

LOUISA KELLEY



Lydia and the
DRACA

LooseId

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Louisa Kelley



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eISBN 978-1-60737-449-7

Editor: Morgan Fayne

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

www.loose-id.com

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About this Title

Genre: Shape-shifter Paranormal

Lydia has no idea why an entire race of shape-shifters was lusting after her. First of all, she didn't believe they were real. Then why was she so incredibly on?

Science fiction geek Lydia Neal was just recovering from her latest relationship crash and burn. When she woke up in a glowing cave surrounded by enormous dragons, she was pretty sure she was having a sci-fi nightmare. Until it happened again. Then she met the smoking hot *Draca*, Eremon, and there was no turning back. Especially after he showed her the very special kind of ecstasy a *Draca* male could offer her—whether on the ground or in the skies.

Whatever the obsessed *Draca* wanted from her, she was ready to find out. Eremon seemed determine to resist her, but Lydia, for once in her ordered, boring life, was going along for the wildest ride of her life.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play, group sex/moresome, same-sex interaction/practices (f/f), sex in shifted form*

Chapter One

Lydia woke up gasping, tangled in sweat-soaked sheets. Disoriented, she tried to thrash her way out and rolled off the edge of the bed, landing in a shocked heap on the floor.

A light knock sounded at the door. "Lydia?" Her roommate, Jennie, cracked the door and leaned in. "You okay in there?"

"Yeah, yeah...I'm okay. Come in." Lydia pulled herself up, her heart still pounding in reaction from the fall to the cold hardwood. She grunted with the effort and leaned her head against the side of the mattress. Pieces of her dream kept hold of her like fiery, insistent fingers and then, like always, slipped away before she could make any real sense of them.

She rolled her eyes and pushed her hair back off her sweaty forehead. "Guess I kind of fell out of bed."

"Nightmares again?" Jennie asked.

"Yeah, I guess that's what you'd call it." She tried to suppress the irritation in her voice. She knew Jennie was worried about her, but she didn't really want to talk about it again, and she didn't need Jennie's sympathy right now. This had been going on for weeks, and she was damn sick of it.

"Want some coffee?"

"No, I think I'll go for a run and stop for coffee at Port Bean."

Yeah, that's what she needed. A run. That would help clear these dark images out of her brain for sure.

Jennie headed downstairs, and Lydia stood, grimacing. Surprised at how stiff she felt, she stretched out her arms and did some gentle back stretches. She looked out the window at the continual rain. No doubt, Portland in winter sucked. Jogging in the rain was not her favorite, but if that's what it took, she'd just gear up and go.

She pulled off her nightgown and rummaged around until she found her sweats and rain gear. Not bothering to brush her teeth and barely running a comb through her hair, she found herself almost rushing to get out.

Images of fire and large, razor-sharp fangs kept intruding, pushing their way through her mind even as she tried to resist. Thinking too much about them only made them more real. She shook her head and jammed her keys and some money into her pocket and took off.

She settled into an easy jog, glad to be running the familiar sidewalks again. It had been too long. Her breath quickened in effort, small gasps escaping as she ran. Ah, this felt good. A light rain splash soaked her sneakers, and she didn't care.

Go, she commanded silently. Scary images go away...

Up ahead shone the welcoming lights of Port Bean: best coffeehouse in the neighborhood. Lydia increased her pace, anxious now for coffee and food. She hadn't quite reached that no-mind place of runner's bliss, but she was good enough for now.

And still a bit cranky, she noticed, as she served herself coffee and bit back an annoyed remark at the empty half-and-half container.

The usual Saturday-morning crowd started showing up, and Lydia hunched down at her table, hoping no one she knew would walk in.

Too late.

"Hey, Lydia, fancy meeting you here." Gary, her persistent ex-boyfriend, slid into the chair across from her. Lydia barely resisted a groan.

He gave her an innocent look, but she wasn't fooled.

"Did you call the house again, Gary?"

"Well...ah...Jennie mentioned you'd gone out running, so I figured I'd find you here."

Yeah, he was pretty cute, especially when he grinned at her like that. All that shaggy blond hair and surfer good looks...

Exactly what had gotten her into trouble in the first place.

Don't encourage him, she told herself sternly. And then, irritated again, she remembered this was all Jennie's fault.

Traitor. Jennie knew she'd been trying to dump this guy for the past month. They'd have words when she got back. She had to admit she missed the geeky sci-fi crowd Gary hung out with, being somewhat of a sci-fi freak herself. Still, it wasn't enough to sustain any further romance.

If there had even been any to begin with.

"Look, Gary, I thought we had this talk. You've got to quit calling me. I need some space, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, I know, but I have some tickets for opening night of the new *Star Trek* movie, and I figured you might be interested." He grinned at her again, unrepentant. For a second, she considered it. Opening-night tickets were a prize. Reviews had been good, and she always loved a good *Star Trek* movie.

No. She would not do this, despite the fact that he fit perfectly into the mold she always attracted. Needy and troubled. Weak. Appealing to her codependency tendencies, her instinctual need to fix and rescue, and to control all the major aspects of the relationship. Give her a passive man, and she'd have him running in circles in no time.

But not this time. She'd come to her senses after a few months, and now she couldn't get rid of him. Where was all that ambition when they were together?

"Sorry, Gary. Thanks for the offer, but what I said before still stands. You and me—we just don't work. Give it up, okay?"

By the time he finally left the coffee shop, the residual weirdness from her dreams had disappeared. She jogged more slowly back to the house, pondering her plans for the rest of the day. And the night—she needed to do something different before she went to bed, something that would set the stage for better sleep. Something that would ward off the nightmares and give her a much-needed break. The herbal sleeping tonic she bought did nothing but give her a headache the next day, so there had to be something else.

A sense of weariness washed over her. No wonder she was so irritable lately. Persistent nightmares of fire and winged, reptilian creatures haunted not only her sleep but her waking hours too. This had to end.

Determined to get some real rest for a change, she regarded the total mess in her bedroom. How could a girl relax in such chaos? She pulled the sweat-soaked sheets off her bed and tore into the clutter, dusting and straightening. She opened the window, despite the damp from outside, and let fresh air blow in.

When that was finished, she made her bed with clean sheets and stepped back to survey her work.

Much better.

She took a long, hot bath and, afterward, pulled on her favorite flannel pajamas with the little bunnies all over them. Sitting in front of her makeshift altar, she lit a candle and incense around the small, ceramic statue of the Buddhist goddess Quan Yin and said a few *oms* to put her mind in a gentle, meditative space. There was nothing to fear. Nothing to fear at all. She breathed in and out in a series of rhythmic breaths, soothed by the scent of incense.

Sleep would come easily and peacefully. She would not remember her dreams. Not at all.

Chapter Two

Something woke her, and she noticed right away that everything was way too dark. Confused, she tried to make sense of what little she could see. Did the power go out? She moved to get out of bed and froze in astonishment. A hard, rocky surface pressed uncomfortably against her back. Definitely not her bed.

Okaaay. Dreaming or awake?

She pushed up from the chilly surface and stood on shaky legs. She must be awake. But this made no sense at all. And she was still in her pajamas.

Dim lights rose gradually, revealing nothing but a small pool of yellowish light surrounding her and utter blackness beyond. She could barely make out the hard, cut squares of stone that made up the floor, and her stomach clenched in sudden memory.

Oh God... Oh God, oh God, a cave. A big, black cave.

Lydia's agitated breaths seemed abnormally loud, echoing off nearby walls she could sense but couldn't see. She tried to ignore the panicked voice in her head shouting, Again! You're here again!

Shadowy lines of immense walls on either side of the cave shimmered into view, as if an outside hand controlled the light with a dimmer switch. Carved surfaces soared as high as she could see, emanating a faint, golden glow.

A dreaded sense of familiarity pulled her to her feet and closer to the obsidian walls and their illuminated alien surfaces. She remembered this—but oh God, how could this be real?

Her dreams. These were the images she had been struggling to forget.

Deep, labyrinthine etchings were cut deep into a wide swath on every wall. Mythic, monstrous creatures massed and crouched and flew, fierce reptilian forms with huge, gaping jaws and wicked fangs, enormous wingspans sweeping, black skies.

She recoiled. Creatures! These were the very creatures—the ones that had driven her awake, sweating in terror. Even so, she couldn't pull her eyes away. She followed the deep, carved lines that turned into gusts of fire—fire that blew with such force, she could almost hear the sounds, a fiery roaring over razor-sharp teeth and fierce, scaled heads.

Something emotional pulsed here, beyond anything she could truly comprehend. Stories were being told—stories that looked like old myths, the complex lines of the vast onyx surfaces painting her fears and resonating with some deeper meaning.

She peered harder, fear and anxiety growing by the minute. What did this all mean? Why, why was she here and not in her bed?

Gathering her courage, she turned around and called out to the edges of the dark around her. “Hey! Is anybody there?”

No answer. Continued, total silence.

She turned back to the sinuous sweep of carvings, trying to make sense out of the narrative. Maybe the answers were all here.

Creatures and warlike men appeared to be destroying each other in equal measure. Swords and fire, pain and death... Increasingly mesmerized, and not sure if this was a good idea or not, she moved close enough to touch one of the walls. She placed a tentative hand on the shimmering stone and felt a warm, living beat under her palm, faint and steady, tapping against her skin. A rhythm—a message?

She leaned closer; she *wanted* to be closer. She leaned in, almost touching the warm surface with her cheek.

“Stop! You are not yet ready for that!”

Lydia yanked her face off the wall and turned so fast, she almost stumbled. For one blinding instant she saw an enormous glittering dragon spanning the width of the room, radiating the same sense of palpable danger and wonder as the surrounding walls. Smoke hovered over its fierce form, beauty and terror so immediate and intense, she wanted to weep at the pure,

heart-stopping beauty of such a creature. And then she blinked. What stood before her instead was a woman. Not a dragon. *And not just a woman.*

She had to be at least six feet tall, and every inch of her glowed with the same golden shimmer as the mysterious carved walls. Her copper hair gleamed in a pile atop her head and spilled long tendrils of flame across her pale shoulders. Her gown fell low across her breasts, clinging tightly in a diaphanous river of jade and garnet silk, hugging her curves.

A musky sugar scent swirled in the cave, mixed with smoke. Her senses drank in the overpowering presence of the woman before her.

“Do you remember us?”

“What—I mean—who?”

“Nareen,” she said. “I am called Nareen.” She paused. “You have been here before. Do you really not remember?”

The vision in front of her stared calmly back. Suddenly aware she was wearing pink pajamas with bunnies on them, Lydia froze in place.

Memories started flooding in. The voices, the stories...

“No! I mean, I've been having these horrible dreams—I didn't think any of it was real.” She had tried to shove the memories away, blame it all on bad dreams, but there had always been that itchy sense she could never quite get rid of—the sense that she'd left something important unfinished. A task in grave need of help? The whole save the—*save something*—thing.

It was true. *She really had been here before.*

Nareen's unusual jade green eyes warmed, as if she understood exactly the thoughts pounding through Lydia's head. “Come,” she said. “Come with me, and I will try to explain again.” She held out her hand.

Lydia ignored the hand, too freaked-out to unclench her arms from in front of her chest.

Nareen dropped her hand, seeming not offended. “You will see,” she said. “Everything will make sense.”

“If I click my heels, can you send me home?”

Nareen smiled but didn't respond. Her white teeth were just a little sharper than normal, and her lips were very red. Something tightened in Lydia's chest.

Nareen made a curious gesture, and behind them, the amber lights lifted. For the first time, Lydia saw a large, overstuffed couch. *A couch?*

"Come," Nareen said. "Let us make ourselves more comfortable."

For all the world like they were in someone's living room and not a mysterious cave, Nareen seated herself gracefully, her gown trailing the floor, and patted the seat in invitation.

Lydia padded over the cold stone floor to the couch and sat gingerly on the edge. "So...why am I here?"

"You are here because the gods have called you to us." Nareen paused, as if waiting for Lydia to remember.

She tried and failed to understand the messages zinging between them like electrical pulses.

"You are special," Nareen murmured, reaching out a slim finger to Lydia's face and tracing a sensuous line from her cheek to her jawline. Tendrils of long copper hair had fallen loose and glowed like flame against Nareen's amber-hued neck. "Did we not tell you that last time? It seems we failed in our task...and that failure caused you to insist on returning to your world. We did not mean to frighten you away. Never that. Perhaps a *demonstration* would help."

Nareen moved closer and reached a hand to Lydia's cheek, and without any warning, she leaned down and brushed Lydia's lips with her own.

All coherent thought deserted her. Moist, hot lips caressed her trembling mouth. Shocked arousal pounded in her blood, and the scent of smoke circled thicker. For a few unreal moments, Lydia ceased caring that she was in the middle of a science-fiction dream. All that mattered centered on the smoky, intoxicating taste of Nareen's lips and wet, delicious tongue probing at her own.

With a gasp, Nareen broke contact and pulled away, breaking the spell, her eyes focused like glittering diamonds on Lydia's face.

Lydia's arms fell to her sides; her wits scattered. "What—I don't understand..."

Nareen smiled, her ruby lips so red, so inviting, Lydia could hardly take her eyes off them.

"Do you not see? Do you not feel this? You are awakening the great potential of your blood. There is no other human woman alive who could...arouse such feelings in one of my kind."

Nareen reached out and smoothed down the back of Lydia's tangled hair. "Please, give me a little more time," she murmured, her voice husky. "There are things I must prepare now. Let go of your fears and rest, my most special one."

"Wait! I need to understand what's going on... Don't leave me here!"

"Be patient for a while longer. I will send you human refreshments."

Nareen vanished in a trail of smoke, and for a second, Lydia could have sworn she saw fierce, hooded eyes and outstretched, golden wings.

Fearful memories tugged at her again, and she looked wildly around the room. Lingering smoke spun in Nareen's wake, creating a haze that shadowed the glowing walls and permeated everything with the smell of smoke.

Lydia found herself surrounded again by gleaming blackness. She had a feeling she had passed some kind of test. A test that still had her overstimulated nerves throbbing as she wondered what could possibly be next.

Chapter Three

A wooden cart immediately appeared in front of the couch, fully loaded with covered dishes and bowls, and a tall pitcher of cool water. Delicious smells wafted up, and she realized she was famished. She lifted up a few plate covers. Mmm... Pasta primavera! And green salad. And chocolate cake!

She poured herself a drink, which spilled from her trembling hand. “*Wow*. I am so not in Kansas anymore.”

She piled up food on a blue glass plate and sank with a sigh into the couch. Good. This, at least, was good. Apparently captivity in this mind-blowing place didn't mean starving to death in the process.

And wow—how about Nareen? What an incredible woman—or what was she exactly? An alien? Lydia hadn't even tried to pull away when she'd *kissed her*.

She tried to piece together what she remembered from the first time she was here, combined with what she was experiencing now. Something about the creatures and having babies. And flying dragons and blood. Her memory jolted—blood? A shiver of fright swept up her spine. Screw this, she thought abruptly, trying to shake off the weird feelings. She needed to figure out how to get home again.

First things first. She really needed to find a bathroom. She had to use the facilities, if they existed here, something fierce.

Maybe there would be a place farther down the dark corridor. Finished eating, she headed down the corridor in what she hoped was the right direction. The yellow circle of light followed as she walked, giving just enough light to see her way.

After a few minutes of shuffling half blindly down the hall, a door opened in front of her, and soft pale light spilled out into the hallway, accompanied by billows of steam. She peeked inside and found, to her surprised delight, a huge sunken tub on one side of a modern bathroom, along with a double sink,

marble vanity, and gleaming toilet. Water was running in the tub, and soap bubbles glistened on the surface. Something told her this bath was meant for her.

She used the facilities, and then, deciding to just go with it—why the hell not, at this point—she dropped her sweaty pajamas on the marble floor and sank with a blissful sigh into the warm bath full of scented oils. Nareen must have had something to do with this. She imagined Nareen soaking in the tub with her, her golden skin covered in soap bubbles, and sighed again. Confused by the aroused sensuality of her feelings, she sank farther into the steamy water.

Closing her eyes and leaning back against the side, she lowered herself until her chin bobbed on the surface. Improbable images of dragons did a free fall behind her eyes. Immense creatures filled the sky, blazing gold and crimson, flashing sharp fangs and talons, with wingspreads twenty feet across. Her breath caught. The images burst, then fell in lacy patterns of diamond-bright light, morphing into humans. Beautiful humans. Beautiful humans like Nareen.

Lydia sat bolt upright in the tub. Draca. They were called *Draca*. And Nareen was one of them. She choked on a little remnant of chocolate cake.

And Nareen wanted her. She wanted her *in particular*.

Apparently, they all did.

* * * * *

Her pajamas had vanished, and clean ones were left next to the tub. How they'd gotten there, or who brought them in, Lydia had no idea. It was a mystery, just like everything else. She picked up a long, sleeveless dress that shimmered in the dim light. Thin and slinky, of some material she couldn't place, it glowed in the same green and garnet colors as Nareen's gown. She smiled in approval. All her favorite colors. And no underwear, no bra.

She slipped it on, sighing at the soft feel of the material sliding down her damp body. She looked in the mirror over the sink and didn't recognize herself. The neckline dipped in a low vee over her breasts, showcasing what little she

had there. Her eyes seemed huge and a little wild, her hair a mass of tangled auburn curls. She looked—well, what with the dress and all—she looked almost *beautiful*.

She sighed again. What a dream she was having. She had never thought of herself as beautiful; she'd always been more of the tomboy type who cared little for makeup or girly things. Her closet held little beyond T-shirts, jeans, and workout clothes.

She smiled at her image in the mirror. She was way, way outside her comfort zone. For the first time in her life, the situation was completely out of her control. Yet the path forward seemed irresistible. For once, she was forced to just go with the flow. Her heart skipped in anticipation. Clearly, much remained to be discovered.

She wandered out into the hall and found it blazing with light. Wall sconces she hadn't noticed before lined each side as far as her eyes could see, the end of the hall disappearing. Sounds drifted from somewhere—voices deep and lyrical, talking in a language she didn't recognize. Sometimes they broke into laughter, amid the clink of glassware, as if they were having a party. She kept walking until she reached the area where most of the noise seemed to be coming from, and peeked around the edge of a slightly open door.

“There you are!” a masculine voice called out.

Lydia shrank back and turned to run, but no, too late.

“Come in, please. We have been expecting you.”

Reluctantly she edged into the room, and her senses swam at the scene in front of her. The room spanned a width as big as her entire apartment, with floor-to-ceiling windows behind drapes of heavy crimson brocade taking up most of the far wall. A blue-tiled hearth in front of an enormous bricked fireplace took up the wall on the far right. A lively fire burned, and the now-familiar smell of wood smoke tinged the air.

Someone handed her an amber drink in a tall crystal glass. She sipped it and felt a bolt of warmth shoot through her middle. She took another sip, and

as the warmth spread through her body, she gathered her courage and looked at the others in the room.

Nareen stood on the far side, smiling in what seemed like encouragement. As for the rest of the crowd, never had she seen such glorious creatures, matching, if not exceeding, Nareen's exotic beauty. Three men and three women stood around her, each one over six feet of graceful, dignified bearing. Identical slanted green eyes glinted at her in rapt attention. Long hair in various shades of mixed red, copper, orange, gold, and bronze cascaded down their backs, some almost to the floor, men and women both.

Gowns flowed like silky water over generous female curves, falling in ruby red and emerald folds to matching heels. High cheekbones graced exotic faces.

The men shone with the same primal beauty as the women. They wore tunics of dark red over wide, muscular chests and leather belts set with large red stones. Black boots rose knee-high over slim black trousers.

They all, without exception, stared at Lydia in blatant curiosity—tinged with something else. Something that sent chills up her back.

Nareen walked over to her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Please, everyone, allow me to once again introduce you to Lydia Neal.”

As one, they collectively bowed to her.

“Do I—Have we met before?” she said, proud her voice only trembled a little.

The tallest male stepped forward. He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. He raised emerald green eyes that smoldered as they met her own. “I would know your scent anywhere,” he said, not letting go of her hand.

Lydia's breath caught. There was something vaguely familiar about him, just on the edge of her awareness. His sculptured jaw was shadowed with a layer of reddish beard that hadn't seen a razor in days. His glittering eyes, so like Nareen's, stared into her own with a hypnotic power she sensed from all of them.

Lydia yanked her hand back. “I don't... I'm not sure I remember you.”

"This is my brother Aedhan," Nareen said, shooting a warning look at him. "You met before, in the old caves."

At the mention of the caves, Lydia's memories opened up again. *The caves*. That was where she had been last time. Where she had first met them. In their other form, as Draca.

More memories she had been resisting and denying rushed in. They had shown themselves to her before, and she had completely freaked out.

She had been in that same dark cave, and she had screamed and screamed and remembered no more until she woke up in her bed, covered in sweat, convinced she'd had the worst nightmare of her life.

She stared in renewed agitation at the shining creatures in front of her now. She took another sip of her drink for courage and tried to breathe. She didn't remember all these beautiful people. No, this was not what they showed her before.

Maybe she should try not freaking out this time.

As if they felt her increased awareness, protective shadows lifted from their forms, and the innate wildness and fierceness of their ancient race shimmered in response to her trembling attention. Fear warred with helpless fascination. Lydia couldn't have run if she had tried.

She noticed for the first time a motionless Draca male sitting in the shadows across the room. It was as if she'd grabbed a pair of binoculars; her sight laser-focused on him, and his form lit up to her with some hidden source of light.

His hair, so dusky purple it was almost black, lay thick and unbound on wide, broad shoulders. Smoke and utter raw masculinity emanated from him in almost visible waves, inflaming her already acute senses. She had the sudden urge to run her hands through the long strands, to press her face to its shining length and inhale this smoky, musky scent. Her nipples tightened in helpless, aroused response.

Of course he noticed her staring at him. With a sardonic half smile, he lifted his glass up in salute. He didn't stand to meet her like the others, but she

felt, as much saw, his hooded green eyes blazing at her with such mysterious intensity, her legs almost gave out.

Sex. Why did it all seem to be about sex?

She shook her head in an attempt to clear the fogginess. Maybe that drink was getting to her. She tried to think. Sex was involved because someone needed saving. How was she supposed to accomplish that with sex?

She turned in confusion to Nareen. So much seemed to be going on beneath the surface. She had a definite sense that these creatures—*these shape-shifters*—were all communicating wordlessly. About her. And so far, actual explanations about the true reason for her being here had been limited or nonexistent.

She gulped as seven pairs of eyes watched her every move with growing predators' sharpness. Rapt attention had turned to hunger. Lust filled the room as surely as smoke.

Nareen's arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her close. "Do not let them bother you," she whispered. "It has been so many years since one of us could...mate in...*passion* to create a young one."

Ah, that was it. Everything *was* about sex. Her awakened feelings of sensuality, her tingling nerves and pounding heart, made her fair game for these muscular, gleaming specimens of smoking hotness, all of whom were staring her into a melting puddle of hormones.

She felt light-headed, and the room started spinning, making it hard to breathe.

Nareen said something sharp to the assembled group and quickly steered her out of the room. "That is enough for today. We have tired you out, I fear."

Her arm was firm on Lydia's shoulder as she directed her down the long hall, now brilliantly lit. Before her brain turned to complete mush, Lydia realized no one had really answered any questions. Maybe they didn't want her to freak out again, so they were giving it to her in pieces. But she couldn't speak, couldn't question anymore. Total sensory overload gripped her; she

barely noticed where they were going as she struggled to keep pace with Nareen. The only thing keeping her upright was the hot grip on her shoulder.

They stopped at one of the doors.

“This is your room, my dear. Please, sleep and rest. Someone will be here in the morning to see to your needs. You are perfectly safe here. No one will disturb you, I promise.”

Nareen gestured at the room, her eyebrows lifted as if to say, *See—nothing to be afraid of*, and then, after a quick kiss to Lydia's forehead, shut the door behind her with a firm *click*.

Lydia gazed at the stone-walled room. Most of it was taken up by an enormous bed. Dark purple and black bedcovers draped in lavish thickness, generous matching pillows piled at one end. It enticed her beyond belief. She ignored the rest of the room, noticing only a brick fireplace with an active fire and large wooden chests.

Lydia wobbled to the main target and crawled up the middle, sinking in enough to be perfectly comfortable. She sat with her knees drawn up, her cheek cradled against her arms. She couldn't unwind completely. Not yet. She squeezed her eyes shut and blew her breath in and out in deep gulps. Reaching for her meditation, she tried a few tentative *oms*. They came out in little squeaks, tinny and strange.

Tired. So tired. Giving in, she stretched on her back, moaning at the softness.

Nothing felt safe or familiar here. She squeezed her eyes shut. Nothing made sense. But it would, she'd make sure of it.

Chapter Four

Lydia woke with her head pounding. What the hell did she have to drink last night? She only remembered taking a few sips.

She looked around, and her heart sank. Damn. Waking had not taken her back to her real life. She was still here, in an enormous bed at the ends of the earth. There were no signs of modern telecommunications anywhere. No landlines, computers, televisions, or electrical appliances of any kind—she was beyond the reach of cell phones for sure. All the rules of her reality had changed, and her usual burning need for control was completely thwarted. No control here. Over anything.

Heart suddenly hammering, she realized she was naked and started looking around for clothes. Hugging her arms for warmth in the chilly air, she drew closer to the fireplace that took up most of one wall. The fire barely sputtered, giving little warmth. There were no sounds coming from outside the room, and with no windows, everything still felt vaguely underground and cavelike.

Shivering from more than the cold and feeling a little creeped out, she pulled on her Draca gown, which she found hanging neatly in the closet. She went for the door and turned the stiff brass knob. For a hysterical second, she wondered if maybe they'd locked her in, and rattled it hard in sudden panic. The door burst open, and she leaned out just enough to see in each direction.

“Forget it, sweetiekins,” said a tiny but confident voice. “You will never find your way out in that direction.”

Lydia jumped back. “What the...”

“Over here,” the voice said drolly, sounding like it was coming from the floor. “If you don't see me pretty soon, I'll be decorating the bottom of your shoe.”

She looked down. He had to be no more than three feet high, but his stance was as proud as if he were the six feet plus of his Draca kin. Bristle

cones of cherry red hair stuck out in all directions, and the now-familiar emerald eyes sparkled with humor. He looked very young and very ancient all at once. He grinned up at her, and she couldn't help it. She grinned back.

"Well, ah, hello," Lydia said. "I'm sorry—I wasn't trying to step on you."

"Quite all right. No harm done. I am very pleased to meet you. In fact, I feel I know you already." He held up a tiny hand. "My human name is Camus."

Bemused, Lydia reached down and gently clasped his hot little hand, noticing how unusually warm he felt. She met his eyes and saw the same aroused interest his taller kin had shown toward her. Although this one seemed less...*predatory*...than the rest. Something in her stomach relaxed a little as she straightened and dropped his hand.

"Listen—Camus. Can you answer some questions for me? I'm only getting bits and pieces here, and I need—I really need—some explanations."

Camus winced as her voice rose. "Yes, yes, of course. Come for a walk with me, and you may ask away."

He indicated the direction with a sweep of his arm and led her into another long hall she didn't recognize. It was narrower and darker than the one the previous night, and she could just see the top of Camus's fuzzy head bobbing at her side as they walked.

She had no memories of small creatures from the time before; her memories were dominated by visions of breathtaking winged monsters that morphed into people. Could he do that too? Sprout wings and breathe fire? Even so small, he must still be Draca.

Deep in her thoughts, she barely noticed they were climbing steadily upward. They walked in silence until Camus pushed open a creaky wooden door to the threshold of an outdoor courtyard. Thick gray stones formed a wall, fully enclosing what looked exactly like a wild English garden. And sun!

She whirled in delight, her face lifted to the warm rays. Blue skies and a few white clouds floating lazily in the sunny expanse. This couldn't be Portland; deep winter had the city locked down in solid gray. These kinds of flowers and

sun wouldn't happen for at least another three months, and yet here she was, standing in a country garden.

Buttercups and yellow daisies lined the path, while lavender and rosemary grew wild everywhere, scenting the fresh breeze. She leaned down to breathe the fragrance of a bush loaded with deep red roses.

"So sweet," she murmured. "You would hardly know I'm actually lost in time and space, and yet here I am, smelling roses."

"You are not lost, my lady," Camus said. "I would say you are found, more than you are lost."

That struck a strange chord. "What do you mean, I am found?"

"Shall we sit?" He indicated a rustic wooden table. "Let us make ourselves comfortable."

Lydia settled on the bench, sheltered beneath a leafy maple tree, and Camus perched on the tabletop near her elbow.

"We are on the mountain. You call it Mt. Hood," he said. At her incredulous look, he added, "But not as you know it in, ah, *human* time."

Mt. Hood towered over most of northwestern Oregon, the king of the Cascade range. It should be covered in deep snow this time of year.

"Yeah...so, okay. I still don't understand, but go on."

"We are in the *sideways time*. We call it 'Dracan.' In Dracan, we live separately, in the human world, *but not*." He looked up to see if Lydia was following.

"Here, we are protected from the humans who sought to destroy us for centuries. We follow our own timeline, answering only to our gods. And no one but Draca, or those we allow, may enter."

"The Draca. Are they—are you—dragons?"

Camus shifted and looked away. "No. And yes. We are...*other*." He turned back to her, his green eyes darkening. "And we are dying."

He paused. "And you—you are here to save us!"

“Hold it right there. What do you mean I'm here to *save you*?” Maybe it was his diminutive size, but Lydia felt bolder about demanding answers from him than from the others.

“We have lost our...” He wiggled his fingers at her, as if that would tell her.

“Your what?” “How do you say this? The flame? The spark that makes life? For Draca, this spark... It must be, or the baby cannot be formed.”

Camus hopped down and started a slow pace back and forth in front of her. “You see, we were forced, because there are so few of us. We needed young ones, so we...bred amongst ourselves for many hundreds of years. And we live very long lives, longer than you or any human can imagine. But after a time—the genes, the blood lineage—started breaking up in some fundamental way, and our women stopped conceiving.

“In desperation, we turned to a great working, an ancient spell of immense power. What we could not have predicted were the consequences of such a working. No one, not even the oldest and most powerful, could have predicted what would happen.”

Camus looked over at her, his face mournful. “We tried to mate with humans. And it came at a great cost—the ceremony to do the human and Draca mating. And later also, there were tragedies and mistakes... I...ah, I am one of those called a *mistake*. I can barely fly, or do much of anything in my true form.”

His voice trailed off, and he looked away. It was the longest speech anyone had made yet. She felt restless, itchy, wanting to resist sympathy but unable to stop an odd pain in her heart. Yet surely there was more to the story than this.

“What happened when you were here before?” Camus asked, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. “I heard tales of you, but I never understood what happened at the end.”

“Yeah, well. That's all still kind of fuzzy. I remember mostly being terrified.”

As she glanced at him, a vision of his other nature shimmered to tentative life, superimposed over his human form. Wings and claws, elongated head and fangs, rose briefly and then faded like smoke.

Memories pounded at her again, images of being surrounded by fantastic beings—creatures of nightmare and myth. She trembled as emotions cascaded along her spine, and the vision rocked her to the core. Even at the time, as she had cried out in terror, something had been so *familiar*. As her conscious mind tried to reject what she was seeing, something deeper had rejoiced. What had Camus said...? *She was found*.

She blew out her breath. She must be crazy to be thinking like this.

"We never meant to frighten you," Camus continued as if he didn't notice she was quietly freaking out. "We had forgotten how to speak in the human way, how to explain... But now, thanks be to Nareen, we have the words once again. That is why you are back here. We needed another chance to ask you."

"Ask me what?" she said sharply. "And why me? Why am I the one you want? I'm nothing, nobody. Just a single Portland girl, trying to make her way in this world. I didn't ask for this, and I don't want it!"

Yet even as she said the words, she knew part of it wasn't true. Newly awakened emotions were clamoring, *Tell me more!*

He gaped at her. "Did not Nareen show you?"

Heat unexpectedly laced her cheeks. Oh yeah, Nareen had showed her something, all right.

"You mean that's it? I...I what? It's that I turn all of you on?"

"Well, yes, of course there is that, but... She did not mention perhaps something about your blood? And the Wall?"

"My blood? What do you mean?"

Camus looked nervous.

"What? Camus—come on. Are you afraid to tell me something?"

"Now now, sweetiekins. Let us slow down here."

Sweetiekins? Lydia snorted. "No, let's not slow down. How about we tell Lydia the whole story? How about that for a change?"

Camus hesitated. He glanced at her and then quickly looked away. "You must forgive us our ways. I am under strict instructions from Nareen not to—" He bit off the next words and then continued slowly, choosing his words carefully. "In our excitement at the emotions you stir in us, I am...I am so sorry we captured you and made you so afraid." He looked at her, his eyes pleading for understanding.

"Captured me? So I'm some kind of prisoner? For what, my blood? For...sex?" All thoughts of her having any trace of control over this new reality vanished. *Captured*. The word brought a strange thrill. Her life in the hands of sexy shape-shifters. She should be angry or demanding, but the interest that sparked had nothing to do with outrage.

"Well. The fact of the matter is"—Camus cleared his throat—"there is one of our kind, I believe humans would refer to him as a *prince*. He is one of our eldest and holds great sway in the opinions of our people. He has become, ah, how can I say, entirely accepting of his Draca state. He does not wish to mix Draca and human, even to continue our bloodline. He is of the mind that the Draca as a species are near their natural end. He persists in believing our race has come to its inevitable conclusion, and there is nothing to be done about it."

There was that aroused interest again. Camus's bushy red hair shimmered in the sunlight like an iridescent patch of garnets. "But you, dear sweetness... You have everything needed to convince him otherwise."

For the first time she noticed his face had the same sculptured handsomeness as the rest of the hunky males she'd met. Camus grinned at her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. Even this small-sized Draca had hormones that called to her.

She'd never been needed by anyone before. Not really. Not like this.

"So...who are you, in all this? You're the first one to really answer any of my questions."

"Ah. Well, you see. I am the brother of Eremon. I am here to plead on his behalf, the ungrateful, stubborn Draca. He needs you—whether he is willing to acknowledge it or not."

He needed her. There it was again, the whole *needing* thing.

“Have I met him?”

“He was there, in the reception room. You probably did not notice him. You were too busy dealing with the unwise offer of our gold liqueur and my kin's intrusive attentions.”

But she had noticed him—the dark-haired one, brooding alone in the shadows. Her pulse sped up as she remembered the hulking god saluting her with his drink.

Lydia breathed in the smell of jasmine wafting in the sweet air and tried to wrap her brain around this crazy new reality. She turned with more questions on her lips, but Camus forestalled her with a raised hand.

“It is not my place to offer any further words. It is now simply a matter of you and Eremon meeting once again. Then what shall happen after that—only the gods can know.”

It felt like a foretelling. Just as Lydia noticed the strands of her hair crackle with static electricity, the entire mountaintop scene faded.

Chapter Five

She crash-landed back onto the overstuffed couch, with an audible *thump*. Her stomach felt a little queasy with all the abrupt swooshing around. She felt like an otherworldly yo-yo, being pulled across lines of invisible universes.

She was back in the bat cave, with its black, carved walls and mysterious gold lights. She remembered what Camus said about a wall. Could this be the wall he had been talking about?

Thoughts of Camus fled as she realized she wasn't alone.

Eremon leaned against the obsidian wall, his arms crossed in front of his broad, muscled chest, a picture of arrogance.

"You must forget whatever it is they have told you," he said coldly. "I am not interested in this game, or anything to do with it. You may go. Now."

Lydia jumped up, her heart pounding. Eremon towered over her, his black eyebrows low over hooded emerald eyes. He radiated a palpable sense of danger, setting her heart beating even harder.

The dim light around them lifted as if to showcase his presence, and she gulped at the rugged, sculptured lines of his face. He was quite simply the most magnificent man she had ever seen. Familiar electrical currents were starting a jig up her spine. She breathed in the increasing scent of smoke and tried not to think of sex.

"You do not belong here," he snapped.

"Well then, tell me how I get out." The boldness in her voice surprised her. As if they created their own tiny microclimate, the air became denser, charged. Eremon straightened and took a step toward her, and she immediately backed up.

"You must forget us. You have been put through much, for all my family's good intentions." Without warning, he raised a hand and lifted a strand of her hair. For a brief moment he held it to his face, his eyes closed, and an

expression like pain crossed his face. Then it was gone, replaced by an inscrutable look. He dropped his hand abruptly and turned away.

Lydia stood, stunned. She could still feel the electrical charge of his hand on her hair, catching a brief glimpse of long, thick fingers and a flash of calluses and scars. His touch had been unexpectedly gentle. Suddenly, trying not to question, she knew she wasn't ready to leave this. Not quite yet.

* * * * *

Eremon paced back and forth, unable to look at Lydia. How could he explain why she must go, when she didn't even understand why she was here at all?

His back spasmed in reaction to the emotions swirling around him, and he ached to spread his wings. He didn't want this false promise of hope to rip out his heart again.

He was done. They all were. It was time to let it go, let the humans have what was left.

Nareen's unrelenting scheming and spell casting always left a price to pay. He would not be the one to suffer again with the results of her meddling in the powers only the gods should have.

The scent of the human woman wafted in the cave air, tantalizing and testing his resolve. She was not what he expected. Most shocking of all, once he'd gotten a real whiff of her, his cock, flaccid for a hundred years, had burst into almost painful life. He refused to believe what he'd felt in the reception room when she'd walked in. He barely believed it now.

A small growl escaped, his beast awake, interested. The predator in him, the brother to his human nature, had been full of approval from the moment they both caught a glimpse of her. Still, he resisted what his senses were telling him: a faint Draca essence swam in tiny currents through her blood. If it was real, her journeys to the Caves of Remembering must have activated the powers in her blood to the potency that allowed them to detect her.

No wonder his brothers and sisters were going crazy.

It couldn't be true. Nareen had to be wrong about this, yet when he looked at the woman, she shone with a familiar Draca beauty. She probably had no idea how she appeared to them, or what it was about her that attracted his kin so strongly. Her auburn hair glinted with the same shades of red as all the Garnet Clan. The high, delicate cheekbones reminded him of his sisters, and a strength he would never have expected resonated from her.

How bravely she faced him! He could swat her down in an instant; she must know that, yet she didn't flinch. This only made her more attractive to one of his kind.

The thin fabric of her dress clearly showed a sweet swell of breasts and a lean, athletic build. He could just make out stiff nipples and caught the scent of her arousal mixed with his own. Something pulled at him, something he was determined to resist.

He circled the edges of the cave, avoiding Lydia's eyes. He should not have touched her hair. For a brief instant, a door in his consciousness had crashed open. A door that he had shut, cemented in place, a hundred years before. A blazing memory seared to life, before he had a chance to slam the door closed again.

No. This must not be. He could not allow it. Humans weren't the answer; they were too weak. They couldn't even survive the breeding ceremony, let alone endure the rigors and dangers of giving birth to the children of Draca. He had no desire to watch any more brave, beautiful women torn apart by childbirth in this senseless pursuit of the impossible.

Every attempt to use humans had been a complete, disastrous failure. His brother Camus's small stature was just one of the failures that haunted him, one he'd been paying for every single day of his long, meaningless life.

And now Nareen had somehow found Lydia, and all his kin's impossible hopes had been rekindled.

"No!" he snarled. Yet unable to stop himself, needing to know for sure, he reached out and grasped Lydia's slim shoulders in his hands. She gasped, and

her head snapped back, but she didn't pull away. Her eyes were huge, full of questions and a trace of fear. But she stood her ground.

He gripped her harder, and still she didn't flinch. He said through gritted teeth, "You have no idea why they brought you here, do you? What could happen to you, what you must endure. Has no one explained?"

His sexual awareness was stirring; he felt his talons stretching to the surface, and his wings pulsed with the subtle beat that signaled such hunger. He wanted to shake her. Shake her or just...crush his mouth against hers, so near to his own, so red and moist and trembling. Rings of agitated smoke circled the room, his cock pulsed to hard attention, and the very air crackled in the awakening sexual pulse of a Draca male.

This human Daughter of Draca was upsetting everything.

He felt the echoing response from the Draca kin, invisible all around him. Alert, aroused. Waiting for his next move. At the thought of all the Draca cocks that could possibly be springing to life, intense irritation flooded him. How dare these brothers assume they had any right at all to...

"Please..." Lydia said breathlessly. "The way you look—Are you going to kiss me or kill me? Make up your mind before I fall over in a dead faint at your feet."

His last resistance crumbled, and he brought his mouth down on hers. His lips met hers in a heady rush of long-forgotten sensation. He opened his mouth and pulled in her tongue, suckling and licking. The feel of cool human flesh under his hands, in his mouth, her tongue stroking his... It seared him with the intoxicating promise of life itself.

More—he wanted more. Quickly, before he came to his senses, he dropped to his knees and, in one smooth movement, pulled up her gown and thrust his face between her legs. He pushed against her damp curls and inhaled hard.

She moaned, not resisting. Her hands moved up to clutch his hair.

Eremon rubbed his face back and forth, unable to stop his predator from insisting on his mark. He clutched her hips convulsively, pinning her tight against him, and opened his mouth against her dripping flesh. He drank in her

womanly fluids and swallowed, the liquid heat exploding in his throat. The truth of it was undeniable. The old blood swam in her; the slick wetness coated his mouth in pleasure he had forgotten was even possible.

She moaned, arching into his mouth, and then losing her balance, stumbled back, grabbing his head for support. That was just enough to bring him to his senses.

He remembered another beautiful woman calling out to him—not out of love or ecstasy, but full of pain, pleading, pleading for him to release her from the agony loving him had caused.

Shuddering at the memory, he pulled away from Lydia, breathing hard.

Flinging himself to his feet, he turned his back on her, walking away. “No,” he said, his voice strangled. “This cannot happen—I will not have it. Not again. *Not ever again.*”

Lydia sank down to the couch cushions and leaned her head back, her hair a mass of tangled curls and her thin dress bunched around her waist, the wet curls between her legs still visible. She looked impossibly erotic, and it was such a rare sight, Eremon barely held on to his control.

He couldn't just leave her like this. Forcing calm into his raging libido, he struggled for the words that would send her away from him as fast as possible.

Reeling from the implosion of pleasure that had just rocked her world, Lydia yanked down her dress, Eremon's sudden rejection giving her brain melt. What had just happened? Oh God, how she wanted to finish what they had started. She squeezed her legs together and tried to calm her breathing.

He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, scowling at her.

“Lydia, I need to tell you...” He stopped, his eyes cold and secretive. How could he be so cool with her juices all over his handsome face?

“You are—you carry the old blood.”

“The *old blood*?”

“Draca—in what humans call their *DNA*. You have it, a strain from our oldest lineage. It is in your blood. It is the reason why Nareen arranged to bring you here.”

Lydia couldn't believe her ears. This was nothing but a soap opera, Draca-style. For God's sake, she was part Draca?

“What does that mean exactly? Do I have special powers? Can I shape-shift like you? Will I have wings, and can I fly, and what am I supposed to do here anyway?”

Eremon sighed heavily, frustration cracking his cool facade. “It means *nothing*. It helps *nothing*. Your help is not needed or wanted. Stop listening to Nareen, and tell her to send you back to your world. While you can still go.”

Eremon slapped his arms to his sides and pointed his head straight toward the ceiling. In seconds the shadowy form of his Draca self lifted out of his body and flowed like liquid fire over his rigid form. Black and crimson wings cracked open, filling the room from side to side. His head elongated, heavy, scaled curves replacing the rugged human jawline. Crimson scales as red as blood shimmered in the smoky light as his other self roared to life. His mouth gaped open, emitting a single stream of smoky fire that lit up the room, and then he vanished.

Chapter Six

Lydia wanted to scream. The most gorgeous, sexy man she had ever met had just rendered her pussy to throbbing wetness and then had turned into a *freaking dragon and disappeared*.

Huh. Some kind of alpha hero he was. Lick 'em and leave 'em, she thought, giggling a bit hysterically. Certainly no man she had ever known had been so...so *demanding*. She shivered, remembering his strong hands gripping her hips, forcibly holding her in place while his agile tongue plundered her without even asking first.

And she didn't even resist. No, not a bit. Just like when Nareen had kissed her, what seemed like aeons ago. Male or female—they wanted her, and she wanted them right back.

It was her *DNA* making everyone so crazy about her?

It still didn't add up. And damn it, her body was still zinging. What she wouldn't give for more one-on-one with the Prince of Draca.

Surely this latest twist in her Draca drama had earned her a total meltdown. Feeling punchy and abandoned, she looked around for clues to the next episode in this crazy drama. And she was alone again, in deafening silence.

Too bad she couldn't figure out how to light the wall sconces, powered by some source she hadn't discovered yet. Dazed, she wondered if maybe tomorrow she'd be lucky enough to wake up in her own bed in Portland. Maybe Eremon was right. Maybe she should take his advice and find a way out of here before something else happened.

Suddenly, that was just what she wanted, more than anything. Her own bed, her own apartment, *her life* back.

“Hey!” she shouted out to the silent hall. “I want to go home now!” She spun in circles, shouting out in all directions. “He didn't go for it, in case you

were wondering! So whatever we were supposed to do together isn't going to happen. I want to go home—now!”

“You can stop yelling,” Camus said. He stood leaning against the wall in almost the same pose Eremon had used. “We will see you again; there is no doubt about that. Good-bye, dear Lydia, for now. And try to remember, it is not a dream.” He waved his hand in a gesture she remembered Nareen using, and then she blinked—and was home.

* * * * *

“Lydia!” Jennie screamed. “You're back! Where the hell have you been?”

Jennie vaulted over the low back of the living room couch and ran over to Lydia, practically tripping as she grabbed her in a tight hug.

The room tilted from fantasy erotica back to the reality of her life. The contrast between the Draca world and this sudden reality shocked her almost speechless.

Jennie still had a grip on her. “Girl, you've been gone without any word for two days. Repeat, where the hell have you been?”

“Oh my God, Jennie. I don't even know how to begin.” Avoiding Jennie's eyes, she pulled away and headed for the kitchen. Food. She really needed food. Jennie blocked her path and stood accusingly.

“Look, please be patient with me. I feel grimy and tired, and I'm starving. Can I please talk to you about this later?”

“Nooo, I don't think so. At least tell me where you've been. It wasn't with Gary, because he's been calling and calling. And why the hell didn't you answer your cell phone? I left you about twenty messages.”

“Can I pee first?”

Jennie let her pass to the bathroom. Lydia shut the door and leaned against it, closing her eyes in numb disbelief. How could she explain what had just happened? Would Jennie believe her? Maybe a shower would help. Almost too tired even for that, she peeled off her slinky dress. Her Draca dress.

It was soaked with sweat and the smell of musky smoke. She tried to ignore the instant arousal it gave her. Eremon had been kneeling with his face between her legs just moments ago.

She groaned. Frustrated, aroused, and more than a little scared, she turned on the taps and stood for a long while under the hot shower. Finally, feeling a little calmer, she decided to trust their friendship, which had withstood the tides of junior high, high school, and all the years since.

Lydia settled with Jennie in their usual sharing mode on the bed, cradling a giant bowl of corn chips between them, and proceeded to spill her guts.

It took an hour to tell the whole story, what with frequent interruptions for more details from an increasingly excited roommate. Finally, Jennie fell back onto the bed and sighed.

“Jeez, Lydia. It sounds like you've been invited to be a sex slave to dragons or something. And you're related to them? Does this mean I'm best friends with the new superwoman?” They looked at each other, grinning at the total weirdness of it all, and both of them burst out laughing.

“I know, I know.” Lydia wiped her eyes. “This is not just in my head, right?”

Jennie shook her head. “You know, that stuff about you being special—haven't you always been kind of psychic?”

“Maybe,” Lydia said, hesitant. “Remember how I'd always get one hundred percent on the multiple-choice tests in biology if I focused on Mr. Hadden?”

Her roommate snorted. “Yeah, and I hated you for that too.”

She got chills in dawning awareness that there might really be something to the Draca's assertions.

Jennie was also connecting the dots. “You've always had this kind of good-luck thing too, you know? With your jobs and whenever you needed a place to live and stuff like that. Seems like you always got what you wanted easier than the rest of us. You have a way of being in the right place at the right time, more than anyone I've ever known.”

“Huh.” That only strengthened the growing tightness in her stomach. “Well, these *things* didn't work with relationships. Just look at Gary.” Psychic or not, she attracted losers, her current ex a case in point. He'd been needy and yet sexy in that way that always got to her, sucking her in again with his codependent but attractive sad story. She was tired of taking care of fucked-up men.

Maybe she was getting some emotional baggage sorted out here, with her *special powers*. Images filled her mind of the Draca, wings spread in that huge, black cave. A deep yearning crept in—for that dark space, for the glowing golden walls, and the tall, muscular creature who had kissed her.

“Wow,” Lydia said softly. “Maybe you're on to something here.”

Jennie's eyes had shut, and she yawned as she answered, “Yeah, I know. I could produce a reality TV show just about you.”

Lydia sat up against the headboard and couldn't help a smile. All things considered, this was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to her. Sudden understanding hit her in the chest—she knew she *had* to see this thing through, whatever that meant.

“Hey, I think I figured something else out,” she said, noticing Jennie had gotten very quiet. “Are you awake?” she asked softly, peering over Jennie's back, trying to see if her eyes were open.

Jennie uttered a small snore. Needing reassurance that something was still the same, Lydia leaned over and stared at Jennie's face. For some reason, she focused on Jennie's full, pink lips and felt reality shift beneath her. Why was she noticing Jennie's lips? What was happening to her?

Sudden exhaustion flooded Lydia, and sleep suddenly seemed like a really good idea. She nudged Jennie awake. “Hey girlfriend—time for bed.”

Jennie stood up with a big yawn. “You better wake me if one of those creatures shows up, okay?”

“You really believe me, Jennie? You don't think I'm crazy?”

“I totally believe you. And besides”—she paused—“didn't you say your hunk of burning love has brothers?”

They burst into giggles again, and Jennie shuffled off to her own room. Lydia watched her go, feeling a swell of love and appreciation. Thank God for Jennie, her most loyal friend. Even in this bizarre episode, she stayed true.

Lydia closed her eyes. Her head wanted to sleep, but her body had other ideas. Her skin buzzed and tingled, and her breasts felt swollen. Erotic images of Eremon tormented her, and remembering his hot tongue darting deep inside of her made her want to reach for the vibrator.

This was so not helping. She really should just go to sleep and quit thinking along these lines. Yet newly awakened sexual awareness, like a tiny seedling emerging from winter's cold, stirred from the center of her being. This awakening had started with the Draca, but the seeds had always been inside of her. Remembering Eremon's hot, wet tongue in her mouth, and then on her pussy, elicited a sexual hunger like she'd never felt before. She wanted to welcome the hunger and find a way to feed it. Feed all of her aroused senses, clamoring for more. There was no way she could explain this to anyone right now.

She groaned and rolled over. A big, hard reality check was coming tomorrow morning—she had to go to work. How convenient the Draca had kidnapped her on a weekend.

Determined to quiet the erotic imagery and burning questions, she pulled a spare pillow over her head. She needed total quiet and total dark. Tomorrow...tomorrow she'd figure something out.

As Lydia finally drifted off, she listened to the familiar sounds from outside: a neighbor's door slammed, cars crunched in the driveway. All as it should be. Yet she knew nothing would ever be the same. The rules of her universe had changed, and she had a sinking feeling there'd be no going back.

Chapter Seven

Lydia woke to the blaring of her alarm.

"How long are you going to ignore that noise?" Jennie flung the covers back, and Lydia tried to burrow deeper.

"Go away."

"Hey, look at that." Jennie tapped her shoulder with one finger. "Your birthmarks are right where a flying creature's wings might be."

"What?" Lydia sat up, blinking and yawning. "My birthmarks?"

"Yeah, check it out. They're right near your shoulder blades. I've always thought they were kind of an unusual shape. My girl Draca!" Jennie grinned at her.

Lydia gazed, bleary-eyed, at Jennie. "You're making fun of my birthmarks, and I'm not even awake yet." She pushed the straps of her camisole down and craned her neck to see the spot Jennie indicated.

"I am not making fun of you."

"Yes, you are. I'm turning into a freak."

"Well, wings or no, you better get up for work."

"Shit." Lydia climbed out of bed, dazed and grumpy. This particular reality sucked. She'd rather be having a fantasy adventure than face her nine-to-five.

She went bleary and exhausted to her receptionist job, and everything seemed normal—but not really. She felt suspended in time, like an actress anxious for a role, waiting for a callback.

Two weeks later, she hadn't heard a peep from her other world. She'd changed her mind a dozen times about whether she wanted to go back. They hadn't contacted her, but Camus said she'd see them again. So how long was she supposed to wait?

It was the strangest inner conflict she'd ever faced. Sometimes she thought she heard or felt something and would whirl around—*Is it them?* But it never proved to be anything.

Jennie accepted everything about Lydia's new reality and noticed things even Lydia hadn't realized. And she kept teasing her about her mark of tiny wings.

She went to work and grocery shopping and all the normal things a planet-Earth girl would do. As the days stretched on, she could almost tell herself it had never happened. Even with the faint tingling feeling at the back of her neck and her jumpiness at whispered sounds, she tried to fool herself that life was settling down. Yet her exploding sensory awareness insisted things were not normal.

She felt bombarded with sensation, experiencing the sights, sounds, and feelings of what had once been her normal life in a brilliantly painful new way. The white, bright spotlight of enhanced senses tormented and teased her, all day and half of every night.

Something had happened to her in that weird fantasy place. The few things she remembered Nareen saying went round and round in her head. *She was special...*

Her only relief came at home. Jennie didn't question or grumble; she simply helped her keep the curtains drawn and the lights turned down. Music, if they even played it, was muted, their cell phone rings as low as possible. Anything that could make sound or emit light was muffled, turned off, or turned down.

"You're turning our house into the bat cave, you know," Jennie observed.

Lydia tossed her purse onto the couch and kicked off her shoes. She looked around their little apartment. Outside it was still light, but inside everything was so dark she could hardly see the far side of the room.

"Huh, I guess you're right," she said, surprised at the analogy.

They had both just gotten home from work. Lydia moved into the kitchen and turned on the one remaining dim light. She looked around. It was true—and the darker and more closed-in the house got, the safer and calmer Lydia felt. Inside, in the dark and quiet, her overheated senses had a chance to cool off.

She remembered the cave the Draca had taken her to, and shivered. Images of a glowing cave full of mystery and flying creatures haunted her nights. No matter how quiet or dark the house got, there was no escaping the dreams, or the feelings they aroused in her. She'd wake up covered in sweat, her breasts aching and wetness soaking her panties. She no longer considered the dreams nightmares, just an ongoing source of exquisite frustration.

She relived Eremon's kiss over and over, his hot mouth on her aching pussy... She wanted only him. Every man she'd ever known paled in comparison. And nothing could take away the ache of frustrated, intense arousal; not even pleasuring herself brought any real relief.

Camus had said she'd be back. *When...when would that happen?*

Another week went by. Lydia found herself alone at her reception desk at work. The rest of the staff had gone to lunch, and she'd taken the opportunity to turn down the lights. She'd been finding that the overhead fluorescent lights in particular made her skin itch and hurt in tiny pinpricks of pain.

Prompted by some instinct she didn't understand, she lifted her arm and stretched it out, squinting to imagine a dragon claw. She stared at her hand, at the spaces between her fingers, and pictured gold scales and bronze talons. What must it be like? she mused, her hand held suspended in air while she contemplated it. What must it be like for all that thick sharpness to just erupt out of your skin?

Relaxing in the quiet office, she leaned back in her chair and let her eyes close...

And saw sun, blazing across the desert. A fitful wind blew hot across her face, and the prospect for shade had all but disappeared. In the distance, a dragon. A fallen dragon, one parched near to death, his head sunk so low, his eyes were bare slits above the dunes. He seemed an eternity away, to reach him would mean agonizing steps across the sands. Yet she knew he waited. Waited for her.

Lydia thought she might be dreaming, but the look in the dragon's eyes propelled her feet. She hissed in pain as she stumbled toward him as fast as

she could manage, until she reached the small bit of shade afforded by his enormous body. His eyes were hooded shut, the guttural sounds of his breathing slow. She reached a hand out to his side, tracing with wonder the bloodred scales. Shudders rippled under her hand, and his neck slithered around so his fierce eyes could see her. All coherent thought fled as she realized for the first time that she was naked.

Eremon's long snout opened, and rows of razor teeth showed. She didn't even consider it a threat. Instead, a bolt of sexual heat shot up her middle.

"Thirsty. You."

The thought rang clear. Eremon's voice, although deeper and more guttural.

"Thirsty—You!" he emphasized, making sure she understood.

Lydia felt the thirst too. Thirst for water, and thirst for something else. Something she didn't dare give a name to.

"Closer."

She bumped up against his side, her breasts and groin just touching his scales. He moved his snout against her side, snuffling at her until she'd turned and faced him. He nudged between her legs. A great taboo was being violated. This had to be wrong, on so many different levels. Yet her knees weakened and opened for more.

A small growl vibrated the sand beneath them, and smoky, pungent breath blew hot at her breasts, down her stomach, across her damp curls.

Eremon, naked and entirely human, had his head pressed between her legs, as she lay sprawled across the sand. The gritty surface cradled her in impossible coolness. His tongue licked up her center, and she cried out. Lapping. *Drinking*. Yes...Eremon had been dying of thirst, and she was here to give him her waters, the waters of her most intimate self.

She flooded for him, twisting and arching as his tongue speared her again and again—wanting it all, helpless to stop herself. Shuddering, the body between her legs changed, and it was a dragon's long tongue lapping at her, Eremon, shifting back and forth from man to Draca, wings folded tight against

scaled sides. Forbidden, so forbidden, this rapture at the mouth of a dragon, yet she pressed down against the meaty pulse of his alien tongue in a blinding orgasm that left her gasping, her throat parched and dry as the air.

When she could focus again, Eremon sprawled on his stomach. He looked unconscious. Dark hair spread like blood across the sand. His normally bronze skin glowed alabaster against the desert glare.

The landscape had filled with small groups of other Draca. Some human, some in their predator forms. Parched, gray dust had settled over everything. The clusters of Draca lay motionless.

“Thirst,” Lydia heard, the communication clear like before.

Eremon rolled to his back and groaned. He looked up at her with eyes turned gold and slitted, predator eyes. More. He needed more. He made an inarticulate sound, lunging upward and yanking her down on top of him. His mouth feasted on hers, sucking at her tongue, a man drinking to save his life... His arms crushed her to his chest, his cock hard and throbbing against her stomach. He pulled her up so his mouth could reach her breasts and suckled them, biting the nipples and tugging as if milk could flow. Yet he made no move to enter her. She wanted that—she wanted all of him.

Reaching between them, she grasped his rigid length. He jerked in shock, forcibly pulling her hands away from him, but she would have none of it. Quickly, before he could stop her, she slid down his chest and took his entire throbbing cock in her mouth. He filled her, the rigid veins pulsing against her tongue, his cock, like the rest of him, so dry and hot. She let the wetness of her mouth coat every inch, sucking him as hard as she dared.

His groans rang out over the dunes, the heads of the Draca lifting in response. The breeze stirred again and kicked the sand into swirling eddies. Eremon pulled Lydia up by the arms and flipped her over, laying his full weight on her, sinking her into the forgiving sand. He plundered her mouth, and she kissed him back with all her pent-up passion. Eremon slid three long, callused fingers deep into her aching middle and pressed down. Her back arched over

his perfect touch, wetness pouring over his hand as she let go in an erotic explosion of lust that threatened to undo her completely.

His forehead leaning against hers, both of them breathing hard, he pulled his dripping hand up to his face. Deliberately, keeping his eyes on her, he brought his fingers to his mouth. He licked them off, one by one, closing his eyes in bliss.

Eremon put the fingers to her own lips, and she opened her mouth and tasted her feminine self on him...

“Hey! Who turned off the lights?”

Lydia snapped to attention, stunned by the shift from her vision of the desert to her office at work. She spun to face her boss as light flooded the room.

“Ah...just me...sorry. These overhead lights have been giving me headaches.”

Dylan raised his eyebrows in inquiry as he strode toward his office door. “You okay, Lydia? You've been awfully quiet lately.”

She suppressed an embarrassed laugh. “Yeah, I'm fine. I've just been having some trouble sleeping lately, that's all.”

“Well, if there's something you'd like to talk about, just let me know.” And then he disappeared into his office.

Sure, she thought. Pull up a chair. You like fantasy novels? Trying to get a grip, she upended her water bottle and drank the entire contents. She was so damn thirsty all of a sudden. With a rueful smirk at her own weirdness, she wondered how she was going to finish the day almost weeping with crazy arousal.

* * * * *

As she walked slowly to the bus stop after work, she stopped when she got to a rosebush, unseasonably blooming next to a short wooden fence. Something compelled her to stop and touch the soft blossoms. She bent to sniff the improbable winter buds, and tears welled in her eyes. The desert sun, the man and creature, had ignited all her senses, and now everything seemed

magnified. She touched the soft petals of the flower, and instant tinges of heat pulsed between her legs. Eremon's face rose in her mind, his eyes blazing at her in the seconds before he shape-shifted...

Lust and longing haunted the edges of everything. Like a beat in her blood, a pounding of enhanced sensual awareness clouded her mind and whispered promises she couldn't quite hear and had no way to respond to. Control seemed to be seeping away from her—again. Normal life should have restored the feeling that she controlled her own daily life, but the erotic incident in her office had shown how wrong she'd been about that.

She made it to the bus stop on time and climbed aboard with a sigh of relief. Fortunately, the bus was unusually quiet with no one sitting too close. For a blessed few moments, she felt an easing of the bombardment of her senses and gave a small sigh of relief.

Just let it go, Lydia told herself. Let go of images of dragons. Sitting quietly, she looked out the window as the bus rumbled down the narrow street.

“Good day, my lady,” a tiny voice said behind her.

Lydia squeaked and whirled to look behind her.

Camus leaned around and peeked up over the armrest at her. He was standing on the floor directly behind her seat.

“Camus—oh my God!”

He slid around her legs and hopped up beside her.

Camus the Draca was sitting next to her on a city bus. She darted a look around at the other passengers—no one was looking.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed.

Camus cleared his throat, his normally cheerful face screwed up in anxiety. “You must go back,” he said. “Or Nareen will do something very, very bad to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was never supposed to let you return to this time. Nareen is most displeased with me. Worse, she has invoked *the rule of council*.” He said it like it was the most awful thing that could happen.

Heaving a great sigh, Camus turned and looked out the window.

What, that's all he was going to tell her? Damn it, her newly aware senses were useless with the Draca. They didn't seem to help her understand these creatures at all. Her eyes started to water as smoke wafted up from their seat. She looked again to see if anyone noticed, but they remained almost alone in the bus.

“Lydia, my dear, I am here to ask for your permission to bring you back to our world—and to give you time to prepare yourself.” Camus's face scrunched up tight. “I have, as the humans say, *screwed up big-time*, and it is my mission to convince you to willingly return.”

So many emotions warred in Lydia's chest, she hardly knew what to do or say next. She didn't have a single doubt about anything Camus said, yet an appropriate response failed her. She opened her mouth, closed it. Then it didn't matter, because the bus pulled over for her stop. She turned to warn him, but he had disappeared.

* * * * *

It so figured that he would disappear like that. Lydia walked the six blocks to the apartment in a fury of conflicted feelings. They wanted her to come back, but of her own free will. Wow. Decision time.

She headed into the house just as a scream echoed out of the kitchen.

“Jennie!” Lydia ran through the house to find Jennie holding a pot like a baseball bat at Camus, who leaned, cool as could be, against the kitchen cupboards.

“Call 911!” Jennie yelled. “We have a break-in.”

“No, Jennie, it's okay, it's okay. It's Camus. Remember the story? It's *Camus*, Jennie. Put down the pot.”

“Camus?” The pot landed on the floor with a loud *clang*. “Are you—Is he...?”

Camus made a deep bow. “Camus, of the Garnet Clan.”

Jennie slid down the wall until she sat on the kitchen floor, her eyes wide. “Oh. My. God. You're one of *them*.” Jennie held out her hand toward Camus. “I,

ah...I am very pleased to meet you. I'm sorry I almost hit you with the pasta pot."

Not knowing what else to do, Lydia made tea. The three of them sat at the tiny kitchen table and cautiously sipped, eyes meeting over the steam from their cups. Lydia could feel Jennie's excitement, along with her own churning gut, but she still didn't have a clue about her next move. Camus said little, managing to answer their questions while revealing practically nothing. The sense that something huge was stirring right under the surface of her understanding persisted.

"We need you," Camus repeated, "but we will not force you to return. You must make this decision on your own. No matter what you decide, we will honor your feelings. If you choose to stay here, you will not be bothered by us again."

How they needed her, or *why*, he steadfastly refused to answer.

She flashed on the incident in the office today. She could think of someone *she* needed, and she knew exactly why.

"How do you feel?" he said, when she demanded to know more.

"What do you mean? I feel crazy!"

"No, I mean *how do you feel?*"

Lydia stared at him. How did she feel? Overamped, overstimulated, and horny as hell! Was that what he meant? She hit the table with her palm in frustration.

Camus jumped at the noise, a small grin lighting his face. "Ah... You feel much, yes?"

"Stop playing word games with me. I want answers!" Lydia pushed away from the table. This was going nowhere.

"The answers you seek are with my kin," he said finally, his face serious and hopeful both. "I promise, you will understand everything once you return to us. You will see."

Completely crazy. That's what this was. She glared at Camus and looked to Jennie for help. Jennie shrugged. Her eyes clearly said she didn't have a clue either.

Camus stood. "I will return in a few hours. This will be your last chance to help us."

He looked worried at that, like he thought Lydia might truly say no. Before she could respond with more questions, he made a curious wave with his hands and disappeared, leaving a faint trail of smoke circling in the kitchen.

* * * * *

They started arguing about it as soon as Camus disappeared.

"What do you mean, go back with him?" Jennie exploded. "Now you're really talking crazy."

"Wasn't it you going on about how cool all the sexy stuff was?" Lydia felt curiously defensive and headed up the stairs to her room. She didn't need these accusations right now. All she wanted was for Jennie to help her with this, not make it worse.

"Don't change the subject." Jennie trotted up after her and slipped into her room before Lydia could close the door behind her. She glared at Lydia, her hands on her hips. "We're talking about you actually volunteering to leave planet-Earth time. And go to another other dimension. With shape-changing creatures and beautiful, kissable dragon people. Without me!"

Lydia flopped down on the bed. "It's insane, I know... I mean, they never even explained what it is they want me to do... But damn it, Jennie! You know what life has been like for me lately..." Lydia rolled over on her face and groaned her frustration to the bedspread. "Actually, you don't know the half of it. I'm so turned on all the time, and I can't get Eremon out of my head. And I mean day or night."

Jennie fell back onto the bed next to Lydia. "I feel like we're in the twilight zone."

"Exactly. And you're the only thing keeping me sane. Please, Jennie, help me do this. You know I have to see this through."

Jennie rolled over and stared at the ceiling. “What if you never come back? It's not like I could mount a rescue party.”

Right. What about that? What about if she couldn't get back, what then? There was no one who'd really worry about her except Jennie. Her parents had passed away, and Jennie was all she had in terms of family.

Lydia's heart squeezed. So many unanswered questions. Her practical self screamed at her to use her head, while all her pent-up sensual longings clamored for relief. That newly enhanced sexual self was saying, Find that shape-shifting creature and fuck his brains out!

This thing inside her, boiling and churning—Camus seemed to think it was her Draca blood calling to her, whispered voices just under the surface, urging her to embrace and accept.

They remained silent as the reality of Lydia's choices sunk in. The ends of the earth beckoned, and even though she hadn't said she'd go, the decision had been made. An irresistible course had been laid out; how could she not find out what would happen next?

“It sucks how much I am going to miss you,” Jennie said.

Lydia sat up and gave her a warm hug. “Thank you, Jen girl,” she said fervently. “For everything. You know I love you, and if there's any way to include you in on this, I will.”

“I know,” Jennie whispered. “Just come back to me, okay? And bring some of Dragon Boy's family members with you.”

Giggling broke the tension, and Lydia took a deep breath and looked around. “Do you think I need to pack a bag?” She pulled off her work shirt and sat in her bra, trying to think about what clothes or supplies she should bring.

“Did you need one before?” The voice came from the vicinity of the floor next to the bed, and both of them screamed.

“Camus! Stop doing that!” Lydia scolded. “And get out of here!” She scrambled to cover herself and glared at him.

His eyes gleamed with obvious aroused interest. “Such luscious, human woman flesh,” he said admiringly.

“Stop looking and wipe that drool off your face! Go wait in the other room. I’ll be right out.”

He lingered. “Does this mean the answer is yes?”

“I said go.”

They went looking for Camus a short while later and found him glued to the television. He sat mesmerized, clicking the remote over and over, muttering and exclaiming over every channel. “This human thing,” he said. “This television. This I will discuss with the others when I return.” He looked up at them, waiting next to Lydia’s bag. “So, you are sure?”

“No, but I’m going anyway.”

“Very well. That is good for all of us, and especially good for Camus.”

He lifted his hand, and all Lydia had time for was a quick kiss on Jennie’s tear-streaked face before they disappeared.

Chapter Eight

Her stomach dropped like a roller coaster, and a few seconds later, Lydia opened her eyes to the Draca world.

She'd landed on her feet this time. *Must be getting better at this part.* Familiar cave surroundings were illuminated with some welcome improvements—this one had several high windows that let in cobweb rays of sun. Cut stone walls all around and a high Gothic ceiling curved far overhead. Much smaller than any room she'd see in the Draca world so far, it had only a carved chest and one rather severe-looking, armless chair for furniture.

Her trembling legs insisted she go for the chair. After a minute, the shakes slowed down, although the chilly air made her regret not wearing more than a thin blouse. She looked at her feet for the bag she and Jennie had packed, but of course, it was nowhere to be seen.

A closed door across from her beckoned. Should she wait? Or try the door?

Raised voices started echoing from the other side. She must be in an anteroom, a waiting area off the actual meeting place. Sudden shouting erupted, and responses that sounded like swearing in alien French, raspy scratches like chairs scraping across a gravel floor.

She sneak-walked to the door and leaned her head against it, straining to hear the words.

“No!” sounded angry, and something like “stone-headed Draca!” made her eyes go wide. Arguments. She had a sinking feeling the raised voices involved her somehow. Shouting ceased, and the door cracked open. Lydia sprang back with a little shriek, her heart thumping in a two-second meltdown. Then she realized who had come in.

“Aedhan,” he said, reintroducing himself. “The dark one's brother.” And he flashed her a conspiratorial smile and wink. “I remember you well.” He radiated good humor and breathtaking handsomeness that ranked right up there with

his Draca kin. Sporting fiery orange hair and a wide grin, he towered over Lydia.

All the Draca towered over Lydia.

He crooked his arm out, a clear invitation. "I am here to be your escort," he said. "You may refuse; however, I doubt that you will."

Smiling a little, Lydia placed her hand on his wonderfully muscular arm. Maybe she was getting escorted to the equivalent of a firing squad. Whatever. This delightful shape-shifter was Eremon's brother, and she knew he would lead her right to him.

The door swung wide to the enormous cavern she had been expecting.

"Do not be afraid of us, my lady. We tend to get quite, ah...*vocal*."

He guided her to the closest end of an immense heavy wooden table. It easily accommodated the seated crowd of shape-shifters on each side. Aedhan took up station next to her without another word.

She clutched the edge, trying to pretend she wasn't so self-conscious she could barely breathe. Trails of smoke circled overhead, and stray bits of green scales and claw tips littered the floor.

She shivered at the sight of all the beautiful, glittering Draca watching her with great interest, and something more besides. She tried to smile, but her lips trembled when the corners lifted. She needed to find him...

And then she looked to her right.

Eremon.

He was more glorious than she remembered. Her eyes drank him in. Mahogany leather pants stretched across muscular thighs; a sleeveless vest showed sinewy arms and large biceps. His burgundy hair, pulled back tightly, harshened the contours of his square jawline.

Smoke circled the room in remembered tanginess, and the close proximity of her thirsty dream lover caused all kinds of commotion in her lower parts. She wished he would look at her. Surely he could hear her heart pounding almost out of her chest.

Lydia tore her gaze away from Eremon and looked back to the other Draca staring at her with hooded eyes.

Someone cleared her throat and ventured, "Is it time yet, Nareen? Can this get started?"

Attention shifted to the opposite end of the table. Nareen glowed, with her hair pulled back in a burnished red braid and a thin circlet of garnets on her brow. She looked every inch the Draca queen.

"Welcome back to Dracan," Nareen said. "We are deeply happy you have come."

She gestured toward the empty chair next to Lydia. Glad to disappear a little behind the table, Lydia slid onto the cool wood. Her eyes went wide as she absorbed the collective beauty of the shape-shifters.

Silky, long gowns barely covered the generous breasts and voluptuous curves of the women, sitting as tall as the men. And the men—Lydia barely suppressed a sigh. Every one of them could have posed for the cover of a romance novel. They wore leather vests similar to Eremon's, showcasing muscular, bare chests. Their handsome, chiseled faces smiled at her in lusty anticipation.

Eremon sat rigid beside her. Did he think about kissing her? Did he remember? She itched and squirmed and squeezed her legs together, but little helped the pulses of arousal. What next what next what next?

"I have called the Council of Elders together for a vote on how to proceed."

Nareen's voice caused a visible stir. She gestured toward Lydia and to the gathered group and then stopped speaking English. Her voice rang out in a kind of silvery lilt, seductive and alien. Like alien French, Lydia thought again. And whatever she was saying, it was causing quite a stir.

All eyes darted from Lydia to Eremon and Aedhan.

Aedhan slumped in his chair, and looks of sly amusement played over his face. Eremon continued his scowling. He still refused to look at her, his long fingers tapping out an impatient rhythm on the tabletop.

Finally some sort of decision seemed to be made, and Nareen resumed speaking in English.

“Lydia, my brother Eremon has stated that he will not join us in our great task; therefore we are forced to change our plans. We are bound to follow the thread of the gods, no matter what he may think. A great hope and powerful working have brought you to us”—and here Nareen turned a pointed look on Eremon—“and my stubborn Draca brother refuses to acknowledge what is in front of his eyes.”

What? What's in front of his eyes? Lydia darted a look at Eremon. His lips pressed into a thin line, and his hands had knotted into fists.

The whole group rose to its feet without any visible signal that Lydia could see. She jumped up with them. Something had changed—the air fairly crackled with things unsaid.

Eremon edged closer, not quite touching her but close enough she could smell him. And oh, what a smell. All smoky and earthy and yummy. He and his brother both. Utterly delicious.

Purely so she didn't jump on him, she backed away, right into Aedhan. He put his steadying hand on Lydia's shoulder, and Eremon issued a low growling noise.

Aedhan grinned but let the hand drop.

Nareen continued to address the standing group. “Following the great threads of the gods, I wove together enough power to find this very special human. Until she arrived, I had no way of knowing if I was right in my actions.”

She paused, as if for questions. When there were none, she directed her comments directly to Lydia: “What I suspected in the beginning is true. You have in your blood a powerful strain of old Draca. For humans to access the power of such blood, and keep it alive at all—and it is very, very rare—requires an...*awakening*. We think, we believe, the Draca DNA in your blood has begun to do just that, which is the only reason we were able to find you. I am sure you have noticed certain...*enhancements*, even in the human world?”

Lydia nodded mutely. Yeah, right. *Enhancements*.

"The powers stirred to life in your blood wait for the correct signals to fully manifest. I believe I have rediscovered forgotten ancient rituals that have the potential to feed the dying life force of our people. We need your most blessed and noble permission to enact some of those rituals."

Rituals?

Nareen stopped, her eyebrows raised. "Do you understand so far?"

Lydia nodded again, still at a loss for words.

"It is so...difficult to explain this," Nareen went on. "I apologize for not being more, ah—how do you humans put it—more *up front*. We had thought it better to show you the truth of us in small parts, rather than everything all at once. We found that when we rushed things, we frightened you away."

Nareen's lips turned up a little.

Lydia narrowed her eyes. "It wasn't too funny when it was happening, as I recall." Nareen inclined her head in acknowledgment. "We understand this now," she said. "And I beg for your forgiveness. You cannot know how our dreams are full of our pain and our days are spent trying to forget what has brought us to this tragic time. In all of this, I fear our usual wisdom has been somewhat lacking." She gestured toward the Draca women, who were listening closely.

"The sadness of our females has sunk so deep into their souls, it is in their very genes, until even the unborn feel our anguish and hide even more deeply from us. It has become intolerable for everyone, and I have taken it upon myself to use the powers of the gods to find our way out of this. Out of what has, until now, appeared to be the inevitable extinction of our species." She shot a determined look in Eremon's direction. "Despite what went wrong in the past...we must never allow ourselves to give up."

Midway down the table, Camus's head barely reached the surface. Only his round, worried eyes could be seen, darting anxious looks between her and Eremon.

Eremon watched in growing agitation as his brother Aedhan, following Nareen's soft orders, took the luscious human female by the hand and led her past the line of his gawking kin. Aedhan put his arm around her shoulder, as if to guide her, and it was all Eremon could do not to rush forward and push his brother away.

Lydia and Aedhan reached the far wall, a jet-black obsidian surface spanning the entire back end of the cavern. Deeply etched carvings covered its surface, a mass of intricate designs surrounding the jeweled center masterpiece. Gleaming with crimson light, a faceted garnet stone regarded the assemblage like a giant bloodred eye. Consciousness shone dully from the enormous stone.

Nareen indicated that they should face the mysterious gem.

"This priceless jewel holds within it much of the powers belonging to the Garnet Clan of the Draca. It is one of the reasons we can live as we do, in a separate protected world. Great wisdom also dwells deep in its heart. It can know the truth of a person, the true heart and blood and dreams of those it so chooses. And in ways we have never understood how to control, it can trigger certain powers when provided with the right...*chemistry*."

Eremon gritted his teeth. It was his own godsforsaken fault. All of it—he had given her away, and now his brother would be *the First*. Nareen had insisted the threads of the spell had woven his name. But he could not accept this travesty. What would be the price to be paid this time for Nareen's meddling in the fates? Too high, he was sure of it. He had already paid the highest price of all, the senseless loss of his mate and his child. All because of Nareen's unrepentant spell casting. She recklessly continued to disregard the possible consequences of her actions. Better to let the Draca fade gracefully into the depths of history than suffer the living hell that consumed his days.

Yet a slow rage simmered that had nothing to do with his ongoing disagreements with his sister.

"We ask that you allow the stone to know you," Nareen said.

Eremon's chest contracted when Nareen gestured Lydia closer to the jewel. Mine, the unbidden thought shouted in his head. Yes, his predator answered. Yes, and powered his momentum across the room.

As soon as he got close enough, he shoved Aedhan roughly away from Lydia.

Aedhan stumbled aside without protest, looking unsurprised. "Took you long enough, Brother." He gave a small bow. "She awaits you."

Lydia took a step back. Eremon glared at her, yet there was more than anger in his look. *Possession*. A thrill jolted up Lydia's core, and her mouth opened in shock. He faced her and held out his hands.

Lydia couldn't look away from his burning gaze. Her breath quickened as she laid her palms in his huge ones. She could feel his pulse through her skin; his heart was beating as hard as hers.

"Hurry," Eremon said. "We must hurry." And he urged them closer to the massive garnet.

Nareen, who had been standing with her arms crossed, arched her brows. "First you refuse to have anything to do with it; now you want to rush. Hold, Eremon, you should not do this when you are still angry."

"I am not angry. Aedhan is right. We should test the stone, and then we will know if we go forward."

Lydia locked her eyes onto the gleaming jewel. It would know her heart? How?

Eremon squeezed Lydia's hands, his eyes no longer cold. Instead she saw something else—a hypnotic flash of predator gold, of hot desert sand...heat that started in her chest and pooled between her legs.

Lydia could have sworn she felt the stone *reach* for her, causing an even-greater erotic eruption of her body buzz. As if someone besides her had control of the sensory dial, arousal crawled over her nerve endings.

Eremon maneuvered them to the dead center of the stone and, with a rapid movement, thrust his and Lydia's hands flat to the hard surface.

Instantly, a flash of fierce sexual hunger ripped up and down Lydia's spine and planted itself in every erogenous zone she had. Her head fell back, overwhelmed by the erotic zaps lighting up her nipples, her sex. She wanted to howl.

Eremon threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. She shot a glance behind her, looking for Nareen, and saw rose-colored mist filling the cavern. It danced out of the Garnet, falling like a barely visible red net, caressing the heads and shoulders of the assemblage.

No longer able to hold back, and with all her attention riveted to the jewel, she opened fully to the erotic hunger ripping up her spine.

Her nipples scraped against the cool stone, and Eremon's body, pressed against her side, burned everywhere it touched. Their conjoined hands started to slide with sweat against the stone, and Eremon grunted and pressed harder, keeping them in place. Doors in her consciousness blew open; light surged in, and she clung to the jewel, metaphysically glued in place.

She saw skies—like another waking vision. Flying creatures soaring. Mountains and soft clouds overhead...

Strong hands pulled her, with a sucking noise, away from the garnet. Eremon yanked her around and crushed her to his wide, muscular chest. His mouth found hers, and she opened with a moan and let him in. His mouth, on hers, at last.

Excited voices in the background seemed to be causing quite a stir, but she didn't care. Eremon kissed her, his tongue thrusting deep. His hands found her breasts and hardened nipples, and he squeezed the aching nubs. The noises in the background grew louder.

Held prisoner by the flood of sensations, something else started to intrude. A different emotion hovered at the edges, a yearning, tinged with...*sadness*?

Eremon pulled back and leaned his forehead against hers, breathing hard. He felt it too. Lydia clutched him, rocked with emotion. What was this?

What was this pain—this strange *yearning*? Some of the beautiful faces watching her were openly weeping.

She had done this. Or at least contributed to it, the powers in the garnet, she and Eremon. Something had been triggered. She caught sight of Nareen, who looked satisfied and sad at the same time.

Eremon took her face between his hands and kissed her again, his lips a slow burn as he brushed them almost tenderly across her trembling mouth. "I know," he murmured. "I know of this pain."

New, unfamiliar feelings settled in Lydia's heart. Her very blood was responding to the unspoken longings of the Draca. She didn't understand everything under the surface, all the powers and magics and schemes about saving a dying race, still didn't get how it involved her.

"What do we do now?" she whispered into Eremon's hair. His arms held her close.

"Patience."

Sure enough, the tension around her lessened as if a dam had broken. Something had shifted, but she wasn't sure what.

"You see, Brother?" Aedhan called out from the other side of the room. "Do you finally see what has been in front of you all along? She is perfect. When was the last time you felt anything like that?"

They turned around, and the room erupted in scattered cheers. Eremon went stiff, growling at his brother. Lydia glanced at him with a small thrill at his possessive manner. Yeah, this was more like it.

"It was Eremon who needed the proof, damn his stubborn, scaled hide," Aedhan said, without the slightest hint of repentance. "I merely helped things along. No one else cared, Brother. We wanted Lydia to get on with it; no one needed this kind of evidence besides you. *The chosen one*," he added on a sarcastic note.

"Enough!" Nareen's voice rang out. "Enough of that."

There was instant silence. A few coughs and throat clearings and grins continued for a few minutes, until Nareen pounded her hand on the table and had everyone's complete attention. She gestured them back to their seats, and once the room had somewhat settled, she addressed Lydia.

“You have done very well, human Daughter. There is nothing to be alarmed about in your responses. Or Eremon's.” Nareen glanced in amusement at the brothers. “We have all seen the truth of it—and we have shared your wonderful intimate responses in ways we have sorely missed.” Nareen's gaze locked onto Lydia's. “And so, if you are agreeable, the gods would smile on the continuing test of this theory.”

Still zingy from all the confusing emotion, Lydia nodded.

“I was sure, but my kin, especially Eremon, needed to see more. To see that you are the special human we thought you to be. A human *Daughter of Draca*.”

The words rang out like an announcement of great import. More cheers sounded, and Eremon's grip on Lydia's shoulder tightened.

“Everything we have seen and felt tonight illumines this basic truth. The DNA of Draca in your blood is from our oldest, most potent line. It is known to carry healing...life-force healing. As you open your body and spirit to the depth of your own sexual nature, your Draca blood becomes *more alive*. In a way, it is born. Or the potential for it to be born becomes more possible. Can you understand?”

Lydia's brain turned furiously. Her newly awakened sexual nature was part of her Draca heritage? Pieces of the puzzle started falling into place.

Eremon stood. “No, Lydia *does not* understand this.”

“We have all heard what you have to say on the matter, Brother.” Nareen gestured to the avid Draca men and women around her. “If you are going to change your mind again, there are eleven others who are willing to take your place.”

Eremon turned away from the council table with a frustrated snarl. “Very well, Sister.” He bowed low, apparently willing to accede to their wishes. “I will take the human Daughter to my aerie. There, she will be given the time she needs to make the final choice herself. All I ask is that you leave us alone. For as long as I deem necessary.”

Nareen looked suspicious. “What are you planning, Brother?”

“I will do as I have promised,” Eremon said.

Chapter Nine

She let Eremon steer her with firm hands down a long hallway and out through another heavy, carved door. He moved with fast, impatient strides, pulling her along with an iron grip. His hand swallowed hers, claiming it as his with every step. She thrilled at such possessiveness. No man had ever dominated her in such a manner. She had always thought only weak women let men take charge. Smoke rose around him, as if his Draca self fought to break through. It circled their heads as they walked, thick lines of gray trails that seemed to echo the shudders of the earth with each of Eremon's steps. They walked across a small meadow and down a short bank to the edge of a calm river. Cypress trees lined the bank, offering leafy shade. A slight breeze stirred the air, and the improbable smell of spring mixed with all the smoke.

"What are we doing here?" Lydia asked when they finally stopped.

Eremon dropped her hand, indicating a green space for them to sit. He looked at her briefly, his eyes cool. "I needed to get out of the council chambers and clear my head."

He didn't join her on the grass but, instead, turned away and walked toward the water.

His back had as much to be admired as his front side, she thought, sinking to the ground with a sigh. Her eyes soaked in the sight of his broad shoulders and slim hips. His tight-fitting vest showed every rugged, muscular line of his backside. Tooled leather boots rose up his black trousers to his knees, and sun gleamed on his dark burgundy hair. Loosed from the tie, it hung past his shoulders in a careless mass. He looked, she thought, like a young god.

She gazed in wordless longing while he stalked back and forth at the water's edge. He moved with a predator's grace in long, soundless strides. The part of him most alien to her rippled under his skin like the hum of a constant

song. His other self, the fierce, winged creature he had shown her so briefly—it too lived in him, and somehow she felt it watching her, wanting her.

Her experience with the garnet in the council room had shaken something deep inside. Nareen and the council had guessed what might happen when she dared to touch the glowing jewel. Was it what they expected? Nareen indicated the garnet controlled the magic in this world. Now it controlled something in her. And something between her and Eremon.

Lydia blew out her breath and fell back, trying to stretch out her tension.

After a while, Eremon turned away from the river and walked over to her. A pulse of excitement flashed through her chest at the bronze, sculptured beauty of his face. His wide green eyes had an unusual slant, full of glittering mystery, and his dark eyebrows were lowered. Stooping down, he reached out as if he couldn't help himself and ran one finger down her cheek in a light caress. His thick hair fell over his face, his hooded eyes serious. He looked as if decisions had been made. She waited, anticipation tightening her chest.

"You came back to us," he said.

Lydia sat up, her cheek tingling from his touch. "I know, weird, huh? What was I thinking?"

"I tried to warn you away."

Lydia's face warmed, remembering the last time she saw him. Some kind of unforgettable warning *that* had been. "I needed to know for sure."

"To know what—for sure?"

"If it was real. If I really am—you know. Part nonhuman." She couldn't quite get out the word *Draca*.

He settled on the grass next to her facing the river, his legs drawn up. . "You have been discovering the powers of your blood. Even I admit all this is most unusual."

"So I hear."

He finally looked at her. "It isn't like you are going to sprout wings or anything." His lips tilted. "You are not *Draca* in the full sense. You carry DNA, yes. But not enough to send you flying into our skies."

She couldn't help a teasing grin. "Oh. Well. That's disappointing."

He flashed her a surprised smile, the warmth in his emerald eyes so different from before. "I am sorry for all the subterfuge. You know by now that I never agreed with it." He inched closer, until the side of his leg pressed against hers. His eyes went liquid green. The filtered sunlight laid a pattern of shadows across his face, and she could almost hear the compelling voice of the hidden creature inside of him. Calling to her. Yearning for her.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers, slanting his mouth and pressing for her to open for him. In a slow, mesmerizing rhythm, he sucked her tongue, igniting the growing embers in her core. He kissed her long and deep, until she could have pulled him on top of her and spent the rest of the day kissing him senseless.

His lips slid to her neck, and he murmured against her skin. "I should not do this."

Lydia pulled back. "Why not?"

His arms pulled her close, and she buried her face against his chest, smelling the leather of his vest mixed with his own tangy scent.

"I had a mate," he said, so low she could barely catch the words. "Before we realized the full extent of the danger we were in as a race, I allowed it, and she was willing to take the chance. She paid a terrible price...." He stopped and then began again, his voice ragged with pain. "She, and our child, died in childbirth. The birth of a Draca child is very difficult under the best of circumstances. The baby...could not find the way to shift to the birth form..."

Lydia's heart contracted, and tears thickened her throat.

Eremon's face stayed buried in her hair. "Too many mistakes—too much death. I was so blinded by my own desires, I allowed the death of my mate and child."

His arms tightened around her. "I was convinced the end of our race had come, I would not agree to any more of Nareen's supposed gods-driven plans and her great spells." He raised his head and met her eyes, memories still

clouding his face. “And then Nareen found you. And you are not just a willing human. You are Draca.”

His eyes searched her face, as if looking for answers.

“Fine. I kind of get that part. But that next step would be—what, exactly?”

“We will start with me in my true form, and then, we will see.”

“Your true form?”

“My Draca self,” he said with a slight smile. “My inner predator. He insists upon it.”

Oh. *He was going to shape-shift.* Her heart jumped. “And what am I supposed to do when you, ah, become your other self?”

He hesitated just the smallest second. “You will know what to do when it happens.”

He pulled back and jumped to his feet, raising his arms. In seconds, the liquid flow of his other form raced down his body, and a black and crimson dragon loomed over her. Massive wings in sharp folds hugged the scaled sides. His Draca head twisted on his thickly scaled neck, angling to see her. He flashed the paler, gold-tinted underside, as if showing off.

Eyes wide at the wonder of it all, still she jumped back. She shrieked when he opened his cavernous muzzle, revealing extremely sharp, spiky teeth, some as fat as small branches.

“Why, Grandma,” she cried out, a little breathless. “What big teeth you have.”

In response, he opened wider, letting out just the smallest spark of flame. She jumped back again in fear, then relaxed as his giant form slowly knelt and leaned a little toward her.

“What—you want me to get on?” Oh, he had to be joking.

Blazing emerald eyes challenged her. He looked like a creature of myth and nightmare, but his eyes were all Eremon. “Yes,” he seemed to say. “*Unless you are too afraid.*”

She eyed his back, sharp, protruding bones and scales that looked rock-hard. What would she hold on to?

But again, his voice sounded in her mind. *“Do not worry, I will protect you.”*

He lowered himself even farther, waiting. Tentatively, she reached out her hand to touch him, her fingertips tracing cool, sandpaper-like ridges lined with hot, fleshy outer skin. Irregular gashes ran across every scale, gleaming with purple iridescence. She brushed across his side, gently smoothing her whole hand against the rough hide. Shudders ran under her palms as she moved her hand back and forth.

He is incredible—fantastic, she thought and wished she had a camera. Her geeky sci-fi fan friends would go absolutely nuts if they could see this. Heart thumping, she stood for long minutes and considered taking a ride.

Eremon's smoky breaths gathered in small clouds around their heads. Would he breathe fire while she was up there? She would probably fall off for sure if he tried any stunts like that.

“No fire,” she said firmly.

His eyes gleamed in a Draca grin. He tossed his head, showing off his great horn. Again, he swayed toward her, inviting her to climb up.

Throwing her last bit of caution to the winds, she flung her arms up, grabbing one of the ridges that spiked the top, and pulled-pushed herself up his scaly side. Gasping, she swung one leg over and straddled him, her legs stretched as far as they would go, swinging above and just behind the great folded wings.

His muscular, ridged back dug into the tender undersides of her thighs, which were clad only in thin jeans. Heat rose from him, working its way through her clothes to her skin, as if she were sitting in a slow-heating frying pan. She winced, adjusted her position, but couldn't quite escape the burn. Then the building heat settled into something more erotic—and pleasurable—between her legs. Before she had time to take this all in, Eremon lifted up his massive bulk.

Balancing her in perfect form, even as his huge body came to full extension, he made subtle adjustments, easily keeping her upright. Lydia threw her arms around the closest bony ridge, holding on with all her strength.

Eremon's legs bunched, crouching in readiness, and with a low rumble of air like a distant jet plane, his great wings swung out, the vibration and power of it jarring every inch of her body. He flapped once, twice, and with the third downstroke, he uttered a planet-shaking roar and soared straight up into the afternoon sky.

Chapter Ten

Utter shock kept her glued to the topside of her flying Draca. Hair and clothes blew madly as Eremon leveled out and started gliding, riding the winds that shuddered at their backs.

All her senses screamed in heightened awareness—she was flying! She was really flying! Eremon soared in effortless grace through a purple-blue sky, and then through wisps of white clouds, causing dampness to plaster her clothes to her body. Lydia had no idea why she wasn't more freaked out, but there was no denying it all felt so weirdly right. A huge, incredulous grin split her face.

She relaxed and found herself laughing and shrieking at each dive and climb Eremon performed. Eremon, his batlike wings filling the sky in a glorious, terrifying sight, soared high across the ridges and canyons of her new world, and Lydia clung to his back like a hot little burr.

Eremon's flesh and scales grew even warmer. The bony ridge she clung to rose between her legs in a cannon of scaly edges, pressing against the crotch seam of her jeans and squeezing against her breasts. Mighty vibrations of rhythmic muscle strength pulsed from every inch of Eremon's streaming body, arousing her to a sexual fever pitch.

Riding the skies with a massive winged beast between her legs fed her newfound sexual powers, rocking her to the core. Growing erotic hunger and images of what she'd like to do with Eremon when they hit the ground tormented her as he soared.

He started slowing down, gliding in long drafts, aiming for a nearby cliff. She saw an irregular opening far down a rugged rock face, and she had barely blinked before Eremon pulled his wings back and skimmed in perfect timing and grace through the opening.

They landed with a soft series of thuds, until Eremon had slowed enough to fold his legs down and lean for Lydia to slide. She stumbled as she hit a

surface of sand and fell in a heap, unable to get her balance. Excitement and arousal pounded through her, vibrating as if they were still aloft. She laughed helplessly in reaction and tried to stand up.

And how was her flying man doing? Because she was so on fire.

Eremon's Draca form flowed into steaming naked maleness, and Lydia's heart stuttered. He looked as wild as she felt, something unleashed and primal in his eyes.

In one long stride he reached her, grabbing her into an embrace with iron strength, crushing her against his sweaty, smoky chest. Their mouths collided in a heated rush, open and thrusting deep, as they fell onto the gritty cave floor. Never breaking from her mouth, he rolled her over, her ass swinging up and her breasts hitting his chest. He moaned in response.

Finally, the plot of her Draca drama started to make sense. She and Eremon. Together. In one world or the other. This, *this is what her Draca blood had brought her.*

Her gasping breaths matched his. His mouth, his lips, roamed all over her face. Eremon murmured in her ear strange words she didn't know, his voice warm and husky, filling her with intense, screaming need. His blistering lips and tongue knew hers, knew exactly what to do, how to claim her. They rolled along the cave floor, heedless of the small stones beneath their naked bodies. Eremon's hair covered her face and smelled like erotic fire. He was the fire and she was the light, and she burned hot, only for him.

Any space between was too much. She welcomed the heavy weight of him, the hot slickness on the muscles of his back, bucking under her palms. Nothing existed except the desire to get every inch of his jutting arousal inside of her.

He tore open her blouse; somehow they got her jeans off. He uttered a growl of wordless approval and slid down her body, lifted her hips, and put his mouth full on between her legs. Lydia opened, giving him complete access, as he thrust his tongue deep up the dripping middle of her.

Eremon's lips and tongue drank in her salty wetness, the hot, slick fluids sluicing into his mouth. He suckled and licked and had never tasted anything so good. He gripped her hips and sucked her labia and secret female places between his teeth while she thrashed above him, grinding her hot center all over his face.

He'd been dying of thirst. Dying of thirst, and now, finally, the waters of life itself came streaming from the hot center of a true Daughter of Draca.

Memories of the drought and the endless waiting melted in blistering sexual heat. Her sweet juices flooded his mouth, offering new redemption.

He stayed between the soft flesh of her fragrant thighs, suckling until Lydia lay moaning, satiated, whispering happy sounds at him. Barely able to manage it, despite his pounding arousal, he pulled himself back and slid up her body.

More than life itself, he wanted to finish this thing. Yet the message of his duty had been clear. He must, by strict order, wait. His predator keened in acute disapproval.

Things could not go any further at this point, and he needed to remember that.

He rolled over, pulling Lydia into his arms, and she laid her head on his chest, her legs splayed across his. Her sweet breasts pressed against his side, and the wet curls between her legs dampened his thigh. It took all his self-control not to flip her back over and push his cock in as hard as she could take. A growl escaped his predator. He had waited a hundred years already, thinking he would never have sex again. Still, they must be patient awhile longer, despite his aching testicles.

The minute he had felt her awareness of his Draca self between her legs, he had stopped fighting the inevitable. Nareen and the council had been right all along. He had to have her; they all did. She had ridden his Draca fearlessly, delighting them both. She'd soared with him, laughing out loud. He bent for her mouth and kissed her with unfamiliar emotion.

Lydia's eyes, glowing from their lovemaking, looked almost shy. Her tumbled beauty stabbed his heart. He wanted nothing more than to shield her from what was coming next.

"What about you now?" she whispered. "We're not done yet, are we?" Lydia's hand squeezed his cock, still rock hard.

"No—I mean, yes. I want to finish this with you. But...there is more."

"Oh Eremon," she groaned. "There is always *more*. Why doesn't someone just tell me *everything*, just for once? I mean, look at us! If you don't think I can handle what's coming next, well, you just don't know me well enough yet." She pulled away from him, but he would have none of it.

He coaxed her back and kissed her, marveling at her spirit. He wanted to ravish her, now and every night in the future. Unexpected emotions surprised him again, churning up places in his heart he had thought long dead. He remembered the feel of her on his back while he flew, her legs tight against his sides. So much sexual tension and excitement had poured through her, he'd had to stop the flight before he lost hold of his form hundreds of feet in the air.

"There has never been one to fly with me such as that," he tried to explain. "Ever in my long life. No female has laughed in such joy while riding the winds with me."

He turned to look deep into her eyes, searching. Did she know he'd felt her sex while she rode him? Her eyes had gone soft, all golden brown in the cave's dimness, her hair a wild tangle, her scent a spicy mix of woman and Draca. A bond had happened, even as he had fought and resisted. She knew it. He knew it, now.

For the first time in a hundred years, he'd dropped his shields. Just like that, lowered the gates around his heart. A great hope was building, and Lydia was the center. They needed to take the next step, the next, very important step. And after what he had just seen and felt, things might turn out better than he ever expected.

Eremon blew his breath out, suddenly nervous. The last bits were the hardest to explain. "There are two more things..."

Chapter Eleven

“What more things?” she asked.

Still naked, Eremon got up and led her toward the back of the cave. “I’ll show you.”

He led her through a small entrance, cut roughly out of the stone wall, to a greater space beyond. He gripped her shoulder in reassurance, and she leaned against his strength, her arm around his waist. She had an uncontrollable urge to stay pressed against him, bare skin to bare skin, as if her pores were absorbing something vital from him. The hum under his skin sang against hers as they walked, their feet a matching beat.

They entered another even-larger chamber. Thick, padded Oriental rugs covered the ground; no other furnishings could be seen. Light glowed around the edges of the carpet, as if the floor beneath were lit by some unknown source. Warmth rose as well, toasting her feet and dismissing any chill. Being naked felt utterly right, and she didn’t miss her clothes at all.

When they reached the exact middle of the room, Eremon stopped and pulled her into a tight embrace. Lydia laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes. He murmured things in his silvery language again, kissing her cheeks, her lips, over and over. For the first time in her life, her need for words and explanations had vanished. In its place, the beat in her body circled tighter, the hum surrounding them louder and louder. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

Eremon smoothed his hands down the line of her hips. “You are so sleek,” he said admiringly. “Sleek and long, like a...” He paused. Lydia watched him reach back through his context of understanding, trying to find the right word. The sheer *alien-ness* of him struck her; his fantastic, fairy-tale life was nothing like her own.

Eremon continued, “What is the word for fast hound? Greyhound—yes, you are like a greyhound.”

Lydia leaned back to look at him. "You're comparing me to a dog?"

"Yes. Ah, no," he said when he saw her face. "Only in a favorable way. You have strength in your human form, and that is what you will need, my Draca beauty. To do what comes next."

Lydia giggled at the greyhound comparison, strangely flattered. After a few minutes, he asked softly, "Are you ready?"

Lydia sobered. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Instinct will take over whatever I have missed or do not know to tell you. Your own Draca blood should direct you."

His eyes burned into her with heated conviction. "No matter what happens, this feeling I have—these feelings between us—I will not let them, or you, go. Remember that."

She nodded. *Feelings between them.* The words echoed inside her with a kind of joy. Yes, yes, she was ready.

His human form melted, and the cave suddenly became very small as his winged Draca filled the space from side to side. As before, he lowered his massive bulk and knelt, wings drawn in.

His gleaming scaled neck turned so he could see her, and his eyes clearly asked, "*May I please?*"

Lydia nodded, her breathing uneven, and in response, he did a slow, careful roll all the way onto his back.

He lay splayed out like a giant winged cat waiting for its tummy to be rubbed. She suppressed a semihysterical giggle, even as she stepped closer. Sultry heat radiated from Eremon, and sweat rolled in rivulets down her face, falling onto her bare breasts and sizzling across her nipples. She eyed his massive exposed belly, and wetness gushed between her legs.

Her desert vision flooded in, the heated sand and the pulsing Draca tongue, the forbidden taboo of her arousal. *Yes, there*—and his massive length, the wings exactly like giant bat wings, nestled closed against his gleaming garnet black scales. Gathering her courage, she looked between his tail, near

his upraised back legs. The biggest, wettest, thickest cock she had ever seen pointed straight toward the cave ceiling.

Seeing where she looked, Eremon let out a small roar, accompanied by trails of smoke that floated across her face. The smoke danced around them and caressed her sensitized skin, the smell igniting her blood in erotic anticipation.

His eyes slanted at her with a predator's excited gleam. *"Come closer, my lady."*

She crept over to his long, fanged snout. She inhaled his scent, such a heady, musky mix of earth and fire, she felt almost drugged. His long, red tongue snaked out between razor teeth and aimed a lick at her. She didn't move away. He did it again, and this time the wet-sandpaper surface reached her breasts and made a damp, electrifying sweep across her nipples. She cried out and pushed her breasts even farther onto his tongue, until Eremon growled, his serpent's body twisting in reaction.

She stumbled then, legs barely able to hold her. Reaching for his neck, Lydia pressed her slick face against the length of it. She stroked the smooth underside; the scales were softer here, more vulnerable. Under her hands, his raspy, hoarse breath and the hard drumbeat under his hard exterior pounded louder and louder, filling the room. The beat and the beast called to her, willing her to continue.

She climbed up the lowered side of his neck, turning so her bottom faced his muzzle, almost sending her off his back as they both shook and shuddered at the sensation of her soft flesh against the harsh edges of black scales.

Smoke poured between her legs, and she fell belly-down across the top of him.

Again Eremon's slick tongue darted out and hit the target—right between her legs, sending a wet, electrifying lick across her entire pussy. She cried out, spasming into an immediate, shuddering orgasm, and he licked her again, the tip of his long tongue hitting her clit with perfect accuracy, almost rolling her off his back as they both shook and shuddered.

She looked down the ridged, rolling mass of his muscular underside and eyed his dripping cock, upright and swaying, as tall as her arm. Waiting.

She scooted down the length of him, clutching his sides with her arms, trying to mind the sharp edges of his thick scales. As she grew nearer, her breath fanned across the erect, fire red phallus, eliciting another smoky roar. The ridge of the head was circled in thick, garnet-colored flesh, and the wide bottom end was bound with his enormous sac of testicles. They, too, quivered in anticipation, the whole package shuddering.

Her mouth watered, and her pussy tightened. Any inhibitions she still had left vanished.

She drew herself to her knees, wincing at the prickly surfaces, and stretched her body full out, her legs splayed out on either side.

He had told her about this, had tried to explain. Yet nothing could have prepared her for the overwhelming need flooding every cell in her body. She craved his fluids like life itself. She had to taste him. This must be what he meant when he said her *Draca blood would direct her*. It commanded Lydia to her knees, demanded that she stretch for his jutting cock, until her tongue could reach the wide, slick head.

Grasping the shuddering tower of flesh with both hands, she opened her mouth as wide as it would go and sucked the salty, earthy fluid down her throat, swallowing convulsively. Long-dormant Draca life force flooded her with ambrosial fluids and then exploded in a red-hot blast of fiery energy. She screamed in a kind of pain-ecstasy and, forgetting where she was, almost fell off. He rolled to catch her, throwing her back against his cock.

It had been done; the spell Nareen had woven pinwheeled into her very cells. The long-awaited signal had been given, and the rivers of microscopic Draca DNA woke up in a frenzy to reproduce.

She was covered in sweat; her arms slipped against the slickness of his heaving sides as she struggled to press the whole of her body back across his belly. He, too, was covered in fluids, the wetness thicker and more sticky than

hers. It cooled the heat and made it possible to lay her cheek against his hide, and for brief seconds, she closed her eyes.

As Lydia's sweat bonded with the salty essences pouring from Eremon, the combination exploded the dormant Draca cells into shuddering life. In the next instant, her pussy convulsed across Eremon's belly. The nuclear version of what she had experienced at the council table shot an instant orgasm through her entire body, arching her back and contorting every pussy muscle in a delirious rush. She screamed in ecstasy as a continuous orgasm rocket-blasted up her spine and drenched Eremon's rough scales with her orgasmic fluid.

Eremon grunted deeply, the viscous fluid pouring from him, soaking Lydia's underside. Forgetting where she was, and imagining only Eremon's hands, mouth, and cock on every inch of her body, she lost her grip and almost slipped off again. He rolled neatly and caught her, the cave echoing his grunts and her gasping breaths.

Where she started or ended, she no longer knew. Her shuddering human flesh was his flesh, his fire, his blood, her own.

"Eremon!" she screamed, not sure if he could hear her.

That's all she needed to say. He managed to reverse positions in one graceful swoop, somehow keeping her on top as she sprawled across his ridged back. A deafening sound filled the cavern. Dazed, she saw the ceiling erupt in a blast of rocks, and as soon as there was clearance, Eremon uttered a mighty roar of triumph and streaked out to the open skies.

The cool moist air streamed like a blessing across her overheated body. She clung to the ridged flesh of her soaring Draca while Eremon's vital life force raced into every corner of her being, an adrenaline rush that had her jerking and twisting like a mad thing while tears poured uncontrollably down her face.

She threw back her head and howled at the sky in pure joy, the intensity of everything she had experienced spilling over, completely undoing her. She propelled herself up, sitting astride like she was riding a horse, fear of falling long gone. The pumping of Eremon's wings as he raced through the sky at top speed filled her with ecstasy.

Tears changed to laughter, then to something else, as the powerful winged creature between her legs soared and dived. She wanted Eremon the man's cock in her as soon as possible. The minute they hit the ground would not be fast enough.

They flew straight through the last wispy strands of clouds and emerged to a breathtaking sight. The skies were full of flying Draca. Circling, dipping, swooping close, they surrounded Eremon above and below, a flying honor guard escorting them home. She caught sight of a tiny Draca, wings flapping at twice the rate of all the others, trying to keep up. Camus. Her heart swelled when he dived close enough to duck his head in salute, until he was swept away in the crowding horde of wings and flying bodies.

Great wings of sinewy hide beat in rhythmic waves, bending the treetops below. Flames singed the clouds the higher the Draca flew. Truly, she belonged here, soaring in the sky with these incredible creatures. She didn't care if they ever landed.

* * * * *

They hit the ground all at once in synchronized grace, landing in an open green meadow. Wings folded back in windy drafts, and beast forms melted away with liquid beauty. The air resounded with the jubilant sounds of the Draca, laughing and exclaiming as they regained their human bodies, all of them rushing over to Eremon and Lydia.

Lydia rolled to her feet, gasping and out of breath, when she caught sight of a familiar face running toward her. "Lydia! Oh my God, Lydia!"

"Jennie!" Lydia cried in happy disbelief as Jennie collided with her, sweeping her into a huge hug. "What are you doing here—how did you get here?"

"Camus showed up in the house again and invited me to visit!" Jennie said, her face awestruck. "Is this great or what? And I saw you up there, flying!"

Lydia hugged her, her throat tight. Blessings overflowed.

Eremon was being led away by an excited contingent of grinning Draca males. He threw a look of apology over his shoulder at Lydia. She shrugged, smiling at him, her adrenaline still pumping. Her connection to him, to all the Draca, had been irrevocably bound, and the entire scene struck her as completely surreal. Life had moved permanently to an altered state of being.

Now with Jennie here, things could not be more perfect. Smiling, beautiful Draca women surrounded them, throwing silky wraps over Lydia's flushed, naked body.

Chattering and laughing, they led Jennie and her across the meadow. Lydia gripped her friend's hand and rejoiced at her presence. She didn't even care where they were going. For once, she was going to simply enjoy this new, glorious reality. Besides, she thought with a throb of excitement, there wasn't any doubt she'd be seeing her flying man soon. And they'd probably spend the rest of the night finishing what they had started.

Chapter Twelve

They were led to the first aboveground structure Lydia had seen. It looked like an old-style European castle, complete with turrets and a wide drawbridge over a moat. So many aspects of this magical world remained hidden and mysterious to her. That she went from caves to a sprawling castle right out of fairy tales didn't surprise Lydia in the least. She suspected she'd get little explanation about the castle and didn't say much as they followed their gorgeous escorts down marble corridors and across bright rooms with enormous fireplaces.

They were given luxurious suites and treated to an ultimate session of pampering. The women waited on them like personal servants; they were bathed, brushed, oiled, and fed like some kind of royalty.

Jennie hadn't stopped grinning. Lydia filled her in as well as she could with the Draca women adding their bits to the conversation.

After a few hours of blissful indulgence, Nareen swept in and asked the women to leave.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Lydia looked at Jennie as if to say, *Here we go*. Pulse jumping, she gave Nareen her full attention. "For what?"

"For the Wall of Remembering."

"This must be the part everyone's been avoiding."

Nareen reached a warm hand to Lydia's cheek, gently cradling it. "Try not to worry, my beauty. You have come so far and surprised everyone with your strength. Just a little longer, now, and if all goes as well as I hope, we will be in your debt forever." Nareen leaned over and pressed a soft kiss on Lydia's lips. "Thank you, for everything," she murmured and then left the room, leaving Lydia with tingling lips and Jennie gazing at her in total awe.

* * * * *

Without further ado, Lydia's stomach dropped in the now-familiar transition, and in seconds, she found herself standing in the original cave.

Her attention was immediately drawn to the massive obsidian walls. Pulses of luminescent golden light throbbed in subtle rhythm, a counterbeat to her own. The great garnet jewel glowed from the center of the left wall. It hadn't been there before; Lydia was sure of it. Yet another mystery to add to her growing list.

The entire Draca council had assembled around her, everyone wearing the same translucent emerald robe Nareen had given Lydia. They might as well have been wearing nothing—Lydia could clearly see thick cocks standing in arousal, the full breasts of the women, the dark hair between their legs. Eremon stood with his arms folded against his chest, watching her intently, fear and arousal warring on his face.

Nareen's face showed no trace of emotion. "It is important that you do not try to stop the process once it has begun. More harm than good would come of it. In what form, I cannot say; however, it is imperative that the spell be allowed to finish."

Lydia's skin prickled in the tension-charged air. As usual, the Draca were silent.

Shaking off her nerves and determined to see this through, she looked for the spot on the right-hand wall Nareen had described. The outline of a standing body had been carved into the stone—the curvy hips and small waist obviously intended to be female. Remembering, and feeling again the irresistible draw of the wall, Lydia dropped her robe and walked over to it, naked.

The shape faced the stone, and as she fit herself against it, her backside faced the Draca. She leaned the full front of herself against the carving, the black stone cool against her belly and heated skin. Her breasts tingled as they pressed into the obsidian, a promise of more to come shuddering along her spine. She stretched her arms out to either side; her legs spread, and finding the edges of the carving, she fit each body part to the corresponding space.

As soon as she finished and stood motionless, she heard a dull roar, like a cresting ocean wave. A beam of bloodred light shot out from the garnet and hit Lydia's carved outline, tracing every inch in laser-beam precision. Her body slammed hard against the surface and froze in place.

Closed doors in Lydia's most hidden self wrenched apart. Long-dormant power, deep in the wall she shuddered against, pried open simultaneously in a massive burst, invading every cell of Lydia's body.

Memories poured in. Memories of the Draca. Remembrances of a world filled with peace and joy that had existed for thousands of years, until the onset of humans... Unable to resist the allure of their blood, the Draca had intermingled and mated with them, not realizing their fatal error in judgment until it was too late.

The human world turned on them, hunting and killing Draca in battles full of bloodshed and mindless, sickening violence. She felt the hard thrust of swords cutting deep, the terror of bloodthirsty humans who raged against them out of superstitious fear that spanned centuries. The fires of flying Draca were no match for the humans' relentless crawl across the planet, and their endless propensity for violence.

As she twisted and cried out, carvings on the black walls turned to molten gold, running liquid like volcanic lava pouring off the surfaces and sizzling along the edges of Lydia's body.

Lydia screamed, living the memories and dying over and over with the Draca as the centuries progressed through her mind in rapid succession. She held on to just enough consciousness to know she had reached the point of no return. No one would rescue her or stop the sequence of memories that were ripping her heart out. She sobbed helplessly while the ancient stories flooded every cell of her being.

In desperation, a plan was hatched to save the remaining Draca, a spell more powerful than any ever attempted before. Nareen, in a great working, called upon the gods of their kind for a place of sanctuary—the *sideways time*, the world of Dracan. The entire race had fled and had lived hidden in their

protected idyll for the last two thousand years. What they never anticipated was the effect that breeding with humans would have on their bloodline. The birth of their young ones slowed and finally stopped. They turned to inbreeding among those still pure of blood, trying to mend what had become so broken.

Lydia's body twisted like a kite on a string, the rivers of memory chaotic and relentless. After a time, her arms flopped bonelessly to her side. Her role in the magic completely forgotten, she bowed her head, lost in despair and pain.

Faint noises sounded behind her. Slowly she gained awareness again of where she was. Cool hands touched her back; soothing words were murmured in the Draca tongue.

A woman's body pressed against hers; she felt soft breasts and silky skin, hands running up and down her arms. A surge of well-being started at her feet and traveled to her head, shooting out the top in an intoxicating, healing rush. Lydia sighed, moaning in relief. It was Nareen, gently licking the hot sweat on Lydia's neck, rubbing her nipples against Lydia's sensitized skin, and bringing her back to full awareness.

Nareen tugged on her shoulders and turned her carefully around, still keeping her lodged against the black, carved magic. Lydia faced the Draca.

They had dropped their robes and stood facing her in magnificent nudity, the men's cocks standing straight up, hard and aroused. In a surreal procession, they slowly approached, some kneeling before her, taking turns licking and kissing every damp inch of Lydia's anatomy. Lydia's sweat, her dripping pussy, every orifice, swam in hungry, revitalized Draca DNA, calling to the Draca like water in the desert.

Her desert vision flooded her memory. Everything had come back to that. The Draca—*so thirsty*.

Strong, masculine hands kneaded her breasts, a series of lips sucked on her nipples, and hot mouths fed on her clit, bringing her to blinding orgasm again and again. Pussy juices ran down her legs and then were sucked dry. Other hands reached behind her and parted her ass cheeks, fingers probing like erotic pistols, lips replacing fingers. Fingers in her ass and fingers in her

pussy convulsed her so many times, she lost track, lost track of everything except the delirious feeding of the Draca. They were feeding, feeding and healing as each swallowed her precious fluids. As they healed, some part of her rejoiced. Finally there was joy to share, joy instead of pain.

At some point Lydia opened her eyes. She wanted Eremon. Where was he? Where were *his* mouth and hands? Surely she would have known him, felt him, even in the electric mass surrounding her.

Eremon stood to one side of the crowd, his face full of jealous rage. He'd died a million deaths watching her suffer, then agonized as his brothers and sisters tasted and suckled her. *She was his*. When this was all over, he was going to make sure of it.

Finally, the last one had touched her.

"Enough!" He strode over to her, grabbed her hips, and lifted as she wrapped her legs around his waist, and in one convulsive movement, he impaled her on his jutting cock. Lydia screamed, her arms clutching his shoulders.

"You...are...mine," he said with each thrust. He pounded her, the hot silk of her inner flesh gripping his cock so slick and hot and tight he almost exploded. He wanted to bury himself so deep inside of her, she would forget anyone except him. He knew he would never get enough of this Daughter of Draca.

Her nipples branded his chest, the wet, slapping sounds of their heated bodies the only noise he could hear. She came loose from the wall, and they fell to the floor, Lydia landing on his chest. In seconds he had her under him, never breaking contact, thrusting his cock as deep and hard into her dripping pussy as she could take. Years of repressed desire burst every inhibition, and his predator roared in approval. He grabbed for her breasts and squeezed, taking her nipple into his mouth, biting and sucking while he thrust over and over into her intoxicating, pulsing wetness.

An ignition of fire thundered from the base of his spine, and Eremon climaxed in a blast of thick, milky semen that overflowed out of Lydia and soaked the floor underneath them. He convulsed over and over in the multiple orgasms of his kind, and when the spasms stopped, he barely managed to pull away. Her cries rang in his ears.

Gasping, somehow he stood, the slick feel of his own fluids under his feet.

Never had he seen a sight more breathtaking than his beautiful Lydia, sprawled naked on the floor of the Cave of Remembering and glistening with the life fluids of his race.

He reached down and gently pulled her to her feet, swinging her unresisting body into his arms. He clutched her close and strode past his elated Draca kin, and knew without a shadow of a doubt what would happen next for everyone.

Chapter Thirteen

As Eremon predicted, the next few days were spent doing nothing but having sex. The entire Draca world, it seemed, engaged in lovemaking in every available space, private or not, in bedrooms, under bushes, in caves, and in the air. They mated in human form, and they mated while suspended in the sky, dive-bombing the ground in flying, ecstatic release. Hope for the future had come from the most unlikely of places. The future and all its unknowns waited, but for this one glorious time, no one worried about anything, and everyone, without exception, had hope.

Love sizzled everywhere like a remembered dance, affecting all it touched. No matter where Lydia was, she was surrounded and embraced by it, a continuous outpouring of warmth until she thought that surely she must have gone to heaven.

On the fifth day, she stood in front of the Wall, tracing her fingers over the new lines of carving. As they had explained, a new story was appearing. Her story. And Eremon's. How much of their lives would be here and how much in Lydia's Earth world, she still had no idea. She didn't even know if enough magic remained from Nareen's spells, or if more could be made. She only knew she belonged with Eremon. And her newfound relations, along with the emergence of her other nature, excited and delighted her beyond her wildest dreams.

Hands slipped from behind and cupped her breasts. She sighed and leaned back.

"Greetings, my love. I awoke and you were not in my bed."

"I didn't want to wake you. After all, who even remembers the last time we slept?" Lydia settled her back more firmly against him, wiggling her bottom against the erection that seemed to be nonstop. Eremon made a noise and licked her neck, thrusting against her.

"Are you two still at it?" Jennie sauntered up, grinning.

Lydia reached her arm out and pulled Jennie close, embracing both her Draca man and her best friend. Jennie had been keeping quite busy. Aedhan had commandeered a very willing Jennie to his bed, and they seemed to be having quite a lustful time of it.

According to Nareen, sex with other humans would not harm or influence the Draca bloodline, as long as they didn't have children. What that meant exactly for her and Eremon, Lydia wasn't sure. Nareen had said something about Lydia being the "great exception." Eremon dismissed the remark as nothing more than Nareen's continued scheming. Even so, Lydia wondered if it meant she and Eremon could actually have a baby. She thrilled at the thought, even knowing about the tragic past.

Bathed in the quiet glow of the cave walls, Lydia felt full to bursting with joy. She smiled happily at Jennie, who leaned over and gave her an affectionate kiss. Then Jennie stood on her toes and kissed Eremon too.

Lydia craned her neck to see his face and laughed at his surprise. "I have a feeling, my handsome, flying Draca, that life is going to get very exciting for all of us."

THE END

Louisa Kelley

Romance and science fiction took hold of Louisa Kelley at age nine, when she read *Little Women* and the *Narnia* series. She is convinced that the genre paranormal romance, which developed years later, was purely for her benefit. After all, it's what's been in her heart all these years. She resides in Portland, Oregon, where, in a strangely perfect combination of rainy winters and urban skyline, her writing inspiration abounds.

Meet the sexy world that's been evolving in her fevered brain... She'd love you to join her in some over-the-top erotic adventures with the *Draca*: dragon shape-shifters of a very different kind.

Louisa is a member of Romance Writers of America. Find out more about Louisa by visiting her Web site at <http://www.louisakelley.com>.