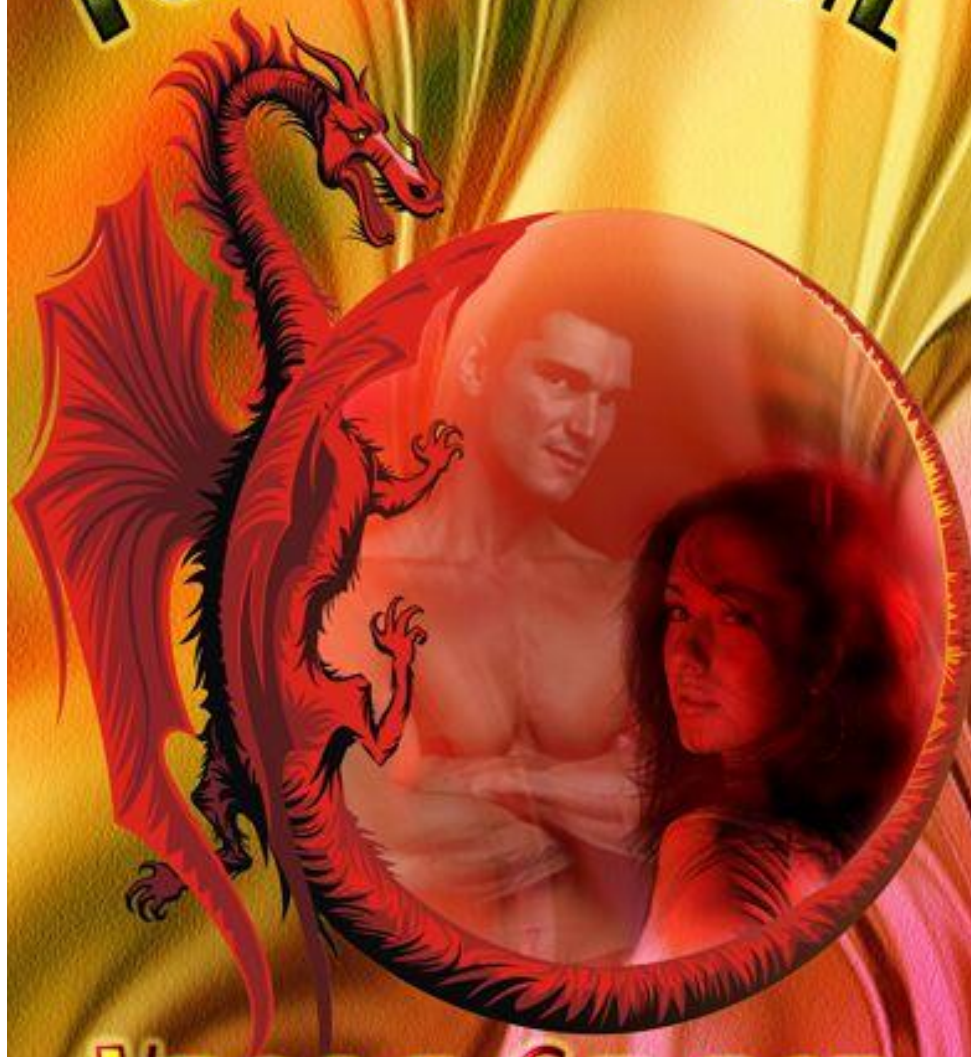


YULE BE MINE



VIOLA GRACE

Family tradition is important to Arabel Marx. Every year she comes to her cousin's pub to bless the building against violence under the roof. This year, as she dances her blessing and calls the wild magic, she has an audience. Her cousin's husband has invited a friend to watch the blessing and this shifter likes what he sees.

Zenner is a dragon with a secret, his mother was human and he has a craving to know that kind of genuine affection again. Female dragons are fine, but they are all *pull my tail*, and Zen likes to play with his lovers. Watching Arabel dance the blessing, he has only one thought, *Soon, You'll Be Mine*.

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Yule Be Mine

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Yule Be Mine

A Lost Warders Tale

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Arabel Marx was exhausted. The holidays were a time for family and giving. They were also a time for blessing and warding buildings and businesses. It was her busiest time of the year.

It seemed that when the holidays rolled around, people remembered they needed to protect their properties for the New Year. The tinsel must trigger a memory or something, because right after Thanksgiving, her phone went nuts.

Blinking with fatigue, she pulled into the parking lot outside of Pax Nocturnal. Sighing with relief at being at her destination, she didn't even think about ploughing into the werewolf bar as a lowly human. She felt her own wards as she walked through the door, it enveloped her, gave her an overwhelming sense of calm and well being.

The bartender almost shattered that calm.

"What do you want, baldy?" He was referring to her non-shifter status. For a sensitive nose, her humanity flared out in a wave.

"I am here for Dev. Can you get her, please?" Being polite was the best tactic. The full moon was close and he didn't really seem that controlled. Caution around werewolves was a lesson she had learned early.

"Why don't you take your pasty ass out of here and I won't have to throw you out?" His crossed arms and scowl said it all. He was in charge and she had better do what he said, or he would take pleasure in getting violent.

Her charm must have been wearing off.

"Steven, that is no way to speak to a lady." Six and a half feet of dark-haired masculinity moved to Ary's left side. She caught the scent of magic on him—dark and wild. He wasn't a werewolf, but he had another form.

"She should find a place that caters to her type. Like a library."

Ary shook her head at the observation. It wasn't the first time that she had been told she had a serious and studious look about her. The bartender obviously liked judging people on their appearances.

Her new admirer touched her arm lightly and she met his gaze with only a little difficulty. His black eyes were ringed with gold. It made it awkward to look at them. "Who were you looking for? I hope it was me, but I am rarely that lucky."

"Dev. She is expecting me."

"Ah. You are the specialist she mentioned. Please come with me to the office."

He moved with an elegant gait that had the crowd parting in the path of the superior predator. If Ary kept close, she could draft him before the crowd cut her off. They headed for the stairs at the back of the establishment and he let her precede him. She was too tired to worry if he was scoping out her butt.

Opening the door was a little shocking for her, Dev and her husband, Antony, were twined together in a most disconcerting way. "Alright. Break it up. I am only here for a couple of days, so this is a waste of time. Can I still use the guesthouse?"

They jumped apart as if scalded and the man behind Arabel laughed.

"In the last six months, I have tried to do that and they never even flinch," her escort murmured it to her quietly.

She leaned up to reply, "It's the librarian thing. It separates necking couples of any species. It works especially well on wolves though."

"Ary! You made it!" Dev released her husband's thigh and sprinted over to hug her cousin.

"I did indeed. Although I may have had to meet you two at home if not for this dude. That bartender you have is very anti-human." Ary breathed in the scent of family on Dev. It was good to be with someone she had grown up with.

"That is Steve. I will talk to him." Antony crossed his arms and leaned back against the desk, unabashed about his visible erection. It wasn't the first time that Ary had walked in on them and he was obviously not concerned about the man who brought her up the stairs.

"Good. Now. Something is up. What is it?"

"Well, Ary. With the success of Pax Nocturnal, Antony and I decided to branch out and create a chain. To do that, we needed a partner and Zenner happened along at just the right time."

"So, Zenner is your new partner?" She turned to the mass of muscle beside her, "And I am guessing that you are he?"

"I am indeed. Zenner-Arial-Ifical. Zen or Zenner for short. You may call me anything you wish."

The name gave him away. “Dragon.” His magic was too old to be anything else. A mythical beast right here in their midst. If she wasn’t still exhausted, she would be picking her jaw up off the ground.

He was impressed. “You are very astute.”

“Your magic gave you away. Strong, wild and predatory—those are your tastes.”

He had the grace to look flattered, but the hooded eyes also betrayed his interest in her. She had suddenly turned from something mildly interesting into something fascinating. Ary had the overwhelming feeling of being a mouse with a circling eagle.

She tried to distract him by resorting to the practicalities of her visit. “Well, is he a part owner in this bar now as well? Because if he is, I will have to change my schedule.”

“I am. What will you have to do differently?”

“It will be four days instead of one. Just like the first time I did it. I hate to say it, Dev, but you will have to run it past Charles. Better do it soon though. The clock is ticking.” She couldn’t hold it in anymore, she yawned. Stumbling to the couch, she dropped onto it and then smirked as she flicked a set of her cousin’s panties from between the cushions.

Dev sighed and picked up the phone. She dialled with a heavy hand and began to speak to the person on the other end in a calm and submissive voice.

Zenner sat next to Arabel, close enough that she could feel the heat coming off his body. The warmth that he was putting out was making her drowsy.

Dev asked, “Ary, when are you going to start it?”

With bleary eyes, she checked her watch. “Tomorrow, wait, today at dawn. Anyone mind if I catch a quick nap? Wake me at dawn.” She didn’t wait for an answer, just slipped into unconsciousness.

* * * *

“Zenner, you can move her if you want to. And make sure she doesn’t drool on you.” Antony kept his voice low and moved to shift the sleeping woman off his business partner.

“Don’t worry about it, Tony. I like her.” He lifted Ary off the couch and draped her across his lap. She murmured lightly and then squirmed until she was comfortable and he was hard as a rock.

“You can’t be serious. You don’t mean you *like* her?”

“I do. She has all the qualities I enjoy and enough power to satisfy my family.”

“But you just met her five minutes ago,” he was whispering, but almost shrieking at the same time.

The wolves did like to get upset over the small things. Zenner rubbed the back of his finger down Ary’s cheek and smiled as she frowned. Her skin was like a baby’s, porcelain against the dark chestnut of her hair and brows. Her thick lashes formed crescents on her cheeks, but didn’t quite cover the dark circles under her eyes.

“Devora, how long has she been travelling? She looks exhausted.”

“She is always on the road. I don’t think she has a home anymore. The clan keeps her so busy that she just drives from assignment to assignment, collects her fees, then moves on. I have spoken to Charles about it, but she is his daughter and he will use her as he sees fit.”

“She isn’t a shifting were?”

“No. She is a throwback to one of our ancestors. She is bound to serve the clan with the only talent she has.”

“Bound how?” If it was a charm, perhaps it could be broken.

“By honour, I suppose? Blood maybe?”

Devora was looking a little confused, so Zenner stopped his queries. He would have a few days to woo the woman curled against him so trustingly and if she ran, he would simply hunt her down and make her his own.

If there was one thing a dragon learned to trust after a few centuries, it was his instincts and all of Zen’s were telling him that Arabel was designed for him alone.

Chapter Two

Waking in a strange place was second nature to Ary, but waking *on* a stranger was a new experience entirely. He was waking her by the expedience of stroking her cheek and rubbing his thumb along her lips, but the moment her lips parted in surprise, his thumb slipped inside and the electric shock of her tongue touching his flesh brought her to complete wakefulness in an instant.

She scrambled off his lap and fell ignobly to the floor. Dev and Tony were staring at her with confused and amused expressions.

“Is it go time?” Business was always a safe fallback position when she made a fool of herself. She sat comfortably on the floor while everyone in the room tried to think of what tact to take.

“You still have an hour to freshen up and change. I assume that your robes are in your car?”

“Yup. I’ll just get my bearings and fetch them.”

“No need. Give me your keys.” Zenner was speaking from behind her and she did not look at him. Ary had no idea how long she had been in his lap, but based on how warm she had been when she woke, he had not just lifted her to wake her. He had cuddled her while she slept.

Dev handed Ary her purse and she dug around to hand the keys to Zenner.

“Are you never going to look at me again?”

“I wasn’t interested in staring at you before this. Why would I want to now?”

“Well, after you and I having slept together here, in front of witnesses, I would think that a little eye contact would be warranted.”

Ary gasped and spun in place. “We did no such thing.” She glared into Zenner’s bewitching eyes with all of her power and he merely kept an unholy innocence about him. Fink.

Tony cackled with laughter. “Technically, you slept with him. And witnesses were involved. The bouncers came in at the end of the shift, the waitresses cashed out and the pay stubs were handed out. You two made quite a centrepiece for the office.”

She would have groaned, but there was no point. She would not see these people for another year and it wasn’t something to get embarrassed about. Sleeping was essential to her ability to complete her work. If her sleep and food was not regulated, her talent suffered the effects. It was only her choice of company when she had nodded off that was questionable in this case.

When she pressed the keys into Zenner's hand, he used the contact to pull her up and toward him. The kiss that he brought her in for was more of a nuzzle, but it still started her heart in a rapid beat.

She was blinking stupidly when he let her go. The saucy wink that he threw at her as he left the office rubbed in her reaction to him. "Damn."

"I'll say. I have never seen you like that with a guy, Ary. You two made my knees weak." Dev was fanning her chest and grinning.

"Aw, I thought I was the only one who did that, Dev." Antony caught his wife in his arms and swept her into a deep embrace.

"Only you, babe. Well, you and watching my cousin falling for a shifter. Her father will freak."

That statement cooled the heat that had begun to swell in Ary as nothing else could. Her father *would* freak. Charles had forbidden her to mate with any of the wolves, so it had been understood that she would live out her life without romantic entanglements. Even dating a dragon was out of bounds. Her bloodlines were too royal for contaminating with a line that wasn't pure. It didn't matter that she was not a shifter. She was the Alpha's daughter and that meant that her veins carried the honour of the clan.

"Oh, Ary. I am sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." Dev freed herself from Tony's embrace and ran to her cousin's side. "I am so sorry, Ary."

Arabel patted Dev's hand where it rested on her arm. "It's alright. Nothing will come of Zenner's flirtation anyway. What man wants a non-shifting shifter?"

Dev and Tony shared a long look that Ary couldn't decipher. She sighed and stretched, her hands, reaching for the sky. It was at that moment that Zenner reappeared.

"Now, that is a lovely view." He dropped her duffel next to her and took a seat on the couch.

Ary scooped up the duffel and headed for the executive bathroom. There was a bath and a shower facility as well as the standard amenities. She splashed water on her face, brushed and selectively braided her hair and changed into her blessing robes. She lashed them into place so they would not restrict her movements, but would still float freely as she danced. It was a Grecian arrangement that she had perfected over time.

Some leather sandals completed the outfit and Ary did a few experimental turns on her toes to make sure they were snug enough for her purposes.

She chanted to herself *its show time* and made her exit out of the bathroom.

As an entrance to an appreciative audience, it was everything she could imagine. Zenner's mouth dropped open and even Antony's eyes showed a flare of interest.

“Bravo, cousin. Lovely as always.”

“Thank you, cousin.” Ary executed a graceful curtsy. She had plenty of practice. “I can feel dawn calling, I had best collect the energy that I need.”

Devora and Antony stood still as she came to each of them and kissed them in turn. Zenner refused to stand, so she straddled him where he sat on the couch and laid her lips on his.

This was not a kiss to arouse but to take the energy that she would use to build the blessing. It aroused them both anyway. Zenner’s skin flushed a deep bronze while Ary felt herself turn a heated pink. She had what she needed, their magics and essences swirling around her in bright ribbons of power that only she could see.

Dismounting carefully, she walked to the door of the office, stepping onto the small balcony overlooking the bar. It was blissfully empty and the floor had been cleaned. Wonderful. It was time to open the doors and greet the dawn.

The owners followed her and opened the main door to let in the newly born light of the day. In that light, Arabel danced.

* * * *

When she stopped to kiss him, his heart had tried to leap out of his chest and his scales tried to run over his skin. He had felt the pull of her power and let her take what she needed. It wasn’t much, but it did explain Dev and Tony’s ability to stop anyone in their tracks within Pax. It was fully warded and warded to their energy alone.

Their word was law under their own roof and it was Arabel’s power that gave it to them. Fascinating. The were clan had her all to itself since the day that she had gained control over her talents and her family must be raking in tremendous profits.

The warding had been on the books at Pax Nocturnal as a *Private consultation*. He had insisted in knowing exactly what it entailed, never guessing that his woman would be dressed in all that magic. Now, if he could have her dressed in nothing but magic, he would be one happy dragon.

Arabel stood in the growing light and slowly started to move to a beat that only she could hear. Zen was fascinated. He couldn’t take his gaze off her.

Her dance was slow at first. She trailed her hands dreamily along the walls, wainscoting, the bar and tables. Each step, each twist of her hips kept him riveted.

Ary danced faster, making the same rounds again until she began to spin.

“Holy mother of Stars.” As she spun, the rainbow of fabrics around her flared out and showed her calves, knees and thighs. Magic was spinning off her as well, the power flowing in silken strands to touch every wall, surface and dimple in the establishment. The light was blazing off her now, shattering into glittering shards and embedding itself in Pax.

Time seemed to stand still as he watched her dance, but when she finally dropped to her knees, the light was bright and strong. Morning had come, leaving dawn far behind.

Zen jumped to assist Ary as she tilted and fell to the floor. Her breathing was steady, her skin cool and she was terribly pale. “What’s wrong with her?”

Dev was looking over her cousin as well.

“She’s exhausted. The clan works her too hard and every ward she lays takes a piece of her life.” Sorrow was evident on Devora’s face. “She will simply run out of power one day and the clan will only mourn her missing talent.”

“Bastards.”

“Yes, her father loves the cache of having her in the clan, but hates having her in his family.” Dev smoothed the hair back from Ary’s face and smiled a little. “She will need to sleep for hours and then eat like a fiend. Will you share the guesthouse with her, Zen? It will save her a long commute.”

“Of course. I invite you both over for dinner before we open up for the night. When will she need to do the next ritual?” Ary was a comfortable weight in his arms, easily conforming to his embrace. Zen strode out the back door, aiming for the guesthouse that he had taken over.

“Tomorrow. Noon.” Dev was just behind him as he exited Pax. “Antony will bring her things.”

“Tell him to make it quick. She is getting a bath and then being tucked into bed. Tony’s presence will not be welcome in a few minutes.” Zenner put steel into his voice, his intention of protection as obvious as he could make it without roaring it to the skies.

The slight woman in his arms didn’t just need a lover, she needed a protector. He could and would be both. Now, he just had to let her know it.

Tony was amused but prompt with the duffel and Ary’s purse. Zen took her from the couch and carried her up to the bedroom, laying her on the bed and leaving her for a moment while he ran her bath.

He cursed his lack of bubble bath or oils before returning to disrobe his guest. With sure fingers, he removed her sandals, opened the knots on her robes and slowly slipped them off her shoulders. She was not wearing anything beneath them.

As heat shot through his groin, he took a deep breath for calm and found his knees buckling at her scent. All of his mating instincts were in high gear, but grabbing a quick fondle was not his style. She needed his help and he was here to give it.

As he untied her braids, he had a single thought, *Who helped her at other times, or did she just struggle on alone?*

Chapter Three

The comfort of waking in a bed was marred by a single thing, Ary wasn't alone. She breathed deeply and knew in an instant whose arms were around her. "Zenner, let go. I have to use the bathroom."

"You know, at this point, that is the only thing that would get me to release you."

His voice was husky with sleep, but his arms loosened and she rolled free. A loose, gauzy nightgown flowed over her and she blinked in surprise—it wasn't hers.

"What am I wearing?"

"Well, you didn't have a nightdress and it wouldn't have been appropriate for me to share your bed if you were naked, so I improvised. Do you like it?" His dark hair was tousled, his eyes shining black and gold in the fading light.

"It's lovely. And as soon as I get back, you will have to explain what you meant by *improvised*." She pattered into the bathroom on bare feet and answered the call of nature. When she was washing her hands and looked at herself in the mirror, she almost jumped in surprise. Instead of her standard greasy bed head, her locks were clean, carefully brushed and braided into a long tail. Drying her hands, she went to confront her groomer.

"You *bathed* me!"

"You were sweaty and the only way I like a sweaty woman in bed is if she becomes sweaty *after* she gets there." He was lying on his back, grinning at her, his hands tucked in behind his head.

"Ha-ha. What else did you do while I was asleep?" She knew better and when the anger lit his eyes, she knew she had poked at his chivalry.

His good humour turned sour in that instant, "Washed you, fucked you, washed you again, posed you, posted the pictures online and then dressed you in the nightgown." He jackknifed out of the bed and slammed out of the room. She could hear him snarling downstairs as he rummaged in the kitchen.

Great. She had one chance to make a new friend and she had driven him away, just as she had all men who showed even the most remote interest in her in the last five years. She sucked.

Peeling the gown off her body, she carefully laid it at the foot of the bed. It really was lovely—all antique lace and butter-soft fabric, just opaque enough to be decent. She found her duffel

empty so she opened the wardrobe. Next to her working robes, jeans and sweatshirts, was a selection of men's shirts and trousers.

Oh hell. He lived here now and had extended his hospitality to her and she accused him of being a leech. She was one class act.

Time to make amends. Well, as soon as she dressed. *Now, where is my underwear?*

Dressed in her day-to-day armour, she wandered down the stairs to see a domestic dragon. He seemed to be involved in the preparation of her favourites—hot wings and nachos.

“Zenner, I would like to apologise. You have been nothing but kind to me and it seems that I have been a bit of a jerk. I am sorry.”

His head came up warily. “Are you?”

“I am. I am usually a bit disoriented when I wake and I always have been alone up until this point. I didn't know how to react so I went on the defensive.”

“That is very open of you to admit.” He continued to add hot sauce to a bowl of what seemed to be wing sauce.

“Thank you. Do you accept my apology, or should I find accommodations elsewhere?”

She took a seat on a barstool near the kitchen island and watched him work. He had a complete command of chilies that she envied. He was adding ingredients to the bowl with an ease that she wished she had been able to gain. Her life was not conducive to cooking. Or learning to for that matter.

“I will get over my outrage, but it would fade sooner if you kissed me.” The twinkle was back in his eyes.

“Would it?”

“Oh, indeed. It's a known fact that dragons are soothed by the touch of maidens.”

Arabel almost jumped off the stool. “How could you possibly know that?”

“That dragons are soothed or that you are a maiden? I know the first from trial and error and the second is in your scent. All innocence and curiosity.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. She didn't realize that virginity was something a dragon could smell. “If you know all that, why do you need a kiss?”

“To sooth me, of course. You insulted my hospitality and that is a very serious matter.” He held his arms out. “I promise no hands.”

Still put out but wanting to put it behind her, she got off the stool and went to stand in front of him. Even if she went up on her toes, she wouldn’t be able to kiss him. He was too high up. He was waiting.

Muttering obscenities, she grabbed the barstool and planted it in front of him. She climbed up and knelt on the high chair and it put her within range. Ary reached up and threaded her fingers into the dark, silky hair at the back of his neck, then surprised him with a sudden jerk to bring him into kissing range. It was a short contact—nothing intimate and not terribly arousing. With some relief, she released his hair and leaned back. “There. One kiss. Are you soothed?”

The snarl that she heard would have had her scrambling out of the way, but she was in a precarious position. His hands gripped her waist and she squeaked, “I thought you said no hands.”

“That was for your kiss. I never said anything about mine.”

His lips teased hers, the wide mobile expanse moulding her mouth to his. She slumped against him in surrender and he made another noise. This one satisfied. His hands held her plastered against him from chest to pelvis as he used his mouth alone to seduce her into compliance. When his tongue teased her lips apart, she sighed and allowed him in. It was a learning experience for her. She mimicked each thrust, stroke and slide to be rewarded by another groan.

When she heard the laughter behind her, her eyes closed and she jerked away from Zenner’s hypnotic mouth.

“Hiya, Dev, Tony. There is an explanation for this. Just give me a minute.” She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against Zen’s chest.

“No hurry on our account. We are just here for dinner. Since Zenner doesn’t want you causing a ruckus in the bar, he has offered to make your meals here as well as share the space.” Devora was incredibly cheerful.

Antony broke in. “We’ll be in the living room. Join us when you are, ah, ready.”

Peeping beneath her lashes, Ary watched Tony haul his smirking wife into the other room. “That just caps off the evening for me.” Ary pushed away from the dragon and climbed off the stool.

Zenner was smirking and returned to his cooking—heating oil and removing a closed container of wings from the fridge.

Ary cleared her throat and resumed her watching position at the kitchen island. “So you use the fry and toss method of making wings?”

“I do. I finish them off in the oven for half an hour.” He was moving quickly and smoothly.

As she watched, he made a dip out of artichokes, cream cheese and asiago. He placed it in front of her with some toasted pieces of bread and the sound of her munching must have alerted the wolves, because soon, there were three of them working their way through the dip.

“I have to say, this is the most time off my feet I have spent in years.” Ary wiggled the appendages in question happily. The smells in the kitchen were enough to keep her appetite raging, even after the snacks.

Zenner was efficiently producing cooked chicken wings, tossing them in the sauce and parking them in the oven. The tortilla chips were laid on a baking sheet and covered with a number of toppings followed by cheese. They took up the top rack of the oven while the wings finished their cooking process on the bottom. The scent of food was making Ary’s mouth water.

“Alright, vultures, into the living room. I will be serving dinner shortly.”

Zenner shooed them all into the living room and Arabel stopped in surprise. Everything was Christmas all over the room. There was a tree, tinsel and even a pile of gifts under the tree.

“Wow. Christmas overload. This looks so festive.” She smiled crookedly. “I haven’t even had time to realize that the holiday was upon us.”

There was a large, low table in the room and a ring of pillows around it. Couches were present, but Dev and Tony headed for the table.

“When in Rome.” She folded her limbs under her and took a cushion across from her cousin.

Zenner followed with the remaining dip and toast rounds. “Make yourselves at home. Can I get you something to drink?”

She asked for a soda and he brought it to her with two glasses of water. “Drink it. You are dehydrated.”

“Yes, sir.” She gulped down half of the first glass and was not surprised when he returned with a pitcher full of ice water and topped her up. “Are you trying to float me out of here?”

“No. But your fatigue is increased by insufficient fluids. This will help.”

Zenner served Dev and Tony, much to their amusement.

“Don’t laugh, Dev. He takes hospitality seriously.” As she had found out. Her lips were still tingling from that punishing kiss.

“So, Ary, what do you have planned for the holidays?” Tony blurted it out before he could stop himself.

“Well, I do three more days here and then I am halfway across the state for a day, then another day’s drive and another day’s work. I think I am at the clan seat around New Year’s, but I will be blessing the hall while the pack hunts.” Ary shrugged and munched on some more dip as if she didn’t care, but as she grew older, not having a home was wearing on her.

Tony seemed shocked. “You never spend time with family?”

“No. My brother is in line to be the next Alpha, my mother is the Lead female and Father, the Alpha. They have their duties and their own traditions.”

“You never spend a Christmas or Yule at home?”

“I don’t have a home. I haven’t had one since I didn’t shift.” She could see Zenner watching from the doorway to the kitchen. “You know how it is in the clan. If you aren’t a wolf, you are nothing and cast out. At least I didn’t get thrown out the door. I was allowed to find a useful purpose within the clan.”

Antony was looking shocked. Dev elbowed him, “I did try to tell you, Tony. And here you have been sucking up to Chavin and Charles. They are unfeeling bastards and the less that we deal with them, the better.”

Her brother’s and father’s names piqued her attention. “The clan has been sniffing around? Why?”

“They have been making noises like they want to buy us out. It was that which caused us to seek a partner outside the clan.”

“And I was only too happy to oblige. What good is gold if you only sleep on it?” Zenner called out as he returned to the kitchen.

Wonderfully spicy smells were coming out of the kitchen and if he didn’t come out, Ary was going in.

Chapter Four

Tears were running down her face, she was snivelling into a napkin and Arabel hadn't been so happy in years. "Zenner, you are one helluva cook."

Dev and Tony were sniffing as well. The chilies in the wings had felled them all.

"It is only a matter of practice—the more I work on the recipe, the better it gets." He was looking a little bashful at the praise.

"If you change one thing on this recipe and I hear of it, I will be back here and kicking your ass so fast, it would make your head spin."

Zenner's eyes gleamed. "Is that all it will take to have you running back to me? I am getting the urge to tamper as we speak."

Dev waved her arms to quiet the banter. "Alright you two, enough talk of mutual tampering. Zen, it has been a great dinner, but I had better get back to Pax. With only the one blessing holding, I want to make sure that nothing stupid gets started."

Tony helped his wife to her feet and they bowed to the dragon in thanks for his meal. In a flicker of politeness, Arabel was alone with her dragon.

"So you are taking the night off?"

"I am spending every moment with you that I can. Given your obligations, I am sure that you will be needed at the next clan business meeting in short order."

She snorted in an inelegant manner. "Since my father would not take my word for it, I had to have Devora tell him about the delay. He does most of my booking and the clan gets most of the proceeds. I get enough to keep me on the road. He'll have me back on the road as soon as I finish this project."

Zen hissed in disgust. "That is horrible for your family to use you like that."

"It may be horrible, but it is my life."

That statement sounded horrible and for the first time in a long time, Ary let herself think of her endless future warding and moving from place to place. "It's depressing to think about."

"It is. If you were given an opportunity for a home, a family, would you take it?"

“Yes.”

“Even if it meant turning your back on your family for their entire lives?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation. For a chance at a normal life, she would risk anything.

“Will you be mine?” Zenner was suddenly next to her, his fascinating gaze burning into her to find the answer he sought.

“If I can be released from my clan with no loss of life, I will.”

She reached out slowly and took his hand in her own. The light contact was casual for most, but for her, it was the first deliberate contact she had made to another living being in years. His size had a funny effect on her. Rather than intimidate her, it made her feel secure.

“If you will it then, you’ll be mine.”

“I do.” She leaned forward to seal it with a kiss, but as she shifted forward, she hissed. Sitting on the cushions, her legs had fallen asleep.

“What is it?”

“My legs and feet are asleep. Pins and needles.” She dropped his hand and leaned back on her own to brace herself as she extended her legs in front of her.

Zenner moved to grab one of her legs and she yelped before he touched her. “Quiet, sissy.”

He held his hands an inch above her legs and she felt a warmth running through her limbs. He drew his hands down and flicked them away, then returned to do the same hover and flick. In under a minute, her pins and needles were gone.

“Thank you.”

“You have declared yourself mine and I will now be taking care of you. You are doing a horrible job of taking care of yourself.” He rubbed two knuckles along her cheek and she blushed.

He was right, but it still rankled. In a year or two, the clan would have drained her dry and she would have fallen asleep, never to wake.

If Zenner could get her away from her clan, she would be happy to stay with him for the rest of what may be a very long life. She would certainly never be bored. And he could cook. He was her perfect man. Well, her perfect dragon.

Now, he just had to free her from her obligation prison. She had no idea how he was planning to do that, but part of her was morbidly fascinated to find out.

“So, dinner was lovely. What’s next?” The lemon and warm towels that he had put out did a wonderful job of taking the sticky residue off her hands and gave her something to do while she tried to not make eye contact with the man who had just pledged his life to hers.

“Well, if you are up to it, we can do the dishes and then spend some time over at Pax. Or we could just cuddle and watch movies.”

The offer to cuddle surprised her, but it was far more appealing than a night in the noisy bar. “Movie night, please. I need a little more time to recuperate.”

When his full lips twisted into a smile, she had to stifle a gasp. Just that little bit of happiness lighting his eyes sent her heart hammering in her chest. To disguise her reaction, she sat up and got to her feet. “Dishes?”

“I will do them. You sit on the couch. I will be with you in a few minutes. Drink the rest of that water as well.” He scooped the dishes up on a tray and wandered back into the kitchen.

She was just settling in on the couch when he returned. Zen fiddled with some DVD cases, loaded the player and settled himself on Ary’s left. With the remote in his hand, he settled her against him and began his first selection.

Hours passed with his sturdy warmth at her back and his arms around her. Ary watched the action movies, the comedy and the tear jerker with only a few bathroom breaks caused by his incessant forcing water on her. Each time, she returned to him and snuggled back into position.

She was nodding off by midnight and didn’t even do more than whine for him to put her down as he carried her to his room and once again placed her in the nightgown.

Arabel was bemused at his lack of interest in her, despite his declarations earlier. When he held the bedding back for her, she crawled in and settled on her side, unsurprised when Zenner spooned her and swiftly fell asleep. She felt the darkness pulling her in behind him.

Ary was rested and alert when she woke. Smiling, she realized that it was the first time in years that she had felt this good. Zenner wasn’t in bed with her, but his side was still warm so he hadn’t been gone long.

The bathroom was empty, so she took a shower, washed her hair and put her robes on. If she wasn’t mistaken, she only had an hour until noon and she needed to be ready for step two of the blessing. With her sandals on firmly, she pattered down the steps and headed into the kitchen. A note on the fridge was addressed to her.

Arabel, I am over at Pax. Please join me there as soon as you wake. I will be in the office.

Hope you had a good night’s sleep. Hugs, Z

PS-Drink a glass of water.

The glass in question was next to the fridge with a few pieces of ice bobbing in it invitingly. Shrugging, Ary gulped it down and put the glass into the sink. It was time to head to the bar.

The wind tugged at her robes, cooling her rapidly. The bright light of day outlined the bulk of Pax Nocturnal half a kilometre away. Ary didn't waste any time, her sandaled feet crunched in the snow as the crisp air lashed her lungs. It was not her brightest move.

She was more than cold by the time she worked open the back door to the bar and she headed immediately to the office space above the bar. Ary skidded to a halt as she recognized one of the occupants of the room through the open door.

The shouting was uncharacteristic, but his voice was all too familiar.

"I don't care what this freak is offering. Arabel's talent is the property of the clan." Chavin Marx's voice was almost shrill. Ary had never heard her brother so agitated.

"Her talent, as used by your clan, is killing her. She has never received the training she needs to protect her own life and she has steadily drained it away. You and your parents knew this and did nothing." Zenner's cold fury was coming through loud and clear.

The defensive tone was apparent in Chav's voice. "And what will you do with her, use her for your own purposes? Drain her and toss her?"

"I plan to keep her, protect her and live out my life with her. Unlike you, I know her value as a person, not a power."

Ary heard the shift of a chair and knew that her hot-headed brother was going to pick a fight and lose one, which wasn't good.

"Boys! Knock it off. I need Dev, Tony and Zen front and centre please. It is almost noon." She folded her hands in front of her and waited. Greeting her brother wasn't going to do any good. He was in a complete lather.

His form was shifting from human to canine while she watched, so she ignored him.

Her clients lined up as she requested and once again, she kissed them one by one. When she tried to move away from Zenner, he held her tightly against him. He was staking a claim and they both knew it. So did her brother. His snarl of rage was unmistakable and soon she was forcibly parted from the enjoyable pursuit of kissing her dragon.

She spun out of range and started down the stairs as the meaty thuds of fist fighting broke out in the office. Neither Dev nor Tony would interfere. Chav was an alpha and two puny betas would not presume to interrupt his anger.

Ary centred her mind and began her rituals. She touched each surface that she wished to enchant and then began to move to the beat of the bar. It was a quick and powerful beat. After she was moving with the power inherent in the building, she started to spin and pour the magic of her clients into the walls.

A little of her own life went with it. She could feel it every time and today was no different. Zenner was up there right now, pounding her brother into the floor, because he realized the truth that even Ary hadn't wanted to face. Her job was killing her.

When the building hummed happily, she stopped dancing and was able to make her way back up the stairs to the only part of the building not warded against violence. The office.

Chapter Five

Blood was in the air and it was no surprise to Ary that it was Chav's.

"Well, brother, I am guessing that you are not here to see me?" Her robes fluttered as she walked to Zenner and touched the bruises that were forming under his bronze skin.

"Devora contacted the Alpha..."

Ary's voice was flat. "You mean Charles."

"I mean our Alpha and told him that this dragon wanted you to part company with the clan. Our father was unhappy with this thought and sent me to explain matters to you."

"Shout and beat him into submission? Oh. That worked really well." In an effort to show how matters were, Arabel perched in Zenner's lap.

"So. You are whoring yourself with someone outside the clan? Classy."

Dev gasped, Tony's face darkened and Ary had to hold Zenner down on the couch. She pressed her lips against his ear and simply whispered, "Wait."

She turned to her brother and stared at him until he squirmed. "You know as well as I that my non-shifter status led our father to declare me unmateable. No member of our clan would come near me and no other clans know that I exist. I have been alone for a very long time, brother. If it was not for Zenner choosing me as I chose him, I would not even have the possibility of love with another.

"Now, I have made inquiries. No other clan does that to an unpowered female. They simply keep her away from the Alphas and let her choose her mate from the lesser wolves. They hope that her lack will be remedied in the next generation and if it isn't, then they simply kick the female out and she will pick her mate from humans.

"No other clan does to their non-shifters what was done to me. How do you explain this? I think I am due a little whoring around."

Chav opened and closed his mouth as he flushed in surprise. He rose to his feet and left the office with his head held high. Not an easy feat considering his limp.

"Did you bite him?"

Her dragon was rubbing his head against her, inhaling her scent and breathing in her irritation. Zen chuckled against her neck. “No, he jumped away from me and tripped over the chair.”

His lips were doing strange and intriguing things under her ear. A flick of his tongue and she felt a pulse start between her thighs.

The scent of sudden heat reached even Ary’s nose and she buried her face in Zen’s hair.

“I hadn’t noticed before, but you have the scent capabilities of a wolf, don’t you?”

She lifted her head as he distracted her. “Yes. Of course. I am the child of two Alphas, after all. I have speed, strength, hearing, the ability to track. All I lack is the ability to change my form.”

“You have the magic instead.”

“I suppose.”

She moved to leave his lap, but he gripped her hips with his hands. “Not just yet. Why is it that yesterday you were insensible after the blessing, but today, you are well enough to pick fights with your family?”

“It must have been your care and attention as well as a full night’s sleep.”

“What about the power you siphoned from me while you slept?”

That surprised her. “I did what now?”

Dev and Tony left the office and gave them privacy.

“Your body sought mine to top up your power as you slept. Although you didn’t do it consciously, your magic did it automatically. You have gained a slight expansion on your lifespan if you don’t spend it all.”

“How much time?”

“If you don’t burn the power off or top it up, about fifty years. Your regular lifespan is back.”

“You did it.”

“No, my dear. You did it. A self-defence mechanism that is built into your talent. Many talents have a similar system. That is why they mate early enough to make it an equal sharing, or they drain their mate dry and they both die early. Your family kept you from bonding and therefore, your body drained itself instead of sharing the burden of your magic.”

“So, I am a giant, sucking vortex? That’s fabulous.”

She was miserable. Her mood had shifted so rapidly that it even left her dizzy. She had been so proud of standing up to Chavin and declaring herself an abused sister that she hadn't even thought there might have been a reason for her segregation.

He lifted her chin with his fingers. "You have done nothing wrong. The werewolves are not very good with creatures of magic. I suspect that you have at least one magical ancestor that no one knows about."

Her eyes felt hot, itchy and she wasn't surprised to feel tears rolling down her cheeks. When Zenner leaned forward to catch them on his tongue, she held still and let him take care of her. Sobs racked her body and he held her through the storm.

When the worst was over, he held her tightly and told her, "Breathe, Arabel. Breathe and let your calm reach out into the office."

She snivelled against his shirt, but reached out with her mind and touched the walls. Her calm washed over them with the grace of splashed paint at first and then it took on the soothing patter of rain.

"There. Now no one can pick a fight with me in here again."

She laughed with a hiccough. "Not even me. But anywhere else is fair game."

"That's the spirit. Now, let's go and take a look at my new house."

"Uh. Can I change into something a little less drafty? The walk here almost froze me solid."

"You walked here like that? Woman, you need a keeper." He rose to his feet with her in his arms, taking the steps with ease.

She turned her face against his chest and whispered, "Well, it's a good thing you volunteered for the job."

He muttered something under his breath, but threw a coat over her before he took her out the back door. His legs covered the ground to the guesthouse far faster than hers had. He dropped her onto the bed and left her to get changed.

Dressing for the kiss of winter in the week before Christmas was fairly easy. All of her standard clothes were jeans and a sweatshirt. She was dressed and downstairs in a matter of two minutes.

"Ready when you are." Her jacket was hanging in the closet and she slipped it on. Zen was leaning against the door wearing the coat she had been draped in earlier.

"Come along." He held the door for her and locked the guesthouse behind them. "The site I selected is up in the mountains. It makes it easier for me to come and go."

The car he was leading her to was gorgeous. A deep, vibrant blue and sleek, smooth lines. The interior was as graceful as the exterior and as she slid into the passenger seat, she was completely at ease.

She buckled her belt out of habit and was happy to see Zenner do the same. *Safety first, kids.*

Their drive was quiet. The mountains and trees flew past the windows, the suspension of the car was so tuned that she felt like she was floating on air. Their drive could have lasted two hours or two days, all she knew was that when he pulled up in the rotunda of the home that was still under construction, she whistled in amazement.

She was home.

Her soul recognized the structure jutting from the stone as its resting place, a place of peace and introspection.

When she looked over at Zenner, she saw the same thing in his eyes. He knew that she belonged here. He had built this for her before they had met.

“*Cordis Exitor*. The soul’s awakening. I named it the day that they first cut the earth to lay the foundation. Would you care to see inside?”

“I would love to. Please. Show me your soon-to-be home.”

He held his elbow out to her and she took it, unsurprised as the doors to the house opened without his touch. The air was thick with magic up here. Fewer humans to dilute and waste the purity of the energy.

“Wow. The entry hall is amazing. Those staircases are hand carved? They look incredible.”

“Everything here was done by hand. Few craftsmen around that will do it my way, but I pay very well.”

“I imagine that you do. Where do you get your money? A huge pile of gold that you used to sleep on?” He was silent and she started to laugh. “Seriously? Wow. Stories about dragons are not exaggerated.”

“Only a few of them. The rest we put out there for propaganda.” He twirled her into an arc that had her laughing. When she swung back, she was flush against him and her laughter quickly stilled.

“Would you care to see the bedroom?” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Of course. But if it is a thorough tour, will I lose my maiden’s status?”

“Not until you are free of your clan and can come to me willingly and eagerly.” He wrapped his arm over her shoulders and steered her up the left staircase. There were no carpets in the home, but the smell of polished wood was everywhere. The entire house was made of granite and oak and it seemed to be made of light as well.

“The goblins that I hired to work here only work nights. Their craftsmanship is better after dark.”

“Goblins? Goblins are real?” A whole new world was starting to open to her. Not just the insular world of werewolves, but she was here with a dragon and his contractor was a goblin. Life just kept getting weirder.

“Yes. Most mythical or fairytale creatures are real.” The double doors to what must be the master bedroom swung open at their approach.

“That’s a nice touch.”

“The bedroom and the kitchen are the only finished rooms so far. I like to fly up here and look out over the mountains. The view is amazing.” He steered her past the enormous bed in the centre of the room and out onto the balcony.

With the wind blowing, the sun setting and the mountains keeping them safe, he went to one knee and proposed.

“Arabel Marx, once we have freed you from the mire of you clan, will you marry me? Will you be my wife, my partner and my lover forever and ever?”

“I will see how long forever lasts for me, but Zenner-Arial-Ifical, I will marry you until my last and final day passes.”

Before she could lean down to kiss him, he took her left hand and slid a ring of incredible beauty into place. “A mere trifling of the wealth at my disposal, but a rock that I dug out myself for the woman who would take my heart and hold it within hers.” He stood and lifted her at the waist for a kiss. She wrapped her arms and legs around him to return the kiss and the friction as he walked was driving her out of her mind.

If sex is off the menu, why is he dropping me onto his bed?

“You know, even though I intend to save the best for our first official night together, I have been dying for a taste of you.”

With only a few quick movements, her sweatshirt and bra went flying and he was working at her jeans with incredible dexterity. She was leaning back on her elbows and watching him, then looked away and blushed furiously as her jeans were removed and her underwear with them. She had no idea when her boots and socks had disappeared.

She couldn't make light of the intent look in his eyes as he stroked her shoulders, collarbone and trailed his way down to her breasts. He leaned forward and nuzzled her breasts, warming them with his breath as he moved from the left to the right. Ary brought her hands up and caressed her own flesh gently as he worked his way down her torso to rest between her thighs.

His breath heated her sensitive core, the petals of her sex opening with moisture under his intense scrutiny. The embarrassment of having her body getting slick with someone watching went out the window when she first felt the touch of his tongue.

She gripped the bedding with both fists as his mouth began to stroke her in places that her own fingers could never reach. When he licked her, she mewled and as his tongue worked into her and started to undulate. She cursed his dragon heritage.

Unlike the ones generated by her own hands, this orgasm caught her by surprise with both its suddenness and its strength. A keening cry came from her mouth as she arched her back in abandon. Zenner kept licking her until he had licked her dry. Her body was sweaty, exhausted and singing with the tune he had taught it.

She didn't know if she would be able to move again. Ary didn't know if she wanted to. "This is a good place to die. I think I will just lay here forever."

Zenner crawled up her prone body and gave her a kiss that started her belly clenching all over again. "No, you won't. We are going to have dinner in town. It's a human tradition, is it not, to have a nice dinner on the day you get engaged?"

Ary licked her lips and tasted herself. "That is true. But neither of us is human and you have already eaten."

Her dragon howled with laughter. "Sadly, if you eat maiden, an hour later, you are hungry again."

Summoning all her strength, she punched him. Hard.

Chapter Six

Since Zen was intimately acquainted with her wardrobe, she was unsurprised when he stopped outside a ladies' clothing shop.

"You need some more festive clothing. On a day like today, looking your best is important. Well, that is what the women's magazines have told me."

She was getting out of the car as he held the door for her. "Seriously, you read women's magazines?"

"It helps me with the conundrum of modern women. You are the first I am experimenting on." He held her hand as they approached the dress shop. It had seemed closed, but the lights flicked on as they reached for the door.

"Zenner. So glad you could make it. Is this she?" The woman on the other side of the door was speaking, but her bright lipstick made it easy to read her lips even before they were inside her establishment.

"Ystine, this is Arabel, my intended."

"I am so happy to meet you, my dear. Zenner has been alone for far too long."

The woman extended her hands to shake Ary's and that is when Arabel realized the woman had too many hands. Dazed, Ary took the two top ones and let Ystine grip them for a moment.

"Ystine, you are her first spider goblin. Go easy." He pried the woman's hands away from Ary's and put a protective arm around her.

"Fine. Spoilsport. It is not often that Warders come this way, though this will be the second dragon in the last few years." She twitched her skirts and led the way into the shop. "Well, miss, unlike most of your cousins, you seem to be lacking in the style department."

"Cousins?" She whispered it to Zen.

"I will explain later, but I have made a few calls on the subject. Just follow her lead and let her help you pick out some clothes. Your jeans and sweats are fine, but you may want to leave your fashion comfort zone now and then."

Ary shook her head and tried on whatever Ystine brought her. He must have really been reading women's magazines. He knew just what to say.

She was in dizzying yet comfortable heels and an elegant gown with a deep blue faux fur wrap. She certainly felt elegant. When she turned to Zenner, his eyes confirmed it. She was stunning, it showed in his expression.

“These heels are high. You had best be prepared to catch me when I fall.”

“I have sworn myself to your defence. I will be on guard.” He held out his arm and they made their way to the car.

“Wait. My stuff—coat, shoes and stuff.”

“Ystine will send everything over to Pax and we will pick it up before we retire for the evening.” He tucked her in with a style that she envied.

Dinner was lovely, but Zen had a look on his face that said he could do better. There were several women eyeing them during their meal, but he wasn’t concerned so she ignored them.

Their drive was uneventful, but their return to Pax Nocturnal caused a bit of a stir. Zen left her at the bar while he went to speak with Dev and Tony. A few women attempted to waylay him during his journey, but he brushed past them all.

Steve, the rude bartender, looked her over from head to toe. “Hello, miss. How may I serve you this evening?” Zen’s scent was on her and it must have thrown off his no-humans game.

“Leave me here quietly and keep your eyes out of my cleavage.” She turned to keep an eye on the office and waited.

Steve didn’t have much patience. “Why so rude? A lady like you shouldn’t be alone.”

“Two days ago I came in here and asked to see Dev. You insulted me and were about to attack when Zenner intervened. Your reasons for keeping me from my cousin are your own, but the next time you see Chavin, tell him that his sister says hi.”

She turned on the barstool to watch Steve’s face. He went from wolf to human so fast and so many times that she wasn’t surprised that he fainted. Ary flagged down Val, a waitress, and pointed to the flat Steve behind the bar, then went to follow her dragon up those stairs.

The crowd parted for her. She was past the familiar bouncers and up the stairs in an instant.

The conversation was not one that she was particularly happy to walk into.

“So, the clan leader will be here at noon?” Tony had his hands fisted in his hair while Dev rested her hand on the phone. Zenner watched from across the office.

“Yes. Charles will also be bringing his wife, Bellanie.”

“Good, I think it has been a while since Arabel spent any time with her mother.”

Ary stepped in. “You know, closing the door would make this a lot more private.”

“I am sorry, Ary. I expected to be down after I had asked for an audience with the clan head. He was a little argumentative.”

“That would have been my father then. Wonderful.” Ary rubbed at her forehead. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

The thought of the look on her father’s face was enough to make her shudder. “Good. Then I need sleep and a good breakfast. It will probably be my last meal.”

“Nonsense. Nothing he can do will harm you in any way. You are an adult and you have the right to choose. Even the omega wolves have the right to choose life in the pack or life with humanity. They can choose it once and then must live with that. Can you make that choice?”

She looked at him for an endless moment. The noise of the bar behind her and the silence of her audience in front of her. “I think I already have.”

His smile broke through her dread and she knew then that whatever happened, for the first time in her life, she would not have to face it alone. “Then let’s get you that rest. You want to be bright eyed and bushy tailed for tomorrow.”

He extended his arm to her and she took his support down the stairs. “Zen, I thought the tail business was your thing?”

The bouncers looked startled at Zenner’s laughter and the crowd parted wide to let them through. He led her back to the front door and the car.

“You are not wandering through that field in those shoes and as much as I love carrying you, I need the car for tomorrow. We are picking up some guests for our meeting with your father.” The tires crunched on the ice of the parking lot and all too soon, they were at the guesthouse again.

Ary waited until Zen opened her door, enjoying the novelty as much as his expectation that he do it. These tiny formalities warmed her, the care that he lavished on her made her feel both loved and desired. If only they didn’t have her family to deal with the following day, she could lose herself in the illusion forever.

Her sleep had been uninterrupted after she relaxed and let the heat generated by his spooning wash through her. Once she figured out that he wasn't going to do more than hold her, her heart stopped pounding over a hundred beats per minute.

After she sashayed out of the bathroom the next morning, he set her down to eat. He was as good as his word and gave her the enormous breakfast that she had requested. Her hair was still wrapped in a towel as she tucked into the eggs, pancakes, bacon and syrup that were on her plate. It was a very big plate.

When she finished her meal, he sat her down on a cushion, knelt behind her and started to brush her hair. "Why are you obsessed with taking care of me?"

"Because every man out there wants to be useful to his female. You give me that opportunity and for that, I thank you."

"Ah. Like the opening pickle jars thing?" She had never been in one place long enough to buy a jar of pickles, let alone look for someone to open them, but she had heard women ask their spouses to do just that. The men had seemed delighted.

"Exactly like that. Plus, it isn't everyday that the dragon gets to save the girl."

Arabel chuckled and leaned into the strokes of the brush as he worked through her hair. Although she had slept well, his hands were lulling her into a hypnotic state. When he lifted her to her feet, she stumbled and her hero was all too eager to catch her.

"Are you done playing with me?" She blinked up at him and was gratified to see his eyes flare and narrow.

"No. I have yet to begin playing with you. Trust me—you will know when I do." He kissed her, a soft kiss that took her breath away. When he teased her with his tongue, she responded in kind and soon, they were eagerly running their hands over each other until his phone rang. The small noise made him jump back like a scalded cat.

"Damn. We need to get going. Our guests are waiting."

"Aren't you going to pick it up?"

"No. The ladies and I arranged a signal and it is too cold to leave them waiting long."

Ladies? This got curiouser and curiouser. She was wearing her jeans and sweatshirt again. The new clothing was not yet hanging in the wardrobe.

"Let's move then. I'll get my coat." When she got to the door, she noted a slight problem. "I think my jacket and shoes are still at the store."

“Damn. You are right. Just a moment.” Walking to the centre of the room, Zen clapped his hands together and then pulled them apart slowly. A pile of boxes topped by her jacket and shoes appeared on the table. The magic startled her more than anything he had done so far.

“That is *so* much cooler than anything I can do.”

“I would beg to differ. Now put your shoes on and let’s get our guests. They must be freezing by now.” Zen was getting his own gear on for the brisk breeze and freezing temperatures.

In a matter of minutes, they were tooling down the road and Ary was dying of curiosity. He refused to answer her queries and merely told her that she would find out soon.

Soon arrived five minutes later next to a stand of trees that marked the edge of the clan’s territory. Two figures stood there, each swathed in a cloak from the concealing hood to the tips of their shoes.

Zen got out, opened the rear passenger doors for each of the figures, confirming his earlier declaration of *ladies* being their guests. The figures sat silently in the back of the car and since no introductions had been forwarded, Ary kept quiet.

They arrived at Pax Nocturnal with five minutes to spare. Ary took Zen’s arm and he escorted her past the guards that had been posted at the entrance. He stopped and explained, “These ladies are the guests of the Alpha. The meeting being held cannot be completed without them.”

The guards looked at each other, uncertain. Zen simply held the door for all the ladies to precede him. No sane wolf would take on a dragon.

Inside, the women kept their hoods in place and walked slowly up the stairs to the office.

It was a slow procession that moved into the presence of the Alpha and he was surprised to see more than Arabel and Zenner.

“Who the hell are they?”

“You must be Charles. I am Zenner. These ladies are women who share your daughter’s talent and will be only too happy to welcome her into their midst if she leaves the clan.”

Ary was comforted by Zen keeping close to her and when he put his arm around her shoulders, she breathed a sigh of relief.

The women pulled their hoods back and met the anger of the Alpha with calm serenity.

“How can these women have Arabel’s talent? She’s a freak.” Charles finally said it to her face and she wasn’t surprised to hear it.

Her mother's white face made her feel a little awkward for what was about to transpire, but if it was going to be her life or her future, she was choosing a future.

"Thanks, Dad. It was nice to hear it straight from you for a change. I would like to hear what these women have to say. Ladies, I don't believe that we have been introduced. I am Arabel Marx."

She held out her hand and the taller of the two took it in a firm and cool grip. Her father was turning purple, but he couldn't shift forms the way he was trying to. Her magic was keeping the office calm and controlled. That included werewolf attack.

He had bullied his way to the head of the clan and no one gainsaid him. Ever.

"My name is Eylonwy Warder. This is Ralta, your cousin four times removed."

"Pleased to meet you, Arabel." Ralta was as dark as Eylonwy was pale and if Ary wasn't mistaken, the taller of the two had pointy ears.

"Would you care to explain why my father is having a fit at the word *warder*?" It was true, Charles was on the floor, thrashing in an effort to shift, but he was being held by the charm that she had lain on the room.

Eylonwy smiled. "I am guessing that you laid your powers in this room?"

Dev was standing far back, but witnessing her Alpha thrash. "You did? You never did that before."

"It was Zen's idea. I needed to calm down, so I projected calm and restraint into the room. I guess I was a little literal on the restraint part."

"You can pull your power back into you, by the way. There is no lock on your wards. You have left them wide open to drain your life. Who trained you?" Ralta looked at her with eyes that seemed to see right through her skin.

"No training. I just found a method that worked. Is there another way to do it?"

Ralta barked a laugh. "You could say that. When are you scheduled to lay the next ward?"

"Uh. Sunset. So we have a few hours."

"Excellent. That will be plenty of time to teach you how to lay one permanent ward with a finite amount of power." Ralta smiled and her white teeth were extremely sharp for someone who appeared human.

Eylonwy stepped forward. "We know your decision and although you want to confront your father, now is not the time. I will negotiate with Zenner on your behalf and will attempt to

preserve ties to your family in the process. It will not be a pleasant discussion to start, so we will bring you back when things are ratified.”

Ary was sure that the woman was an elf. It was amazing—she had never thought that she would see one in her lifetime. Clan teachings had left her thinking that werewolves and vampires were the only paranormals left.

“Fine. But I do wish to speak to my parents before they—or we—leave.” She nodded decisively and left the room with Ralta, looking back at Zenner, comforted by the calm acceptance in his eyes.

Her life was changing and she wasn’t allowed to watch.

Chapter Seven

“Don’t worry. Eylonwy has been representing Warders for contract purposes for hundreds of years. She knows what she is doing. And Zenner seems very interested in your interests. The wolf won’t know what hit him.” Ralta was removing a bag from under her cloak and setting up a small bowl and a bunch of pebbles.

“Those are my parents you are referring to, you know?”

“I know and I am sorry for it. But you are what your ancestors made you and they will just have to deal with it. You, however, need to get a grip on your talent. Please explain the method by which you lay your wards.” She grabbed a stool off the bar and perched on it, looking over at Ary expectantly.

“Uh. Okay. First I dress in robes that make it easy to move. Then I kiss each of the people who will take part in the ward and pull some of their magic into me. I stand and listen to the rhythm of the place and then I touch each wall and structure to anchor tendrils of power and after that, I start to spin the power out to coat the walls.”

Ralta blinked her dark brown eyes in surprise. “That is a very effective way to coat a property with a ward, but it also explains why you need to keep redoing them. The method I will show you is a one-stroke warding.” She palmed a handful of the pebbles. “These will be the wards and all we need to do is charge them and then bury them either outside the building or we can use the magic to embed them in the walls.”

Arabel observed, “It’s cold outside, so I am thinking the second option would be best. The first would be a little brisk.”

Curious, she had came a little closer to the strange woman who seemed terribly familiar. Her own features, Charles’s features, were muted but visible in this new woman. “It is my father’s line that carries this talent, isn’t it?”

“You guessed correctly. We had a magus run a trace on your family line and it met up with mine, so I am here as your tutor.” She smiled and patted Ary on the hand. “What is the nature of your ward?”

“Well, it squishes violence in the patrons while they are here and for the rest of the evening. It also allows the owners to use their voices to control the patrons in case of emergency or if the wards thin.”

“I am impressed. That is a very advanced filter and your ability to weave three different clients into the wards is a special skill that a lot of us don’t master.”

Arabel was feeling good about herself until...

“It’s just a shame you have such a crappy technique. Now, call back some of the power from yesterday. Think of it as using your mind to touch the puddle of power on the wall. Let me know when you have it.”

Ary reached out with her talent and pulled in the energy from the day before. It was rather like tugging on a rubber sheet, but she was able to free samples from all of the owners. “Got it.”

Ralta held up the bowl with the pebbles. “These are hematite—the best for this kind of ward. Put your hand in the bowl and pull the power from yesterday out of your body and put it into the pebbles. Stop when you feel it pulling on your personal life energy. We will shield that next.”

Bemused, Ary plunged her hands into the bowl of cold stones. They warmed rapidly at her touch and soon, they were all coated with the power from the day before.

Ralta did not touch the bowl again.

“Now, take those stones, there are thirty-three, and place them against the wall, using the power inside them to stick them to the walls.”

Ary took the bowl and walked to one of the walls. She reached up as high as she could with the first pebble and pressed it to the wall. An instinct she didn’t know she had activated caused the stone to fuse into the wood. *Lather, rinse and repeat.* Arabel walked around the room, her instincts guiding her on placement and each stone became a slight shadow in the wood when her fingers fell away.

In under an hour, the bowl was empty and she was tired. “All done. Now what?”

“Nothing. You are finished. You can tune the stones at a later date for additional features, but the walls now resonate with your power and that of your clients. You’re done.” Ralta went behind the bar and scavenged for glasses and a bottle of shiraz.

“All those years I was spinning and I could have just done this? I feel stupid.”

“Don’t be. I am guessing that the only magic user with an even remotely similar talent that your family could find was a dervish. That explains the robes and your referring to it as a charm or blessing.”

“What were you saying about protecting my life force?”

“That is the first thing you should have been shown, but everyone has their learning curve.” Ralta took her glass of wine and sat on the floor. “Okay, sit across from me and close your eyes. Think of the part of you that grows exhausted when you work. Wrap that part of you in a cocoon

of your own making. Pour power into that shell and wrap it around your very soul. You will only need to drop this shield for your mate.”

Ary concentrated on the words flowing over her. She protected herself for the first time in her life and when she finished, her shoulders were straighter and her head was high. “I did it.”

“I knew you could. There are a few more things you need to learn, but I believe it will give us a chance to visit in the future. I am happy to have another cousin and if you are willing, you can meet a few more of your relatives on the Warders side.”

“I think I may have to ease into that. The few relatives that I have grown up with are heady enough for now. What else can wards do?”

“You can protect your garden against bugs and rabbits, hire out your services to other paranormals to protect their homes and assist them with anchoring glamour.”

“What?”

“A goblin who works out of their home but wishes for their visitors to see them as a human, they hire someone to work a glamour on their home and a Warder to anchor it. That is quite a cash cow.”

“Wow. So this could actually make me some money?”

“If you want it to. Quite a few Warders choose the lives of housewives quite happily.” Ralta stood and dusted off her cloak.

As Ary stood, she asked the question that just sprang to mind. “Why are you dressed in cloaks? And how did you get to that copse by the road?”

“That is a discussion for another day, but your fiancé can fill you in.” Ary’s new cousin looked up to the office. “I think they are ready for you now. Eylonwy dropped the sound ward.”

“Seriously? You can ward for sound?” She followed—a thousand questions and possibilities running into her head.

“You can ward for anything if you have a way to support the magic. I was serious when I said that I would come back to help tutor you, by the way. We are not going to leave you floundering now that we have found you.”

Ary followed her back up the stairs, her mind reeling with what she had been told. She wasn’t alone. She had a proud tradition of magic behind her and shame wasn’t a part of it. It was a heady thought. She could be proud of what she was—she just had to sacrifice her family to do it.

Eylonwy was standing with one hand on Zenner's arm. Bellanie was doing the same with Charles. Both men looked angry but resigned.

The elf was completely serene when she smiled at the returning women. "Arabel. An agreement has been struck. The Warders will return to your previous warding sites and create permanent wards. Zenner will provide your father with the two years' worth of wages that you would have earned before you died and Charles will free you from obligation to the clan while allowing you to retain your status within it."

That sounded horribly one sided. "What does Charles give up?"

Eylonwy smiled and it was not a pleasant smile. "He gives up a dowry of half your earnings throughout your lifetime and gives his support to your immediate handfasting to Zenner with a wedding to follow in a year and a day."

"What's a handfasting?"

Zen answered with a certain amount of heat in his voice. "A trial wedding that either partner can dissolve with no notice. They can simply go their separate ways. If there is a child, however, the wedding becomes permanent." He was going to try for the child clause—it was obvious in every muscle of his body.

Dev and Tony were casually cowering in the corner. Too much power in the room was forcing them into a defensive posture.

"When would the handfasting take place?"

"Immediately." Zenner barked the word out so quickly that she blinked in surprise.

"I am not getting even temporarily wed in jeans and a sweatshirt. I am going back to the guesthouse, getting into something pretty and meeting you on a snow-covered field in between. I want everyone there. Dev, I know that you are about to open Pax, but if you could get your peons to open for you, I would really appreciate it. I want you there."

Dev looked to her husband and then to her Alpha. She steeled her shoulders and nodded decisively. "I'll be out back in half an hour."

Suddenly, she lunged forward and gave Arabel a hug. "Congratulations. I wish only the best for you."

Charles and Bellanie gasped, Ary had had enough. "Oh, shut up. I don't suck people dry and leave them for dead. I know that is what you have circulated around for the last ten years and I am sick of it. Fine, you kept any of the clan members from becoming interested in me, but it's time for me to get a life instead of giving one."

“I also know that Chavin got married last year and his wife is expecting a child. I wish them both the best.” Ary looked at both of her parents. “I hope that you wish that kind of joy for me. In Zenner, I have found a man who wants me for what I am and does not chastise me for what I am not. I hope I can make him as happy as he has already made me.”

Zen got tears in his eyes, but Eylonwy held him back when he tried to approach Ary. “Go and get changed, Arabel. We will meet you in the field.”

Ary left with Ralta on her heels. It was time to Google *handfasting* and put on something pretty.

Chapter Eight

“Something old. Well, I think that’s Zenner. Something new, the dress.”

Ary was looking around and with a smile, Ralta removed her black, fur-lined cloak. “Here is your something borrowed.” Ralta was wearing a set of knee-high boots with trousers and a lovely blouse and suit jacket. Very chic.

Something niggled at the back of her mind and suddenly, Ary darted up the stairs to grab her denim jacket from the wardrobe and removed a tiny blue pin from the collar.

“Aha! Something blue.” She almost crashed into her cousin as she started down the stairs. “I forgot that I had this pin to ward off the evil eye. It may not have worked, but it’s blue.”

She pinned it carefully under the edge of her gown and dug through the boxes to find the form-fitting boots that she had picked out the night before. They would be hidden beneath her gown, but would protect her feet from the snow and ice.

“Are you sure that I can borrow the cloak? You will probably get cold.”

Guilt was assailing Ary until Ralta smiled. “I can ward myself to retain heat. It isn’t a worry and I am glad that I could be of service to you.”

“Thank you. You have been very helpful and frankly, having a witness kept me from doing something stupid.” She quickly checked herself in the mirror and then squinted through the frost on the window. They were waiting for her.

Ralta opened the door. “It’s time.”

“Then let’s go. It has been a while since I was last a witness at a handfasting.”

The cloak settled heavily around her as Ary walked out of the guesthouse to the collection of people waiting for her.

Her hands were clenched into fists as she waited for her parents to try and stop the proceedings, but they didn’t say a word.

Eylonwy smiled kindly at her and gestured for her to step forward and take Zenner’s hand.

A shimmering bubble of magic expanded from the elf and the winter air suddenly held the promise of a summer day. “I bid you look into each other’s eyes.”

Ary looked into the black and gold mystery of Zenner's eyes and saw surety there.

"Zenner, will you cause her pain?" Her voice was solemn, serious.

"Yes."

"Is that your intent?"

"No."

"Arabel, will you cause him pain?"

"Yes." Her voice was steady and she spoke the truth. No one could promise to never harm another emotionally.

"Is that your intent?"

"Never."

The elf looked to both of them. "Will you share each other's pain and seek to ease it?"

Ary and Zen spoke as one. "We will."

"And so the first of the bindings are made." Eylonwy draped a ribbon across their joined hands and it melted into their skin, a cool whisper of their first vow hanging in the air.

"Arabel, will you share his laughter?"

"Yes."

"Zenner, will you share her laughter?"

That sentence caused a grin to cross his features. "Yes."

"Will you both look for the brightness and positivity in life and in each other?"

"We will."

"And so the second bidding is made."

Another ribbon was draped across their hands and disappeared into their flesh. The vows continued, both of them answering in the positive, would she burden him, would they share dreams, would they cause anger and would they honour each other.

“The knots of this binding are not formed by these chords but instead by your vows. Either of you may drop the ties, for as always, you hold in your own hands the makings of breaking this union. Thus, you are bound for a year and a day.”

Ralta and the others clapped as Zenner took her into his arms and kissed her.

Ary's eyes widened as she felt his power flow into her. She closed her eyes and returned the flare of magic. Filled to bursting with the energy of a dragon, Ary held tightly to her new husband, dizzy as he swept her up into his arms and took off with her.

Wings that she had mistaken for a cloak were spread wide and carrying them toward the mountains. He held her close to his chest as he flew off with her into the haven of rock and snow.

She was truly lost in the arms of her dragon.

“How could it be finished already?”

Zen had landed in the front rotunda of his newly built home. It was now complete, the areas that had previously been open to the elements were now sealed and finished walls.

“Goblin labour. You get exactly what you pay for.” He walked confidently to the entrance and the doors opened for them, again, with no contact. “I present to you my home, my heart and my love. You may do with them what you wish.”

He carried her into the central hall between the arching stairways, then set her carefully on her feet.

She turned from her audience of one, surveyed the house and then closely looked him up and down. He had a tail that she hadn't seen before and sharp teeth that had not nicked her during their intense kiss at the ceremony. “You look a little different.”

“This is my warrior form, similar to the half-form that a lot of the weres prefer to use while fighting. If you wish to see my full form, I will have to go outside.”

She wanted to see him in all his forms. “If you wouldn't mind.”

“Not at all.”

There was something in his grin and when he started to strip off right there in foyer, she knew what it was.

Arabel wanted to look but not stare and finally gave in to gawking as his musculature was exposed to her avid gaze. Her mouth was watering and she definitely knew why.

There was no fat on his body—every inch of skin covered rippling muscle that explained his ease with lifting a maiden for a quick get away.

Her eyes focused on his abdomen as he peeled the trousers away. His boots and socks were already off, but the slow strip tease had her making fists in the fur lining as he unveiled his erection and the upper slopes of his thighs.

“Wow.” She caught a look at the profile of his eager cock as well as the killer curve of his ass while he tugged his pants free of his feet.

“Well, are you going to look outside or are your eyes glued to my ass?”

“Um. Both.” She followed that ass out the front door and watched him turn to face her in the rotunda and turn from a man into a dragon.

“Oh my.” Suddenly, the brisk and frigid weather was far too warm. He was the same golden bronze as a dragon as he was in human form. She was a few feet from the doors when the head approached her and snuffled at her from top to toe.

The tongue playfully licked at her and she couldn’t help but giggle. Carefully, slowly, she stroked his nose and started to run her hands down him from nose to tail. It took a very long time.

His claws were as long as her arms and the dexterity he exhibited was amazing when he removed her cloak and kept her warm with his breath.

“Very pretty. I like how hard your scales are.”

Zen closed his eyes as if she had pained him. He was shifted back to a human and carrying her inside in seconds.

Up to the bedroom and out of her gown, she almost didn’t see her clothing go. Her boots went flying, one into the bathroom and one toward the window. In a moment, they were both naked and shivering with heat.

“With this mating, you are mine.” He waited for a response.

She jumped him. With her arms locked around his neck, her legs around his waist, she gave him the answer that he wanted. “What are you waiting for?”

Growling with anticipation, he ran his hands over her body, learning her curves with purpose.

She arched into each touch, learning her own responses to his different touches. Harder strokes and feathery caresses were all designed to find her pleasure points.

A few of her reactions surprised her—the touch at the base of her spine in particular. When he touched her there, her hips ground against the cock trapped between them and he groaned in response.

“I will have to remember that one.” His dark chuckle against her throat caused a moan that surprised them both. He used his lips and then teeth on her neck, holding her tight as she shivered and shook in his arms. “That’s a keeper.”

Coherent thought was out of the question for Ary. She merely hung on for dear life as her body rioted out of her control. When the bedding pressed her back, she sighed in relief at being able to drop her arms. The relief was short lived when she felt a cold cuff on one wrist and then the other. She could move her wrists to her shoulder level, but no further. “What the hell?”

“Humour me. Family tradition.”

She was going to give him hell, but he found that spot on her neck again and the moisture that flowed from her during the light pleasure-pain distracted her. His fingers tested her opening and one slipped into her.

“Not quite ready. Perhaps a little more exploration.” His mouth tormented her, lapping at her breasts, licking at her ribs and nibbling at her belly. A spot two inches below her navel had her moaning in surprise and he slipped a second finger into her. He laved his tongue against her lower belly and she hissed when she saw he had switched it to his bifurcated tongue. In fact, she could see his wings sprouting from his back and his tail lashing in the air.

He caught her looking and gave her a grin that had her shaking and straining at her cuffs. He kept eye contact as his tail snaked around and replaced his fingers inside her. He plunged the tip in until it contacted the resistance inside her and then pulled it back.

Over and over, it thrust into her until her hips moved along with it, trying to take it deeper, moaning, sighing and fighting the restraints as she blindly fought to cum. Suddenly, it was gone and she sobbed in frustration until Zen moved over her and the scalding, hard prod of his cock took his tail’s place. She wrapped her legs around him and held on for dear life.

He worked into her slowly, moving against her as his tail had. Shifting in, pulling out and she was moving with him in a few minutes, trying to take him deeper, but he was still resisting it. She mewled in frustration, her body only allowed to climb so high before he pulled away from her and she cooled down.

They were on the third round of his teasing game when she felt a prod at her backside. Her juices had run down to coat her other entrance and the tail was using it.

Ary opened her mouth to protest and Zen kissed her as he thrust fully into her, his cock going where no man, dragon or werewolf had gone before. At the same time, his tail eased into her ass and the feeling of fullness was overwhelming. As he set up that same thrusting pattern, this time

in both entrances, she screamed and went over the edge, coming apart under him with her legs tightly around him.

He paused for a long minute, letting her come back to her body while keeping the tiny aftershocks going with minute motions. As soon as she looked into those dark, starry eyes again, he started to move again.

The tail stayed firmly in her tail and each time she came apart in his arms, he was there to catch her. Finally, after what seemed like hours of tangled limbs, he leaned down to bite her neck as he growled his own release into her body.

She could swear that she felt the spurt of his cum inside her, jets of heat that cooled when it touched her channel, but definitely noticeable. Either she had nerves where she shouldn't or dragons were a little different from the articles she had read. She shouldn't have felt a thing.

When the tail was removed, she breathed a sigh of relief...and loss. Although shocking, she had gotten into it after a while.

Still helpless, she tugged at the cuffs. "Can you let me go now?"

"Nope, but I will open the cuffs." He waved his hand and the wide silver bands sprang open. She dropped her arms, rubbing her shoulders.

Seriously, she lifted her hands and cupped his face. "Thank you." She gave him a kiss from the base of her soul.

"For what?"

"For buying into Pax Nocturnal." She punctuated each word with a kiss. "For seeing me. For wanting to rescue a maiden. For being able to face my father." She gave him an impish grin. "For having hard scales and dexterous claws."

At her words, she felt him start to swell inside her. He held her arms above her head and kissed her senseless. "Those are fighting words."

She felt the prod of his tail again and lifted to receive it. "I certainly hope so."

Freshly bathed and tucked into bed a few hours later, Arabel faced Zenner. They were both still nude and she was wearing mating bites on her neck, a light blue tracery beginning under her skin across her collarbone. "So, this is now our anniversary. What do you think we will be doing in a year and a day?"

"Probably the same thing we did tonight...only you won't be so sore."

She punched him in the arm. "I meant, do you think you will still want me in a year?"

"A year, ten years, a lifetime, eternity." Zen raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "What other woman would let me tie her up on a first date and let me use my tail." His eyebrows waggled suggestively.

She giggled. Well, the vows were coming true. They had shared laughter, shared pain and were sharing dreams. It was only day one. There was so much yet to come.

Epilogue

One year and a day later...

“With this ring, I swear to be yours, to love and honour you all the days of our lives. My life is yours until they day we die.” Zenner was having trouble putting the ring on his new wife’s finger, but a little effort and a touch of magic and it slid on.

Ary was a little impatient and really unimpressed with her husband’s sense of humour. He had insisted on a wedding one year and a day from the day of their handfasting. Who knew she would be in labour at the time?

The damned blue tracery around her neck had been proof that she could mate with a dragon, and their daughter was due, which would explain why Ary was having contractions at her wedding.

Zenner had been insistent that they be wed before their handfasting term was over, and he had looked so earnest, she agreed even though she knew they were cutting it close.

Ary grunted out her vows. “With this ring, I swear to be yours, to kick your ass when this is over and to torment you all the days of our lives. My life and the life within me are in your hands.” She grunted, but put the specially made ring on her shifter’s finger.

Eylonwy was presiding again and apparently, she was licensed for nuptials in the state.

“I now pronounce you dragon and maiden... now go have the baby.”

Laughing with joy and a little bit of relief, Zenner carried Arabel to their room and the midwife snapped to attention.

“My water broke during the ceremony, so we are hopefully to the halfway mark.” Ary was shucking her gown with Zen’s help and when she was ready, he prepped his supplies including a rubber sheet for the messiness of birth. Nothing was more irritating than a father who wanted to deliver his own baby, but with the midwife standing by, she had agreed. She couldn’t deny the big lizard anything, which was how she had gotten into this condition to begin with.

Between contractions, she warded the room against pain. Not a lot of pain got through but enough to let her know that she was in labour. Her last year had been an education in more ways than one.

Ralta had been the first of over twenty directly related cousins that she had met. All of which were waiting downstairs in the main hall. Surprisingly, even Bellanie and Charles had been in attendance. Ary suspected that her new husband had simply grabbed the wolves and flown them in, but she didn't ask and they didn't say. They even engaged in conversation with one of the cousins who had married a wolf from another clan.

One thing that Arabel had quickly come to realize was that the dragons and Warders were both baby crazy. This little girl had enough toys, blankets, nappies and onesies to last her until she graduated from high school.

As the pains grew closer together, she began to frown. "I thought first babies were supposed to be slower."

The midwife shot to her feet and came over to investigate the situation. "You are already nine centimetres. I can see the baby's head."

Ary fought the urge to push until she was given the go signal by Zen. Then it was *Get it out of me!*

She was turning purple, she could feel it. But then they were telling her to stop pushing and she was listening for the first noise. The silence went on far too long, but then she heard a snuffle, a hiccough and a small wail.

"Is she okay?" The concern of every new mom was weighing on her.

"She's beautiful, just like her mother, but let's get her sister out because there is a head coming down the track."

"That has to be the afterbirth."

"Not unless it has hair and fingernails, she is coming out with one arm over her head." The midwife was chuckling, but she took the firstborn and stood aside as the confused but proud father caught his second daughter in the space of ten minutes.

An hour later, bathed, dressed and a lot flatter, Arabel lay in state to receive her visitors with her twins cuddled against her breasts. The Warders cooed at the little ones and then left them alone to have their first meal.

Zen was next to his collection of girls, examining the little latecomer with interest. Eylonwy had examined the second born and laughed. She had been warding against detection in the womb. No computer or magical device could pick her up. In a way, Ary was relieved—she thought she was delivering one large violent baby not two healthy ones.

"Have you thought of names, Ary?"

“A few. How about you?”

“The dragons in my family tend to have multiple syllables. It would be easier to name them after humans or Warders.”

“Charlotte and Antoinette then. After my father and your partner.”

“Those are good. We can give them draconic names later. After your father though?”

“He was the one with the Warder ancestor. If not for him, none of us would be here right now.”

“You have a point. Charlotte it is. We can call her Charly. Charly and Tony, I like it.”

“You are one sick man.”

“Sick dragon, I couldn’t be happier to have my Ary, Charly and Tony under my roof and in my family. Three cheers for rescuing maidens!” He said the last in a tiny whisper to his little girls.

Ary looked at his absorbed face as he looked at their children and smiled. *Three cheers for dragons!*

Author's Note

Yule Be Mine is the first of the Lost Warders Tales. All of the Warders have been breeding like rabbits and a few of their daughters must have slipped into regular life at some point. That was my logic anyway.

If you have enjoyed this tale or wish to suggest a new Warder, feel free to contact me at

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About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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