's shoulder. The last piece of her daughter shattered into a thousand shards as they watched.

Orala's mind broke. She sobbed uncontrollably and began to tear at her flesh and hair. The Questioner walked calmly up to her and, with the touch of her hand, knocked her out. They would take her to the guildhall and keep her from further harming herself.

"Rhys, give it to them."

Alethea understood why Celestyn was weeping. Rhys nodded and took the tiny pouch out of his belt as he crossed to the elf and his wife.

"Kesler, I believe that Celestyn needs this."

He held the pouch out, and, looking bewildered, the elf took it and opened it. As he shook it out, his eyes widened in wonder as a chunk of amethyst fell into his hand, pulsing gently with warder power.

"Cely, look."

She took her swollen face away from his shoulder and gasped. There, in his hand, was the last remaining piece of Altira Warder's soul—he could feel the power radiating from it, and it was the generous soul of his daughter he sensed.

Celestyn held out a shaking hand and traced it with unsteady fingers. Tears flowed unheeded down her face as she looked from her husband to Rhys.

"How did you get this?" It was a mother's whisper

of pain and relief.

"Alethea took it after she drained the stone. She took a piece and put her mother's soul in it. To keep it safe."

Rhys looked back at his wife; she looked lost. He gestured for her to come to him.

"How? How did you know? We have wardstones from every member of our family for the last three hundred years. Altira was the only one who left before giving the family her stone. She said she would do it the next time she visited, but she never came back."

Celestyn was smiling through her tears.

"It wanted to come with me, so I took it. I don't know why. I was prepared to drain every ounce of power I had and die with the village. I don't know why I took it."

Alethea took the hand her grandmother held out to her, and was embraced by both of her mother's parents. They started to cry, and she started to cry. She felt their tight embrace loosen, and she turned as the Questioner cleared her throat from behind them.

"This was found in Orala's effects." She handed over a leather-bound book with the Warder crest on it. "I believe it is yours now."

Alethea took the book and opened it.

"Orala always had this with her. She said it was my mother's plan for revenge."

Phailin looked at her curiously. "Didn't you ever read it?"

"She said I wasn't worthy to read it." She shrugged, "And besides, I can't read."



"That we will take care of as soon as I take you home. There is a school in the town I live in; everyone is welcome." Rhys spoke quickly to cover the looks of dismay that filled the faces around her. "I am confident you will learn in no time at all."

Celestyn also came to her rescue. "That still leaves the matter of celebrating your union. A Warder party is traditional. Will you host it in your town?"

"Cely..." Kesler began.

"Yes, of course. A proper celebration of our union by her clan is a wonderful idea." Rhys sounded relieved it would be that simple. His people loved a good party.

Kesler sighed deeply; then a grin lit his features.

"There is nothing proper about it. I will alert the other clans, and we will hold a Choosing."

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"A Choosing?" Rhys's voice sounded weak—he had heard about those. He would need to lay in reinforcements. Fortunately, there were quite a few dragons looking for women of power.

## EPILOGUE

**II** Your relatives are insane. It took them two months to put this together, and now they have overrun the town!" Rhys paced in his effort to calm down.

"It will be over soon. The Choosing starts tomorrow." She was distracted. Her lessons in reading were going fairly well, spurred on by the notes with interesting suggestions he hid in her primer. Making the words more complicated with every page, he performed anything she could read.

Last night he had *"Covered her breasts with honey, and licked her from head to toe."* She was proud of her accomplishments—she grinned wickedly—and of his.

She was stuck on his current note.

"I didn't know I had so many relatives." She smiled at him.

The problem wasn't her relatives. The problem was the men the other clans had sent to try and gain the favor of the Warders. Djinn, dwarves, elves, healers, shamans, werewolves and the dragons had all sent males to try and win the affections of these powerful women. Rhys wished he could warn them about what they were getting in to, but every time he saw his

wife's smiling face all the words went right out of his head.

She laughed outright now. Genuine amusement rippled through her with every little thing, and he loved it. Especially in bed. Making love to a laughing woman was a challenge he was more than ready to try over and over again. Especially when she was on top.

The dagger that contained the curse Orala had laid on her was in their custody, as they knew how dangerous the artifact could be. Orala's Dagger would be a burden for their family to bear, and based on the tracing of blue around Alethea's neck, their family would be here soon enough.

She cleared her throat and spoke in measured cadences. *"I want tie you to the bed, tease you with feathers and eat a meal off your belly?"* She blinked owlishly. *"Was that right?"*

He gave her a feral grin. "Yes. Now, let's find out if you can study for your spelling test while I use the feathers."

She began to laugh again, and he carried her over his shoulder to their bedroom, despite her half-hearted struggles. He flipped her giggling onto the bed.

Her blouse had fallen open, the lacings loosened by her weak struggles. He eyed the soft mounds of her flesh in anticipation. Her eyes glowed in sensual welcome.

What would he tell the hopefuls? That being married to a Warder was the best decision of his life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A compulsive crafter and sucker for a 'happily ever after', I spend my time avoiding anything related to housework. My hobbies have included needlework, metalwork, henna tattoos and costume design. Oh yeah, and writing. I love to write. A rabid sci-fi buff and nerd to the core.