



BONDED HEARTS

Marty Rayne

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-580-7

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lynne Anderson
Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Dedication

A special thanks to my editor, Lynne, for her patience, encouragement, and time. Also to those at Loose Id who helped make this book possible.

Chapter One

Awareness came slowly to Nick. The floor beneath him rocked leisurely, almost lulling him back into the abyss of unconsciousness, until he was jostled none too gently. The movement slammed the air from his lungs. Just when he caught his breath, the ground jumped from beneath him again.

Nick groaned with pain and forced his eyes open. He tried to lift to his hands and knees, keeping his balance with the sway, but his right leg refused to hold his weight. He tumbled back down and his right arm screamed in protest as he landed hard on it.

“Fuck,” he spat.

The rattle of chains drew Nick’s attention to his surroundings. His eyes finally focused on the wood floor. The sun heated his skin, the sound of birds chirping reached his ears, and a horse neighing let him know he was outside.

His thoughts remained foggy. What was the last thing he remembered?

Chasing a killer. Amos Bronson. And blood. Lots of blood everywhere. There was a light, its brightness and heat burning him, followed by cool darkness. What had happened? How had he gotten outside? And hadn’t it been nighttime?

“He’s awake.” A sharp voice dragged Nick from his cloudy memories.

There were six sets of eyes staring at him. Men of varying ages. Unkempt, streaked with dirt, they were clad only in pants that tied at the waist. The only other items they wore were thick manacles on their wrists from which dangled chains that were locked to the floor.

Prisoners? What the hell was he doing with prisoners? But these men weren't wearing the normal inmate attire.

"Where the...?" Nick attempted to sit up again, this time being more careful of his leg and arm.

He was in some sort of crude cage. The top and bottom were made of thick wood; the bars surrounding them were solid black iron. The swaying and jostling was the result of the cage being pulled behind a single horse. The creaking wheels kicked up dust from the dirt road.

Like the others, thick iron manacles chafed his own wrists, locking him to the floor. Even if he wasn't chained, there would be no way a man of average height could stand in this cage. Even at his five feet eleven inches, Nick wouldn't be able to kneel without having to slump down.

"Who are you? Where am I?" He addressed the group at large, his throat dry and scratchy. He shivered and swiped at the sweat dripping down his face. "How did I get here?"

"Found you on the side of the road. The Master thought he'd get some coin for you before you died," a red-haired man said with a sneer.

Nick shook his head. The Master? Coin before he died? For that matter, what was with the cage? This dirt road? Where the hell was he? Certainly not in Miami. Instead of tall buildings, busy streets, and palm trees, he beheld thick clumps of trees along one side of the road and open fields on the other.

Definitely not Miami.

He closed his eyes. Nothing made sense. Nick ignored the sharp pain in his leg and the way the fabric of his jeans stuck to the wound.

"I don't --" His words were clipped by the pop of a whip. The six other men flinched and cowered as much as their chains would allow.

"No talking, slaves." A harsh, deep voice boomed from Nick's left. Turning, he was met with near black eyes. They belonged to a large man dressed like a Ren Faire refugee. His pants were dark brown and resembled leather. His shirt, probably originally white, and now coated with sweat and the dirt from the road, was tight around his bulk. He had several leather bands around his wrists and leather boots encased his feet. The most menacing part of him was the long bullwhip he held in his hand.

No, Toto. He definitely wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Nick could never be accused of cowardice, but looking at this man, his fingers fondling the whip lovingly, he knew it best to keep his mouth shut. His mother had raised no fool.

When those disturbing eyes turned from him, Nick closed his eyes and prayed this was all a dream. Had he hit his head somehow? Or maybe it was a hallucination due to loss of blood? Posttraumatic stress disorder? He had just seen a coworker murdered. So maybe he was lying in some hospital room having a nightmare.

Yes, that was it. This was just a horrible nightmare caused from the horrific experience he'd gone through. But -- he looked at his arm and thigh, both of which caused him tremendous pain -- why were his wounds untreated? His injuries had been inexpertly wrapped with cloth that looked none too sterile. Blood had already soaked through them. Wouldn't they get infected this way?

That's it. An infection. His wounds had become infected and the fever was causing these hallucinations. Making him dream he was bumping along a country lane, riding in a medieval jail cart. He gave himself a pinch, but it just made him wince.

Nick couldn't wake up too soon.

* * * * *

“Nicholas.” A soft whisper of breath grazed his ear. “Nicholas, I’ve waited so long.” The voice was low, hypnotic. Melodic, but deep -- a male voice. But no one called him Nicholas. Not since he left grade school. Again something brushed over his ear. “We are waiting.”

Startled awake, Nick gasped as pain tore through his leg. Even with his jeans and the makeshift bandage covering the wound, he could see and feel the swelling in his thigh. Yep, definitely infected.

He looked around at the bars surrounding him. Still in the cage. He didn’t know how much time he had lost, but the sun, high in the sky when he’d woken earlier, had made its way halfway toward the horizon. He wondered why his delirious mind had created exactly the same illusion as before. The best he could figure was that he was in a coma. He’d read accounts of this kind of thing. But why had his subconscious conjured such a primitive place? If this was somehow spawned by his reading tastes, his brain was way off. His leisure reading leaned toward murder mysteries by authors such as James Patterson or John Grisham. Though he’d had little time to read since the Amos Bronson case.

He closed his eyes, fighting back the nausea threatening to overwhelm him. If he had any dignity, he’d not throw up in front of these people. Unbidden, his muddled memories flooded in, diverting his attention from his physical discomfort.

The bodies of the eight women flashed in his mind. Eight women who were strangers to him when they died. But the ninth? He knew Kathy Taylor. She was a secretary with the department. He’d had drinks with her and her deputy boyfriend at a local bar. That made the entire case more personal.

The sick feeling in his stomach increased with the memory of her standing naked, bruised, and gagged. Her arms were bound above her head; tears tracking down her cheeks, she’d trembled with fright. Bronson had murdered her in cold blood. He’d held the knife to her throat and sliced it without a second thought. At the final moment, Kathy’s eyes had widened in shock. There had been no time for her to scream or fight back. Blood gushed from the wound, draining away her life.

The alternating sway and jolt of the cage finally stopped once they reached what appeared to be a village. The relief that flooded through Nick was palpable, knocking him from his reverie. Surely someone there could help him.

But hope quickly deflated as he studied his surroundings.

There were people milling about, but none were paying them much attention. In fact, not a single person looked at the men in the cage. They only glanced at the man walking beside the horse.

The people's clothing was drab. No one wore the rich colors of cotton and silk that decorated the streets of Miami. The few women Nick saw wore gray or dull-colored dresses, their heads covered by a matching cloak. The men wore pants of various colors like the men in the cage with him, but they also wore shirts, which were mostly white, with short sleeves.

He saw practical shacks instead of the two-story, five-million-dollar homes of Miami. This place looked to be as primitive as medieval times. Hell, Miami's worst neighborhoods had better housing for the poor. Dirt, dirt, and more dirt; no sign of paved roads or manicured lawns. And not a single motorized vehicle to be seen. There were only horses, cows, sheep, mules, and even a few animals he'd never seen before.

Nick blinked several times, hoping that would help him wake from this nightmare. Everything stayed as it was, though. Foreign. Definitely *not* home.

The creepy man the others had called the Master came around and opened the cage door. One by one, the men were taken from the cage and locked to a length of taut chain strung between two poles.

The Master, mumbling under his breath, had to drag Nick out of the cage when he was too weak to maneuver toward the opening. Nick tumbled to the ground, crying out when he landed on his injured leg. When the Master tried to jerk him to his feet, Nick's instincts took over. Fight or flight. He had to try both. Nick struggled against his captor with all of his strength, but between his leg unable to hold his weight and the dizziness overwhelming his

fevered head, the attempt was futile. He staggered, then the Master punched him in the face and easily overpowered him.

The Master dragged Nick to the chain and attached him to it like the others, uncaring that he collapsed to the ground, moaning in agony. The man cranked a handle on one of the poles, levering the chain upward until all the men stood straight, their arms pulled tightly over their heads.

Nick screamed through the entire process as pain speared like a thousand knives through his battered body. He knew he was a hair from losing consciousness as agony seized his body and made it a home.

Biting on his tongue to stay awake, Nick forced his eyes open. Even when, alone, he'd chased Bronson into a deserted warehouse, he'd never felt this type of fear and uncertainty rolling through him. Never had he felt as vulnerable or helpless as a newborn baby. These were new emotions for Nick, and he hated every second of it.

Movement to his left caught his attention. A man slit the neck of a sheared sheep. The dark blood pooled in a pan beneath the animal. Immediately the murdered women's faces welled up before him. Images of the circle and its strange markings flashed through his mind, as did the blood oozing from Bronson's chest and head, wounds created by his gun. Blood everywhere. The hot, metallic smell permanently embedding in his nasal cavities. The sight making his stomach churn.

He was so screwed.

The madness of the images shifting over and over in his head drove Nick to struggle against the chains holding him. His wounded leg was nearly worthless, the pain taking his breath whenever he tried to put weight on it, but he didn't care. Freedom was the only thought he had now. He refused to be a lamb led to slaughter. Refused to let Bronson slit his throat and drain him dry in his sick pursuit of immortality.

Nick didn't notice the metal cutting into his skin or the blood dripping down his arms. He didn't feel the gag shoved between his lips and secured about his head to muffle his screams. So entrenched in his struggle and fright, he didn't even notice the whip snapping at his back, shredding his shirt as well as his skin.

"Release him," a voice commanded, a sliver of sanity slicing through Nick's fear, drawing him slightly from the bleak darkness of his mind.

"But --" protested the harsh voice of the Master.

"I said release him. Now."

That voice. It broke through another chunk of Nick's conscious mind...soothing. He'd heard it before. Calling his name. Distantly, Nick felt his arms being released from the heavy chain binding him. He immediately collapsed to the dusty ground, the adrenaline powering his struggle fading as quickly as it had come. He was drained. Beyond exhausted. Unable to move, barely able to whimper. With his eyes closed, Nick tried to concentrate on what was being said. Strained to hear that voice again.

"What price do you ask?"

Nick's body gave a shudder of relief as the sound of each word drew him farther from the darkness still clinging to his mind.

"Twenty *kigrans*." The answer was gruff and clipped.

"Twenty for such as he? He's practically dead and raving mad from the looks of him."

Footsteps neared Nick. He ached to lift his head. To see who the voice -- the voice that was saving his sanity -- belonged to, but he had no strength. He shivered, though the air was thick and hot.

"I should ship you to Central myself for such a scam." The tone was callous, berating.

The Master sputtered, and Nick could conjure an image of the man with his head bowed, trying to come up with an excuse as if he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“I’ll pay you five kigrons and you better hope he lives.”

“Yes, sir,” the Master said, his tone meek like a disciplined child’s.

Nick willed his eyes to open, to see what was happening, but his muscles refused to comply. He’d exhausted his strength in his mad struggle. All he could do was lie there as he felt the gag and manacles removed, and his body being lifted easily from the ground. Unconsciousness threatened him again, but still he fought it.

“You are safe. Sleep now. Heal.”

The voice soothed Nick. Every last bit of the beckoning oblivion engulfed him as he suddenly felt as if he were flying.

Chapter Two

“This is absolutely no fun at all!” Jax stomped into the room. “We should be out soaring through the sky, hunting for Merrill or his men. They are always doing evil things.”

Kel glanced at her before turning his attention back to the injured man, wiping the dampened rag across the now cooled brow.

“Merrill has moved north, Jax. Out of our territory and out of our hair for now. Let’s just enjoy the peace while we can.”

Jax plopped down in the chair at the end of the bed. Without looking, Kel knew her arms were crossed over her chest and her rosy bottom lip puffed out in a beautiful pout. Her long black hair flowed free, accenting her smooth, pale green skin. Her crimson eyes were probably piercing him with displeasure. He didn’t have to look; he heard it all in her voice.

Kel had little patience for her antics today, but he knew it was his own fault. He’d indulged her far too much in the years they’d been together. She’d been so young, and still was for her kind. There wasn’t a more spoiled dragon in all of Ketall.

“I thought you didn’t believe in having a slave?” She lifted her head and looked over at the man lying on the bed. “Yet, you buy this beast. What a waste.” She tilted her head,

taking in the sight of the stranger's body. "Though he *is* a handsome beast. But he's dying. Just let him go and we'll go hunting."

Kel sighed, willing patience for himself. "I don't believe in owning slaves, Jax. But I couldn't ignore him. And he's not a beast. He's human like I am." His hand brushed back the chestnut brown hair that had fallen over the stranger's forehead. The fever had finally lowered, allowing him to rest in peace so his body could heal. "This man isn't just a slave. Did you see the clothing he wore? He's not from Ketall."

The mysterious man had worn pants made of material Kel had never seen before. It was a strange color of blue, thick, but soft. The man had also spoken of strange things in his delirium. What was Miami? And who was Bronson? Kel thought this man was some sort of law enforcer like himself by the way he spoke of a lieutenant and asking where his weapon was. But Kel hadn't a clue what a Sig was.

"If he takes a turn for the worse, can I eat him?" Jax asked, a wicked smile on her full red lips.

"No, Jax. You don't get to eat him." Kel shook his head, knowing Jax had a sweet tooth for humans. Another bad habit he'd allowed her. He wiped his hands over his face, having had little sleep since coming across this man.

"Did you get the firelily like I asked?"

"Yes," she said, still pouting. She pulled off the bag tied to her belt and handed it to him.

The bag held the root of the firelily flower, renowned for bringing down fevers and fighting infections. Kel had created a broth from the flower and had to coax his patient into swallowing little sips at a time by rubbing his throat so he wouldn't choke on the liquid. It hadn't been easy, but now there was enough firelily in his system to help. He'd also made a paste of the healing plant and coated the stranger's wounds to fight off the sickness. With just a few more doses, the stranger should be awake and lucid.

“Thank you, Jax. Now be nice while I go and make some more medicine. Call for me if his condition changes.”

Jax didn't say anything, but he knew she was watching him until he was out of sight. He sighed wearily. He didn't know what he was going to do. He knew Jax was growing jealous of the attention he was giving the stranger. The selfish nature that all dragons had -- to be the center of their rider's life -- was irritating at times. However, there was no changing that trait.

But Kel couldn't stop the immediate attraction he felt toward this man. Something inside Kel had demanded that he save the unusual man from the slaver. Now the need to be near the stranger was almost overpowering. Even now, in a different room, he wanted to rush back in and be by his side. It wasn't a natural reaction and it worried Kel. More than that, he thought it was a little scary. He understood what he felt toward Jax. She was his dragon. His bondmate for life. His feelings for this man were eerily similar to bonding.

The urge to protect him, even from Jax, was too strong to ignore.

It was strange having these feelings. Growing up an orphan, having no one but himself to rely on, had made his life none too easy. Then Jax came into his life and they became a team. Depending on each other. Together doing the duty set upon them by their destiny.

How this off-worlder would change that destiny was unclear. But Kel sensed this stranger would change their lives forever. He could only pray to the Goddess that it would be for the good.

Jax moved to the chair Kel had just vacated. She looked down at the beast who had invaded their lives the past two days. She should be soaring through the sky, feeling the wind rush over her body and Kel's weight comfortably on her back. Or at the very least, they should be lying in this very bed enjoying each other's pleasures. It had been too many days already since they'd last joined, which only added to her restless frustration.

She was a dragon, after all. It was her nature to be out in the open, to spread her wings and share the joy of it with her rider. But she was stuck here, inside their home, in human form, waiting for this silly beast to get better.

Being in human form wasn't a problem, but she much preferred her natural form of a thirty-foot-long, thirteen-foot-high, fire-breathing green *Draco Magnus*. Complete with sharp claws and deadly teeth. She was strong in both forms; however, her dragon form allowed the magic of Ketall, the essence of all dragons, to come alive within her, becoming one with the planet that gave birth to her race.

Her initial feeling was hatred for this beast. She longed to gobble him whole so Kel wouldn't have to waste his time, but that would only anger Kel. She leaned forward, getting a closer look at him, her nose filling with his human scent. Her heart quivered. Despite herself, she liked how he smelled. Like the ocean, reminding her of his unusual sea green eye color.

Her hand reached out and, with the most tender care, she ran a finger over his brow and down his cheek. His eyelids fluttered, but he didn't wake, or flinch from her touch. It would be easy to lengthen her nail and spear it right into his heart. Her instincts screamed for her to do so, but even as she watched her nail grow, she knew, somehow, that she couldn't. Her finger wouldn't do as she wished, as his scent continued to permeate the air she breathed. A rush of wetness made her damp between her legs and her hand began to tremble.

Jax snapped her hand back from the stranger and growled, backing away from him and what he made her feel. Kel was her rider. Her life. She wouldn't stand for anyone intruding on that.

"I'm going flying." Jax rushed by Kel on the way out. As she exited the house her clothing dissolved and she felt her body shift as she took flight, her wings expanding and letting the wind lift her up toward the sun.

Chapter Three

Hands smoothed over Nick's chest, nails scratching, leaving red marks. He gasped as shudders assaulted his body, desire slamming savagely. Hot, wet heat surrounded his cock. He was excruciatingly aware of her walls contracting tightly. A growl vibrated his throat as she slowly slid up and down his cock, creating euphoric sensations to ripple along his nerves. His hands busied themselves kneading her soft breasts, his thumbs tracing the taut nipples.

"Yes," she purred. "Mine. Ours."

Hot breath brushed across his balls an instant before they were suckled vigorously. His back arched, driving him deeper into her pussy, and he cried out as pleasure wracked his body. His blood was liquid fire, his need burning for release. Never had he felt such ferocious demands of his body.

In the darkness, red eyes glowed down at him. His body froze, desire turning cold. Laughter echoed around him. Bronson's menacing laughter. Cool wetness coated his hands. Lifting them from her body, he shuddered in revulsion. Blood. It invaded his nostrils, made his stomach roil. Panic seized his heart, his pulse skittering. He couldn't seem to get air past his constricted throat. He felt as if he was suffocating. Helpless to the fear sneaking in from the darkness.

Nick startled awake, his breath gasping as air filled his lungs. He blinked rapidly as harsh light burned his eyes. Turning his face away from the source of the light, he rested a moment, trying to gain his bearings. Searching for control of his breath and quivering body.

His first sight was of the exposed wooden rafters of the ceiling. Listening, there was no beeping of monitors, no smell of antiseptic, no sounds of footsteps in a hall. Nothing to indicate he was in a hospital. Nick should have known. His last memories were of being in some strange primitive world where someone tried to sell him as a slave. He'd hoped it was just a bad nightmare.

Taking a deep breath, Nick steeled himself as he turned his head and finally looked at his surroundings. There was no electrical equipment or IV hooked up to his arm. He wasn't in a sterile room with a TV mounted on the wall. There was no nurse button or rolling tray next to his bed. In fact, his bed was a little bigger than a twin-sized bed and the mattress was like none he'd ever slept on; a little lumpy, in fact.

Nick's clothing had been removed and he was covered only by a sheet pulled up to just above his belly button. The wound on his biceps was wrapped with a clean cloth bandage. Peeking beneath the sheet, he saw his thigh had a matching bandage.

Maybe his life in Miami was the fantasy world.

Careful of his arm, Nick managed to slide up a little in the bed, the pillow supporting his upper back. This gave him a better vantage of the room. Everything looked old and rustic, but in good condition. He almost felt as if he was in an antique store. There was a wardrobe, a table under the window, and two wooden straight-back chairs by the bed.

The clank of dishes came from the next room.

"Hel..." Nick tried to call out, but his voice came out scratchy and barely audible. He cleared his throat, but that only aggravated the soreness.

Footsteps sounded, then Nick was captivated by the man who entered the room. The man's gait was smooth; each step he took looked almost like he was floating on air. He wore

brown leather pants and matching boots, the pants fitting like a second skin to his long, lean legs. His shirt was the color of pine trees deep in a forest. It looked to be made of material similar to cotton, not the bristly roughness of the men's shirts he'd seen earlier.

The stranger's hair was a beautiful shade of ash blond that seemed to glisten in the sunlight pouring through the window. He glanced over his shoulder back the way he came, giving Nick a peek of how his hair fell down his back, bound with a thong at his neck. Nick's gaze locked on the man's lips, red and a little full even for a man. They curved into a slight, yet crooked smile. Nice, kissable lips. Lips he could imagine touching every inch of his body. Lips that would be accompanied by an exploring tongue, nipping teeth, and groans of pleasure. Nick swallowed a groan of lust and was helpless to stop the rush of desire to his cock.

As the stranger drew closer, Nick could see that the man's brows were slightly darker than his hair, while long, thick black lashes surrounded the darkest shade of gray eyes he'd ever seen. It reminded him of the turbulent clouds, dark and heavy with a storm, that accompanied hurricanes. As Nick's gaze slid over the rest of his host's chiseled features, they landed on the cleft in his chin. His face was the perfect mixture of femininity and masculinity.

The man held a cup to Nick's lips. "Drink this. It will soothe your throat."

The voice of his dreams. Or were they nightmares? It was this man who owned the voice that had called him, calmed him, and kept his sanity intact. The same voice had saved him from dying. But that meant Nick was still in his nightmare, in some strange world his fevered mind had created while he lay in a hospital recovering from his wounds. That would explain why he was still in immense pain. But then, perhaps logic wasn't his best weapon in this situation since little made sense.

Nick sipped at the liquid and found it sweet. He wanted to gulp it down, feel its cooling mixture coat his throat and stomach.

“Not too fast,” the man warned, pulling the cup back. “It will cause a bellyache if you take too much at once.” He put the cup aside.

“Where am I?” Nick’s voice was stronger, his throat not as sore now. “And who are you?” He held back the panic growing in his gut. The last people he’d encountered had not been too kind toward him.

“You are outside of Relos, but I doubt it will mean much to you. I’m Kel Targus. It is a pleasure to meet you, Nicholas Montgomery.”

Confusion welled in Nick’s mind. Relos? And how did this man know his name?

As if reading Nick’s thoughts, Kel pulled out Nick’s wallet and handed it to him. “You are not from around here. In fact, Nicholas, I think you are a long, long way from home.”

Nick stared down at the wallet in his hand. His mind was spinning out of control trying to comprehend all that was happening.

“I don’t understand.” He shook his head. “Where exactly is Relos?” For that matter, what year was it? He didn’t ask, not wanting to sink to that level of craziness.

Kel sat back in the chair and laid his hands in his lap. He was in no hurry. There was no nervousness to his actions.

“You are on Ketall, and Relos is in the southern territory of Lexicon. About a day and half’s travel to Central.”

Nick ran his hands through his hair in frustration. *This cannot be happening. It’s all a dream. This is not real.* He mentally repeated the words to himself as his brain fought the information Kel had given him. There were no places called territories any longer. And he wasn’t familiar with a place called Lexicon. In fact, it sounded more like a drug company than a state or country. Maybe he’d seen a glimpse of the name on a piece of hospital equipment and was incorporating it into his dream. Rational, believable explanation. Nick clung to it.

“What about this Miami?” Kel asked, dragging Nick’s attention back to him. “Where is that? The Parthonis Continent?”

“The what?” Nick’s brows drew together in confusion. “No. Miami, Florida. You know, in the United States of America?” When there was no recognition in Kel’s eyes he tried, “On Earth?” Still nothing.

Nick sighed, closed his eyes, and willed himself to wake up. To be back in Miami soaking up the sun, enjoying the ocean breeze, and listening to his superiors lecture him time and time again for not waiting for backup. Hell, never mind the sun and the ocean breeze; he’d be happy with just waking up from this nightmare.

He opened his eyes slowly and felt his stomach drop. Kel still sat across from him.

“What the hell is happening to me? How is this possible? It can’t be real.”

“If this isn’t real, then I’m not real.” Kel looked Nick right in the eye. The darkness of his eyes was mesmerizing. “But I am real, Nicholas. Everything here is real.” Kel picked up Nick’s hand and held it in his warm hands. Hands Nick suddenly imagined caressing his skin. The rasp of Kel’s callused palms against his skin enticed lust, unbidden, to the surface. Kel’s fingertips teased him until he almost writhed with need, begging for more. Nick blinked rapidly, trying to clear those arousing thoughts. Why was he reacting so strongly to a complete stranger? What was it about this man that attracted him to distraction?

“You were found on the side of the road, wounded and fevered,” Kel continued, gaining Nick’s attention again. “I nursed you back to health. You feel pain. You feel confusion. You feel hunger. How much more real can you get?”

At the mention of hunger Nick’s stomach grumbled, but he ignored it. “Why do you call me Nicholas?”

“Is that not your name?” Kel asked, puzzled. “Did I read it wrong or perhaps I’m saying it incorrectly?”

Nick swallowed a chuckle. Kel looked so confused at his question. "Nicholas is my name. It's just strange hearing it, that's all. I've gone by Nick since I was very young. No one but my mother called me Nicholas." Sadness swept through him at the thought of his mother. She'd died when he was only eight years old and he had been raised by his father until cancer consumed him five years later.

"If you prefer..."

"No." Nick stopped him, liking the way Kel said his name. It sent his stomach fluttering every time Kel said it. "Nicholas is fine."

Kel nodded with approval. "It suits you."

Nick sighed and shifted in the bed, wincing when he moved his leg. "But how did I get here? To Ketall, I mean."

Kel leaned forward, his gaze intense, making Nick squirm. "What's the last thing you remember before you woke?"

Still not completely believing that he could be anywhere but in a coma, Nick indulged Kel's question.

"I was confronting Bronson. Amos Bronson. A sadistic murderer. He'd killed eight women, then..." Nick swallowed hard, not wanting to look at those memories, but maybe there were clues in them. "He killed another woman right in front of me. I knew her. I was there to save her and to stop him from killing again." He looked down at the hand lying over his. "I couldn't stop him."

"Then what happened?" Kel leaned closer, his fingers making small circles on Nick's hand. Goosebumps rose on his skin, sending shivers up his arm.

"I shot him. I killed the son of a bitch."

"What else do you remember? What was happening around you?"

Nick stared into Kel's eyes, taking comfort in them while his mind ran through those last moments with Bronson.

“Blood. I was bleeding from the cut on my arm. Bronson had done that during our first encounter. He was a strong son of a bitch. It was dripping down my arm, then onto the floor.” Nick felt his stomach lurch but didn’t look away from Kel. Those stormy eyes held peace for Nick. Calming serenity despite their darkness. “The floor. There was this circle painted on the concrete. Strange markings were drawn inside of it. The dark stains in various places around the circle gave me goose bumps. It looked like dried blood. He’d set up a lot of candles. Some sat around the edge of the circle, others were several feet away. That was the only light in the warehouse.” Nick paused. He shivered, not really wanting to talk about it, but something compelled him to tell Kel all he could remember. “Bronson talked about sacrifices and wanting immortality. He said that death would bring him life.”

“Keep going.” Kel’s voice was smooth like velvet.

“I froze when he killed her. Shocked that he’d been bold enough to do it while I pointed a gun at him. That’s when he threw a knife at me. It hit my thigh. The pain made me fall to my knees. That’s when I shot him. Something inside of me shattered. The sense of death churning around me was overwhelming. It was like I could feel every kill as each of the victims’ lifeless faces flashed in my mind.”

“Did he fall inside the circle when he died?”

Nick paused and thought before he nodded. “Yes. There was this bright light, then darkness. I didn’t wake until I was in a cage with those other men.”

Kel sat back in the chair, his hand slipping from Nick’s. A chill ran up his spine, already missing the touch.

“It sounds like a spell gone terribly wrong.”

The statement was emotionless. Nick got the impression this wasn’t the first time Kel had come across this problem.

“Magic doesn’t exist. It’s not real. And even if it did, how could a fucked-up spell for immortality transport me here?” Was he starting to believe what Kel is saying? No, surely he

wasn't transported into another world. An alternate universe? That was too fantastic even for his imagination. But Nick's cop instincts wouldn't allow him to rule anything out...yet.

"But it does exist. It's all around us. It makes up everything. You may not see it, feel it, or smell it, but it's there." Kel stood. "I'll get you some food. Don't try to get out of bed just yet. You are still weak and will be for another day or so."

Without another word, Kel walked out of the room with the same floating grace with which he'd entered. Nick couldn't help admiring the man's firm, rounded backside.

Chapter Four

Before daybreak, Jax slipped unheard into the bedroom. Kel was asleep on the floor beside the bed. Fury raced along her veins, her stomach burning with it because her lover was lowering himself to the position of a slave. Kel deserved better than that. It was that beast who should be lying at Kel's feet. It had taken a great amount of control to keep from dragging the beast out of the bed.

Her nails dug into her palms, the pain steadying her vicious dragon nature roaring to emerge. Jax watched the human she hated. His sleep was restless, his head turning left and right as if he were caught in a nightmare. Jax smiled. Yes, let the beast be tortured.

Against her wishes, her feet stepped to the bed and she kneeled beside him. Her hand reached out and lightly touched his sweat-dampened brow. The beast immediately stilled. She remembered Kel had said the beast's name was Nicholas. Enthralled, Jax let her fingertips smooth the creases in his forehead. He let out a long sigh as if she was handing him a glass of cool water on a blistering day. Her gut flipped happily at his relief.

She jerked her hand away. She would not comfort him. Confused, she left to feed, but it had taken all of her willpower to leave the room, to leave her rider and the beast who had ensnared his attention.

Jax soared through the sky toward home. Her basic physical hunger was sated after spending some time hunting on the Arcadic Plains. What a refreshing change from the drab silence that had intruded upon her life. Hunting done, now it was time to satisfy the sexual hunger that had been gnawing at her nerves, growing more insistent with each passing hour.

She didn't like depriving herself like this, her control not that of an older dragon when it came to her impulses. But she wasn't the one at fault. It was that damned beast lying in Kel's bed. For three days now Kel had been nursing the unconscious thing back to health. He refused to leave the house, intent on being there when the beast woke. Not even her pouting had worked to pull her lover from the weakling.

Jax huffed; smoke billowed in the air around her. She had to control her fiery jealousy or else she'd burn something she wasn't supposed to and really anger Kel. But Jax thought she'd been very patient so far. Now it was her turn.

Kel had never rejected her. Their bond of dragon and rider had only increased the sexual attraction between them. They shared an intimacy that nonbonded beings couldn't possibly dream of. The desire she felt with Kel often annihilated all other emotions, making her blood boil, her body shudder with longing.

Jax was still young by dragon standards. She was not yet of age for reproduction, having another hundred and fifty years before she could bear offspring, and then only once every hundred years. Their cycles kept Ketall populated, with the dragons in perfect harmony with Mother Goddess Frayland and Ezra, Father Air. Until then, she was free to immerse herself in her rider's life and take full advantage of her sexual nature.

Landing gently in front of their house, Jax smoothly shifted to human form. With only a thought her clothing materialized on her body. She put a little more sway to her hips as she sashayed through the front door. She stopped just inside the house. Something was different. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

Sounds from the kitchen drew her in that direction. Kel stood at the sink pumping water. She slid silently up to him and pressed her body against his back. Shivers rocked her as she was engulfed in his scent. She loved the deep masculine scent that was an intrinsic part of him. It oozed from his pores and she felt drunk from its effects.

Her arms wrapped around his waist, one hand finding its way to his groin, fingertips brushing over his cock. She smiled, feeling him harden at her touch. Her body tingled with excitement and anticipation.

Jax stood on tiptoe and kissed the curve where his neck and shoulder met. She pressed closer and shuddered when his chest rumbled with a growl.

"I've missed you," she said, kissing his back. Her free hand snaked under his shirt, fingers finding a nipple. She traced it lightly with a sharp nail until it pebbled. He breathed out shakily.

"Jax," he groaned, but he made no move to embrace her in return.

"I need you," she tried again, her fingers gently squeezing his hardness so he gasped.

This time Kel did move, but not into her arms as she wanted. Instead, he slipped from her grasp and stepped away.

"He's awake."

Jax seethed with anger. Her blood boiled as her muscles tensed and her lungs burned. Kel was refusing her? For the first time since she'd saved him from the Teslea Desert, he was rejecting her advances?

A growl vibrated in her throat, harsh and strangled as her human vocal cords struggled to make the sound of a dragon. Jax's nails lengthened into razor-sharp claws, preventing her from curling them into fists. Her heart pounded rapidly, pushing rage-heated blood through her veins. If her present form could breathe fire, it would have burst from her body, scorching the house.

Never piss off a dragon. It was a lesson Kel was about to learn.

Kel stepped back on instinct, not fear, since his dragon really couldn't do bodily harm to him. Jax's eyes blazed bright, ruby red. Her chest heaved and he could sense the anger exuding from every pore. Jax was livid and it was his fault.

For the first time since taking responsibility for Jax's welfare and forming their bond, Kel was telling her no. Refusing her. He couldn't explain why. It wasn't that he didn't want Jax. She was beautiful. She roused his body, made him react instantly. He wanted her. He loved her. They would be together until he died.

But his thoughts drifted to Nicholas lying in his bed. Kel had not missed his arousal under the sheet. Or the way his body trembled when Kel had stroked his soft skin. To Kel's astonishment, the attraction between them had been strong. Immediate. Much like it had been when he had first met Jax. Kel craved the off-worlder and was confused by the emotions swamping his mind and body.

"Jax," he breathed out, praying to the dragon goddess of fate, Ica, that Jax wouldn't do something rash and stupid.

She shook her head and in a blink of an eye she was gone. Kel stood, stunned. Even after all this time, her speed still struck him with awe.

There had been no sound of the front door opening or shutting, which meant she went to only one place. He sprinted down the short hall and skidded to a halt just inside the door to the bedroom.

"Jax, don't," he ground out.

Jax stood beside the bed, looking down at a shocked, pale-faced Nicholas. Kel had hoped to prepare the man for Jax. Nicholas was about to get a crash course on Jax as you never wanted to see her.

Jax had her claws around Nicholas's throat, the tips indenting his skin, though not yet breaking it. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl, and her teeth had lengthened and sharpened. Wrath and jealousy poured off her in waves, rippling through their connection.

"He is nothing," she hissed. "This beast will not come in here and take what is mine."

Kel held his hands up in a gesture of peace. "Jax, please. You've got to calm down." He'd never seen her like this. Yes, dragons were born with a vicious side. Kel had even seen her eat a man, but that was a different situation. She had never lashed out against an innocent. Not like this.

"Calm down?" Jax chuckled. "I am calm, love." She glanced at Kel, her cold, inhuman stare halting his approach. "I gave you time. I thought you would tire of him and pass him along to another, but even unconscious, he ensnared you like a tralup in a trap."

"Let Nicholas go. He has done no wrong." There had to be a way to convince her not to hurt him.

"No? Then why do you refuse me? You are mine. Bound for life, yet you do not embrace me. Your thoughts are on him. Not me." Her eyes glowed stronger, fueled by her emotions. "I'll take no more of his interference."

Kel watched helplessly, his blood running cold, as Jax tightened her grip on Nicholas's neck. Kel's heart stopped, panic clawing in his gut. He was no match for a dragon's strength, but what could he do? Jax had her mind made up that Nicholas was a pest to be disposed of as if he were nothing at all.

Suddenly Jax released him and dropped to her knees beside the bed, screaming.

"What has he done to me? To us?" she sobbed. "What magic does he wield to punish me so?" She looked up and Kel's heart broke. Tears fell from her eyes; her sorrowful expression was enough to bring the strongest of warriors to his knees. Regret and sadness were the two emotions he'd never seen Jax display in all their years together.

Kel approached and kneeled in front of her. He dared not glance at Nicholas, hoping he'd just stay still and not draw her attention to him again. Dragons were sensitive sorts, especially the females.

He reached out and wiped away a tear. "Jax," he whispered tenderly.

"Oh, Kel." She fell into his arms, sobbing like a child. He embraced her, arms wrapping tightly around her body, his hands lovingly stroking her back and whispering soft, soothing words. He rocked her gently, waiting for her to calm.

"I can't do it. Just like before. When he was sleeping, I couldn't hurt him. How can that be?" Her grievous tone bespoke the innocence of her feelings, despite her words. "I wanted him dead. Gone from our lives. He lay there vulnerable, defenseless, but I couldn't kill him. My body wouldn't listen to me."

Kel turned his head, finally looking to the still figure on the bed. Nicholas had not moved an inch. His eyes were wide; his face white as a sheet. One hand covered his throat where Jax had grabbed him, but there was no blood. Nicholas had not run, had not screamed. He just lay there in shock.

Kel's chest tightened as realization slammed home. Though dragons didn't reproduce with their human riders, they did become bondmates. That bond was a spectacular, special connection only a rider and dragon could experience. However, the relationship had its ups and downs. One bright side of the bond was that a rider's dragon could never physically harm him. Ever.

Staring into Nicholas's terrified, glimmering, sea green eyes, the mystery of the stranger's purpose was solved.

"Impossible," he exhaled, nearly inaudible.

Chapter Five

Nick lay in a daze. What had just happened? Terror froze him to the bed, his mind uncomprehending what his eyes were seeing. How could he not be dreaming after seeing that...creature? No, this was all too real to be a dream. That's what scared Nick so much. Not that he was dreaming, but that this insane experience was actually real.

So why wasn't he running? Why did he not scream? Wasn't that what the characters did in the movies?

Nick found his voice. "What the fuck?" He coughed, his voice raspier than before. "That...creature tried to kill me. What is she?"

Minutes too late, his body finally got the panicked messages from his brain, and he slid toward the far edge of the bed, away from the couple on the floor.

Nick shook his head. "This is damned crazy. A nightmare. All of this."

Kel released the green woman and stood, staring at him.

"Nicholas."

Nick shivered; the dream he'd had while delirious in the cage came rushing back. Even before Kel saved him, Nick had heard his voice. And hers. How was that possible?

“No. This isn’t real.” Nick couldn’t think about how weak his body was, only that he needed to get far away from here and these nutty people. He tried to stand, not caring that he was naked or that he had no place to go. He had to get out. Anywhere was better than here.

Nick’s good leg managed to support his body weight enough so he could push away from the bed, but the moment he bore weight on his injured leg, it gave way. He fell to the floor with a painful grunt; sweat immediately beaded his forehead, the pain overwhelming his senses.

In an instant Kel was beside him, trying to help him up.

“Don’t touch me!” Nick screamed and shuffled away from the man. “Stay away.”

“Nicholas...” Kel moved closer.

“Stop. Just keep away.” Nick slid into the corner and pressed his back to the wall. He drew his legs up to his chest in a huddle. He hated having to cower like cornered prey. But he was trapped. Injured. No weapon. No way of escape.

“I won’t hurt you.” Kel dropped to his knees, but kept his distance. “I want to help you.”

“What the hell is she? Why did she try to kill me?” Nick asked, tossing his head toward the other side of the bed where the woman still sat on the floor. A combination of a snuffle and growl from her vibrated his spine, spreading electric shocks of fear and arousal. He pulled his legs closer, putting as much distance as possible between him and them.

Kel sighed. “This is Jax. She lives here with me.” His eyes sought her. “She’s my lover. She’s my...” He paused.

Nick glanced across the bed and could see the top of her head. Her jet black hair was a tangled mess.

“Your what? Wife? Girlfriend?” Nick grimaced. “Oh, please don’t tell me your sister.”

“She’s my dragon,” Kel said, his gaze still on Jax. “It appears she’s very jealous of you. Or at least of my attention to you.”

“You think?” Nick scoffed sarcastically. “Wait. Did you just say dragon?” The word slowly registered in his head. Not only did he have to deal with men trying to sell him into slavery, but this world had dragons too? Impossible.

His gaze slid over to where Jax was. She had moved from the floor to the bed he’d just vacated. She wore a red, sleeveless silken shirt, black pants, boots, and belt. It wasn’t her clothing that stuck out, but her skin. It was pale green. An oddity, like her red eyes. Being up close and personal with her, Nick knew it wasn’t makeup. And definitely not contacts with the way her eyes glowed with so much emotion. But other than her strange coloring, she looked like a normal, petite woman. Not some scaly, winged creature. However, Nick could certainly picture this woman scorching him with a breath of fire.

Jax glared, making Nick nervous. He could still feel those claws trying to prick his neck, the strength behind her grasp. No, this woman wasn’t normal. But a dragon?

“Yes.” Kel kept his attention on Nick.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Nick recognized laughter swelling in his chest and gave in to the urge with a loud, hearty laugh until tears ran from his eyes.

“It’s official. I’m insane.” Nick ran his hands through his hair, sweeping the strands from his face. “Because none of this could be happening.”

Kel reached out to Nick, but stopped when Nick flinched. He withdrew his hand and stood with a sigh.

“Jax, let’s go somewhere else to talk. Nicholas needs some time to absorb this.” He looked at Jax. “Time to absorb you.”

Nick stared after them as they left the room, leaving him alone. No other discussions. No other attempts at killing him. No words of persuasion telling him that he wasn’t crazy. He lay his head back against the wall, closed his eyes, and sighed.

“Wake up, Nick,” he pleaded, voice cracking. Frustration, confusion, and agony tore at him, edging him closer and closer to insanity.

Would he ever wake from this madness?

Chapter Six

Kel led Jax outside, thinking it would be the safest place to have their talk, hoping it would provide the needed distance between Jax and Nicholas, preventing further lethal confrontations.

Jax's passivity vanished the moment she stepped outside. She paced on the front lawn, low sounds emitting from her throat. Her agitation and confusion were coming to the surface.

Kel leaned against a post, crossed his arms over his chest, and watched. His mind reeled, though he looked the picture of perfect calm. "Change has come, Jax."

"No," she denied. "You are my rider. You are not dead. I'll have no other until you are gone. Least of all that beast." She sulked. "He's not even of Ketall."

Kel's gaze followed her as she made another trip around the yard. "He's a rider. There's no denying it. It explains my attraction to him. The need to protect and comfort him. Isn't that how you felt when you first found me?"

Jax growled, intense displeasure showing in her glare. She didn't deny that.

“We’ve discovered something amazing, Jax. Don’t you see the blessing the Goddess Earth and Father Air have bestowed on us? In all of Ketall’s history, since the first human bonded with a dragon, there’s never been one who has found two riders simultaneously.”

“I know my history,” she snapped ferociously.

“But Nicholas is more than just a fated bondmate.” Jax stopped pacing and locked eyes with him. “He’s *our* bondmate. Not just yours, but mine also.”

Jax’s skin rippled, her muscles moving, contorting. Her growls grew louder. Her hands were now the claws of her dragon form.

“No. You are mine!”

“Jax, you’ve got to calm down. You know how painful a slow shift can be.” Kel watched her closely, with concern. He hated seeing her in pain.

“I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to feel my nails puncturing his skin. I wanted to watch the blood flow down his neck. I wanted to taste his blood. But I couldn’t.” Her words were angry growls mixed with hisses.

Kel wanted to do something to comfort her, but he knew it was best to keep his distance for a bit longer.

Jax fell to her knees and cried out in pain. Kel pushed off the post, but didn’t dare move closer.

“Shift, for Frayland’s sake,” Kel commanded.

Jax tossed him a sneer, but an instant later she stood in her thirty-foot-long dragon form. Her emerald green scales glistened in the setting sun.

“Better?”

A flame exploded from Jax’s mouth, igniting the brush next to Kel.

Kel chuckled. “You missed.”

Jax's lips pulled back in a menacing scoff and she growled her disapproval at his humor. Her actions didn't faze Kel at all. She was having a temper tantrum. Nothing new.

"Nicholas has done nothing wrong, Jax. Your jealousy will only make things worse for all of us."

Smoke puffed from her nose and her wings beat impatiently, stirring enough wind to rustle his hair.

You are mine. Jax's voice echoed angrily in Kel's mind.

Kel sighed. How do you explain to an emotional dragon about sharing? He'd tried. Goddess Frayland above, he had tried to teach her the best he could. But this was like dealing with an infant.

One who hadn't yet learned to share her toys.

"Stop blaming Nicholas. He doesn't even realize what a stir he's caused."

Jax's large head swung around, her razor sharp teeth just an inch from his face.

You like him, she accused.

"Yes, very much," he admitted, without shame. "I'll not deny my attraction to him."

You do not know him. He could be a maniac. Like Merrill and those who follow him.

"He is not."

How can you be so sure? She huffed, her breath blowing Kel's hair back.

"The same way I knew you wouldn't eat me when you found me in the Teslea Desert."

Your faith will be your death.

Kel shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's gotten me this far in life."

Jax stomped her feet, her wings batting the air. She was still agitated. Her wild, uncontrolled emotions had conjured the blood thirst. A deadly issue when dealing with a dragon. Only feeding or sex calmed it. Kel sensed she'd just fed, so that left sex.

Kel stepped closer to Jax, concerned and ever watchful of his lover. She was the center of his life. They had been together for too many years to bother counting. His heart swelled with love. He reached out and gently touched the side of her head.

"I'm not going anywhere, Jax." He leaned forward and nuzzled the area where her jaw and neck met. "We are bonded. You know I could never leave you. I love you."

A deep sound rumbled in Jax's throat.

"I want you, Jax." Kel kissed that sensitive spot just behind her jaw.

But that...that beast. He...

"Forget about Nicholas for now. He's not here. Just you and me." He shifted position and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm sorry I made you feel neglected. I never meant to do that. Let me make it up to you." A smile played on his lips. "Let me remind you how much you mean to me."

As a rider, Kel knew he would never have children or a normal life like other people, but he would always have Jax and the happiness she brought him.

Jax purred like a kitten and her forked tongue flickered across his lips with the lightest of touches. He moaned and licked his lips wantonly. Kel blinked and Jax stood before him in human form, not bothering with clothes this time as her nude body pressed tightly to his. He felt her heated flesh through his clothing.

"You want me?" she asked innocently, but her eyes twinkled with lust.

"Always." He claimed her mouth, his tongue delving into her wet heat. Her tongue, still holding a semblance to her dragon tongue, teasingly tangled with his, driving his relentless hunger to new depths.

With one swift movement, he swept her up into his arms and walked toward the large building that stood behind their home.

Kicking the door open, Kel strode to the makeshift bed in the back corner of the one-room structure. He briefly thought of Nicholas still alone in the house, but all rational

thoughts fled when Jax reached between their bodies and fondled his hardened shaft straining painfully against his pants.

Kel moaned and reluctantly pulled away from her, laying her gently on the soft mattress. His gaze roamed her stunning, luscious body, the swell of her breasts begging for attention.

“You are so beautiful,” he praised.

Jax smiled, her tongue sensually licking her lips. Her hands rose to her breasts and started fondling them, rolling her pebbled nipples between her fingertips as she pinched them. Kel’s breath quickened as his own hands stripped the shirt from his body before beginning on his pants, his gaze never leaving Jax’s body or the way her hands roamed over her silky flesh.

It took only a moment for him to undress, but it seemed like an eternity, his body anxious, an inferno of longing. He sat beside Jax, the fingers of one hand slowly caressing circles around a nipple. Jax shuddered, arching slightly with gratification.

“What do you want, Jax?” he asked softly.

“You, Kel. I want all of you.”

Jax had never felt more sensual and sexy than she did at that moment. She had Kel’s complete attention...and desire. She could see it in the way his rock-hard cock twitched in anticipation and the way his chest heaved with his breath. She could smell it, drowning her own senses.

She pulled Kel to her, his mouth seeking her nipples. He was irresistible when he suckled her. Moaning, pulling his head closer, Jax trembled. The anger she felt, the need to kill, was slowly fading, replaced by a different need.

His mouth pulled her down into swirls of pleasure. Her breasts were tight and aching. More. She wanted more as her blood scalded her innards.

“Kel,” she gasped when he pulled away from her breast.

“I know, little one.” His mouth slid over her collarbone and up her neck. His knees spread her legs wider.

“Please. Now.” Sweet fire raged uncontrollably in her veins. Just moments ago, she wanted blood. Needed to see it. Taste it. But now, a darker hunger rose within her. A hunger only her bondmate could sate. Ravenous for his cock thrusting in and out of her starved body. Greedy for euphoric release only he could give her.

“Open for me.” His fingers were already dipping in and out of her pussy. She smelled her wetness coating his fingers. Jax did as he wished, and spread her legs as wide as she could.

“Dragons be damned, Kel. Fuck me now,” she demanded, unable to hold back the deep growl coating the words.

Kel eagerly obeyed. With one powerful thrust, he filled her. She cried out in pleasure as her body stretched to accommodate him, then turned to frustration when he didn’t move.

“Kel!” She wiggled under the weight pinning her to the mattress.

Kel chuckled in her ear. “Do you rush pleasure, little one?” Jax struggled to breathe when he shifted his body, his shaft rubbing along her walls creating the most intense sensation. “Patience.” His voice smoldered with passion.

She groaned in response to his words. Jax knew she was stronger than Kel. With just a little effort she could throw him across the room. But that would mean tearing him from her body.

Jax yielded to his will, her legs wrapping tightly around his slim waist while her arms pulled his head down for a kiss. A scorching, passionate kiss that consumed her breath, making her head spin. Her thirst for him built with every touch, every thrust, and every uttered word.

She and Kel had had years of mind-blowing sex, but goddess hearts above, today was different. Jax sensed the change happening all around her, inside her. She couldn't comprehend the why, only that since she woke three mornings before, the very essence of Ketall hummed within her. Did it have something to do with Nicholas's arrival on their planet? Or that he was to be bonded to her? A mystery. One she'd ponder at a later time.

An incoherent cry burst from her throat as Kel's frantic pace probed deeper. She raised her head, biting into his shoulder as her body jolted in electric pleasure, sending shocks of ecstasy through her body. She didn't hear Kel's grunts of passion or feel the sweat dampening their bodies. She only felt their heartbeats join together. Beating as one. The bond between dragon and rider flaring to life.

Her world darkened as her body trembled with release time after time, trapped in the connection of rider and dragon. She could feel Kel. His loving warmth, patience, and strength caressing her. But there was also something else. Or rather, *someone* else. Someone full of grit, stubbornness, and self-sacrifice. It sought her. Beckoned to her.

No!

The darkness closed in on her, thick and suffocating. She clawed at the nothingness around her. Fighting the overpowering urge to reach out and draw him to her. She wasn't ready. She needed more time.

Jax gasped, startled back to reality. Kel lay limp, panting on top of her, his face buried in her neck. She relaxed and wrapped her arms around her bondmate. Her fingers brushed through his long hair, letting the silky texture and the rhythmic movement lull her back to tranquility.

"Jax." He rolled to the side so their bodies lay side by side, still entwined in each other's arms.

"Rest, my love." She kissed his hair and felt relaxed for the first time in three days.

Kel didn't know how long they'd slept, but when he woke it was long into the night. The light from the two moons in the sky drifted in through the high-set windows. He was swathed in warmth, Jax's body wrapped around him. Familiar and welcome.

His next thoughts, though, were not of the woman lying in his arms, but of the man he'd left in the house. Was he still there? Was he in pain? Did he think they had abandoned him? Or had he left? Concern for Nicholas made his heart flutter.

"You're thinking of him, aren't you?" Her voice startled him.

Kel didn't deny it. "I shouldn't have left him alone for so long. What if he needs something? Or if he's in pain?" He should be getting up, but if he did so without resolving this with Jax, he knew she might never accept him. Accept *them*. Dragons were temperamental. He had to remember to keep his head if he wanted this strange turn of events to turn out the best for everyone involved.

Jax huffed, her arms tightening around him.

"You know, Jax, this could be a good thing."

"I don't see how." She was in a sulky mood again. Displeasure saturated her voice.

"Riders give up so much to bond with their dragons. We walk out in the world, but we really aren't part of it. Sometimes it can be lonely."

"You aren't lonely," Jax purred, her hand sliding over his hip and between his legs. Her fingers gently cupped his spent balls, lightly caressing circles on them.

"Listen to me, Jax. Yes, riders bond with their dragons. Love them. But there is so much more we miss out on."

"Like what?" The moonlight illuminated her face. Her kissable lips were puffed out in a pout. He had never discussed this with her before. Even though she coexisted with humans, she didn't have a clue how they lived outside the home he had provided for her.

"If we have families, we forsake them for our duty. Life for us is dangerous. We move from territory to territory, wherever we are needed. It's hard to keep friends and family close

for fear of enemies using them against us. We don't settle down in one place, marry, and have children. It doesn't work. That's why riders are loners."

"Sounds boring to be in the same place all the time."

Kel sighed. He knew she wouldn't understand. The dragon mindset was very different from that of humans. They had different priorities. Different instincts.

"When the time comes, Jax, you will find a dragon to breed with. You will bear an offspring and stay with it until it is old enough to survive on its own. You will teach your offspring all you know. Watch it grow. I will be out of your life by then and that child will be your number one priority until it is time for you to find another rider."

Jax was silent, but Kel had a feeling she still didn't understand.

"Nicholas is fated to be bonded with you, Jax. Unless he dies, you can't escape it."

"He's weak," she argued.

At least she wasn't refuting it. "He's wounded, but he will gain his strength again. And bonding with you will make him even stronger."

"I don't like him."

Kel sighed. "I know. But think of it this way. You'd not only have me, but both of us to play with."

Jax's eyes flickered briefly in the moonlight. "Both?"

Kel brushed his knuckles over her cheek, then down her slender neck. "Yes. Two men to play with. To give you satisfaction. To love." He felt her tremble. "You think he's attractive, don't you? You saw his eyes, right? They are the most unusual color. And he's well built. Thick." His lips twitched at the thought of Nicholas's cock. Even lying flaccid it was thick, and Kel so much wanted to see what it looked like full of blood and desire.

"He is?" Her eyes glistened with interest.

“Yes, my dragon. We just need to convince him to stay with us. So you must be nice to him or he won’t want to play. And you will not, under any circumstance, force him to play. Do you understand?”

Jax slowly nodded. He could tell by the way her breath quickened that she liked the idea of having two of them for sex.

“But I still don’t like him.”

Kel chuckled, kissing her lightly on the lips. “I know. But I have a feeling you’ll grow to love him.”

* * * * *

Nick had the unsettling feeling of being watched. Turning his head, he found a shadowy figure sitting in the chair by the bed. Brief panic shot through him as he instinctively reached for the gun he always kept on the bedside table. Nothing was there. No gun. No table. It took a second before his mind registered that he wasn’t even in his own bed.

“It’s just me.” Kel’s voice sounded just as a light flicked on. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I was just checking on you.”

Nick carefully pushed to a sitting position. He blinked several times while brushing the hair from his eyes. He was long overdue for a haircut. The lieutenant had been harping on him for weeks to get it cut. Guess he wouldn’t have to worry about it now.

“Get me my clothes and go away.” Contempt coated his voice. He knew he was being rude, but he couldn’t muster an ounce of goodwill toward his host. It mattered not that Kel had saved his life. All he wanted was to go home.

“I see that you helped yourself to the stew. Do you need anything else?” Kel asked, like a good host, ignoring Nick’s rudeness.

“My clothes,” Nick snapped. The little angel on his left shoulder chastised him for not thanking Kel for the care and food. He ground his teeth to keep from telling it to fuck off.

"I'm sorry. Your clothing was destroyed. I will get you some that fit you in the morning." Kel's tone was calm. His serene manner agitated Nick further.

"Fine." Nick slid down in the bed, mindful of his injuries. He was finished. He didn't want to talk to Kel. He didn't want to think about Jax. He just wanted to go home. If he was transported to this world, there had to be a way back. Right?

It was strange, but Nick found that accepting the fact this was all real was a bit comforting. At least he wasn't losing his mind.

He turned over, giving Kel his back, but even closing his eyes wouldn't take away the image of those mystical gray eyes. It also bugged Nick that his fingers itched to see if Kel's ash blond hair was as soft as it looked. To thread them through its length. A rush of blood to his groin made his cock twitch with arousal. Yes, Kel was handsome as hell. He'd love to kiss those full lips. Hungered to feel Kel's callused hands touch him tenderly, lovingly. Craved to hear his beautiful voice harsh with lust. Nick shivered with longing.

He shoved those delectable thoughts aside. They were of no help. He needed to concentrate on getting on his feet again and finding a way back home. He could not be deterred. Not even by his lustful desires for this man.

Kel sighed and Nick heard him stand, turn off the light, and leave the room. Guilt seeped in, making him want to call Kel back and apologize. Nick wasn't normally such an ass. But could any sane person blame him? He'd been cut, stabbed, and transported to some world where he'd been sold like cattle. Oh, and let's not forget the dragons living in this world and gorgeous men who knew how to cook. What else did Kel know how to do? And what about those red kissable lips? How would they taste?

"Stop it," Nick reprimanded himself, turning to his back and staring up at the ceiling. The house was quiet. Where had Kel gone? And what about Jax? Did he need to worry about her trying to kill him again?

Nick closed his eyes and hoped sleep wouldn't elude him for too long.

Chapter Seven

Kel watched Nicholas lift his face to the sun and smile. It was the best sight he'd seen all day and he couldn't stop his own smile playing on his lips. His stomach fluttered with joy seeing Nicholas this way.

Since Kel had obtained clothing for him two days ago, Nicholas had stubbornly insisted on getting out of bed and walking about. Today was the first day he'd been strong enough to venture outside. Kel was impressed at the man's recovery and the determination he had to get back on his feet.

The two had spoken little since Jax attacked him. Kel tried to be patient and understanding toward Nicholas, sensing that his guest was digesting a lot. So he left him be, watching from a distance as he went about his normal routine around the house.

Kel was also thankful that Jax too had kept her distance, staying out in the barn during the day and slipping in with Kel at night to sleep. They didn't discuss Nicholas, but he was in the back of both of their minds.

Nicholas approached him, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket. "Have you seen this before?" He held up the paper for Kel's inspection.

Taking it from Nicholas, Kel studied the drawing. It was a circle with a variety of symbols all around. There were also some off to the side, drawn with uncertainty, as if Nicholas wasn't exactly sure of what they looked like.

"No, I'm sorry. I've never seen it, but I could see if anything like it is in one of my books."

Nicholas's face brightened and his eyes glittered, making Kel's stomach flip. "Would you?"

"Of course. I'll work on it tonight after dinner."

Nicholas nodded and started wandering around the land. Kel tried not to be obvious, but he followed not too far off. "Those symbols have been haunting my nightmares. I have to know what they mean. They could mean a gate back to my world."

Kel was silent. He didn't want to think of Nicholas leaving.

"So, what do you do? A farmer?" Nicholas asked, without looking back.

Kel smiled, pleased Nicholas was aware of him. He chuckled. "No, though I do have a small garden in the back. I'm called a rider. An enforcer of the law in Ketall."

"Like a cop."

"I'm not sure what that is."

Nicholas reached a wooden fence and leaned against it. "A cop is a law enforcement officer. Someone who upholds the law and makes sure that people follow it."

"That sounds like what Jax and I do." Kel's smiled widened. How lucky could he be to have another who understood what he did? "The Grand Council assigns a dragon and rider a territory to watch over."

"There are more of you? I mean, more dragons?"

Kel hesitantly moved closer. This was the first time since Nicholas woke that they'd spoken so much. He seemed almost eager to learn about Ketall.

“Yes. They are an essential part of Ketall. Believed to have been here before humans.”

“And humans and dragons have always coexisted easily together?” Nicholas’s attention was on his hands as if they were the most interesting thing in the world.

“No.” Kel sighed. “Not always. There was a time of war between the species. Before treaties and before the first human bonded with a dragon.”

“Bonded?” Nicholas finally looked up at Kel, but still didn’t meet his eyes.

“A dragon and its rider are intimate. They form a connection, which bonds them for the rest of the human’s life.”

Nicholas said nothing in response. He turned thoughtfully toward the mountains in the distance. Kel had slowly moved closer while they spoke and now stood next to Nicholas. His gaze grazed over Nicholas’s fit form, remembering the sculpted abs hidden beneath his clothing. Unadulterated visions of Nicholas lying naked in bed, smiling up at him invaded his mind, engorging his cock. Kel’s skin tingled like electric wires sparking to life.

“What are those mountains over there?” Nicholas asked, breaking Kel out of his lewd thoughts.

“Those are the Dunbar mountains. They divide Lexicon into northern and southern territories.” He looked in the direction of the mountains, suddenly wondering if Jax was nearby.

Nicholas limped over to the fence post. He no longer needed a walking stick, but Kel saw the slight wince in his expression. The man was truly stubborn. An appealing characteristic.

“And it’s just you and Jax out here?”

“Yes. Dragons need a lot of room so we live outside of the village. It’s quiet and we are rarely disturbed.”

Kel’s gaze wandered over Nicholas’s backside. He was a perfectly proportioned man. Broad shoulders, beautifully formed chest, tight stomach, muscular legs. The sight of him,

even in the loose pants, was enough to make Kel's pulse race. The brown shirt accented Nicholas's eyes, deepening their hue.

"Doesn't it get lonely?"

Kel shrugged and went to stand next to Nicholas. "It's the way of a rider's life. Plus, I have Jax. With her around, it's rarely boring."

Nicholas snorted. "I don't think she likes me much."

"Jax doesn't like anyone. Sometimes not even me."

"Yeah, but did she try to kill you?" Nicholas glanced at him.

Kel shook his head.

Nicholas sighed and ran his hands through his thick hair, mussing the style he'd combed it in. "I still expect to wake up and find myself in a hospital back in Miami."

What could he say? Words wouldn't take away the sadness and confusion that emanated from Nicholas's eyes. Kel couldn't think of a single thing to say that would help Nicholas's sanity as the battle raged inside the man. Everything Kel told him or showed him would just intensify the war between fantasy and reality.

Kel turned, lifted his hand, and cupped Nicholas's cheek. His touch was light and gentle, unsure if Nicholas would welcome it. His heart skipped with hope when Nicholas didn't pull away. The gloom darkening Nicholas's eyes made Kel's chest tight, aching to comfort him.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas."

Nicholas let out a breath and actually leaned slightly into Kel's touch. Nervous energy threaded through Kel's veins and he shuddered from the close contact with Nicholas.

"I like the way you say my name. It sounds..." His voice dropped off when their eyes locked.

Sensuous, was Kel's thought, loving the way Nicholas's voice came out low and scratchy. "Sounds what?"

A flush tinged Nicholas's cheeks and he raised his eyes again. "Sexy," he said in a throaty growl.

Kel's body tingled, the hair on the back of his neck prickling with arousal. His admiration and fascination with Nicholas had been growing with each passing day, as had his attraction to this man who was fated to be bonded to him and Jax. It had taken pure willpower to not make advances on Nicholas. To keep his enthrallment low-key so as not to confuse Nicholas any more than he already was.

Neither spoke, but Kel was painfully aware of his body's pull to Nicholas and he hungered for the slightest indication that Nicholas felt the same. Leaning forward, closing the distance between them, his lips grazed over Nicholas's and a shudder of lust jolted straight to his cock when Nicholas's lips parted invitingly. Kel dipped his head to kiss him again, to taste the maleness he longed for, when he was interrupted by the whizzing sound of an arrow passing just over their heads.

Kel jumped back instinctively, pushing Nicholas in the other direction.

"Down!" he yelled, already pulling his sword from the scabbard at his waist. Kel didn't pause to see if Nicholas followed his orders as he rushed the two attackers running across the yard, swords held high and ready for battle. Kel silently scolded himself for letting his guard down. If that arrow had been just a little lower, it would have hit one of them. It was pure luck that it hadn't.

Kel parried the first blow; his hands shook sorely at the impact as their swords clashed. The second attacker circled behind Kel, making him pivot, trying to keep both enemies in sight. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement from where his attackers came. Yet another man.

Jax, where are you? I'm in trouble. Kel growled inside his mind, hoping Jax was close enough to hear him through their bond.

If it were just him, Kel wouldn't be so insistent on Jax's presence. He had fought two or three opponents single-handedly before, and being here at home was to his advantage. However, Kel had to think of Nicholas, who was unarmed and still recovering. He needed help and Kel wasn't about to let anything happen to him.

Kel waited for the third man to join the other two, keeping them circling, parrying their attacks, but the third never came close. In fact, in a glance, Kel saw the man going toward where Nicholas crouched by the fence.

Jax! he screamed as he countered his opponent's attacks with a flurry of strikes.

Kel's movements mesmerized Nick. He couldn't tear his eyes from watching the way his host expertly handled a sword. It was a double-edged sword, much like a longsword from medieval times and looked heavy, yet Kel swung it as if it weighed no more than a feather. Kel moved with smooth agility as if he and the sword were one.

The method of the attack was surprising. He'd been shot at with guns and attacked with knives in all his years as a cop, but getting shot at with an arrow was new in his book. It just didn't happen in Miami. Of course, people didn't carry swords and have a battle like he was witnessing either, as Kel swung his sword with fury as the two men ganged up on him.

Nick was so engrossed in watching Kel fight his two opponents he didn't notice a third man sneaking up on him.

"Nicholas!" Kel shouted a warning as he parried a lunge and countered it with one of his own, slicing deep into his attacker's arm.

Movement to the side drew Nick's attention. He turned just in time to see a man running toward him, dagger raised above his head. Nick scuttled backward, but his back immediately hit the fence. He couldn't get up and run. His leg wouldn't obey the commands his brain was sending. He was screwed if he didn't do something.

Looking around, the man only seconds from reaching him, Nick found several rocks lying on the ground. He picked one up wishing like hell he had his gun and pitched it, hitting his attacker square on the nose. His years of baseball were paying off as he watched the man stop, stunned.

The delay gave Nick the chance to put more distance between them. He managed to use the fence as leverage, pulling himself to his feet, another rock in hand and ready. The attacker shook his head, unmindful of the blood gushing from his nose. The man literally growled at Nick and lifted his dagger.

“I’m going to gut you.”

“Shit,” Nick hissed, looking around to find another weapon, panic eating at his stomach. His pulse raced, adrenaline pumping, frantic to escape.

A thundering roar disturbed the clashing of blades, freezing the attackers to where they stood. The man attacking Nick looked up and past his head to the sky. His mouth opened and his face paled.

Nick slowly turned his head, peeking over his shoulder. His lungs suddenly burned for oxygen. A huge, green, snarling dragon was swooping down toward them. Nick froze with fear. He was truly seeing a dragon. A real live dragon!

Kel had told him that Jax was a dragon, but Nick hadn’t really believed it. Yes, Jax, he knew, was not quite human, but he couldn’t picture her beautiful, sultry body as anything other than what it seemed.

Nick locked eyes with the dragon. The glowing red orbs flared with anger. Immediately he knew it was Jax. Nick was a believer. Jax was a dragon. A large, scary dragon.

Nick ducked, closing his eyes, positive he was her target. She’d already tried to kill him once. A wild rush of wind surrounded his body as she flew over him, but the feel of her claws tearing into his body never came. A scream sounded a fraction of a second later and

when Nick opened his eyes, the man who had been threatening him was in fact Jax's victim, her claws already shredding into his body.

"Wow," he said with awe at her massive strength while shivering with fear for the same reason.

An arrow shot past Nick's line of sight and hit Jax in the shoulder. She screeched, the sound like nails raking down a chalkboard, and she dropped the would-be attacker, his remains hitting the ground with a sloppy plop. Despite being injured, Jax didn't crash to the earth. How tough was that?

Kel was still busy fighting off his two opponents who, though bloody, were not showing signs of backing off. This left Nick. But what could he do? He didn't have his gun. No sword, not that he knew how to fight with one. Only a rock...and a good throwing arm.

Nick swallowed hard, pushing past the pain and forcing himself to move as fast as he could toward the area from which the arrow had been shot. He was sure the archer's attention was on Jax, who was heading toward the men fighting Kel. She wasn't giving up. Kel was still fighting. Nick wasn't about to hide like a frightened kitten. There had to be something he could do.

Jax had just narrowly evaded another hit with an arrow, sending her back in the air for another try at those fighting Kel.

The archer wasn't well hidden. Nick found his blond mop of hair easily in the shrubbery. The perpetrator was pulling back on his bow, already aiming for another shot. Nick had to take action before it was too late.

Nick threw the rock, willing his aim to be on the mark. It hit the archer on the side of the head, hard. It was enough to make the man's shot go wild and miss Jax by at least five feet. Without thought, Nick rushed the man like a football player, using his body weight to knock him to the ground.

Irrepressible anger swelled in Nick. He was pissed and tired of screwing with self-control. He let the archer take the brunt of Nick's confused emotions that had been building since finding himself so far from home and the life he knew.

"Nicholas." The voice broke through his haze of red. "Nicholas, stop."

Nick looked up, feeling dazed and lost. His hands were hurting and blood was splattered around him.

"He's down. Help me with Jax." It was Kel and he sounded worried.

Nick looked down at the man he was straddling. The bow and arrows lay to the side where the man dropped them. The man, though...he was well beaten, groaning, and in a lot of pain, from the looks of him.

Kel offered his hand. Nick took it, still feeling dazed from the adrenaline rush. He let Kel help him up, swaying slightly, but the dizziness quickly passed. His leg was throbbing mercilessly, but he clenched his teeth and looked to where Kel had been fighting. One man lay in an unrecognizable bloody heap several feet from them. Nick had to assume Jax got him. The other lay still on the ground, a pool of blood surrounding him.

Nick turned his back on the assailant he'd beaten the shit out of and started hobbling back toward the house. He heard a grunt, then silence. The world did a funky little twirl on him as he turned back, almost toppling over. Once his vision cleared and the world stopped spinning, Nick took in the sight of Kel standing over the archer, his sword buried deep in the man's chest.

Nick's mouth opened and closed silently, taking in the bloody scene. Without warning, images bombarded him. The shocked expression on Kathy's face as Bronson sliced her throat. The infernal circle on the floor spotted by helpless victims' blood. The endless flow of blood, its heavy, metallic smell. He could almost hear Bronson's laughter echoing in his head. Before the memories could firmly take hold, Nick vehemently shoved the thoughts away. He focused his eyes on the scene before him. In the archer's hand was a dagger and he noticed

that the man wasn't lying the way Nick had left him. Nick had only turned his back for a few seconds, but the archer had continued to try to attack them.

Kel pulled the sword from the man's chest.

"Stubborn," Nick mumbled, swallowing the bile rising in his throat. He wouldn't vomit. Not now. Not in front of Kel.

Kel nodded in agreement. "Paid henchmen. They will do anything for the right money. Come. Jax needs our help."

Kel took Nick's arm and pulled him past the dead bodies and into the house to the room by the kitchen as fast as Nick could limp. On the small bed lay Jax in her human form. An arrow was sticking out of her left shoulder. Tears ran from her eyes and her breathing was heavy. Pain etched her striking features. Nick's heart ached. He understood the type of pain she was in. Okay, he'd never been shot by an arrow, but he figured being stabbed with a dagger was close enough to sympathize.

"What do I do?" The haze was gone. His shock would have to wait until later. Right now Jax was hurt and needed help. Looking at Kel for the first time since the fighting stopped, he saw that he was injured also. Spots of blood bloomed here and there on his shirt.

It looked like it was Nick's turn to play nurse.

Chapter Eight

“We need to get this arrow out of her,” Kel said, grabbing up a variety of towels and laying them out around Jax. “It didn’t go all the way through so I can’t cut the tip off. I’ll need your help holding her still.”

Nick nodded. His First Responder classes were coming back to him. But did they apply to dragons?

It was crazy. Dragons. There really were dragons in this world. He’d held out hope that it was all just some delusion, but he knew what he’d seen. Jax was a dragon. One that had shredded two men.

“Lie on top. She’s strong, so you’ll need to use your weight to help keep her still while I pull out the arrow and tend to the wound. If we’re lucky, she’ll pass out.”

“I am not a weakling,” Jax snapped through clenched teeth, her gaze cutting to Nick. Sweat rolled down her pale face; her body trembled.

“Of course not, my dragon,” Kel soothed her, brushing her hair from her face tenderly before laying a loving kiss on her forehead.

Nick felt a tightening in his chest at the affection of Kel’s tone. He’d been busy with his own fight, lost in the oblivion of his own mind, but for a split second before that, he got the

sense that Jax and Kel were the perfect partners. It was something Nick had never had in either his job or his personal life.

Nick moved to lie on top of Jax. She was petite, but he knew she was stronger than she looked, having experienced it up close and personal. Trying to be gentle, so as not to jar her, he shifted his body so his hips were level with hers, his legs entwining around hers, and his arms lying across her chest. He looked up at Kel and nodded. Kel tore the material of her shirt from the wound.

"I'll make this quick." Before Kel finished the sentence, he pulled the arrow out.

Jax let out an ungodly screech Nick wasn't sure a throat could even make. He winced, and would have cupped his hands over his ears to protect them from the piercing sound if only they weren't so busy holding Jax down to the bed. Just as Nick expected, she was very strong, her body arching up and trying to buck him off as the pain ripped through her.

It tore at his conscience to watch her in such agony. Nick did the only thing he could think of. Tightening his hold on her legs and bracing himself the best he could, he slipped a free hand up to Jax's face. He gently caressed her cheek and softly spoke soothing words. Or at least he thought they were soothing words.

Jax calmed almost immediately to his touch. Her breath still came harshly, but at least she'd stopped her screeching. A welcome respite to Nick's ears. She whimpered when Kel gently probed the wound with his fingers, inspecting it.

"Almost done, Jax. I've got to clean it before I can wrap it. Do you understand?"

Jax nodded and bit her lip.

"This isn't going to be pleasant, Nicholas," Kel said, picking up a bottle filled with clear liquid. It reminded Nick of rubbing alcohol. "Distract her."

"Distract her?" How in the world do you distract a dragon?

“Just do something,” Kel demanded as he pressed a towel to her wound to help slow the bleeding. “In five seconds I’ll be pouring this tacumroot on her and she’ll scream again. If you distract her, it won’t be so bad.”

Nick surveyed the room, looking for a way to distract Jax. He found nothing helpful. Looking down at her, he gazed at her lush red lips. Despite her pain, they were parted and looking very kissable. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kel lifting the bottle and tilting it to pour.

Taking a risk and leaving his life to his libido, Nick kissed Jax. It was harsh and demanded her attention. Her response was hesitant, showing her shock at his actions, but she opened her mouth to him and returned the kiss with fervor.

Kel poured the liquid on her wound, making Jax arch her back again as she tried to pull away from the source of the pain. Nick wouldn’t let her. He tightened his hold and deepened the kiss, his tongue devouring her mouth, forcing her to respond to him instead of to the pain. His cock flooded with blood and hardened, reacting to Jax’s heated answer to their kiss. He ground his hips brutally into hers, pinning her to the bed, showing her how she made his body react.

Nick’s head spun with lust. The room around them faded. There was no attack, no wound, no Kel. Just him and Jax. Together, entwined in heated passion.

Jax’s scent surrounded him, her sweetness intoxicating. Her uninjured arm rose, fingers tangling in his hair, not letting him move away. Not that he wanted to at that moment.

Nick shuddered, aroused more than ever before in his life. He needed Jax like a drug addict needed his next fix. It didn’t matter that she had red eyes and green skin. It didn’t matter that she was a dragon or that she’d tried to throttle him. It didn’t matter that she and Kel were lovers. Right now, she was in *his* arms. She was responding to *his* kiss, her mouth hot insistent against his, her body rubbing against his, in time with his movements, making him lose his breath and his reason.

He groaned as he slid his hand from her hair to her breast. It was full and firm. His fingers squeezed the flesh, damning the barrier of cloth blocking her skin from his touch.

“Jax,” Nick groaned against her lips.

“Nick,” she sighed softly, her body relaxing beneath him.

“Holy Mother.” Nick ground his cock harder against her, desperately craving relief. Needing to feel her heat surrounding him, milking him, making them one.

Nick pulled away slightly so he could look into her eyes. Red, mystifying eyes. They glowed brightly. He saw the same confusion that he felt illuminated in her eyes. Her eyes, laced with the lust that mirrored his own.

How could he feel so attracted to someone who disliked him so much? How was it that in the days since waking here with Kel and his dragon, he’d felt more at home than he ever had in Miami? He didn’t miss the computers and cell phones. The hustle and bustle of the big city no longer called to him. There was something about this place that made his insides hum, especially when he’d stood outside, and now here, drowning in Jax’s eyes. He felt almost at peace.

“It’s done.” Kel’s voice invaded his thoughts, breaking the moment.

Nick glanced to Jax’s left shoulder and found it freshly bandaged. He hadn’t realized how much time had passed. A rush of breath left Nick’s lungs at the turn of events and his cheeks flushed pink at losing himself so in the kiss.

“Damn,” he said, his curse almost inaudible. Nick wanted to curl into a ball and suffocate in the frustration of his aching body.

Looking back at Jax, he found her eyes closed and her face completely relaxed. Her breath had stabilized. Jax had finally fainted.

Nick’s head dropped. He forced himself to get his body back under control. Using great care, he shifted off of Jax and got off the bed without disturbing her.

“Will she be okay?”

“Dragons heal fast. By the morning she’ll be as good as new.” Kel gathered all the towels and put them in a pile by the door.

Looking for a distraction, Nick turned to Kel, seeing his bloodstained shirt.

“Your turn.”

Chapter Nine

"I'm fine." Kel busied himself with the cleanup. He was trying to do anything to keep his mind from thinking of Jax and Nicholas kissing. His emotions were a jumbled mess. Watching them together had been arousing. His blood heated as it found its way to his cock. Yet another part of him was demanding that he pull Nicholas away. That Jax was all his. A mixture of anger and jealousy. Kel wasn't sure if he wanted to kiss Nicholas or punch him.

"You're hurt. Grab some stuff to clean your wounds and I'll do it for you."

Kel hesitated, looking over his shoulder. Nicholas still stood beside Jax's bed. Blood, thankfully not his own, covered his shirt. His cock was hard and tenting his pants, but Nicholas seemed oblivious.

Kel sighed, giving in, and nodded. Gathering up some clean cloths and the bottle of tacumroot, he started toward the door.

"Let's go to the kitchen to do this. Jax needs her rest."

Nicholas followed him out of the room and waited by the table while Kel closed the door to Jax's room and placed the things in his hands on the table. Kel started lifting his shirt but stopped, wincing and biting back a groan of pain. Now that Jax was cared for, his body's pain was finally surfacing.

“Let me help.” The proximity of Nicholas’s voice made Kel jump, not expecting him to be so close.

He felt gentle hands pulling at the shirt, easing it over his head. winced when the cloth pulled away from the cuts, stuck to the wounds with dried blood. Nicholas threw the shirt on the floor and immediately surveyed the damage to Kel’s torso. There were five cuts total. He’d have had less if he’d been in his armor.

“They aren’t too deep. All but the one on your side have stopped bleeding already. You were lucky.”

Kel nodded in agreement. He was well trained, but even he had limits when his opponents had the advantage of surprise.

“Hold this while I clean the others.” Nicholas pressed a towel to the bleeding slice that lay just above his waist.

He poured some of the tacumroot on a cloth and started dabbing it gently on the cuts on Kel’s shoulder, back, and biceps. Kel winced as the cleansing liquid soaked into the wounds, but he stayed still and let Nicholas work.

A shiver slipped up Kel’s spine when Nicholas paused in his treatment and lightly traced the mark on his right shoulder. The touch was tender, almost loving.

“This is an incredible tattoo. Who designed it?”

Kel glanced over his shoulder. “It’s the mark of a rider. It appears on the human when the rider and dragon become bondmates.” Being on his right shoulder, Kel rarely thought of the mark.

“On Earth there is a long history of being marked as a show of possession.” Nicholas started dabbing at a wound.

“Jax and I are partners. Neither of us owns the other, but we work together as one.”

Silence settled for a couple of minutes, Nicholas not responding to his explanation.

“So who were those men?”

"They work for Merrill," Kel answered, glad for the distraction from the pain and change of subject. It was obvious that Nicholas was uncomfortable discussing his and Jax's relationship.

"And Merrill is...?" he asked, pouring more tacumroot on his towel.

"A sorcerer who thinks he is the law in Lexicon."

"Wait. A sorcerer?"

Kel looked over his shoulder.

"Sorcerers exist here also? How about leprechauns? Or sprites?" Nicholas laughed. "Or maybe unicorns?"

Kel shook his head and wished there was an easier way to help Nicholas adjust to this world.

"I don't know what those are. But Merrill is evil to the core. Thinks he can do as he will with people. Especially those that are innocent or refuse to join in his madness. He was once on the Grand Council for Ketall. He pushed for the slavery amendment."

"What is that?" Nicholas started working on the cut on his biceps.

"Those who could not pay their debts when due were to work it off in slavery. But now, it's more than that. Criminals are being sold off as slaves. Those found hurt or wandering, like yourself, become victims. Because of Merrill's greed, men and women have been set up to become slaves due to false debts."

"So what happened? I mean, why isn't he on this Grand Council anymore?"

Kel hissed when he hit a particularly sensitive spot. Nicholas paused.

"No, keep going. It just burns."

When Nicholas continued his doctoring, Kel turned his attention to the discussion instead of his discomfort.

“The Grand Council found out about Merrill’s other dirty deeds and how he used magic to deceive and influence those around him, which is against our highest code of ethics. They sentenced him to death, but his followers helped him escape before his sentence could be carried out. He’s been terrorizing Lexicon for nearly eight cycles.”

“And no one has been able to catch him?” Nicholas removed Kel’s hand from the cloth he was holding to his side. It had mostly stopped bleeding, but it was a nasty cut. Thanks to his bond with Jax, he too healed quickly. He knew that in a day or two it would just be a faint scar.

He watched Nicholas clean the wound as gently as he could. It amazed him how delicate his touch was. The thought of having those hands sliding along his body, caressing his bare skin, sent raging heat to Kel’s groin. The image of Nicholas grinding against Jax flashed in his mind, turning the heat to a blazing fire and hardening his cock. He wanted to feel Nicholas doing that to him, to have him press his thick cock against Kel’s own.

“Kel?”

Kel shook his head slightly to rid the images from his mind and focus back on the conversation.

“No. He remains elusive. Last report was that he’d moved into the northern territory.”

Nicholas started wrapping a bandage around his waist. “Why did they come here?”

“I’m on top of Merrill’s enemy list.”

“Because you and Jax foil him at every turn?” He taped the bandage in place.

“Something like that.” Kel chuckled.

“Like some superhero show.” Nicholas shook his head.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll explain it later. You’re all done. The bandage isn’t too tight, is it?”

Shifting his weight to the side and moving his arms, Kel winced, but it wasn’t so painful as to be unbearable.

“It’s good. Thank you.” He turned to Nicholas, unable to resist looking down at his crotch. His pants weren’t tented as before, but it was evident he was still aroused. “Nicholas, about earlier.” Kel stepped closer until they were standing toe to toe.

“Don’t worry about it.” Nicholas’s cheeks flushed pink. “It was just --”

He never finished his sentence because Kel’s lips fell upon his, cutting off further conversation.

Kel was demanding in his kiss, wanting to devour Nicholas’s very essence. Pleasure drifted through his soul when the man eagerly opened his mouth and returned the kiss with the same zeal. Reaching out, Kel pulled him closer, embracing him in his arms. Nicholas didn’t resist, didn’t pull away, but leaned into him.

Sighing, Kel deepened the kiss, changing it from harsh and demanding to a softer, deeper, more languorous passion. A hand slid down Nicholas’s backside to rest on his ass, fingers squeezing the muscled flesh. Kel swallowed Nicholas’s groan, his cock pulsating, throbbing with need.

Kel jumped when Nicholas’s hand slid over his crotch and gave his hardened, leather-clad cock a squeeze.

Kel pulled away, his breath harsh, his chest heaving. “Nicholas, I...”

Nicholas placed his fingers over Kel’s lips. “I don’t want to talk anymore.”

Kel closed his mouth, his stomach fluttering in anticipation. His hands trembled as he reached out and touched the other man’s shoulders. Hadn’t he been dreaming of this moment since Nicholas barreled into his life? Wasn’t this what he wanted? So why was he nervous?

Nicholas’s fingers made quick work of Kel’s pants; he drew out his aching cock and wrapped his warm fingers around the thick flesh. Kel wanted to tell him how much he wanted this. Wanted to tell him how much the man had occupied his dreams, how much he’d longed for a touch, a kiss.

Kel grabbed the man's wrist, stopping him from stroking. Nicholas looked up, confusion flickering in his expression.

"Bed," Kel whispered and started back to his room. If this was finally going to happen, he didn't want their first time together to be in his kitchen.

Nicholas kept hold of Kel's cock as they walked through the hall toward the opposite bedroom. Kel smiled, finding it amusing that he wouldn't relinquish his hold. His own anticipation rose when they stopped and Nicholas kissed him. It was gentle, exploratory. Kel leaned against him but groaned in disappointment to find his skin brushing on cloth instead of hot skin.

"Clothes. Off. Now." Kel nipped at Nicholas's bottom lip, his hands already shoving the waist of the other man's pants down impatiently.

Nicholas chuckled and the sound shot lightning through his veins.

"Demanding, aren't you?" Nicholas was forced to release his hold on Kel's cock to remove his shirt and pants.

Kel took the opportunity to shed himself of his pants and boots. He looked up and gasped, taking in the beautiful masculinity of Nicholas standing before him completely nude.

"You like?" His smile was full of self-confidence, almost arrogant, yet flirty.

"Who wouldn't?" Kel stepped up and touched Nicholas's chest, his fingers slowly sliding down, feeling the muscles under his touch and following the trail of hair to his cock standing ready.

Nicholas moaned as Kel's fingertip swirled around his cock's head. It dripped with precum, tempting him. Kel's gaze lowered, landing on the healing knife wound on Nicholas's thigh.

"Does it hurt?"

"Very much." Nicholas nibbled at Kel's unhurt shoulder.

"I was talking about your leg." His lips twitched into an amused smile.

“Oh, um.” Nicholas’s cheeks flushed again. “Yeah. It throbs like hell.”

“You should lie down.” Kel’s smile widened. “In fact, I think we should both lie down.”

Nicholas nodded. He turned and lay upon the bed. Kel followed, sitting on the bed facing him.

“I should look at your wound. Make sure you didn’t reinjure it.” Kel didn’t wait for a response as he bent down and laid kisses around the scarring skin. His fingers gently massaged Nicholas’s thigh, feeling the muscles relax under his touch. Slowly, he moved up, his mouth and fingers getting closer to the thick shaft just inches from his face.

Unable to resist the temptation any longer, Kel used his tongue to lap at the fluid pooled on the tip. Nicholas’s hips jerked upward.

“Wait.” The tone made Kel look up. “What...what about Jax,” Nicholas breathed.

“What about her?” Kel’s brows drew together.

“You’re lovers, right?” Nicholas propped up his torso using his elbows and looked down at Kel.

Kel shrugged, but his eyes were on the twitching cock before him. “Dragons bond with their rider. Part of that process is sex.”

“But you love her.”

Kel looked up and met Nicholas’s eyes. He loved looking into the sea green pools, especially when they glittered with desire.

“Yes, I love Jax. I will be bonded to her until I die. But I want you, Nicholas. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew that I needed you.”

Nicholas shivered as Kel let his fingers brush down his soon-to-be-lover’s cock.

“You were sent here, Nicholas. You were meant for me to find. For you to come into our lives.”

“But...” He tried to argue, but Kel refused to listen, sucking him deep into his mouth.

Kel groaned, reveling in the salty male taste. His tongue lapped at the hot flesh in his mouth as he sucked in more until the mushroom head lay at the back of his throat. Relaxing the muscles in his throat, Kel drew even more of Nicholas into him.

“Shit.” Nicholas’s body jerked in pleasure. He reached for Kel’s cock and started stroking the heated length, matching Kel’s rhythm.

Kel whimpered at the onslaught of sensations. He was going mad with lust, so close to the edge. As much as he wanted it to last longer, to draw out their first time together as long as possible, Kel knew his control was lost.

Giving Nicholas several little nips with his teeth, then scraping them over the sensitive flesh, Kel sucked harder. He began thrusting his hips, helping Nicholas, who was arching his back, body trembling, cock swelling.

“Kel!” Nicholas cried out as he flooded Kel’s throat with his seed.

Kel, feeling the heat of cum assaulting his throat, responded by falling over the edge and releasing his own load, moaning in satisfaction. His body shuddered in relief before falling to the side, panting.

“I thought we were supposed to be resting,” Nicholas huffed, amusement tickling his tone.

Kel pushed his body up and met the man’s gaze. His lips formed a wicked grin. “I’ll rest just fine if you promise to stay in bed with me tonight.”

Nicholas’s eyes grazed over Kel’s nude body, the corner of his lips hinting at a smile. He nodded. “I think it’s a promise I can keep.”

Chapter Ten

“Teach me to fight with a sword,” Nick said, watching Kel practice, not once letting his healing wounds slow him down.

Kel stopped midswing and looked at him.

“You really want to learn?”

Nick nodded. “Where I’m from we use guns, not swords. I’m a quick study. And until I can find some way to get back home, it looks like I’m stuck here. The last thing I want to be is a helpless target. It’s not my style.”

“You still think you can find a way home?”

Nick sensed disappointment in Kel’s tone. Yes, they had become lovers the night before, but that didn’t mean Nick had given up all hope of getting back to his world. He had to find a way to reverse whatever Bronson had done without the blood of ten people...or was it eleven, since Bronson had bled in the circle also? He didn’t know if it was false hope, but it was better than none.

“I’ve got to try. If there are dragons, sorcerers, and magic here in this world, someone has to know what it was Bronson was trying to do and where he screwed up. Maybe something in all of those books you have will be of some help.”

Kel nodded, but his shoulders slumped. It made Nick's chest ache for hurting him like that, but he refused to lie to Kel or himself. He couldn't give up hope. Not yet.

"It is possible. Ketall's source of energy is a mystery. Even for the dragons that have a sliver of it running in their veins. If there is a way to get you back home, we'll find it."

The words Kel spoke sounded a little forced, but Nick felt the sincerity behind them. "Thank you, Kel."

Kel gave a slight nod. "Get the other sword from my room and I'll teach you."

Like a little kid rushing to the tree on Christmas morning, Nick hurried off into the house, glad to have something to do. Perhaps the next time they were attacked, he would actually be of more use. Of course, he knew the people here had been training since they were big enough to hold a sword. But like he told Kel, he was a quick learner, graduating first in his police academy class. Then he'd made detective status fairly easily after he'd satisfied the required years on the street.

When Nick went back outside Kel was waiting for him, his long, ash blond hair rustling in the wind. Shivers wracked his body, remembering how it felt to have that hair fall softly on his skin. How it felt to have those strong hands, so graceful with a sword, touch him with great fervor.

Shaking the distracting thoughts from his mind, Nick stood in front of Kel, sword tip lifted to the sky, mirroring his lover's stance.

"Ready?" Kel asked.

"Let's rock."

A second later Nick barely blocked the swing of thick blade that crashed against his own sword. He wondered now if it was a mistake asking Kel to teach him.

* * * * *

Jax brushed the dark hair from Nick's still face. He was relaxed in sleep, looking much like a child. Of course, compared to her age, he *was* a child. Her gaze shifted to Kel, who had Nick cradled to his chest protectively. He slept as well. The scent of sex still lingered in the room. Her blood heated with desire and moistness pooled between her thighs.

A war raged inside her. One moment she wanted to yell and scream with frustration and anger. Kel, *her* rider, had taken this beast as his lover. Jealousy ate at her stomach like acid. Her fingers twitched and she had to push back the urge to shift.

The next moment, she felt alone. Deserted. Abandoned. But Jax knew Kel wouldn't do that. Couldn't do that. He needed her as much as she needed him. They were bonded and only death could separate them.

Jax blinked away tears as she wished she were cradled between them. Her gaze lowered and roamed Nick's nakedness, remembering how his body had felt pressed against hers. His thick cock grinding hard on her. How delicious his kisses had tasted. How warm his touch had been and the way his voice had soothed her when she was in so much pain.

"Nick." His name slipped from her lips. Kel called him Nicholas, but Jax liked the shorter version of his name. Simple, like hers.

She was conflicted with so many emotions, she hadn't a clue how to deal with them all. She was a dragon. She had a duty to protect the innocent, to trust in her rider, to share a special bond with her rider. She knew how to feel about these things. This beast, Nick, had shaken up her life. Taken all she knew and turned it to chaos.

Her initial urge was to kill him, to rid herself of this man who caused her so much confusion and threatened to take what was hers. But she couldn't. If Kel was right, which he usually was, Nick was somehow her bondmate also. By dragon law, hers to take -- and protect -- as she wished.

Kel shifted in his sleep and pulled Nick closer, as if sensing danger. Was she a danger to Nick? No, she'd found that she couldn't outright kill him, but surely there were other ways to rid herself of the beast.

But could she do it? Could she take the happiness that shone in Kel's eyes since the two men had become lovers? Kel had told her that she'd have two of them to play with if they could get Nick to stay with them and bond with her. But what if they no longer wanted her? Could the bond between dragon and rider be broken after all? It was unheard of. But then, so was a dragon with two bondmates at once.

If Nick were bound to her, wouldn't that eliminate the jealousy? Even at her young age, Jax knew to be wary. No, it had never happened before. So how could Kel be so sure they could make it work?

She lightly ran her fingertip down Nick's cheek, feeling the heat of his body seeping into hers with the slight contact. She shivered as her stomach fluttered and hot juices seeped from her body. Her flesh wanted him. Her mind protested it. Her heart, the one to resolve the dispute, was uncertain.

Sighing, Jax stood and left the room as silently as she'd entered, unaware of the dark gray eyes that had silently watched her retreat.

Chapter Eleven

Nick swung his sword confidently, only to be parried and slapped across his ribs with the flat of Kel's sword in a counterswing.

"Damn it!" Nick cursed through clenched teeth. His arms ached from the long hours he'd spent over the last two days learning how to use a sword. His ribs hurt from Kel slapping the heavy metal against them time and time again, showing him how vulnerable that part of his body was.

Kel chuckled and lowered his sword. "Let's take a break. You've worked hard this morning."

Nick scowled, hating that it was harder than it looked to actually learn how to fight with swords. The movies made it look so easy. Even Kel made it look simple. So why wasn't he picking it up quicker? Maybe because he kept getting distracted by Kel's graceful moves...or his tight ass and muscular arms. Or perhaps it was the way Nick lost all logical thought when he gazed into Kel's stormy eyes. Everything about Kel was sexy from his long, silky hair to the agility in his every movement. The man simply oozed raw vigor.

Sighing, Nick begrudgingly nodded and placed his sword on the nearby table. Kel swiftly approached and kissed him. Nick relaxed immediately, his agitation melting away

under his lover's touch. It was hard to believe that it had only been two days since he and Kel had become lovers, only two days in which they'd enjoyed their time exploring each other's bodies and delving into carnal pleasures. Only two days since Merrill's men had attacked.

Jax was healed. She made herself scarce, yet hovered nearby as if anticipating another attack. When she was around, she spoke only to Kel, and when she happened to look at Nick, her eyes would blaze red. Just being in her presence brought Nick mixed feelings of lust and fear. He too had avoided her, unsure of his perplexing feelings.

"You make it look so effortless," Nick complained, taking a sip of water.

"All things done correctly appear effortless."

"You sound like some Chinese proverb," Nick laughed.

Kel smiled and shrugged. "I've been swinging a sword since I was strong enough to lift one."

"I really miss my gun."

Hoofbeats in the distance interrupted their conversation, approaching fast upon them. Kel quickly raised his sword and moved in front of Nick, who grabbed for his own sword.

Overhead, Jax flew toward them and settled down just behind them, the three watching their visitor approach. If it was another attack, they were being sloppy, announcing their arrival to their intended targets. Or maybe that was the trick. Get their attention from one direction and ambush from a different way. Nick shifted his body to the side, glancing behind them in search of the slightest movement.

A mere boy, no older than twelve years old, came rushing at them on a brown horse. The horse cantered to a stop just two feet from where Kel stood. The boy jumped down and bowed from the waist.

"Rider Targus, I am Bram and was sent to request your aid." The boy was breathless.

"Where are you from?" Kel's tone was calm, with only a hint of suspicion despite the urgency in the child's voice and actions.

"Willotha." The boy glanced at Jax, his eyes widening with fear as she coldly regarded him. He took a step back, bumping into his horse that neighed a protest. Nick could relate. He'd been fighting the urge to back away from her since she had landed, though he wasn't sure if it was from fear, the sheer size of her, or the prickling lust coursing along his skin.

"My village has been attacked. The men not out hunting were killed and the women and children rounded up. Our patriarch helped me escape to retrieve you. Please. Our village is small. My mother and sisters..." He stopped in a sob.

Nick could only imagine the terror and grief the boy was going through. From what he'd seen of this world, it was similar to the medieval times of his own world. Their ways were simple, their technology primitive. It was a time when family really meant something. Yet, like home, it held violence and heartbreak.

Kel nodded. "Stay here. Nicholas will give you some food and allow you to rest."

Bram shook his head. "I'm not a child. I won't hide. I want to help."

Kel kneeled so he was eye level with the child. "No, you are not a child. You have been very brave and ridden a long way to get us." His tone was smooth and understanding. "But your horse needs rest also. Jax is swift and can get me to your village much faster. Take advantage of my hospitality. Once you are rested, you can start back to your village."

Bram nodded, though Nick could see he wanted to argue, but his respect for the man -- or perhaps it was his fear of the dragon? -- prevented further protest.

"I want to go with you," Nick said quietly. "I can help."

Kel rose and closed the distance between them, unconcerned with the sets of watchful eyes. "I know, but you aren't ready. You haven't even ridden Jax yet. I can't risk your safety." He lifted his hand and brushed tenderly over Nick's cheek. It was a simple gesture, but it held more emotion than his words.

Nick silently cursed not being armed with his own weapons in this backward world. He too was tempted to argue with Kel, but held his tongue as those soft lips pressed on his, full of passion and want. Nick responded in kind, hating that they would be parted.

Kel broke away and went into the house without another word. Nick felt at a loss. His stomach churned with foreboding. Something wasn't right, he knew it instinctively. But Kel had a duty. One Nick was very aware of.

Taking a deep breath, Nick turned to Jax. She stared down at him with those extraordinary brilliant eyes. He swallowed hard before he spoke.

"Something is amiss, Jax. My gut is telling me something is very wrong with this."

Jax lowered her head and tilted it. Her hot breath rushed Nick's body. Still, he didn't back up.

"The attack here. Now on this village. Merrill is supposed to be in the northern territory. Why are his men here?"

Nick knew Jax understood him. He just didn't have the bond that allowed her to communicate back to him.

With a trembling hand, Nick reached out and touched the tip of her nose. She didn't flinch away. Fire didn't erupt from her mouth. Good sign, right? Taking a chance, he caressed her nose like he'd seen Kel do. The scales were as smooth as glass under his touch and he wondered if they felt like that all over her body. Jax surprised him by letting out a low, deep growl, but instead of baring her teeth or pulling away, she pushed harder in on his hand. The way she did with Kel.

Feeling braver, Nick gently rubbed her snout with both hands, ever mindful of the teeth just an inch away. The growl eased into a softer sound. Almost like a feline purr. As if she was enjoying his touch.

"Take care of Kel." His hands stroked down her neck, his courage growing. "Take care of yourself, too. Both of you come back to me."

Jax shoved her head against Nick, startling him, but she did it gently. Much like a cat would brush against a leg showing affection.

Kel walked from the house at that moment wearing his chain mail armor. His sword was sheathed in his scabbard at his waist. His expression spoke of his resolve to settle the conflict in Willotha.

And he looked sexy as all get out.

Jax knelt low, allowing Kel to jump on her back. "Be safe, Nicholas."

"You, too," Nick said, watching Jax lift into the sky, taking his lover into battle.

Turning, he found Bram wide-eyed in awe at the large dragon setting off toward his village.

"Yeah, I feel the same way, kid."

Chapter Twelve

Kel leaped from Jax's back the moment her feet touched the ground. He bolted for their home only to skid to a stop when he entered. The house was in complete disarray, bearing witness to the struggle that had taken place. Kel's eyes searched the room for further clues and found Nicholas's sword lying discarded on the floor. There were also some drops of blood scattered by it.

"Nicholas," he called out, but knew no one would answer. Still, he went from room to room searching. When he came to Jax's room, he found Bram hiding in the corner behind several boxes.

"Where's Nicholas?" he demanded of the boy.

"They took him." Tears ran down the poor frightened boy's cheeks.

"Who?" Kel practically screamed.

"I don't know. There were three men, and a woman who called herself Tempest. He fought them, but he..." The boy started sobbing, unable to continue.

Seeing the fear in the young boy's eyes after having been through so many traumatic events in one day, Kel sighed and forced himself to be more understanding. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he focused on the boy again.

“What happened, Bram?” His tone was softer now, more under control.

“I woke when they broke down the door. I wanted to go out there and help, but I was scared. I hid in here. I was afraid they would take me too.”

Kel laid his hand on Bram’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m not mad. You did the right thing. Nicholas wouldn’t have wanted you to come out.”

“It was a setup,” Jax said, stating a fact, not questioning it. She stood behind Kel with a sword of her own in hand. As with her clothing, she could materialize a variety of weapons.

Kel nodded. “They were after Nicholas the entire time.”

By the time Jax and Kel had reached Willlotha, Merrill’s men were gone. The women and children were safe, but the patriarch was dead, as were several of the younger men.

Kel stared at Bram. He’d been plagued with uneasiness since the youth’s appearance. None of what had been happening lately added up. Merrill’s attack on him and Nicholas. The sudden attack to a village so far south in the territory. None of it made sense, even for Merrill.

“Why?” Jax questioned.

“I don’t know.” Kel felt lost. Nicholas wasn’t of this world. What did Merrill and his witch want with him?

“What do we do?”

“Somehow we find him,” Kel said bitterly.

Jax bit back the anger raging inside of her. Seeing the defeated look on Kel’s face and hearing the despair in his voice was tearing her apart. How dare Merrill take Nick? How dare he take what was not his, but hers?

The thought startled Jax. Her breath rushed from her lungs at the realization. Kel was right. A dragon is drawn to her bondmate, regardless. She’d just been too jealous and childish to see Nick for who he was.

But would Nick accept her? Doubt crept at the edges of her mind. She'd never felt doubt before, always knowing what she was, always secure about her place in the world.

She shook off the thoughts, annoyed. First they had to get Nick back from Merrill. Then she would apologize for her despicable attitude and deal with their future.

"Take Bram and wait for me outside."

Kel tilted his head, his brows drawn together in confusion. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Nick."

Kel opened his mouth to speak, to ask how, but the deep growl from her throat stopped his words.

Watching them leave, Jax let out the breath she was holding. There were ways for a dragon to find her bondmate. Dragons had a ritual that was not known to or ever witnessed by humans. A ritual she'd only performed once before. Jax noticed a pattern setting in, and she didn't like it. Finding her bondmate also meant saving his life.

Chapter Thirteen

"This is the man that is to cause my downfall, witch?" The man scowled down at Nick.

Nick scowled back, ignoring the pain coursing through his body, along with the crusted blood on his bottom lip, the swelling cheek, and the rope burns on his wrists. He knew he looked like shit from the beating he'd gotten back at Kel's house. But then, his attackers had not gone unscathed either. He was actually proud to have gravely injured one man with his sword.

"Yes, m'lord." Tempest stood right next to the six-feet-three man Nick assumed to be Merrill. "I've had several visions. He must leave this world if your plans to conquer Ketall are to be successful."

"He's but a *whipling*. Nothing more than an insect to swat away."

Nick ground his teeth. He was a decorated Miami police officer. He'd saved a great many lives in the line of duty and had taken down his share of bad guys.

"Yes, but his joining with Rider Targus and his dragon will be your death. We may already be too late. We must finish the spell and send him back from whence he came. Doing so will leave Rider Targus and his dragon vulnerable."

Merrill stood toe-to-toe with Nick and glared at him like he was a spot of dirt that dared to land on his clothing. This was the man who'd sent those lowlifes to attack Kel. This was the elusive sorcerer terrorizing Lexicon.

Nick wasn't impressed with this man. Merrill had long, black hair falling down his back, but it was thin. His brow was sharp with a widow's peak. Thin, harshly pointed, black eyebrows lay over striking silver eyes that flashed with power. His nose was thin and pointed to match the eyebrows. Though the man was lanky and lean, there was dark strength radiating from him. The black leather clothing he wore made his white skin look more blanched, like looking at an image from a work of vampire fiction.

"Bring him." Merrill walked away from Nick and farther into the caverns of the mountain.

Someone pushed Nick from behind. Reluctantly following Merrill and Tempest, Nick strove to understand what the woman had told Merrill. Nick was to be the cause of Merrill's death? How? And what did she mean about joining with Kel and Jax? He was only Kel's lover. Despite the underlying attraction to Jax, he doubted she would ever like him. That kiss they shared days before, that had just been a distraction from the pain she was enduring. Right?

Nick's thoughts stumbled when he walked into a large cavern lit only by candlelight. He stared, shocked, at the large circle drawn in the middle of the floor. Inside of it were markings he'd seen before. This was the same circle Bronson had drawn. The circle he used to murder his sacrifices in. This *déjà vu* wasn't a pleasant one.

Immediately Nick started backing away, only to be stopped by a large, muscled body. It was one of the men who'd helped kidnap him.

"No." Nick shook his head. The logical part of his brain knew that this was the way to get back home, but flashes of blood and death overrode logic and took him back to Bronson's victims. The killings and the cold, crazy light that had animated the madman's eyes as he

sliced Kathy's throat open. The healing scar on Nick's thigh throbbed, aching as if the knife still protruded from his body. Ghost pains seared his body as the details of that night surfaced. He could almost smell the stench of dried blood mixed with dust and the residue of his gun firing.

"Bring him," Merrill repeated.

Large hands on Nick's shoulders pushed him toward the circle. Nick fought, tried to escape, but with his hands bound behind his back he wasn't much of an adversary to his captors.

Other men approached once Nick was dragged into the center of the circle. The ropes binding his wrists were cut, only to be secured again above his head to a chain hanging from the darkness. Nick struggled against the bindings, but it was useless. He was trapped. It was becoming a horrible habit.

Tempest leaned against Nick, her breasts rubbing along his side. "You've seen this before, haven't you?" Her blood red lips were curved upward in a wicked smile.

Nick swallowed hard, trying to control his harsh breathing. His heart felt like it was ready to leap out of his chest. Sweat beaded on his forehead though the cavern was cool. Even if he wasn't fighting back old nightmares, he knew he'd be repulsed by the way she was mauling him. Yes, her slim frame held curves in all the right places, her face was a touch of beauty framed by golden blonde hair, but her eyes sent chills to his bones. They were black as sin. Evil glimmered in their depths.

Her fingers brushed through his hair. Nick flinched at her touch and tried to pull away. Her fingers balled into a fist, yanking his hair and causing him to gasp with pain. It was the pain that brought some clarity to his memory-ridden mind, enabling him to think beyond the horrific images thrashing in his head. There were no bloodstains on the ground around him. It had taken Bronson ten sacrifices to do what he did. Tempest had insisted that they

get rid of him, but did that mean dying in the process? And would this really open the gate back to his world?

Tempest licked the side of Nick's face, her tongue lapping like a child's licking an all-day lollipop.

"It's a shame your time here is so short. I'd love a new play toy." She pulled his head back farther, stretching his neck so she could start biting along the sensitive skin.

"Stop." Nick whimpered as the painful nips trailed down to his collarbone. Her free hand grabbed his balls and squeezed, bringing an agonized whine to his throat.

His reaction was turning her on, he realized, as she rubbed her body against his and groaned softly like a lover caught in ecstasy.

"Witch!" Merrill barked.

Tempest slowly, reluctantly, released Nick. He didn't miss the hateful glare she shot Merrill.

"I can't have you ruining my plans, whipling. I'd rather just kill you, but the witch's visions are never wrong. I don't want to chance what she's seen if I just run my sword through your heart."

Nick shuddered. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this type of terror. If it weren't for Tempest, Nick realized that he'd already be dead at the hand of this man.

"What will happen?" Nick risked asking.

"It's not going to happen, so it's not your concern. What we are going to do is send you back to where you came from."

Hope flared in Nick's heart. Home. Back to Miami. Back to real civilization. Where there were cell phones, computers, cars, fast food, airplanes, and skyscrapers. No more swords, archers, or slaves. Back to his job with the police department, to his apartment, to...his lonely life.

No Kel. No Jax.

True, he and Jax didn't get along. That was putting it mildly. She hated him, but she was part of Kel's life. And in the short time he'd been in Ketall, he felt part of that family. He'd felt at home.

"The dragon will come for you. She'll walk right into our trap and she'll be mine."

"No, she won't. She hates me. She won't risk it," Nick argued.

"You are her rider's lover," Tempest whispered, pressing her chest to his back, her hands sliding around his ribs and under his shirt. Her touch sent shivers of revulsion through his body as his blood cooled like ice. Repulsed, he involuntarily jerked away from her. She clung tighter and laughed.

"Dragon's blood will send you on your way while the rest of her will allow me the power I desire to fulfill my plan." Merrill gave Nick a satisfied smirk.

"Kel would never allow harm to come to Jax."

"He will be dead," Merrill spat. "Rider Targus will no longer be a thorn in my side." He turned to Tempest. "Finish with your preparations, witch."

Merrill walked out, leaving Nick alone with Tempest.

She circled around to face him. Withdrawing a dagger from its sheath at her waist, Tempest used it to cut away Nick's shirt. Her gaze roamed his torso, her free hand trailing along his skin. He fought to keep his expression blank, to resist instinct and not recoil from her poisonous touch.

"You would make the perfect pet." Her fingers twisted his nipple, making him jerk as he bit back a whimper. "You are filled with the physical strength to endure my play." The fingers left his nipple and tapped at his temple. "And you would be easy to break mentally."

"Fuck you," Nick growled, annoyed that she'd picked up on his fragile mental state.

Tempest laughed, the sound rattling his nerves. "It's a shame to send you back. However, that doesn't mean you have to go back the same as you came."

Nick's eyes widened as he watched her raise the blade of the knife to his chest and place it against his skin. His pulse raced. Forcing his breath to keep steady, Nick steeled himself, discerning what kind of play she enjoyed. Obviously, play that caused the recipient an immense amount of pain.

Chapter Fourteen

“This is very likely a trap,” Kel whispered, dismounting from Jax and pulling his sword from its scabbard.

Of course it is. Her answer was a simple acknowledgment, not making Kel feel any better.

“How do you know Nicholas is here, Jax? This mountain is filled with tunnels and caverns, most leading nowhere but a dead end.” As he spoke, his eyes were searching the darkened cavern they’d just entered. From the echo of his voice and the way Jax was able to stay in her dragon form with plenty of space, he knew the cavern was large. It was hard to judge with so little light, but all appeared quiet and still.

How did I find you in the middle of a desert?

Kel sighed and moved farther into the darkness, though his instincts cried out to leave. He knew better than to question Jax’s abilities. There were just some things humans would never understand about dragons.

“A little light would be nice,” Kel muttered.

An instant later fire rushed along his right side, startling him, the flames lighting two sconces on the wall.

“Dragon’s breath, Jax. Next time warn me,” he scolded. He was about to turn and say more to her, but the sound of metal scraping caught his attention. The noise came from where the cavern narrowed to a tunnel. “Something doesn’t feel right.” He spoke so softly his voice was barely audible to human ears, but he knew Jax could hear him. Kel started walking toward the tunnel entrance.

No, wait, Kel, Jax warned, but it was too late.

Behind Jax a large boulder rolled to cover the opening just as a net fell on her. Kel turned his back to the tunnel entrance to help Jax, but quickly found that a mistake. A sharp blow to his lower back made him stumble forward, nearly falling to his knees. Pain tore through his body, stealing his breath. Turning back to the tunnel, forcing a gulp of air into his lungs, he swung his sword just in time to block a deadly strike from a man exiting the tunnel.

Kel countered and parried the attacker’s thrusts. It didn’t take long to bring his opponent to the ground, blood seeping from his neck wound. However, Kel had no reprieve as five men ran from the tunnel, taking their fallen companion’s place. He was outnumbered and unable to help Jax, but he didn’t give up. His cry of battle echoed in the cavern as he plunged his sword into the side of the first opponent to reach him.

Jax screeched as the net surrounded her body, trapping her wings at her sides. The thread was not the normal rope used to make nets, but threads seeping of magic. Dark, black magic that could scorch a heart. It seared her body, sucking her strength and bringing her to her knees. Jax opened her jaws but only her breath came out. No fire. Whatever spell that had made the net also prevented her from breathing fire.

Struggling, Jax clawed at the net, her teeth gnashing, but to no avail. Jax was ensnared and helpless.

“It’s useless, dragon.” A deep voice echoing in the cavern made her look up. Now lighted with a glow that seemed to come from nowhere, two people stood on the ledge above her.

Merrill and Tempest. Both wore smug expressions.

“Your essence is joining with the net, making its hold stronger. It won’t be long before it drains the life out of you.”

Jax growled, her struggles renewed.

Tempest laughed. “A stubborn one. Like her rider.” Her eyes shifted to where Kel stood.

Kel.

But Kel had his own problems as men circled him, beating him down, bleeding and bruised.

“Jax!” Kel screamed as he fell to his knees, further view of him blocked by the bodies surrounding him.

Jax roared in frustration and desolation. Kel was in trouble and Nick was still somewhere in the maze of tunnels waiting for them to come for him.

Chapter Fifteen

“Kel,” Nick gasped when his lover was dragged into the circular cavern. His chest tightened, seeing the beautiful man battered and bloodied. Bruises were already forming on Kel’s skin. His hair was loosened, hanging in his face, and he had been stripped of his armor, leaving him only in his pants and boots. His hands were tied behind his back as they forced him to his knees outside the painted circle in which Nick was bound.

“Nicholas,” Kel breathed out. Relief was evident in his eyes.

Nick pulled on his bindings again, ignoring the jolt of pain every movement caused. Though he had loosened the ropes’ grip on his raw wrists, they still held stubbornly. But now his fingers could reach the knots so he could work on them more readily.

“Where’s Jax?” Fear churned deep in the pit of his stomach.

“She’s alive...for now,” Tempest said, following Merrill into the cavern.

Nick stayed his struggles, watching as no fewer than twenty men pulled a tightly bound Jax into the room. A net was wrapped around her body, its threads sparking like fire and glowing blue.

“Jax.” Her name rushed out with his breath. He turned to Merrill. “Don’t do this. I don’t care what you do to me, but not this. Leave her alone.”

Nick had never thought he'd be reduced to begging, but here he was, begging for the life of a creature who'd tried to kill him. A beast he was inexplicably drawn to. A dragon whose lover was also his.

Tempest boldly crossed the lines of the circle, reached out and touched the symbol she'd carved into his chest. Nick flinched. Tempest had painted his body with the same markings Bronson had marked himself with, only instead of black paint, she'd used the blood that had seeped from the large symbol on his chest. She'd done it slow and deep, enjoying every second of pain she'd inflicted upon him.

"Would you beg for his life too?"

Nick looked to where Kel kneeled. One of Merrill's men grabbed hold of Kel's hair and roughly jerked his head back as a dagger was held to his throat.

Tears stung Nick's eyes, images of Kathy's death flashing before him. It had been nearly unbearable to watch someone he knew killed in such a cold, heartless way. Could he stand to watch the man he loved die the same way?

Nick's breath whooshed from his lungs. Love. Yes, he loved Kel. It didn't matter that he'd only known him a week. Kel, with his ever calm and patient ways, had touched him where no one had ever reached before. His heart. During his tender, healing ways, during their fiery, passionate lovemaking, Kel had burrowed his way into his life and soul.

"Don't, Nicholas," Kel ground out. Nick watched his Adam's apple bob against the gleaming blade when he swallowed. "When Jax dies, so do I."

"Beg," Tempest whispered in Nick's ear.

"Yes," Nick sobbed. "Please. Do as you wish to me, but let him go." Nick no longer cared what happened to him. Kel and Jax were in this situation because they had tried to rescue him. He would willingly sacrifice himself for their safety.

Tempest's hand lowered to his cock. Her palm rubbed gently, as a lover's would. Her fingers curled and pain pierced through his body. Nick screamed, his body trying to double over, but his bonds held him upright.

"Beautiful music, pet." Tempest gave a wickedly pleased smile.

Merrill laughed brashly. "Your sacrifice will be for nothing, whipling." He stood just outside the circle as if he feared stepping in. Only Tempest had crossed over since she'd marked him. He nonchalantly waved his hand in the air and the entire cavern was illuminated. Surrounding them were rock walls covered with strange symbols that meant nothing to Nick.

"There is a downside to being a dragon rider. While dragons can have many riders in their lifetimes, a rider can only have one dragon. And once that dragon dies, so does the rider."

"No." Nick looked toward Kel. Surely this madman was lying. He'd seen Jax flying through the air. The muscles that rippled when she moved. He'd felt the strength she possessed. Jax wouldn't die easily. But if she did, was their bond so strong Kel would die also?

Tempest's hands were again roaming over Nick's body, making him feel unclean. Her touch made him shudder with disgust.

"Tell him, Targus. Tell him that my master speaks the truth."

"Kel?"

Slowly, Kel nodded, locking eyes with Nick. He was suddenly overwhelmed with grief. His mind was numbed from the truth. He would be returned to his home if this ritual worked, but despite his own fate, both Jax and Kel would die. How could he let that happen?

"I..." Nick's words stuck in his throat. He wanted to tell Kel he loved him, but the words wouldn't come. He broke his gaze from Kel and looked to Jax, still bound tightly, her eyes watching everything silently. Rage shot through Nick's veins. He couldn't let this happen. But what could he do?

“Enough!” Merrill shouted. “Finish the incantation, witch.”

Tempest sighed as if she were reluctant to let Nick go.

“Wait!” Kel yelled. Quite the accomplishment, considering the knife still held to his throat.

Merrill rolled his eyes. Nick couldn’t believe it. The bad guy had actually rolled his eyes at the interruption of his plans. If it weren’t so real, he would have laughed at the absurdity. It reminded him of a bad movie.

“What is it?” Merrill grouched.

Unconcerned with the blade at his throat, Kel struggled to stand. After Merrill nodded to his goon, the man released Kel and allowed him up. It was obvious that Merrill was confident in his position of power over his three hostages.

“I, Kel Targus, challenge you, Merrill Barbus of Central. To the death.” Kel spoke clearly, his words echoing off the walls.

Merrill laughed, breaking the silence that followed Kel’s challenge.

“I will die anyway. Why not allow a dragon rider the opportunity to die the way he should? Fighting.”

“Kel, no.” Nick protested at the same time a whimper came from Jax. He didn’t know why Jax wasn’t frying everyone in the room, but if she was still able to communicate with Kel, he was sure his lover was getting an earful.

Or would that be a mindful?

Merrill’s amusement died. “Untie him.”

“Master,” Tempest protested. This was the first time Nick had seen a glimpse of fear from her. Her gaze shifted from Merrill to Kel, widening a little. She paled. “I have to advise against this.”

Without a word, Merrill glared at her, an angry spark igniting in the darkness of his cold eyes. “Finish the incantation, witch. I will take care of the rider.”

Now, all eyes were set on Kel. Nick tried not to imagine Kel being slaughtered as Merrill ordered one of his men to hand over his sword. The pit of his stomach grew heavier as he watched Kel take that sword. Kel winced slightly as he took a couple of practice swings.

Nick's fingers started working the knots again. Getting free was his only thought as Tempest lifted a thick book and started reading from it in a language Nick couldn't understand.

"Shit, shit, shit," he chanted softly.

The sword was off balance, but what choice did he have? Merrill was probably assuming he'd be thrown off balance with the poorly constructed sword. Couldn't happen. Kel had been trained by the best. Yes, it would affect his swings, but he would quickly compensate as he'd been taught.

Kel didn't dare look at Nicholas. It had taken all of his control to contain the fury he felt upon seeing his lover in terror, bound, blood sliding down his body, and tied up as a sacrifice. He only glanced at Jax, his chest constricting at seeing her helpless. Turning his gaze on Merrill, he tried to think only of his opponent. He had to stall until he could figure a way out of this. His best plan was to kill Merrill. But how was he to delay Tempest? He couldn't let her finish her spell.

"You went through a lot of trouble to get me, Merrill. Of course, kidnapping an innocent isn't beneath you."

Merrill's men stepped back, forming a circle around them. All eyes were on the two men about to fight. Merrill started circling Kel, sword held at ready.

"Do you really think I did all of this for you, rider?" Merrill chuckled, but there was no amusement in his cold, silver eyes.

"I've been a pain in your ass since you decided to make Lexicon your home. Your ego hates that I've thwarted you at every turn."

“You really think this is about you? Rider, you are nothing but a consolation prize. You are a dead man even as we speak. As your dragon’s life drains, so does yours.”

It was true. Kel felt weaker since they captured Jax, but he wouldn’t let Merrill know it. It still didn’t answer why they were using Nicholas. Before he could stall further, Merrill lunged in attack. Kel was slow in getting out of the way and felt the sword’s tip slice into his side. Once more he was forced to fight without his armor, leaving him vulnerable.

Merrill laughed, the sound filling the cavern. “Already you slow, rider.”

Kel answered his jest with his own attack only to find his blade being stopped by chain armor appearing out of thin air. Merrill quickly countered the move and Kel barely blocked it in time. That one would have landed in his shoulder.

Across the cavern Tempest’s voice rose as she began chanting. The candles lighting the area flickered as if wind blew lightly over the flames. The air seemed to thicken, charged with magic.

This wasn’t good, Kel thought. He quickly blocked another round of blows.

Jax dared not distract Kel. She felt his strength drain along with her own. Using the bond between them, she fed as much of her strength to him as she could afford.

Turning her attention from Kel, she looked at Nick. He was struggling against the ropes that held him in the circle. She’d seen this before. Nick had drawn it. He and Kel had spent a night looking through Kel’s books. They’d found what a few symbols meant, but not enough to make sense of it.

The scent of Nick’s blood penetrated her senses and wrath roiled through her veins. She had spent the last few days avoiding Nick the best she could, denying what Kel had told her, wondering why her? Why now?

But when she performed the sacred ritual to find Nick, she realized it was true. Nick was hers. She no longer questioned the reason. From the first time Kel had laid him across

her back, she'd felt a tingle of awareness of him. Felt the need to protect him. To fuck him. The kiss they'd shared had nearly been her undoing. Only a sliver of control had prevented her from tossing him under her and fucking until they were both senseless. It mattered little the extent of her wound. Raw animalistic lust had taken control until her body shut down from the pain. Now her second chance would slip through her claws.

Tempest approached Jax. Her lips were curved into a smile, shining of evil intent. Jax's lips pulled back, revealing her razor sharp teeth; she growled viciously. Tempest merely raised a brow and pulled the dagger from the sheath at her waist. The tip was covered with blood. Nick's blood.

She conjured a rope and handed it off to a man standing behind her.

"Tie it around her mouth and pull it away for me."

The man, hesitant and twitching with fright, looped the rope around Jax's mouth. She had little strength to use for struggling. Her eyes were locked on Tempest until the man and three others pulled on the rope to turn her head away from the witch.

"This will only hurt for a moment," she said.

From the corner of her eye, Jax saw a cup appear in the witch's free hand. The slice was quick, the pain sharp, but Jax swallowed the whimper edging from her. Tempest had found a vulnerable spot on her neck that was left unprotected by her head's position.

The smell of her own blood mingled with that of Nick's and Kel's.

The men released their hold on the rope and Jax immediately swung her head toward Tempest. But the magic had slowed her reflexes. The witch jumped out of the way, laughing.

"Strong blood. Perfect for this spell."

Nick's fingers were bleeding, but it was working. The rope was loosening. Almost there. He pulled more on the rope and felt it give another centimeter. One quick jerk and his hands would be free.

Looking around, he found most people were engaged with Kel and Merrill's fight. The rest were watching Jax warily, as if they still expected her to swallow them. Kel wasn't doing so well. His movements were slow and he stumbled often, as if his strength was fading. The grace which made him appear as if he were floating was gone. It looked as if it took all he had just to stay on his feet.

Tempest had just turned from Jax, a cup of the dragon's blood in her hand. The bitch had said that using the blood of a dragon was as powerful as fifty sacrifices. The plans they had for Jax disgusted him. Once the net weakened her so that she was on death's door, they would completely drain her blood before chopping her to pieces. As she'd carved the symbol into his chest, Tempest had revealed, with graphic detail, exactly how she would dismember Jax.

Nick had only one chance. He had to do this right. Patience, not his strong suit, was the key. He waited.

The moment Tempest finished her chant, her fingers dropped to dip into the cup, Nick jerked his hands free of the rope. He lunged toward Tempest before she realized he was free. Together they fell to the floor outside of the circle, the cup of blood flying away from the markings.

She screeched and started clawing at him. Years of fighting criminals gave him an advantage as he yanked her arm behind her back until he heard it snap. She howled in pain, but Nick didn't stop there. He kept his hold on her until he could stand with her in front of him like a shield.

By now her screams had drawn the attention of the men. Even Kel and Merrill stopped their fight and turned to the sounds. Swords were unsheathed as the men neared.

"Stop!" Nick shouted to the men, all the while pulling on the witch's arm so she could let out another cry. He nudged her in Jax's direction, keeping a tight hold on her arm. A grunt of pain pierced the air.

Kel used the distraction to his advantage. He thrust his sword into Merrill's side. The man's eyes widened with surprise. Kel jerked the blade up, cutting deeper. Tempest cried out as both men fell to their knees. Kel's chest heaved, his face blanched. If what they said earlier was true, Kel was dying.

Panic seized Nick.

"Get the net off of Jax," he demanded of Tempest.

The witch was sobbing now. If it weren't for Nick holding her up, she'd have fallen to the floor.

"Do it!" Nick was getting desperate as Kel fell forward, barely catching himself with his hands.

Tempest shook her head. "I cannot."

"Yes, you can. You made the damned net. Get rid of it."

"It won't stop draining her until she's dead."

"No," Nick said in disbelief. Jax's head lay on the floor, her eyes no longer glowing. Her lids drooped. She was dying. Kel was dying.

"Bullshit." Nick yanked on her arm again. "There's got to be a way."

This time Tempest fell to the floor, Nick going down with her. She sobbed harder. She wasn't even struggling anymore, as if she'd given up.

"Only..."

"Tell me," he demanded when she didn't continue.

"Blood. Blood of an outsider, yet one linked to her."

Nick glanced over at Kel. He lay on his stomach, his breathing labored. Merrill's men stood stunned. Their leader lay dying in a pool of his own blood. Their witch was weakened and useless. They were unsure what to do. Nick knew chaos would ensue at any moment.

An outsider. One linked to Jax. Nick's gaze went back to Kel. His lover. Kel was bonded to Jax. Would that connection be enough to save them?

Jax's eyes closed. His time was nearly gone. There was only one choice. Nick plucked the dagger from Tempest's belt as he released her. She fell to the floor and curled into a ball, her broken arm lying at an odd angle. Without thinking, Nick made a cut across his forearm. It was deep and the sting of the slice hurt like hell. He held his arm out over the closest part of the net.

It seemed an eternity before the first droplet of blood fell onto the threading. But once it landed, others followed close behind.

Ignoring the dizziness in his head and the shuffle of feet around him, Nick held his arm still, watching the blood pool red on her green scales. The color reminded him of her eyes. The way they sparkled so bright when lust filled them. The way they were full of innocence and fierce devotion to Kel.

Yes, you are now included in my protection. My bondmate.

Her voice in his head startled him. "Jax?"

Red eyes stared back at him. Her lips pulled away from her teeth as if in a smile.

Yes, Nick.

She said nothing else as the net suddenly burst from around her body, her wings spreading full, filling the cavern. Terrified screams echoed all around. Heat and flames flickered across the room as the cries for mercy rose. Mercy Nick was sure Jax wouldn't give.

Chapter Sixteen

Nick was surrounded by carnage. He ignored the charred bodies lying around him, numb to the sight. He knew it was shock. Later, once his mind was able to assimilate it all, he would likely have nightmares of what he'd just witnessed. Watching Jax eat someone wasn't a pleasant experience and definitely not something he cared to watch again.

But he would deal with that later. Right now his attention was on the circle before him. He stood just on the outside of it, his toes only an inch from the line. One step and he'd be back inside.

Jax, in human form, came to stand next to him. Nick noticed her rubbing her tummy before she reached out a hand to touch him, but withdrew it before she made contact. She seemed unsure, as if she was anxious about his reaction.

"Kel has the survivors contained. Including Tempest." A soft burp escaped. "Excuse me," she said softly, very ladylike. Almost timidly.

Nick nodded, but didn't look to her. His gaze was still on the strange markings that lay before him. This was the way back to his world. Back to Miami and to the life he knew. But was it his home anymore? What did he have there for him? A job? That was doubtful after disobeying orders and disappearing. And who would believe that he'd been transported to an

alternate world where there were dragons and evil sorcerers? If he told the truth, he'd surely be put in a mental institution.

What distant family he had was practically unknown to him. Hell, he didn't even have a pet to go home to. Just a cold, silent apartment in a big city full of crime. Could he go back to that and pretend none of this had happened? And what if this circle didn't send him back home, but to some other place?

"Tempest completed the spell." Jax's voice brought Nick back from his thoughts. "You need only to step inside and use a couple of drops of my blood to send you home."

Her voice was soft, and he thought he could hear sadness in her tone.

"You would give me some of your blood to do this?" Nick finally looked at her.

Jax nodded, teary eyed. "Yes."

Nick's heart ached. In that instant, he knew. Home wasn't a place. It was people who cared for you. Who loved you. Love. That's what he felt toward Kel. And more and more toward Jax. He was linked to her. The way he'd freed her was proof of that. She could speak to him in his mind. It mattered not why or how. It just was. And he was home. Right here in Ketall.

"When we leave here, I want you to destroy this place, Jax. Make sure no one ever finds this circle."

"What?" she gasped. "Nick, this is the gateway you've been searching for. This could be your only chance of returning home."

Nick shook his head. He brushed his knuckles across her cheek tenderly. His lips curved into a slight smile. "I am home."

Jax's brows drew together in confusion. "Nick, you don't make sense."

He chuckled at her innocence. "I make perfect sense." He lightly kissed her lips, drawing a surprised gasp from her. This was the first time he'd touched her since that day she was shot by the arrow. His tongue slipped between her parted lips, filling his mouth with

her sweet taste, which was surprising since not fifteen minutes before, she was breathing fire.

Jax moaned, her body leaning into his. Nick managed to embrace her with his sore arms and deepened their kiss as lust and desire sparked between them. His blood warmed, and his cock tingled as it hardened. Sliding his hands along her torso, down her back, Nick cupped her sensuously curved ass and pulled her to him. She gasped again, feeling his arousal.

“You. Kel. The three of us, together, make a home.” His words swept over her lips and into her heart.

“Oh.” She pulled her head back and locked gazes with him. Her crimson eyes started glowing brightly, twinkling like stars. “Kel was right. I get two to play with.” Her smile spoke of wicked pleasures to come.

Epilogue

Four days later...

Nick looked around the house one last time. He'd spent the day cleaning and had a pot of stew simmering on the stove. His fight with Merrill's men had really torn up the place. Luckily, he'd had the past four days to fix what he could and get things back in order.

Four long days spent alone healing. The swelling on his face was gone. The rope burns were still evident, but not nearly as sore. The damage that Tempest had done to his chest was still healing. Luckily, no infection had set in. It would be a reminder of her twisted cruelty that he would take to his grave. But it was also a reminder of what could have happened, making him appreciate every breath that filled his lungs.

Kel and Jax had to see to the transportation of Tempest and the remainder of Merrill's men to Central. They were also to meet before the Grand Council concerning the interesting development of Jax having two bondmates, since riders technically worked for the Council. Luckily, they convinced the Council to allow Nick more time before appearing before them. Time to recover from his traumatic experience. And time to settle into their world.

Nick had received word earlier that they would return home that evening. Which was why he was now pacing restlessly. He was ready to start his full recovery...and the complete

bonding with Jax. Events had been in such a whirlwind after he'd decided not to go back to Earth. Jax had swiftly flown him home, but his mind had been too exhausted to appreciate his first conscious dragon flight. And she'd needed to return quickly to the mountain where Kel was getting ready to transport the prisoners.

There was a tingling in the back of his mind and instantly Nick knew Jax was near. They had not yet fully bonded but, according to Jax, once she had performed the sacred ritual to find him, that had activated the connection between dragon and rider.

He scratched his lower abdomen, just below his waistline, where his skin held a darker hue. He had found it after returning home. It itched frequently and occasionally tingled. After careful inspection, Nick realized that it could only be the mark which Kel told him all riders acquired after bonding with their dragon. And since the connection with Jax had been opened but not completed, the mark wouldn't be fully formed yet.

Nick walked outside and looked toward the mountains. In the distance he saw her, with wings spread wide, almost majestically, her green scales glittered in the moonlight like emeralds. It was breathtaking seeing her in this form. It was still sometimes hard to believe dragons really existed. But Jax was proof positive it was true.

Her landing was graceful, and reminded him of Kel. He searched for his lover, and he suddenly felt a touch of fear and uncertainty. How could this possibly work? What if this really was just a fantasy world and one day he woke to find himself in a hospital after being in a coma?

But those thoughts fled the moment Kel slid off Jax and smiled. Nick returned the smile and took a step forward. In a blink, Jax shifted to her human form and stood next to Kel. Nick was momentarily stunned by their beauty. And they were his.

"Hey," he said in greeting, a little unsure what to do next, as this was new territory for him.

Kel took the matter out of his hands by being the first to move. The enthusiastic greeting Kel gave him was much different from Nick's casual "Hey." Kel's mouth crashed down hard on Nick's, his tongue delving deep as they shared a passionate kiss.

"Missed you," Kel said with a smile when they finally broke apart.

Nick was speechless but smiled back, not caring if he looked like a grinning idiot. He jumped when he felt warmth on his back. Jax.

"I believe you promised me something when I returned," she practically purred.

Nick swallowed hard and felt blood rush to his already hard cock, making it burn with longing.

"Did you?" Kel questioned with brow raised.

Nick nodded. "Oh, um, well, she made me promise to finish what we started when she was wounded by the arrow." He was glad it was dark so Kel wouldn't see the flush rising in his face.

"A reasonable promise. So why are we standing out here?"

Jax chuckled and took hold of Nick's hand. "Come on, beast. Show me what you have to offer."

She practically pulled his shoulder from its socket, but he went willingly. Looking back he found Kel following, still smiling.

The moment they reached the bedroom, Jax tore away Nick's clothing, shredding them. He was shocked by her actions, never having been stripped in such a way, but not an ounce of fear crept in.

Kel laughed. "Jax, what did I tell you about scaring him? He won't play if he's scared."

Jax's lips puffed out in a pout like she'd just been told she couldn't have a cookie.

"It's okay, Kel. As long as it's not my skin." Nick reached out and started releasing the buttons on her shirt.

Jax smiled sweetly at him. "I could never hurt you. I hurt you, I hurt myself. But you do not have to be so careful."

Her clothes dissolved so she stood nude before him. Nick moaned at the sight. He had thought her beautiful with clothing. Without, she was stunning. Though her build was petite, her body was perfect. Her breasts were full, yet firm. Already her nipples pebbled as if aching for his attention. Her waist was slim, and her legs toned.

Nick reached out, his fingers brushing over the spot where the arrow had been embedded. There was no scar. No mark to show it had ever happened.

"It won't be until she is older when her injuries start scarring. Even then, they will be minimal," Kel said.

"Well?" There was impatience in her tone.

"Let him enjoy this, Jax," Kel said. He too had shed his clothing and moved so he stood behind Jax.

Nick watched, fascinated, as Kel's hands reached around her supple body and cradled a breast in each hand.

"Bonding is special. Don't rush it." His thumbs swept over her nipples, drawing a hiss of pleasure from her. "Taste them, Nicholas. Feel them on your tongue."

Who could resist such an offer? Bowing, he took the closest nipple into his mouth. He groaned in delight as his tongue rolled over its hardness. Kel was correct. She tasted sweet and he hungered for more. Her fingers threaded through his hair and she groaned when he switched to the other breast.

"Taste her," Kel encouraged.

Nick lifted his head from her breast, though Jax whimpered in protest. He knew what Kel meant and craved to find out if her juices were just as sweet as her skin.

Kneeling, Nick could smell the desire leaking from her body. Wetness gleamed on her hairless folds. With a deep, husky growl, he leaned forward and lapped at her wetness.

"Sweet goddess above," Nick groaned. She tasted even better. He was sure if the gods of mythology ever really existed, this would be what ambrosia tasted like.

"Nick," she panted, then pushed his head into her pussy.

Above him, Kel chuckled. "I forgot to mention how little patience our dragon has."

Nick didn't care. His hunger ruled now and he wanted to devour the juices coming from her sweet core. He began licking her eagerly, his mouth greedily sucking her clit. She writhed above him, trying to push harder against his mouth, mewling with pleasure. His tongue alternated between fucking her opening and torturing her clit with flicking licks.

Jax shattered, crying out as she exploded on Nick's face. Selfishly, he lapped up every drop until she was trembling and whimpering.

Pulling away, a smile on his lips, he looked up at Kel. His lover's eyes were darkened with desire. He could imagine Kel's stiff cock pressing against Jax's back, aching for release.

Kel swept Jax into his arms and carried her to the bed. With great tenderness, he laid her down and brushed the hair from her face. Her eyes were closed but her expression was one of serene peace.

Nick stood next to him, looking down at her. "She's not done yet, is she?"

"Not by a long shot." Kel turned and kissed him. This kiss was gentle, loving.

"I love you, Kel. I don't know why I was brought here and no longer care, but I was meant to find you. And Jax." He glanced over at her. "I'm still scared that I'll wake up one day and find this was all a dream."

"No dream, Nicholas. As I told you before. I am real." To prove his point, he reached down and took Nick in his hand and slowly stroked him. Nick threw his head back, eyes closed, as he shuddered with desire. "I've loved you since I first saw you, Nicholas. I will spend the rest of my life loving you."

Jax cleared her throat. "You aren't finished, beast." Her tone was full of laughter.

“Beast?” Nick looked to her, brow raised questioningly. “I’ll show you what kind of beast I can be.”

He knelt between her legs and moved so the tip of his cock was right at her entrance. He raised her legs and pulled her body closer to him. She gasped as his throbbing head entered her body. The skin around the faint marking on his body started to heat. Nick gasped as it grew warmer by the second, but it wasn’t unbearable.

Kel knelt behind Nick and pressed his own cock against him. The coolness of lubricant made him shiver and press slightly back against his lover’s cock. A quick thrust had Nick buried in Jax’s body. He moaned as her hot tightness surrounded him.

“Damn.”

If he wasn’t careful he’d blow his load right there. He groaned again when Kel pushed him forward, shifting Nick’s angle in her, and pressed against his spasming hole.

“So tight,” Kel murmured, pushing deeper. “Frayland, help me.”

Nick bent his head and bit Jax’s breast. She cried out, her body writhing beneath his as the painful pleasure assaulted her senses. He felt as if he were in heaven. Being filled by his lover’s cock while being surrounded by Jax’s delicious heat was more than enough to drive him over the edge.

“If we’re going to do this bonding thing, then make it quick,” Nick ground out.

Jax chuckled and shifted beneath him. Nick whimpered in response.

“Jax,” Kel breathed. He too was close, though they were just getting started. But there was always later.

“Fine,” Jax said with a pout, but her eyes spoke of happiness.

Nick felt a tingling rushing along his nerves. His body felt as if it were on fire, but he wasn’t sure if it was because of whatever Jax was doing, or if it was just from being sandwiched between his two lovers.

“Til the last breath, you are mine.” Jax reached up with a hand and cupped Nick’s cheek. “Together we are bonded in life and in death. Your essence a part of me forever.”

The heat intensified, making his breath hitch. Behind him, Kel did the same.

“Three souls combined to one. Forever.” Jax panted the last word.

“Done?” Nick asked, unable to stay still any longer. The skin where his mark was forming sparked intensely for a second then calmed just as quickly. Glancing down, he saw that it was now as dark as Kel’s tattoo and fully formed into a black dragon, its mouth open and claws ready for shredding. The mark of a rider. Jax’s rider and Kel’s lover. He couldn’t be happier.

“Yes. Now fuck me, beast.”

Nick laughed, filled with true happiness. “I’ll break you of calling me beast, dragon.”

Moans and pleasure-filled cries filled the night air as souls joined and hearts bonded.

 THE END 

Marty Rayne

When I'm not being a wife, mother, and grandmother, I am creating passionate worlds of fantasy. Pushing the limits and experimenting with new angles and worlds.

Books have been my first love since I could remember. I love getting lost in new and exciting worlds. The characters claim me, even for just a short time. Writing just naturally came next, but I never really took it seriously until a few years ago when I gained access to the Internet. With the encouragement and help of a wonderful friend, I decided to venture into the field of writing.

I live in Florida and enjoy time at the beach. Okay, not so much the water. I'm not crazy about sharks, but I love watching the waves roll in and the feel of the sand between my toes. I also enjoy motorcycle rides with my husband and learning karate with my children.