

For her people, she'd sacrifice anything. For her, he'll sacrifice everything.

When the children of her village start dying of a mysterious plague, Sophie refuses to believe it's the will of their deity. As the town cleric, she's always followed the church's strict rules, but enough is enough. She vows to do anything to find a cure—even if it means defying the church.

The giant black dragon she finds injured and poisoned near the abbey seems beyond her ability to heal. Until he suddenly shifts into a dangerously handsome man who, even in his weakened state, is a temptation beyond her ability to resist.

Reuel has never trusted humans, but this delicate young woman entrances him with more than her beauty. Her bravery, devotion and passion call to his wounded heart, and he's moved to lend his magic to her cause. Magic that is not only powerful, it's all too tempting to abuse—something his family has never let him forget.

Sophie is hopeful when Reuel solves the secret of the plague, until one healing uncovers a sickness that runs far deeper than the children's vulnerable bodies. Now she is being persecuted, and to save her, Reuel may have to become the monster his family believes him to be...

Warning: Contains a stubbornly sexy cleric who'd rather have her hands tied to a headboard than exhibit any self-control, a shape-shifting dragon who's too busy running from himself to see where he's going, an epic dragon battle, and sex in the great outdoors.

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Dragonborne
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Dragonborne

Chandra Ryan

Dedication

To my husband. Without his unwavering faith, this story would have never come to be.

Chapter One

Sophie breathed into the child's mouth and pressed lightly on his chest, but there was no response. Beads of sweat were forming on her forehead and her stomach was cramping with anxiety, but she couldn't stop. Unable to believe the truth that was before her, she tried again. Still nothing.

Unshed tears burned the corners of her eyes as she looked down at the porcelain face. They'd lost eleven children in the past three months and she wasn't sure her heart could take a twelfth. There had to be some way to save this one, this tiny boy she'd helped bring into the world just three years ago.

"Let him go, Sister Sophie. He's gone."

She turned to face Naryn, her betrothed and the healer for the small village, but she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. He was a good man, even handsome in a scholarly way, but after three years of serving beside him she was no closer to loving him than on the first day she'd been stationed here. Not that she hadn't tried. She desperately wanted to love him, willed herself to, but every day they seemed to grow further apart. And, every day, it was getting harder for her to bear the thought of being married to the man.

"I helped birth him." A small piece of her wanted him to take her in his arms, comfort her in some way. Maybe then...

"And I helped birth the girl we lost yesterday. That we are attached to them doesn't bring them back."

The words held a truth, but their cold nature filled her with bitterness nonetheless. "We should be able to do more. We haven't even saved one!"

Looking down at the lifeless body, she felt her tenuous hold on her control start to waiver. He had a mother and father, but he was also hers. She considered all the village children her children. They were, after all, the only children she'd ever have a hand in raising. True, she was expected to have Naryn's children, but they would be spirited off to the schools before they could even walk. Their children would be part of the next generation of clerics. But not this child. This child was supposed to grow up in front of her; he was supposed to run past her abbey, laughing at some harmless prank he'd pulled on friends. It was the order of things. Your children belonged to the church, but you got to share in the raising of the village children.

"I know this is painful," said a soft, feminine voice.

Sophie turned to look at the young, silver-haired woman who'd just walked into the room. She doubted the woman really knew how painful it was. How could she after being here for one year? "Do you, Sister Lilith?" The challenge rang though the air.

Naryn pulled his top lip back in a snarl. "Sister Lilith cares for the people of this village as much as you or I do."

Hearing the distain in his voice, she knew she should be jealous. He and Lilith had become very close over the last year, close enough to set tongues wagging in the small town. But she wasn't. She felt only anger over the injustice of the plague. "Why only children? Their lives hadn't even begun."

Naryn stared at her for a moment before taking a deep breath.

It was an argument they'd gone over too many times to count, but one she kept coming back to. This time, however, he chose to keep his silence, leaving Lilith to defend their position.

"You mustn't think of it like that." Her voice was filled with calm condescension. "They've crossed over now. Their souls are at peace and will be born into the world again."

They'd been saying the same thing since the plague started, and for three months she'd let it go. A youth wasted writing scripture and a life of raised eyebrows had taught her to think twice before opening her mouth. But she couldn't keep her silence any longer. "But what did their souls take with them?" Her voice was loud, but she was beyond caring. "What great lessons did they learn? Patience? Faithfulness? Righteousness? Love? It was a wasted incarnation! They will be born again only to suffer!"

"The Maker doesn't waste lives, Sophie." Naryn's words came out in a harsh hiss. "They were here for a purpose, for His purpose. How can you question that?"

"Because he was three!" She stood and gently picked up the child's small body. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to tell a mother that her child's life purpose has been served."

She walked past him without waiting for a reply. He was blindly devoted, and although she respected the discipline and faith, the blindly devoted were weak willed. She could never love someone with a weak will. Never share her life with someone who thought a child of three had somehow served their life's purpose because that's what their scripture said.

Crossing through the door into the infirmary, the mother's wail slammed into her, its bone-weary misery tearing at Sophie's soul. It was only ten feet to where she knelt, her husband's arms locked around her shoulders in support, but each step felt like an eternity.

"I'm so sorry. We did everything we could." The words sounded hollow even to her, not that there was anything she could have said that would bring comfort to the family.

The father nodded stiffly as he took the boy from her, his face a mask of stone. "I appreciate..." He stopped as his voice broke.

"I only wish we'd been able to..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence, tears were once more gathering in the corners of her eyes.

“We know.”

With his son in his arms, he helped his wife to stand. She looked up at Sophie with haunted eyes, and then turned with him to leave.

It wasn't until after the door swung shut behind them that Sophie allowed the tears to escape and flow down her cheeks unchecked. She cried for the children they'd lost, but she also cried for the ones they were going to lose the next day and the day after that, the ones that were alive tonight, but would be gone by week's end. That was the worst part, knowing there were going to be more.

When there were no more tears to cry, she stood and quietly made her way out of the building and into the black cover of the night. She wanted nothing more than to return to her home and sleep for a week, but the Spring Solstice didn't care if she was tired. And there was much to do to ensure they had a good harvest. Despite the current crisis, the people were still going to need grain to eat and barter with come fall.

As she walked through the warm night air, she tried to concentrate on the rites that would tell her when planting should be done, but images of the child's face kept pulling her back.

It wasn't fair. She wasn't even a healer. Why had they dragged her into this?

She shook her head to dismiss the question. It was selfish for her to wallow when so many children were sick and dying. Besides, she already knew the answer. They'd asked her because they were desperate. Desperate for anything that could stop the plague. And an understanding of plants might have given them the break they were looking for. Unfortunately, it hadn't.

The abbey was dark and its air stale as she pushed open the heavy door. Settling in at her desk, she couldn't contain the series of yawns that escaped her as she tried to focus on the charts laid out in front of her. The work was tedious, but it helped her escape the memory of the children, for a time at least. There were no distractions, however, when she finally went to sleep.

As soon as she closed her eyes, her dreams mocked her, amplifying her failures not only with the plague but with her station as a whole. Three years and what had she accomplished? Her more unconventional convictions had labeled her an outsider to most in the village, she couldn't make herself feel anything for a man any sane woman would swoon over, and because of a freak ice storm her first year here, the farmers were still wary of her predictions.

She'd done everything asked of her, everything expected by her church, so why did she always come up short? It was a cruel question. And it kept her tossing and turning until the warm rays of the morning sun woke her.

She didn't mind the bright light streaming through her window, though. Despite the rough night, she loved lying on her side, looking at its glorious glow. And soon, she was overcome with the need to stand in its comforting warmth, to stare into the clear sky and bask in the rejuvenation of the earth.

Jumping out of bed, she dressed in comfortably roomy breeches and a long tunic before throwing a robe over her shoulders. She didn't bother with her boots as she made her way outside. She loved the feel of the soft earth under her toes, had always found its cold touch comforting.

The sky was a beautiful expanse of blue as she stood in the morning air. So perfectly clear that the black form flying through it immediately grabbed and held her attention. After all, one didn't see dragons very often this far into the grasslands. She hadn't seen one her entire time here.

She watched as it dove and rolled through the air, its movements as fluid as a fish swimming through the sea. It was a sight she missed greatly since moving, one that made her smile warm with affection.

It was almost directly above her when she saw it start to fall. At first she thought it was merely a deep dive, but when she heard its roar of pain, she knew something was terribly wrong. Transfixed by the horror of the moment, she watched until the sound of it striking the ground snapped her into action. Running back into the abbey, she grabbed her kit of herbs and then ran to the stable. The creature hadn't landed far away. She prayed that she'd reached it before its hunter did as she spurred her mount into a run.

Chapter Two

Reuel landed in the lush field, his rear legs tumbling over his head as his forelegs buckled under him. He was barely conscious. His vision was dimming. But he could hear the sound of racing hooves echoing in his ears. His hunter would be on him momentarily.

If there were any chance he'd survive, he'd shift into a human form. Play on the human's ignorance of magic to hide in the tall grass. But with the poison swiftly overcoming his senses, he decided to die a dragon.

Closer and closer the hooves came, until finally, they fell silent.

"Can you move?" The melodious voice rang in his head, but he didn't have the strength to answer. "Your hunter approaches. I can give you aide, but I haven't the strength to move you."

The scent of jasmine surrounded him as he heard her kneel next to him.

A cool hand pressed down on his scales a fraction of a second before he felt the burning pain of muscle and flesh being torn away. Letting out a roar, his mouth sought out her hand, but she was too quick to be caught.

"I'm sorry." She slathered something on the wound that left the area cool and numb. "I had to remove the arrow. The monk's mud will stop the bleeding." Her hand left him for a moment, but returned quickly. "Eat this."

He smelled something spicy as she shoved her hand into his mouth. Still incoherent, he allowed her to feed him several handfuls before he noticed the burning sensation it left on his tongue and cheeks.

"More poison?" His voice was weak, but audible. Something he saw as an improvement.

"If I wanted you dead, I would just stand a hundred feet away and wait. Now, can you move?"

"Not yet."

"Damn it!"

He heard the soft grass crush under her foot as she stood and took a step away from him. Opening his eyes, he was initially overcome by the intensity of the green energy that surrounded her. He'd never seen a human with such a strong aura. Part of him hungered to taste her energy, use it to heal his wounds, but his grandfather's taunts rang through his mind at the thought, the sharp words pushing back against the temptation.

"What to do..." she mumbled quietly.

Her voice brought him back to the present, back to the dilemma of the situation. “Your horse?” With every passing second he was feeling stronger, but he doubted he’d be able to escape before his hunter found him. Not on his own at least.

“What about it? The only good my horse could serve is as your supper!”

He chuckled lightly at the sharpness in her voice. It took a very brave woman to stand up to a full-sized dragon, even one in his condition. “He does look very tempting. But I had something else in mind.”

Focusing on his magic, he felt his body become more compact, more vulnerable. Her face stayed stoic as he shifted, but she couldn’t hide her surprise from him, not while he could read her aura.

“Better?”

Her gaze slid over his human form, one corner of her mouth lifting slightly as if she were about to smile. “You are more of a manageable size.”

Looking at her through human eyes, he was surprised to find the young woman quite attractive. Her olive skin was aglow from the cool breeze and her black hair lay around her shoulders, tousled from riding. And then there was her aura, it was still crackling with strength, calling to him softly. She was flesh and blood temptation. And she was every bit as dangerous as the arrow that’d just brought him down.

“Why are you helping me? Your kind hunts us for sport.”

“Not all of us.” She glanced off into the distance before bringing her gaze back to his. “Do you want my assistance or not?”

Certain he was safer in her hands than waiting for his hunter, he nodded.

“Good.” Her hand slipped under his ribs and she let out a grunt as she tried to pull him up off the ground. “A little help would be appreciated.”

Wincing, he pushed himself up, but his knees buckled as soon as he stood. Fortunately, she’d wedged herself under his arm, and although her body felt slight against his, her strength held.

Again, the sound of distant hooves rang in his ears and something told him it wasn’t a savior this time. “We need to go.”

Her steps were small, but it was still difficult for him to keep up with her pace.

When they reached the horse, she untied her cloak and handed it to him. “Here. You might be more comfortable with something on.” Her grey eyes locked with his before they quickly slid down his body. Thin golden sparks of desire flared in her green aura. “I know I will be.” The words were mumbled, but mumbled loud enough for him to hear.

Taking the garment, he wrapped the soft white cotton robe around his shoulders and then looked at the horse again. The thought of riding the horse in nothing but a robe sounded uncomfortable.

“And these, they might help too.”

Warm leather breaches were thrust into his hands as she stood before him, her shapely calves bare under the long tunic. Staring at the exposed skin, he felt his blood warm.

As if sensing his thoughts, she lifted her chin so she could stare directly into his eyes, her aura shimmering with challenge. “And here I was under the impression we were in a hurry.”

He smiled at the reprimand before sliding the trousers over his hips and tying them around his waist. They only fell to his mid calf and were tight around his hips, but he was grateful for them.

Already enough of his strength had returned to allow him to mount on his own. Scooting as far back as was allowed by the saddle, he turned and offered her his hand. He was surprised she took it, though, given the defiant set of her chin. He was even more surprised by the sizzle of desire that swept through him at her touch. Scales made great armor, but in that heartbeat he found himself awash in the sensations he’d missed out on because of them.

She studied him carefully before boosting herself into the saddle in front of him. “Thank you.”

The hem of the tunic rode up dangerously as she settled between his thighs, leaving him with the almost irresistible urge to run his hand along the smooth skin it revealed.

“Ready?” She turned to look at him as she asked the question.

Tearing his gaze away from the creamy skin, he wrapped his hands around her waist. “Oh, you have no idea.”

He thought he heard her chuckle as she took up the reins, but the wind carried the sound away before he could be certain.

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and they were racing over the plains. It wasn’t as fast as flying, but rocking rhythmically against her made it every bit as exhilarating. He couldn’t think of anything other than her naked thighs and the graceful sweep of her neck, which danced just inches from his mouth. By the time the small stone structure appeared in front of them, he was pondering what her body would feel like under his.

“How many live at the abbey?” His voice was rough, even to his ears.

Galloping past the building, she led the horse to a small stable and dismounted gracefully. “Just me, it’s a small village. I’m the officiating agricultural cleric.”

Not wanting to disturb the dry monk’s mud or display how much he’d enjoyed the ride, he dismounted carefully while she took the bit and reins off the horse.

“We should get you inside so you can lie down.”

Still picturing her lying under him, he chuckled. “That sounds interesting.”

Her eyes met his, the saddle frozen in her hands, and for one brief moment he thought she was going to agree. But then she shook her head as she put the saddle on a nearby table. “By yourself. So you can heal.”

He was disappointed with her answer but still smiled devilishly, his gaze seeking out her calves again. “That’s a shame.”

His eyes found hers and the flicker of gold surrounded her again, but before he could act on it, she broke the contact. Without saying a word, she turned and walked away. Irritation quickly replaced the desire in her aura, but he chose to focus on the sway of her hips instead. It was a pleasant sight. One he was happy to enjoy until she'd disappeared into the building.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, he followed her into the simple sanctuary. The comforting aroma of sandalwood mixed with mint surrounded him, their earthy scents both relaxing and rejuvenating.

"Over here." She was already standing at the front of the room, her hand on the handle to a door that was just to the left of the altar. Their eyes caught for one moment before she turned and walked through the door.

He grimaced to himself as she disappeared. He was a hunter by nature and she was doing a damn good job playing prey, though it didn't appear to be intentional. If he were honest with himself, he'd have to admit she'd done nothing that could be interpreted as an invitation, but that didn't stop his body's reaction to her. It was a situation that had the potential of becoming problematic.

Forcing himself to keep a tight hold on his instincts, he walked up the aisle between the pews and followed her through the door.

The sitting room was only dimly lit, a curtain over the window blocking much of the sunlight, but he didn't have a problem finding her. Her eyes met his boldly as she pulled the new pair of breeches over her hips and tied them at her waist.

His chest tightened at the sight, but he stood his ground, refusing to move towards her.

"There should be some clothes that fit better in there." She pointed to an open armoire before walking deeper into the room. "The last cleric stationed here was about your size. I'll need to clean your wound and apply a salve, so don't worry about the tunic." With that, she disappeared through the door at the back of the room.

Alone, he wondered if he should stay. This was a dangerous game for him to play.

Taking a quick mental account of himself, he could tell his magic had healed most of the wound and her herbs had flushed out the poison. He might even be able to fly by now. But, as he turned toward the door, he found he didn't want to leave, not really. He wanted to stay. He could push the boundaries of his control for a little bit longer, just until he discovered her intentions, then he could leave if need be.

His decision was made. Grabbing a pair of breeches from the armoire, he peeled hers off and slid the new pair on. He was relieved to find she'd been correct; they were a much better fit. He'd just gotten them tied when she breezed back into the room to gather several vials off a shelf.

"I put some water on the fire. If you'll take a seat, I'll be right back to see to that wound." She nodded to an overstuffed chair before disappearing through the door again.

Sitting in the chair, he watched her intently as she moved from room to room gathering a bowl of hot water, several towels and some strips of linen. Each item was deposited on an unbalanced, rickety table

next to the chair before she'd hurry off to get the next, the sway of her hips making him thankful for his decision to stay.

When the table appeared about to buckle under the weight of the supplies, she knelt in front of him, towel in hand. Dipping it in the water, she nudged her way between his thighs and then paused. "I need to wash off the mud before I can do anything else. I'm sorry, but this might sting."

As the cloth swept over his skin, however, he found the sensation anything but painful.

"Dear Maker..." She leaned forward to get a better look at his injury. "You've almost healed already."

He heard the words, but didn't answer. His mind was too busy focusing on the feel of her breasts pressed against his thigh and the warmth of her breath on his skin.

"May I?"

Not knowing what she intended to do, the question left him at a loss.

"I've just never seen anything heal so quickly."

Her fingertip skimmed over the skin lightly, eliciting a soft growl from the back of his throat. Her head shot up at the sound, her eyes meeting his, but there was no fear in their depths.

The game had gone far enough. It had to stop now, while he was still under control. "I thank you for saving my life, and for being so intent on keeping me alive, but I feel compelled to remind you that I am a dragon, not a school boy."

She cocked her head to one side, her brow puckered as if in thought. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't understand."

He didn't believe her, not with the flecks of desire and defiance that shimmered in her aura, but decided to be blunt, just in case. "You are a very tempting woman. You should be sure there's no room to misinterpret what you're offering."

She sat back on her heels and studied him for a moment, regret flickering around her lightly. "Medicine is the only thing I'm at liberty to give."

It wasn't the answer he'd hoped to hear, but it did feel better to have it out in the open. "Thank you. I appreciate your honesty." Exhaustion swept over him as he stared at her. It'd taken almost all of his energy to heal himself and now he needed to regenerate before he became too weak to deny himself the comfort of her body, or worse. "I need to sleep now, and when I wake, I'll leave."

"If that's your wish." She stood up, taking the bowl and towel with her.

Before he knew what he was doing, his hand reached out to capture one of hers. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

She smiled down at him. "Why would I be afraid?"

Everyone feared him, feared what he could do, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her that. "Even in human form, I'm much bigger than you."

“The Firesting wasp is small enough to fit into my palm, yet one sting is fatal.” She released his hand with a reluctant smile. “Size is a worthless judge of threat. I prefer to look at character, and you haven’t done anything to make me question yours—yet. Now sleep.”

Her brow puckered at his bitter laugh, but she didn’t press. And, unable to look at the trust that shone in her eyes, he shut his eyes tightly and concentrated on sleep.

The sound of her humming a random tune was the last thing he remembered before he drifted off. It had a beautiful melody that filled him with dreams of the high mountains and the low valleys of his home.

Chapter Three

Sophie sighed as she saw his shoulders relax and his chest begin to rise and fall with the rhythm of sleep. Her gaze slid down his muscular torso until it found the wound in his abdomen. Unbelievably, it was healing. Only an angry red line remained where once there had been a poisoned hole, but still, she was uncomfortable leaving it untreated.

Before she could change her mind, she grabbed the salve and the bandages and knelt back down between his legs. She dipped her fingers in the creamy ointment and looked back at his torso, wondering if she was doing the right thing. He couldn't possibly be angry with her for trying to help. And if he had to fight off infection he might be stuck here for days. Surely he didn't want that?

Even she was willing to concede the argument was weak, but it was better than acknowledging the truth. She wanted to stay close to him, the desire to touch him was too great for her to resist, even if she was promised to another. Besides, he was asleep now. What harm could one touch do?

She reached out to him cautiously, her fingers massaging the medicine into his warm skin. She wasn't afraid of him, not really, but she was having a hard time forgetting the way he'd snapped at her when she'd pulled the arrow out, not that she blamed him. It'd looked painful, and with his body poisoned, it would've been even more so. But warranted or not, his snapping had made an impression on her.

This time, however, he only moaned softly in his sleep. Wrapping the bandage around him, she secured it tightly and sat back on her heels. Now she didn't even have her weak excuses to justify being between his powerful thighs, staring at his naked torso, but it didn't seem to matter. She couldn't force her eyes away from him.

When she'd come upon him in the field, she couldn't believe how breathtakingly beautiful he was. His scales iridescent purples and blues so dark they appeared black. But nothing could have prepared her for the devastatingly handsome man he'd become right in front of her. With skin the color of ground cinnamon and eyes of onyx, he was the embodiment of temptation. And that was before she'd let her gaze skim over his muscular body and lean hips.

Shaking her head to clear the memory, she brought her attention back to the present. Fantasizing about the man wasn't going to help her stay faithful to Naryn. She needed to get up and go do something. Then, when he woke, he'd be off. He'd leave and everything would return to normal.

For one brief moment, she felt jealousy sweep through her. Soon he'd be flying away, the wind rushing over him as he made his way back to a life with no orders, no edicts, no compromises, and her life would go back to the way it'd always been. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

As quickly as the jealousy came though, it left, replaced with the numb quiet she'd grown so used to. She had a good life—for the most part. And really, it wasn't like she had any other options. It wasn't like he was offering her an alternative. True, falling into those muscular arms might feel good for a moment, might offer her freedom from her prescribed life for a brief time, but he *was* leaving. And after he was gone, she'd have to either face Naryn with the truth or spend a lifetime lying to him. Neither option sounded appealing.

So why was she still kneeling in between his thighs?

She was so tired she couldn't think straight. Poor sleep and the physical exertion of the rescue were taking their toll on her.

And then there was the dragon. What on earth was she going to do with a dragon?

Sophie snuggled into the soft leather under her head. The spicy-earthly scent of cloves enveloped her as firm fingers brushed over her cheek. It felt so good. She felt so good. Only her legs hurt. They felt tingly, like they'd fallen asleep, like she'd fallen asleep.

The hunter, the dragon, the chair—it all came back to her at once.

Bolting upright, her eyes locked with smoky black ones.

"I fell asleep." Her voice had a dreamy thickness to it.

"I know."

There was a feeling of expectancy pressing against her, demanding she do something. "I'm Sophie."

"Reuel." He looked down at the bandage then back up at her.

"I know you said you just needed sleep, but I was worried about infection."

"It was kind of you to be concerned."

She was transfixed by his gaze, by the hunger and need echoing in its dark depths. It would be so easy to lean forward, to close the gap between them, so easy to bring her mouth to his.

"I realized I hadn't thanked you for saving me, not properly at least." His voice was rough as he spoke, sending tiny warning bells off in her head. But she refused to hear them.

Unable to tear her gaze away from his, she nodded absently. "I'm a cleric. It's my duty." She wasn't sure if she was telling him or reminding herself.

He smiled seductively as he leaned forward. "All the same, thank you."

Her head was spinning from his nearness, making it difficult for her breath, difficult for her to find the right words. "You're welcome."

He cocked his head to one side as he studied her carefully. "Now you do look frightened, how very odd."

"I'm not frightened." She cursed the breathiness of her voice and her racing heart. It was so loud she was certain he could hear it.

His smile broadened for a moment and then disappeared altogether. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Strong arms pulled her onto his lap seconds before his mouth found hers. Feeling the passion and heat of the kiss, her body responded. Moaning softly, she thrust her hips towards his, bringing their bodies closer. It'd been three years since she'd shared her bed with another, an abstinence that was weighing heavily on her.

She felt his hands slide under her tunic, strong fingers exploring the contours of her back. His mouth opened and, without any thought to the consequences, she deepened the kiss. Her tongue meeting his, she felt a wave of heat sweep through her. Gone were any objections.

Her hands began exploring the smooth skin of his torso while her mouth left a trail of kisses from his neck down to his collar bone. Rocking her hips against his, she could feel his erection pressing against the leather of his breeches.

In her fog of desire, she heard her name called, but it took a second for her to realize it wasn't the man under her calling it, but Naryn.

"Maker's tears!" Sophie jumped off of Reuel's lap and quickly straightened her tunic, her eyes never leaving his. "I'm so sorry." She wasn't sure if she was talking to Reuel or about the man she'd been promised to.

Her name rang out again, this time louder.

"Do you have to?" His eyes glowed with barely controlled hunger, but he didn't make a move for her.

"If I don't go to him, he'll come to me."

He looked towards the door and nodded. "But we aren't finished here."

Not knowing how to tell him that they were indeed finished, she turned and walked away.

"I'm here." She stumbled through the door, making sure to shut it tightly behind her. The last thing she wanted was for her betrothed to know she had company. Running her fingers through her hair, she forced herself to look at Naryn. Today his pale skin looked pastier than usual and his hair was a tangled nest sitting upon his head. Staring at him, she couldn't help but compare him to Reuel, a comparison she knew was unfair.

"Sophie, thank the Maker you're alright."

She hoped her face didn't show any of her guilt. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because there was a dragon flying over earlier."

Her heart froze as she heard the words. Could he possibly know the dragon was in the next room?

"A dragon?" Her voice squeaked slightly with the words.

“Yes. It should be dead by now, but if you go riding on the plains take caution.”

Realizing he knew nothing of her guest, she relaxed and fell into the expected conversation. “Dragons are so rare. How can you be sure?”

“Because I shot him down, vile creature.” His top lip curled in disgust, giving him the look of a demented feline.

Sophie felt numb at the words. She couldn’t imagine killing any of the Maker’s creatures, let alone one as magnificent as a dragon. That he would only widened the chasm between them. “You shot down a dragon? Tried to kill him?” She felt compelled to repeat the words, as if that would somehow make them less true.

“I didn’t try, I succeeded. Unless he’s immune to bane’s breath.”

Recognizing the painfully poisonous plant, she gasped. “Bane’s breath isn’t church sanctioned.”

“And are you going to report me? It was a dragon, for Maker’s sake.” He turned away from her, his fists balled tightly at his sides, but then turned back. “Sometimes I don’t understand you. You treat a child with more reverence than the Maker’s will and a dragon with more concern than your own people.”

“I don’t know the Maker’s will, Naryn. None of us do. And a dragon is one of the Maker’s creations. Our oath doesn’t allow us to put one life above another.”

He clenched his fists as he stared at her. “I guess we have different interpretations of the oath.”

She was so tired of arguing with him. So tired of arguing with herself. “It appears we have different interpretations on many things these days.”

This time when he turned from her, he left; the door rung loudly as it slammed shut behind him.

Walking back into her living quarters, she wasn’t sure she was up to facing Reuel. She felt completely drained by the encounter and more than a little ashamed of her brazen behavior.

“Who was it?”

The question wasn’t accusatory, but she still felt defensive. Recognizing her reaction as one of frayed nerves, she took a deep breath as she sought out some sort of inner calm. “It was Naryn. He’s a healer.” She paused for a second debating how much to tell him. “And my betrothed.”

One of Reuel’s eyebrows arched inquisitively, but he remained silent.

“It’s an arranged agreement. My church marries into his church to ensure the next generation of clerics.” The words spilled out of her like water over a broken dam. “I know, that’s no excuse for my behavior. A promise is a promise, regardless of the circumstance.”

“I see.”

She examined him closely, but didn’t see any of the disgust or outrage she’d expected to find. Actually, she couldn’t identify any emotion at all. “I can only imagine what you must think of me...”

“I wasn’t proposing breaking your betrothal, Sophie.”

“Still, it doesn’t make me very faithful does it?”

He studied her for a moment. "Betrothed means the bond hasn't been placed yet?"

"We haven't been married, no."

"Then no harm done." He pulled her to him so she landed in his lap.

"I suspect it's a difference in culture." She was determined to resist his charms this time, but she could already feel desire heating her blood. It wasn't fair. Why couldn't Naryn melt her will with a single look as *he* could?

"I would stop if you asked it." He kissed the sensitive skin where her neck met her shoulder.

His voice was hypnotic, his touch intoxicating. She wanted to tell him to stop, knew she should, but she couldn't force her mouth to say the word. It felt so good, sitting there in his lap, him kissing her neck.

"Do you want me to stop?"

His warm breath tickled her ear and sent a delicious shiver down her back.

"No. But I need you to."

"Then tell me to stop."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer to him, his kisses chasing away any rational thought. But the kisses stopped suddenly as they heard the door to the abbey being thrown open violently.

"You go or they come searching, right?" He released her as he said the words.

She looked from him to the door and then back to him. The room was suddenly cold without his embrace to keep her warm.

"Go. You would have stopped me sooner or later, better now than after one of your villagers sees you in my arms."

Staring into his eyes, she saw the truth of the words. Before she could change her mind, she stood and walked through the door into the rectory.

"Sister Sophie..."

All thoughts of the man in the next room vanished as she saw Maria standing in the middle of the vestibule, her four-year-old son cradled in her arms.

"Please..."

Sophie ran the short distance and took the child from the woman. Her mind was racing for a new treatment, but she couldn't come up with anything they hadn't already tried. "What happened?"

"He was fine this morning, but when the dragon flew over he started having tremors."

"Have you taken him to see Brother Naryn?"

"We were with Brother Naryn when it started. He said he'd be fine, that he just needed to lie down."

Something didn't seem right with the statement. But not being able to think about anything but the child, she jumped on the first thing that came to her. "He told you to have the child lie down?" She couldn't believe he would have so completely given up on finding a cure or, at the least, a treatment to slow the progression of the illness.

“Aye.”

The boy was cold and clammy in Sophie’s arms. Laying him down on a pew, she put her hand over his chest, feeling for the rise and fall of his breath. It was slow, but he was still breathing, not that that gave her any real hope.

“I need to get some herbs. I’ll be right back.” She ran at a full sprint back into her living quarters, but seeing the door slightly ajar sent a prick of panic through her. Had her guest opened it, or had she forgotten to close it? Stepping into the room, she found Reuel still sitting in the chair, flipping through one of her agricultural texts.

“Everything okay?”

Turning away from him, she scampered through the quarters, grabbing any herb or potion she thought might help. “Not really. One of the villager’s children is ill.”

She heard the gentle slap of paper being put down, but continued searching through her things.

“How ill?”

This time she did turn to face him, but her silence was the only answer she offered.

After gathering the mental list of supplies, she brushed past him and back out to the rectory, this time double checking to make sure the door was firmly shut behind her.

Maria had moved to sit next to her son and was running her palm over the child’s hair. The picture brought tears to her eyes, but Sophie blinked them back. If she didn’t stay calm, the mother never would.

Racing to where they were sitting, Sophie started to rummage through her jars of herbs, hoping some idea would come to her. But she stopped when the mother looked up at her, her eyes red and brimming with tears.

“He’s going to die, isn’t he?”

“That’s the Maker’s decision, not mine.” Sophie’s voice sounded firm despite her inner battle to remain in control.

“But I think we can help.”

Sophie turned at the sound of the deep, seductive voice. “Reuel?” Fortunately, he’d found a tunic and robe to slip on over the breeches.

“Who’s he?”

“He’s a...”

“I’m a visiting cleric.”

Sophie watched as Reuel sat down next to the child. His manner was calm and his touch confident as he started examining him.

“I’ve seen this before.” His expression was foreboding, almost angry. “He needs lemonbalm.”

“Lemonbalm?” It was one of the herbs she had carried out with her, but she couldn’t see how it would help. It’s only use was to sweeten bitter potions.

“Lemonbalm.”

Hearing the word spoken through his clenched jaw and seeing the sparks of fire spring to his eyes, she quickly handed him the jar of the requested herb.

Reuel took a pinch of the herb and placed it on the child’s tongue. After he’d coaxed the boy to swallow it, he began checking the boy’s breathing and heart rate. And, watching him, Sophie found herself hopeful for the first time in three months.

He placed a hand on each of the child’s temples then looked up at the mother. “He’s going to be fine.” As if to prove the statement, the child looked up and smiled at him.

“Oh thank you!” Maria grabbed her son and held him tightly to her chest. “You have no idea...”

Sophie had to stifle a gasp of disbelief as Reuel stood quickly, not even letting the mother finish the sentence of gratitude. “If you’d excuse me, I have other matters to attend to.”

He only made it two steps, however, before he collapsed.

For one terrifying moment, she stared at his body not knowing what to do. White noise roared in her ears and her chest clenched painfully. After rushing to his side, she dropped down next to him, her hand seeking out evidence he was still alive. He was breathing and his heart seemed strong, but his eyes twitched behind their closed lids. “Help me move him!”

Maria looked to the man and then to her son, indecision clouding her face.

“This man just saved your son! Now you will help me move him, or I will charge you this year’s entire harvest as the fee!”

Her nod was stiff, but she did stand. “Come on, sweetheart, let’s help Sister Sophie.”

It was hard work, but with Sophie carrying him under his arms and Maria carrying his feet, they managed to get him through the door and into a small bedroom. When he was settled comfortably, she dismissed Maria and checked his breathing and heartbeat. When both appeared normal, she finally allowed herself to relax, relieved that it was exhaustion and nothing more serious that’d caused the collapse.

Satisfied he’d be okay by himself, she made her way to the kitchen and started cooking. The rote chore did wonders for keeping her mind focused and he’d be hungry when he woke.

Chapter Four

Reuel woke to the smell of cooked venison and fresh baked bread. His head pounded and his eyes itched, but he couldn't resist the temptation of food. Rolling over, he opened his eyes and sought out the source of the smell. On a small table next to the bed, he found a steaming bowl of stew and a plate of bread with butter.

"I didn't know what you ate, but I assumed..."

His attention swung to the woman standing in the doorway. Purple flecks of anxiety now clouded her aura. "It's perfect, thank you."

He moved to sit, but the room swam around him and black spots danced in front of his eyes.

"Can I help?"

The smell of jasmine told him that she was already at his side.

"I'm fine." He cursed the sharp edge to the words. The last thing he wanted to do was to push her away, but he hated feeling so weak.

"Okay. I'll just go finish up some texts..." Her voice was soft and her aura was spiked with the whites of uncertainty as she turned back to the door.

"What happened to the boy?" He wanted to know, but he also wanted her close to him again.

She turned back to him, studying his face carefully.

"Is he okay?"

She nodded stiffly as she took a seat next to him on the bed. "He's doing well. After the *lemonbalm*, he recovered fully."

His stomach growled angrily and cramped with hunger, but she beat him to the stew. Picking the bowl up, she dipped the spoon into it.

"You know, in all my years of studying herbs, I've never once heard of lemonbalm having any real medicinal value." She lifted a stew-laden spoon and, after blowing on it softly, held it out to him.

He didn't want to be treated like an invalid, but the stew smelled so good and he was so hungry. Leaning forward, he took the bite and sighed as the tender meat fell apart in his mouth and the rich, savory broth coated his tongue.

"We both know it had nothing to do with the lemonbalm." He took the second bite without reservation.

"Then why pretend?" She broke the bread and dipped it in the broth before handing it to him.

He took a large bite, chewing it quickly before swallowing. He could already feel his strength returning. "Because humans don't have magic and since I look like a human..."

"It's best to act like one." She studied him for a minute before offering him another bite of the stew. "What was wrong with him?"

His stomach turned painfully at the question. He didn't want to talk about what had been done to the child.

"Is there any way we can prevent it from happening again? We've just lost so many already. I can't bear to lose another," she pressed.

He took a deep breath to steady his nerves and shook his head. "His essence had been drained."

The spoon paused, forgotten, as she cocked her head to one side. "His essence?"

He took the spoon from her and set the food back down on the table. His appetite had suddenly disappeared. "Every living thing has a field of energy around it. The field is its aura, the energy trapped by the aura is its essence. The soul feeds from the essence. Without it, the being can't survive."

"His mother said it'd started when the dragon..." she paused for a second before correcting herself, "...when you flew over."

Anger filled him as years of taunts and insults flashed through his mind. "I'd never steal from another, let alone a child!"

The blood drained from her face, leaving it pale. "I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean to..." She paused, looking away from him for a moment. "I'm just trying to understand what's happening to the children. I didn't mean to imply it had anything to do with you."

The stricken look on her face left him ashamed of his outburst. She had no idea what she'd said, nor that it'd stung because it'd hit close to home. "I'm the one who owes an apology."

She inched closer to him, her hand brushing his gently. He felt a sharp pang of desire stir deep within him and regretted letting things go so far earlier.

"I wasn't trying to accuse you."

He took a deep breath and looked away from her. He couldn't bear to look at the undeserved trust in her eyes. She had every right to be suspicious of him. Even as he sat next to her professing his innocence, he could feel the tempting pull of her essence. "You should."

"Why?" The question was barely louder than a whisper.

"Because it's a dragon doing this, and your village is too small to attract many dragons."

"Are you sure it's a dragon?"

He smiled grimly. "Yes. It takes a good deal of magic to manipulate energy. Even among the dragons, there are only a handful that can do it."

"Are you one of the ones that can?"

His stomach rolled with nausea as he nodded.

“Is that how you healed Maria’s child?”

He nodded again. “I gave him some of mine.” He looked away as he remembered how much had been taken from the child. “A lot of mine.”

It was okay to give energy to another, but to take it without permission and to take it from a child... He couldn’t finish the thought. Looking into her eyes, he wondered if she saw him as a monster capable of doing such a thing.

As if sensing his unease, she smiled and ran her fingertips along his cheek. “I know it’s not you, Reuel.”

“You’ve seen another dragon then?” He couldn’t believe he was arguing with her, but to have someone believe in his innocence was too new of an experience for him to embrace.

“No, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any. You can shift between forms. Can others?”

“Yes, that trait is fairly common. But you would’ve noticed a dragon in your midst. It only took flying over for me to be discovered.”

“You had no reason to hide your nature. This one obviously does.”

It should’ve been enough, but it wasn’t. He needed more from her. Needed to know how she could trust him when his own family couldn’t. “How can you be so sure I’m not the one?”

She stared at him for a moment, as if giving thought to the question. “You saved a child when you could have done nothing.”

“I couldn’t let him suffer...”

“Which is why I’m sure. I don’t know exactly what that healing cost you, but judging from your exhaustion, it must have been high.”

It’d been what he wanted to hear, but the words made him uncomfortable. “Only momentarily.” He shrugged, trying to dispel some of his unease. “I’ve already regenerated most of what I gave him.”

“And you knew it would be high,” she continued as if not hearing him. She took a chunk of the bread from the plate and smeared it with butter before popping it into her mouth. “So, it looks like there’s another dragon hiding in the village.”

“Or in the grasslands. It’d have to be nearby, though.”

“How do we find it?”

The word *we* sent a shock through him. Not because she’d assumed he’d be willing to help, but because he found there was nothing he wanted more. To stay near her, to be her rescuer, to be the one she desired, the one she trusted—the thought left him heady. It also frightened him more than he’d ever imagined possible.

“We don’t.” He needed to put some space between them. He needed to remember that she was already promised to another, and that it was one of his kind killing the children in her village, a dragon just like

him. Or, at least, that's how she'd eventually see it. "But if I were you, I'd keep my eyes open and stock up on whatever was on that arrow tip that brought me down."

Her face fell slightly and her aura filled with flecks of disappointment, but she recovered quickly. "Of course. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed you'd help."

He hated the way she looked at her boots as she said the words, her face crestfallen. Cursing himself under his breath, he shifted uncomfortably on the bed. "Although, I'd start with Naryn, if I were sticking around."

"Naryn? But he's a healer."

The look in her eyes told him she was keeping something from him, but he didn't press. She was entitled to her secrets just as he was entitled to his.

"Doesn't sound like a very good one to me."

Her eyes flittered toward the wall just above his head. "Naryn wouldn't be involved. He's a bit of a zealot, but he's not a monster."

He had to stifle the growl that started low in his throat. He didn't like her making excuses for the man, but he didn't dare question why. Something told him he wouldn't like the answers he got. "He may have nothing to do with this, Sophie. But I heard Maria say the child was with him when he fell ill and that he didn't even try to help."

"Were you spying on me and Maria?" Her voice was high-pitched with accusation.

"Spying? Really?" He shook his head in disbelief. "I'm not a child, Sophie. I don't spy. You left the door open and I overheard you. I'm not sure what his role in this is, but if he's resigned himself to letting the children die, he's not a good guy."

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she considered his words. "Wait. The child couldn't have been with him. Naryn's the one that shot..." Her face paled as she stopped mid-sentence.

He could guess what Naryn shot by the guilt that suddenly flooded her aura and by the look of terror that swept across her face, but he needed to hear her say the words. "The one that shot what?"

She fidgeted on the bed, her face pinched like she was suddenly nauseous. "He wasn't with the child because he's the one that shot the arrow."

This time he didn't bother to stifle the growl. "Your betrothed, the man you will bond, is the one that almost killed me?" The bitter taste of bile crept up the back of his throat. "Oh, that's lovely."

Pushing back the covers, he stood slowly, allowing time for the dizziness to pass. He'd been through a lot today and the last thing he wanted was to fall into her arms. "I think it's time for me to leave."

"You've pushed yourself too far already. You need to rest."

Turning to face her, he was angered by his body's continued response to her nearness. "If I stay, it won't be to rest."

Gathering her to him, he brought his mouth down on hers with punishing force. He wanted to hurt her, to scare her, to push her away from him irrevocably. But she wrapped her arms around his neck and melted in his arms. Unable to hold his anger, he softened the pressure of the kiss. It wasn't until he realized he was listening for her soft moans of arousal that he pushed her away from him. "Goodbye, Sophie."

He heard her footsteps following him, but did his best to ignore them. He waited for the impending water works and the wailing for forgiveness. But she didn't beg or plead for his attention, only followed him out into the sanctuary and then out the door.

"I admit, I should have told you..."

She slammed into him as he stopped suddenly. Her body was warm against his back, but he was trying hard not to notice. Outside, a large group of villagers had gathered on her front lawn, and they didn't look as if they were there for tea.

"Hey! What's going on?" She started to walk around him, but he pushed her back, keeping his body between her and the people.

"Sister Sophie?" A tall, gaunt man called her name as he eyed Reuel suspiciously.

"Would you get out of my way?"

Despite his best efforts, she managed to make it around him and, arms braced across her chest, addressed the group.

"What is it now, Naryn?"

Reuel glared at the man as another growl escaped him. This was the coward that'd shot him down, the man who would have Sophie. A dark, primitive part of him begged to fight the man, vengeance and retribution in one blow. But one glance at Sophie cooled the impulse. She wouldn't be impressed by violence, especially when it was a dragon challenging a human.

"I've been called to serve as magistrate."

"And who's being judged?" Sophie continued.

Even Reuel could hear the strain of control in her voice.

"You are, Sister Sophie."

"And what are the charges?"

"Harboring magic."

Reuel's heart began to beat faster. There was no doubt whose magic she was harboring.

Sophie took a step towards the group, her shoulders squared. "Since when is harboring magic a crime?"

A young, tired-looking woman stepped out of the crowd. "Since it started killing our young!"

"I know you've been through a lot since your daughter passed, Lizbet, but it wasn't my doing. She was sick." Sophie's voice had a calm tenor but her aura was aglow with flecks of sorrow. It was the same

somber shade when she'd told him about Maria's son. Her back was straight and her voice steady, but her heart was broken. And just as it did earlier, it called to him to fix it.

"Maybe you didn't kill her, but you didn't save her."

Her aura became a shade darker, the transformation painful for him to watch.

"We did everything we could." None of her pain was apparent in her voice. A feat Reuel was more than a little in awe of.

"You saved Maria's child, why not mine?"

There was a grumbling of agreement from the crowd that sounded ominous to Reuel's ears. He knew all too well how fast a group of rational people could deteriorate into a mob.

"I didn't save Maria's child, Reuel did. And since he wasn't here when..."

Naryn took another step forward. "And how did Reuel save Maria's child?"

Reuel could almost hear Sophie swallow.

"Lemonbalm."

"Lemonbalm doesn't have any medicinal value, Sophie. We both know that. So how did he heal the child?"

Sophie remained silent as Naryn took another step towards them.

"Or are you going to stick with lemonbalm?"

Reuel saw her straighten her shoulders and lift her chin. "No. You're right, the lemonbalm didn't heal him. Reuel used magic to heal him."

"See, she's admitted it. She's giving shelter to magic!"

"I didn't deny harboring magic. I simply questioned it as a crime."

Naryn stepped towards them at the words. "So you admit to harboring magic?"

"Yes, I am harboring the magic that saved Maria's son. If that's a crime, then I'm guilty."

As a flare of anger sparked in the crowd, Reuel felt the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. She'd trusted him, saved him, and now she was in the middle of this mess because of him.

"Since you freely admit to the crime..." Naryn cleared his voice before continuing, "...I have no choice but to sentence you to death."

Reuel cursed under his breath. He may not have been born with the judicial magic that'd made his family famous, but he could still see a miscarriage of justice when it was playing out in front of him. And, as much as he needed space from the woman, he couldn't leave her to die. Not when the only thing she'd done wrong was to have the misfortune of caring for others.

Closing his eyes, he focused on his magic, focused on his true form. When he heard the collective gasp from the group, he opened his eyes once more. The villagers were staring at him, their mouths hanging open in shock.

"You have a pestilence in your midst, but I assure you it has nothing to do with Sophie."

Naryn took a step back and shook his head, but Reuel didn't wait for the man to speak. He gently grabbed Sophie in one talon and leapt toward the sky. He soared higher and higher, aiming almost straight towards the sun, until he was certain no arrows could hit him. Then, clutching Sophie to him, he spread his wings to their full width and began to glide on the air currents.

The open sky welcomed him and the sun shone brightly on his scales, warming his blood as he flew toward the mountains of his home. But the sun had only just reached its zenith when he began to feel the pummeling of small fists on his underbelly. He ignored it for as long as he could, but when he felt her feet swinging into him at full force, he decided it was time to take a small break.

Landing in a valley meadow, he released her only to watch her pace in the tall grass. Fury radiated off of her in beautiful ripples of blood red and dark purple. He tried not to notice its beauty, but it would be like denying the beauty of the sky right before a storm.

"What?" Her voice was sharp with anger. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Your aura's glowing right now. It's quite lovely."

"No! We aren't doing this." She put her hands on her hips and stared at him boldly. He'd never seen anything so alluring.

"Doing what?"

"I'm angry, Reuel! How could you do that? Scoop me up like a parent with a misbehaving child! Fly me away from my home, from my people!"

He took a step back—away from the heat of her anger. "Your people were about to kill you, if you hadn't noticed."

"They were upset, but given time they would have seen reason."

"Maybe." He couldn't believe what she was saying. "But that wouldn't have brought you back to life."

"They're scared and angry right now, but after I figure out who's responsible for the plague..."

He felt sick as he heard the words. "You sound as if you want to go back."

"Of course I want to go back. They're my life."

"Can you hear yourself? Can you actually hear what you're saying? These people turned on you, tried to kill you, for helping heal one of their children."

"I know what I'm saying and I know what they did, what they were prepared to do, but that doesn't change anything. I'm still sworn to serve them."

"Does that go for your betrothed as well?" The question was painful, but he had to ask it.

Her face paled, but a quick shake of her head brought back most of the color to her cheeks. "I serve all the people of the village; I can't pick and choose between them."

It was irritating that she seemed angrier with him than with Naryn. "So you would still bond the man who sentenced you to death?"

Her glow of anger faded. “No...” She looked away from him, one of her hands seeking out her temple. “Yes...”

“Which is it?” The question was barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to. I mean, I never wanted to, but now I really don’t want to. But it’s not like we’d be together forever. We’d have a couple kids and then go our separate ways. It’s been done before.”

How could she not be with her mate forever? Why would she mate with a man she couldn’t stand? He’d dreamt of the day he would find someone to bond with. Someone who would accept him, accept his magic. Someone to share not only the rest of his life with but also his soul. And now that woman was standing in front of him, but it was different for her. Everything was apparently different for her. “Don’t.”

She began rubbing her temple gently. “It’s not my decision. I’ll have to file an appeal with the church.”

“But if they denied your appeal?”

“My life isn’t mine, Reuel. I don’t have the luxury of choosing my own fate.”

“Your fate is the only thing that is yours.”

“Maybe that’s true for you, but it’s different for me.”

“It’s not! You’re just too busy hiding behind your church to see it.”

She sputtered as she stared at him, her mouth agape in disbelief. “You think I’ve chosen this? You think this is the life I would have chosen given options?”

“You always have options. Right now you could run and never look back.”

She looked at the distant mountains briefly before bringing her attention back to him. “There are rules.”

“Only because you chose to follow them.”

“There are consequences to breaking them.”

“Are they worse than being bound to a man that condemned you to death?”

“Yes.” Her voice was sure, but her eyes shifted back to the horizon.

“Really?”

“I’d lose everything. I’d be excommunicated.”

“And you’d find a new life.”

“Doing what? This is all I know.”

“There are other communities you could work for, ones that wouldn’t care if you were sanctioned by a church.”

She looked away from him for a moment. Suddenly her aura shifted back to the heartbreaking blues. “And when I look at their children, do you think I’ll forget the ones I abandoned?” As her eyes found his, he could see the calm determination reflected in their depths. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ve just

accepted what life handed me. But this isn't about that; they're just children, Reuel, and right now they need me."

He could feel the weight of her words pressing down on him. She was indeed a very brave woman. "And what happens to you after you save them?"

"I don't know." Her mouth fluttered slightly as if she were battling to stay in control. "But I do know that if I don't try to save them, nothing else would ever matter again."

He could feel the honesty in her words. "You'd risk everything for their children?"

"Yes." She paused as if she was going to say something else, but then shook her head. "Will you fly me back?"

He didn't want to. He understood why she felt compelled to return—he'd be heartless not to, but he didn't want anything to happen to her.

"I know they don't trust me and that they somehow blame me for the deaths, but I can live with that because I know they're wrong. But if I don't go back, if more children die because I ran, they'd be right. I can't live with that. Please, just fly me back. That's all I'm asking."

He cursed under his breath. Her argument was hauntingly similar to the one he'd told himself over the years. That it didn't matter what people thought of him, only what he'd actually done. "Fine, but not until dusk. I'm not going to be shot down twice in one day."

"Thank you."

She took the three steps that closed the distance between them and gently wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing her soft cheek to his scaled one.

Enveloped in the smell of jasmine, he closed his eyes, savoring the nearness of her. He was quickly becoming used to the desire she stirred in him, but this time it was different. This time there was a depth to it that made him uncomfortable. Backing away from her, he said, "Now, if you don't mind, I saw a pond just over there. If we're going to fly to our deaths tonight, I'd like to soak for a bit today."

Before she could find something else to argue with him about, he turned and flew off toward the glistening body of water he'd seen from the sky.

Chapter Five

Sophie laid down on the soft grass and tried to relax, but her stomach kept doing somersaults and the warm day was making her skin sticky with sweat. Trying to get comfortable, she rolled over again, but it was no use. She wasn't going to be able to relax. Every time she closed her eyes, her mind insisted on replaying the exchange she'd had with Reuel. Had she been too complacent with her life?

That question was astoundingly easy to answer—painful, but easy. There had never been locks on the school doors, never any guards posted at the church. She even knew a couple of girls who had left the order, and they hadn't been hunted down and dragged back to service. Oh sure, the other sisters had hung their heads and talked in hushed tones about how the errant girls were to be pitied and how hard their lives were going to be, but that was it.

His other question, what she was going to do after she'd saved the children, was more difficult. She wouldn't marry Naryn, regardless of churches orders. Reuel was right about that. Now that she could see her choices, she'd rather be cast out and alone than married to that man. But what did that leave? Would she be able to make it on her own?

Unable to obsess about it any longer, she stood and began pacing in the tall grass. She needed to burn some energy, needed to think about something other than her prospective fates, and a swim sounded promising.

Heading in the direction Reuel had flown off in, she had no problem finding the clear, glistening water. It's promise of refreshment irresistible.

She glanced around, but when she didn't see the dragon, she quickly stripped out of her clothing and dove into the cool water. Relishing the feel of it gliding over her bare skin, she kicked her feet and dove deeper. It wasn't until her lungs were screaming for air that she relented and swam for the surface.

"I was beginning to worry about you."

She spun toward Reuel's voice, only to come face to face with him. "You shifted."

"The pond's not exactly dragon-sized."

She blushed at the obvious statement. She should have thought of it herself. "I could go. If you wanted privacy, that is." Her voice was shaky as she spoke, but she blamed it on the act of treading water and talking at the same time.

"No, I should. I've been in the water long enough anyway."

She reached out to touch his arm as he swam past, but the spark of electricity that shot between them had her pulling her hand back as if burned.

He stopped swimming and began treading water just out of reach. "What?"

Looking into his eyes, she felt her blood heat with memories of the feel of his skin on hers. So much had changed since that moment, but not her desire for him. She wanted to reach out to him again, touch him again, but fear of rejection kept her hand still. "You could stay."

"I don't think it'd be such a good idea. You're betrothed and there're no parishioners to save you this time."

Embarrassed heat flooded her face, but she wasn't ready to back down. "I'm not betrothed anymore."

"Really? Did you hear back from your church so quickly?"

She couldn't blame him for the sharp tone, but it still stung. "No, you were right. I can't, won't, marry him."

"What about the church, the consequences?"

"Being married to him would be worse than anything they could do to me." Saying the words out loud made them real and left her feeling completely alone in the world.

An expression flickered across his face, but was gone before she could recognize it, replaced by an expression she knew all too well.

Drawn to his look of hunger, to the promise of companionship—even if it was only temporary—she found herself sliding through the cool water toward him. But he pushed back through the water, staying just out of her reach.

"You've been through a lot in the last couple of hours. I don't think now's the time to make rash decisions."

The change in his usually bold, aggressive nature gave her pause, but didn't dissolve her resolution. "Weren't you the one who said I should take control of my fate?"

"Yes, but you should give this serious consideration. It's not a game."

"And you aren't a schoolboy. I remember the warning." Moving silently through the water, she brought her body mere inches from his. Her heart raced as she gathered the last bit of her courage to say the words that needed to be said. "I think I've made it clear what's being offered this time, but if you want to leave, I won't stop you." She was careful not to brush against him as she treaded the water.

She heard a soft growl before his arm wrapped around her waist and brought her body to his.

"You should have let me leave."

His mouth silenced any reply she might have had. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she let him worry about keeping them above water. The feel of his skin on hers was the only thing that mattered.

Pulling him to her tightly, she felt his mouth open under hers. She wrapped her legs around his waist, needing to be closer to him, but her weight pulled them down, sending them below the surface of the water.

Reuel held her to him tightly though, not breaking the kiss until he brought them to the surface again with a strong kick.

“I think it’s time for us to get out of the water, together.” His voice was raspy with hunger.

“I’m not so sure.” The hunger flooding her blood was making her bold. “I like the way your skin feels wet.”

His eyes were scorching as he wrapped an arm around her waist. “That wasn’t a request.”

She smiled as he started making his way to the bank, his arm trapping her against his waist. Reaching land, he put her gently on the soft ground and then lifted himself out of the water. Staring at the ripple of muscles in his arms, she quickly forgot everything but the man next to her.

He reached out to her, his fingertips brushing a stray water drop off her cheek. “You are remarkably beautiful.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Sophie pulled him to her as they kissed. The grass made a warm, soft bed as she lay down. He followed her to the ground, his hands cradling her waist.

His hard body pressed into her soft curves, his skin cool and wet against hers. She tried to pull him closer but he shook his head and rolled onto his side. Supporting his weight on an elbow, he ran a finger up her thigh, a gentle wave of warmth following it.

Gasping, she instinctively pulled away from the intensity of the touch, but he followed, his fingers never losing contact with the sensitive skin.

“That’s new.”

He smiled rakishly as his fingers continued their journey up her inner thigh, their intoxicating warmth spreading through her quickly. “I can do more than just shift and heal with my magic.”

Reaching the top of her thigh, he changed direction ever so slightly, his fingers seeking out the center of her desire. As they dipped inside her she took a gasping breath and closed her eyes against the hunger threatening to consume her. “Apparently.”

He chuckled dryly as he leaned forward to caress one of her nipples with the tip of his tongue. The combination left her weak with hunger.

“You have a very strong will.”

She heard a whimper, but it took a moment for her to recognize it as her own. Arching her back toward the sensation, she savored the feel of his fingers thrusting rhythmically inside her. But a drop of cool water on her sun-warmed skin brought back some sense of reality.

Opening her eyes, her gaze locked with Reuel’s. He smiled wickedly before taking the breast into his mouth. When his tongue encircled her nipple she had to catch her bottom lip between her teeth to keep from calling out. Where his fingertips brought warmth, his mouth brought pure heat. Fire raced through her as he left a trail of kisses from one breast to the other.

Moaning in pleasure, she closed her eyes again and took a steady breath. “And is that the goal, to break my will?”

His chuckle sent delicious vibrations against the delicate skin still in his mouth. He took his time with the breast, but then released it to answer her. “Not the goal per se, but it would be a delightful outcome for us both, I assure you.”

The golden flecks of desire in his eyes had become roaring fires, but she was more drawn to the tone of challenge in his voice.

“Really?” Putting a palm on his chest, she pushed him back so he was the one laying on the grass. Before he could react, she threw a leg over his torso and pinned his arms above his head.

“Do you really think you can hold me?”

She lowered her mouth to his, the kiss an echo of the passion and desire that filled her. Breaking the kiss, she stared deeply into his gaze. “Yes.”

To prove the truth of her answer, she let go of his arms. His hands wrapped around her and began to stroke her back, but didn’t move to stop her or to take over.

Slowly, she made her way down his body, leaving a trail of kisses and nibbles as her hands caressed the skin that was yet to come. When she got to his navel, her fingers slid between his thighs to wrap around his growing erection. His groan made her stomach flip with desire.

Seeking out the ridged yet silken skin with her mouth, she slowly encircled the smooth tip with her tongue. A sharp intake of breath was the only sound that escaped him this time. And as she took him into her mouth, her hand stroking the base of his erection, there was only silence.

She smiled as she dropped lower, allowing her mouth to take more of him in before slowly returning to the tip. Her tongue followed the rhythm of her hand as she brought him ever closer to the brink, his moans echoing in her ears as his fingertips clenched on her shoulders.

“Enough.”

She looked up at him questioningly before making her way back up his body, kissing every inch of him that passed under her. Reaching his neck, she straddled his hips, bringing him tantalizingly close to her.

“How’s your will holding out?” She moved to nibble on his earlobe as she whispered the question.

His answering growl was deep and raw with passion.

Feeling the same raw hunger, she sat up and guided him into her. She took a moment to adjust to the feel of him inside her, but then began rocking her hips rhythmically. His hands held her back as she rode him, his strong fingers guiding her into a faster pace.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the man under her. There was nothing other than the lean hips that rose to meet hers, the warm skin that caressed hers at every move, and the rapid heartbeat that filled her ears.

His hands moved to her back and brought her close to him. Her body pressed to his, he rolled and—without him leaving her—she found her back cushioned by the soft grass once again. Settling under him, she spread her thighs, allowing him to thrust deeper into her.

With each thrust, colorful waves of pleasure filled her until she could no longer tell one wave from the next. Crying out, she pulled him to her as time seemed to stop, an eternity that lasted only a moment. She held on to him tightly, surrendering to the overwhelming sensations. When his mouth took hers again, the kiss was hard and demanding. And when the kiss finally broke, her name was mixed with a growl as he was pushed over the edge, his body trembling above her—pulsating inside her.

When they were both spent, he laid down next to her on the warm grass, pulling her into his arms. “That almost makes up for being shot down this morning.”

She nuzzled into his warmth, listening to his now-lazy heartbeat. “Almost?” She tried to sound offended, but her skin was already craving the warmth of his touch again.

“It was very painful.”

She breathed in sharply as he ran his fingers over the sensitive skin where her neck met her shoulder. “I could kiss it, make it better?”

“I have a better idea.” He gently pushed her back so she once again rested on the grass and started a very slow, methodical study of her body. Passion still burned brightly in his eyes whenever his gaze caught hers, but this time it was tempered with control and patience. A control and patience she happily surrendered to. And, as they moved in time, their bodies intertwined, he stared deep into her eyes. His hunger and vulnerability was displayed for her to see as the world broke around her again.

Chapter Six

“Sophie...”

She didn’t remember falling asleep, but as she rubbed her eyes open, she found the sun had traveled the entire way across the sky.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sleep.”

“Are you sure you still want to go back?”

As she pictured the children, she found she didn’t need to even think about the question. “I’m sure.”

“Then you should get dressed.”

She reluctantly moved away from his warmth and began to get dressed. The clothing, which had been soft and supple only hours ago, now seemed scratchy and constricting. Sighing, she slipped her feet into her boots and tied them tightly.

“Ready?”

Turning to face him, she barely noticed he’d shifted back to dragon. She only saw him as Reuel, the man who’d given her her life back. It made little difference which shape he chose. “I’m ready.”

He walked over to her and knelt down. “It’ll be easier if you ride. Just hold on tightly. We need to stop on the way so I can get some clothes, but...”

“Why do you need clothes?”

She climbed onto his back carefully and, straddling his neck, sat down. With not much to grab a hold of, she wrapped both hands around his black mane and held on tightly. The hair was as thick as cane reed and as stiff as sapling wood. It wasn’t the easiest thing to grip.

“Because if I’m going to help you save these children, I’m going to do it dressed.”

“You’re going to help? Why?”

He shook his head gently. “Because I’m an idiot. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

Reuel took three giant steps and then jumped, his wings spread and sweeping through the air as they took flight. Crouching close to his neck, she held on tightly as the wind screamed in her ears and whipped at her face.

Fear caused her throat to close and her heart to plummet as she watched the ground recede under them, but it didn’t take long for excitement and the exhilaration to take its place. Watching the ground streak past her she felt giddy, but was safe in the knowledge that he wouldn’t let her fall. Unable to resist the urge, she let go, her fingers reaching up to the sky.

“Sophie!”

Her name brought her hands back to his mane. But she still kept her head high, taking huge gulps of air until the tender skin on her cheeks couldn't take another second.

They flew toward the setting sun, only stopping briefly to acquire clothing for Reuel. Still, it was near twilight when she first saw the familiar shapes and colors of the village.

Reuel chose to land at the edge of the grain fields. And, though he didn't ask for her advice, she doubted she could have found a better spot. It was far enough to avoid being seen, but close enough that she wasn't dreading the walk.

She dismounted carefully and then watched him shift back to his human form. It was a shame to have to cover his body, but she handed him the clothing nonetheless, wondering if she'd ever have a chance to feel the ripple of his muscles under her fingertips again. When he was dressed, they started off toward the village. They walked in a comfortable silence. Preoccupied with her own thoughts, there was no need for idle chatter.

It was full night when they stepped into the village, but still, she was amazed at how dark and quiet it was. No neighbors were out gossiping with one another, no children were running about celebrating the return of warmth. Even the crickets and night birds seemed muted. And, without torches or lamps lit, the full moon was the only light to see by, its curtain of silver feeling cold and distant. The scene made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end and her skin erupt in goose bumps.

As if sensing her unease, Reuel took her hand, his thumb caressing the tender skin on her wrist. Stopping, she turned to face him. Her heart was racing and her stomach was churning nervously, but he appeared completely composed. Standing in the shadow of a house, he nodded, the simple gesture giving her strength enough to continue towards the infirmary.

As they made their way across the village, each step they took echoed loudly in her ears. They'd made it to the cobblestone path that cut the village in half when Sophie felt something snag her tunic. She nearly called out as she was pulled farther into the inky darkness, but a hand over her mouth kept her quiet. Reuel, however, had no hand silencing him, and from the tone of his growl, he didn't care for the way she'd been torn away from him.

“I'm sorry, Sister Sophie, but I had to stop you.”

Recognizing Maria's voice, she pulled the woman's hand off her mouth and took a deep breath. Sophie felt Reuel's warmth at her back as he followed her, his body radiating tension as he stood poised, ready to attack any possible threat.

“It's okay.” The words were meant for Reuel, but Maria seemed to believe they were intended for her as she started pulling Sophie again.

“We shouldn't be talking here. My house is safe, we can talk there.”

But Sophie wasn't interested in hearing the woman or in a side trip to her house. "I haven't the time, Maria."

"It's important. Please."

She felt Reuel's hand press at the small her back as he leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Charging to the rescue is noble, but it might be nice to know what we're charging into."

She looked at the horizon for support, but the night was still new. Reuel was right. They had time and any information would be helpful. Sighing to herself, she nodded in the darkness and allowed herself to be guided to the woman's house.

The house, like the others, was dark as they approached, filling her mind with thoughts of betrayal and traps. As if sensing her hesitation, Reuel's hand began to stroke her back.

"I'm right here, Sophie. I won't let anything happen to you."

She felt her body relax, but found she wasn't exactly happy about the change. In one day, she trusted him more than a woman she'd been working with for three years. It was an unnerving realization. But before the thoughts could take hold, she pushed them aside. She needed to stay focused on what they'd come back to do. Tonight was about saving the children; she could deal with everything else tomorrow.

After taking a deep breath, she followed Maria into the building. Her ears buzzed with the silence of the room and her eyes strained in the darkness. There was enough moonlight streaming in the windows for her to pick her way around the furniture, but not enough to see what might be hiding in the corners.

"I'm sorry, I can't risk a flame right now. To draw attention to the house..." There was fear in Maria's voice.

Reuel interrupted the woman. "It's okay, Maria. We understand."

Sophie did understand, but not being able to see what was lurking in the corners still made her uneasy.

It seemed to make Maria uneasy as well, as she glanced around before starting. "After you left, the village split into two, those that supported you and those that supported Naryn. Most of the village was behind Naryn, in the early hours at least."

Sophie didn't like the ominous tone of the words. Forgetting the dark shadows, she gripped Reuel's hand tightly before pressing the woman. "In the early hours? What's happened?"

"Naryn gathered those that were loyal, started ranting about the Maker and how he was calling on them to help complete His work."

Sophie's skin crawled at the words. "Did he say what the work was?"

"No, after that they started going door to door." The woman paused as if gathering her courage. "Visiting houses that were vocal about the *trial*." Her snort echoed Sophie's feelings about the mock justice.

"Did they come here?"

“No.” Maria looked down at her feet for a minute. “They’d found what they wanted before they reached my house.”

Sophie glanced at Reuel, silently begging him to ask the question. But he didn’t. “What were they after?”

Continuing to stare at her feet, Maria refused to look into her eyes. “Three children.”

Sophie felt her stomach drop at the words. She was responsible for whatever happened to those children. They were taken because of her. “Are they...” She couldn’t force herself to finish the question.

“Nobody knows.”

Reuel’s weight shifted as he leaned toward the woman. “Why didn’t you do something?” His voice held no accusation, but Maria’s head sunk a little lower with shame.

“I only just got my son back. I don’t know what I’d do if...” She stopped mid-sentence, her head snapping up. “You can’t ask a mother to grieve her son twice in one day. It’s just not fair! What was done to those families is awful, but stepping forward was only going to bring trouble to my house.”

Shaking her head, Sophie had a harder time keeping her voice as neutral as Reuel’s. “Of course. I mean, it’d only be an entire village against a handful of people.”

“What village? Did you see any people protesting?” Maria paused as if waiting for an answer. “I didn’t think so. Call me a coward if you like, but don’t expect me to believe I’m the only one.”

Sophie wanted to challenge the woman, but a squeeze of Reuel’s hand on hers silenced her.

“Where’d they take the children, Maria?” Reuel’s steady voice seemed to calm Maria.

“To the infirmary.”

“Did you see any strangers near the infirmary today?”

“No. Just Naryn and Lilith.”

Reuel faced Sophie now, his eyes sparkling with confusion. “Who’s Lilith?”

She started to tell him, but Maria beat her to it. “She’s the other healer. Been here since the end of last spring.”

Nodding stiffly, Reuel pushed the chair back so he could stand. “Thank you, Maria.”

“You’ll save those kids, right? Like you did mine?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

They were just about to leave when Sophie remembered what’d bothered her earlier. “Who was with your son at the infirmary when Reuel flew over?”

“Naryn. I already told you that.”

“You actually saw Naryn with your son as Reuel flew over?”

The woman thought about the question for a moment. “Well, I didn’t actually see him with Naryn. I was outside watching the dragon fly.” She stopped, her eyes skidding nervously to Reuel. “Not that I was gawking at you or anything. We don’t see dragons very often around here.” She turned back to Sophie

before continuing. “But that’s who I left him with that morning. He said he and Lilith needed to run some tests on him.”

“If Naryn was the one that shot me down, that would leave Lilith with the child?”

“That’d mean they’re both involved.” Sophie stood as they talked. “We have to get to the infirmary.”

She saw him nod his agreement as they plunged back into the night.

“So we’re dealing with two clerics and a dragon.” Even at a whisper, Reuel’s voice seemed to shatter the silence of the night.

“And three children that might very well be dead by now.” A pang of guilt swept through Sophie as she thought back to how she’d spent the day.

“You didn’t know what was going to happen, and if we’d come back earlier we’d have lost the advantage of surprise.”

He was right, but she still felt responsible.

“We’ll find this dragon and put things back to right, Sophie.”

Not for the first time, she wondered why he’d decided to help, but she didn’t dare ask the question again. She was too afraid that he wouldn’t have an answer and would take that as a sign it was time for him to leave. And she didn’t know if she was strong enough to do this on her own.

It felt as if her boots were made of lead as they made their way to the infirmary. She didn’t want to face the horrors concealed by the plain-faced building. Didn’t want to believe the man she’d been betrothed to, the man she thought she knew, was in some way responsible. It’d been hard enough for her when he’d been just fanatical, but now? She shook her head as she thought about what Maria had told them.

Reaching the back of the building, her eyes went to an open window. She pointed at it silently, Reuel’s nod telling her he understood. She’d planned on lifting herself into the opening, but as she stepped in front of it strong hands wrapped around her waist and lifted her deftly. Holding on to the windowsill, she slipped through the small opening, only letting go of the solid wood frame when she landed silently on floor on the other side of the wall. She turned back to the window just in time to find Reuel squeezing through the small space. The sight could have been comical but, given the circumstances, she only found herself thankful for her small size.

They were in a storage room that she knew too well. It was the one her herbs were stored in. Brushing past shelves of plants, she made her way to the door. She could feel Reuel’s warmth as he followed her.

Stepping into the hall, she heard the soft whimpering of a child, the sound both terrifying and yet somewhat reassuring. At least one was still alive.

The fear for her own wellbeing disappeared as she let the sound guide her down the passageway and around a corner to where the hall ended at a staircase. She wanted to race down the stairs, even more so as the whimper turned into a full blown wail. But Reuel’s hand on her shoulder stopped her before her foot

could fall on the first step. When she turned back to look at him, he used the opportunity to squeeze by her so he was now in the lead.

It was irritating to be pushed to the back, but she recognized a losing battle when she saw one. And his stance told her there was no way he was going to let her go charging down the basement steps.

Resigned to her new position, she followed him down the stairs, the wail becoming more chilling with each step. But as bad as it was on the stairs, it was worse in the basement. There the stone floor caused the cry of terror to echo eerily down the long corridors, bouncing off walls as it went.

It was so loud that she couldn't hear the softer whimpering coming from a corridor to her left until it stopped. She was torn. Do they go straight or turn to the left? Reuel, however, didn't seem to hesitate. Reaching the branching corridor, he turned left. And, following him, she was secretly glad to have been spared the decision.

A few feet down the corridor they found the large metal bars of prison cells flickering in the torchlight. Even knowing what she did, it took a moment for the horrifying truth to sink in. This was a dungeon. Naryn, their healer, had a dungeon.

The first few cells were empty, but she could see two further up that were occupied. Small bodies sat curled into balls, their hands linked through the wall of bars that separated their cells. Her heart squeezed painfully at the picture of vulnerability.

"Get them back to their parents and wait for me at Maria's."

She looked back in the direction they'd come from as the wailing began again. But with a hand on her chin, he turned her back to the frightened children. "They need you Sophie. I'll take care of the other one."

Turning away from the children, her gaze caught his and held it. She could feel the cold fingers of dread walk up her spine. "I can't leave you here."

"You can." His hand swept over her cheek, the touch making her more desperate to persuade him of his foolishness.

"I won't leave you, Reuel. Not alone, not like this."

"You will." He turned her to face the children again, their wide eyes shimmering in the flickering light. "They need you more than I do."

She continued staring at the children, knowing in her heart he was right. And when she turned back to him, he was gone.

Dropping to her knees she waved one of the children to the door. "Do you know where the keys are?" She was proud of how calm her voice sounded.

She recognized Andy Seer as he crawled to the other side of the door. His blond curls were dirty and sweat had plastered them to his head, but the freckle-smattered face was unmistakable.

"They're hanging just there." His small finger pointed further down the corridor. "I saw her put them there when she left with Marcus."

She tried not to think of Marcus as she raced to the keys. She had to believe that Reuel would get to him in time.

Opening Andy's door, she noticed that the other child still sat at the back of the adjoining cell, her long hair pulled over her face like a veil. "Tasha, is that you sweetheart?" She couldn't be sure, the child was sitting in heavy shadows, but she looked enough like Marcus's little sister for her to take the guess.

"She won't talk."

Opening Tasha's door, she slipped into the cell and crouched down in front of the child. "It's me, Sister Sophie, I'm going to take you back to your mommy and daddy."

At that the little girl started wailing as loud as her brother.

"Her parents died. The men killed them."

Sophie's heart squeezed painfully as she reached for the girl but Tasha pulled further back into the dark corner. She didn't fault her for her mistrust, but she had to get her and Andy to safety.

With nothing else to do, she grabbed her as gently as possible and looked back at Andy. "Can you run, can you run fast, Andy?"

She waited for his nod before setting off with the screaming girl still bundled in her arms.

Chapter Seven

Reuel heard the sound of them fleeing up the stairs and felt his stomach relax a bit. Nothing had prepared him for the rage that'd consumed him at the sound of the child's wail, nor for the protectiveness that'd overcome him as he'd seen Sophie start for the stairs.

He'd told himself that he was helping because it was the right thing to do, because it was wrong to steal essence from any living creature. That's what his family had fought for.

It's what they tortured me with.

Shaking the thought out of his head, he focused on the corridor in front of him. He had enough to deal with without dragging his family issues into it. As it was, he was rushing into a fight with an unknown dragon because it was the only way he could keep a woman—a woman he had no business being with—safe. Yeah, he was in enough trouble without bringing his family into it.

Pushing the thoughts aside, he continued down the hallway. Right now he needed to focus on making it to the last child in time. Fortunately, it wasn't hard to find his way. The cry pulled him with every step. Down a hall and around a corner, he followed it until he reached the door that stood between him and the wails. Being so close to the sound of pain sent another shiver of rage through him.

His hand went to the cold metal of the doorknob just as the child's cries fell silent again. Fear raced through him. Listening to the child in pain was bad, but the silence could mean far worse things. He opened the door only wide enough for him to slide through it, then closed it silently behind him. He didn't want them to know he was there—not yet at least.

Glancing around the large room, he spotted two robed figures standing in its middle, partially encircled by thirteen glowing healing orbs, each orb sitting on its own pedestal. It was odd to see the orbs here. As far as he knew only dragons could use them, so they'd be no use to the humans whatsoever. And even if the humans could somehow draw the essence out of them and channel it to another, they'd never need that much energy.

A soft whimpering broke his fixation on the orbs, pulling his gaze to the floor between the two robed people. There, the child's body was curled into a tight ball. He was bigger than Reuel had expected, was probably thirteen or fourteen, but in the pose he looked vulnerable, fragile. He was still alive, but Reuel didn't know for how much longer. A good deal of his essence had been taken, leaving him with precious little to sustain himself.

Reuel had to fight against the urge to run over to him, to immediately channel his energy into the dying boy. He needed to know what was going on or he'd risk making things worse.

"He can't take much more."

It was Naryn. Reuel wasn't surprised at the deep voice that'd stood accusingly on Sophie's front lawn that morning.

"Fortunately, we don't need him to give much more. A little more will be enough."

The softly feminine voice, however, did surprise him. There was no mistaking it. The Queen's healer, Lady Lilith, gave almost as many speeches as the Queen.

It was an easy assumption that Sister Lilith and Lady Lilith were the same person, but nothing else about the scene made sense. The Queen would never approve of stealing essence from a sentient being. It was against the law.

"If we stop now he might still live." Naryn moved to stand between Lilith and the boy.

"It's never bothered you if they died before. You said to die while doing the Maker's will was honorable. That their innocence would assure them the Maker's grace."

"It is and it does." The tremble in the man's voice gave away his indecision.

Lilith used the opening to walk around him so she was standing next to the child. "Then why does this child's death bother you? Don't tell me Sister Sophie has finally gotten to you?"

"I just don't think we should push them so far, that's all."

"Maybe we could have taken less three months ago, but the villagers are on to you, Naryn, on to us. We'll be lucky if they let the night pass without coming at us with pitchforks and torches. If we finish this now, the fifteen will be filled."

Fifteen? His eyes searched the space behind them and found the two orbs he hadn't seen earlier. They were completely empty, their transparent glass barely glinting in the low light.

"How can they be filled tonight when we've been doing this for three months and yet all fifteen still sit empty?"

Lilith bent over to the child and ran her hand over his cheek, pulling away more of the blue energy. Standing, she channeled it into an almost-full orb.

Reuel had to grab onto the wall behind him to stop the room from spinning. Questions flew through his head so quickly he couldn't focus on any of them but one. Did the Queen know?

"They're not empty." Her voice was sugary sweet as she spoke. "They're filled with the children's energy. You can't see it, which is why the Maker sent me."

This time when she dropped back to the boy, a solid line of essence flowed from him to her. The child's head snapped back in agony and he started screaming again.

Reuel felt the acidic sting of bile as it crept up the back of his throat. Grabbing a large plank of wood, he stepped away from the wall and headed for Naryn. If he could get him out of the way, it'd make taking down the dragon that much easier.

It only took five large steps to bring him to the man, and one swift swing of the plank to knock him out. At the sound, Lilith once again released the child, his body slumping on the floor next to the cleric's.

"You should have killed him." Lady Lilith didn't bother to turn to face him as she spit out the words.

"How loyal of you."

"They're a subspecies. They don't deserve loyalty."

"They aren't a subspecies, Lady Lilith. And they're protected under the Free Rights Accord. Killing him, killing any human, would be breaking Empire law."

"So you admit to recognizing me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Aren't you worried I'll press charges?"

He had to shake his head at her words, sure he'd misheard. "What charges could you possibly press?"

"Interfering in royal orders. Surely you didn't think I would be here without direct orders from the Queen, did you?"

He didn't believe her, couldn't believe her. "The Queen ordered you to break the law?" He knelt next to the boy and quickly channeled enough of his energy to ensure the child could survive, but made sure not to take his eyes off of the other dragon's back.

"This essence is needed to save the Queen's life, and she sits above the law."

"No dragon sits above the law."

She snorted dismissively as she turned to face him, the cowl of her cape still concealing her face.

"Do you actually believe that?"

Her answer stunned him to silence. Her abuse of her magic and her ability to justify it was what his family had feared. It went beyond corruption to evil. It was what they thought he'd become someday. But they were wrong. "Yes, I do believe that."

"It was a rhetorical question. I couldn't care less what you believe or don't believe."

He growled angrily. "Really? Well what about this: I believe you're done here."

"I'm done when I have enough energy to save the queen."

"No, you're done now. You're out of victims."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

He stood again, bringing his shoulders square. "I know I found the two other children and freed them. But if you've got something else up your sleeve, please, do tell."

This got her attention. Pulling the hood back, she let it fall around her shoulders, revealing her long silver hair and liquid silver eyes. "You did *what*?"

“I freed them.”

Her mouth tightened in distain. “Do you know how much work it was to find such an isolated village and work my way into their trust? These are the last two orbs I need to fill. How will I fill them now?” She paused as her eyes studied him. “Or were you volunteering for their spot?”

He felt her probe at his energy, but with the distance between them, he was able to shield it from her.

“You can control essence. You’re strong in the magic too. How were you not sent to the healer’s temple?”

“My parents knew when to keep something a family secret.” His voice held more bitterness than he’d intended.

“But going to the temple is an honor.” She circled him, her eyes appraising him like a prize bull.

“Not when your grandfather is the one who crafted the Free Rights Accord.”

She laughed manically at the admission. “You’re Stom’s grandson? Oh, what delicious irony. To hate healers as much as he did, and yet he had one of the strongest ones ever born right under his nose, calling him Papaw. He must have cursed you every time his eyes fell on you.”

“That doesn’t matter.” It was a lie, but it was one he’d gotten used to saying over the years.

“What does matter, then?”

“Stopping you.”

“Really, you think you can actually stop me—or were you relying on Sister Sophie for that?” Her smile turned sadistic as she nodded towards the door behind him.

Reuel spun around, his heart clenching painfully as he saw the wide-eyed Sophie standing in the shadows next to the wall, a dagger clutched in her hands. He wished he was surprised at finding her there, but as much as he hated to admit it, he’d known she’d never wait patiently for him to finish this.

“She’s got enough essence to give me most of what I’m lacking.” Lilith took a step toward Sophie, but Reuel moved with her, keeping his body between the two women. “Not you too?”

“You’re done here, Lilith.”

She took another step toward Sophie as if she hadn’t heard him, but Reuel followed the movement. “You know, Naryn wouldn’t let me near her either, wouldn’t even let me be alone in a room with her. He’d rather see children drained than his precious Sophie. He actually thought he was doing them a service. Idiot.” Her voice held a sarcastic whine as she took another step toward Sophie. “Not that I minded, their essence was purer than most of the worn-out adults around here. And the sooner I got what I needed, the sooner I was out of here. But I did wonder what made her so special.”

He looked up at Sophie, already knowing the answer. The woman was willing to give her life to protect the children, the people of the village, even him. Not because she was sworn to, or because she had to, but because she truly believed their lives were worth the sacrifice. She was everything the law had tried to be, the ideal it’d been based on. He felt his throat tighten at the realization.

“It’s over! Leave her alone.”

Lilith shook her head dismissively at the words. “It’s over when I say it is. I only listened to Naryn because I needed him to introduce me to the community, to get them to trust me. But I don’t need you.”

She was right. The realization hit him like a sack of bricks. The only thing she needed was the essence.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he grabbed one of the orbs and held it in front of him. “You need me now. Need me to hold on.”

She paused, her attention now focused solely on him. “Bold move, young Black. But I’m willing to bet you won’t do it.”

He didn’t want to. It felt wrong, sacrilegious even, but he didn’t have any other leverage. “How sure are you?” He held the orb up a little higher.

“It isn’t logical. If you break that, that child’s life meant nothing. His death is wasted.”

He saw the twist in her logic. “His life was wasted. His essence can’t change that. It can’t bring him back. And if I drop this, he won’t be any more dead.”

Her face paled slightly at his words, but she wasn’t ready to give up. “But it can keep the Queen alive, and that’s something.”

The new line of logic left him ill. “You’re right. It means the Queen is no better than a common thief. I take that back, she’s far worse, she’s using the power given to her by the people to break the laws she’s signed to protect them.”

“No, you’re wrong. Your grandfather’s law is wrong. Put down the orb and you can come back with me. You’ll be admitted to the temple. You’ll be a hero.”

“My grandfather was wrong about many things. He was an arrogant, blind asshole. But he was right about the law.” He felt a numb detachment as he let the orb fall from his fingers.

She screamed as it hit the floor and shattered, but Reuel had already grabbed the next orb.

“You oaf! What have you done?”

“If you go back with these, it’ll only be a matter of time before others realize how much essence is out here, just waiting for the taking.” He let the second one slip between his fingers, watched as it shattered on the floor. “And I couldn’t live with that.”

“You’re killing the Queen!”

She darted to grab one of the remaining orbs, but Reuel was too quick, knocking it off its pedestal before she could reach it. Her low growl filled the chamber as it too shattered on the floor.

“Enough! I will get what I came for, even if I have to drain every man, woman and child in this forsaken place.” She turned toward Sophie as she spoke, her wings sprouting from her back. It only took a second for the transformation to be complete and for her to fly straight up, Sophie locked in a talon.

Wood from the ceiling and roof rained down on him as he quickly transformed, but he didn't notice. The look of terror on Sophie's face and the child at his feet were the only things that mattered.

As much as he wanted to go after Lilith, he couldn't just leave the child in the dark room to wake up alone, afraid and hurt. He had to get the boy to safety before he could help Sophie. Holding on to the child, he followed the other dragon up, deftly ducking and weaving through the holes she'd left in her wake. As he broke into the night, he saw a small crowd had gathered outside the infirmary, their heads craning upward, staring at the silver dragon hovering above the building.

He cursed under his breath as he studied the people. Of all the times for them to come out of their houses, they'd picked the moment they could be used as an energy source—or worse, a bargaining chip. Either way, they were a temptation he'd rather not have beneath them.

Spotting Maria, he swooped down to give her the boy and warn her to get the others back into their homes before flying up to meet the Silver.

"How many lives will you trade for hers?" Lilith's wings shimmered under the moonlight as she beat them rhythmically to stay stationary in the night sky.

He looked from Lilith to Sophie, his chest squeezing painfully.

"How many?" Lilith's voice was hard as she pulled a thin line of energy from Sophie.

Watching Sophie's face contort in pain he knew his answer. He would give her the whole damn village if she'd stop hurting the one that'd come to mean everything to him.

"Don't." Sophie's voice was weak. "Please, Reuel."

There was no mistaking the words, or their meaning. He felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. He wanted nothing more than to make the deal, but if he did, he'd be sentencing innocent people to their death. He'd be no better than Lilith. He'd be everything his family said he would become. Even worse though, he'd be betraying Sophie. She'd been willing to sacrifice herself for her people. How could he take that choice away from her? Would she be able to live with his decision if he did? Would he be able to live with himself knowing he'd turned his back on everything he believed?

"None." It was the hardest word he'd ever had to say.

Lilith roared loudly and threw her into the air. Reuel could see one of her talons swinging towards Sophie's body as she fell, its movement seeming in slow motion. But before the Silver could hit her mark, Reuel swung his tail into her talon's path while diving to catch Sophie.

As he wrapped a talon around her slight frame, he breathed a sigh of relief, but it didn't last long. Before he could put her safely on the ground, Lilith was on him, her razor sharp nails raking down his back. Burning pain swept through him, making it hard to stay focused on Sophie. His instinct demanded he turn, fight off his attacker, but his heart demanded he save the woman locked in his grip.

Roaring in pain, he dove as close to the ground as he dared, and dropped her. She landed with a soft thud, but was quickly on her feet.

Soaring straight up towards the Silver, he veered at the last minute and grabbed onto a wing with one of his talons. This time it was Lilith's roar that filled the air.

"The humans are so important to you. But are they really worth your own life?" As she asked the question, she rolled out of his reach. "Fly away and I'll never tell any of the others. Keep up your fight, however, and you'll face exile. That is, if you survive."

"If the Queen has started stealing from unwitting subjects, then she is no queen of mine. And if you aim to kill me, you'd best to do it quickly."

He started to pump his wings again, seeking to get higher than she was, but she charged him, her talons digging into his soft underbelly. The pain left him breathless.

With her talons embedded in his flesh, he had no way to stop her from draining his energy. No shield was that strong. And as both blood and essence flowed out of him, he began to feel cold. Tearing his body away from hers, he nearly passed out as he felt his skin go with her. This wasn't going well.

As she dove for him again, he dug his talons into her ribs and wrapped his wings around her, using his weight to drag her down. Together, they plummeted toward the ground. When they hit, he lunged for her throat, but he had little strength left. His wings were already numb and his vision was dimming. If only he could kill her, it would make it all worth it.

Her neck clamped tightly in his jaws, he could taste the metallic acid of her blood, but he was fading quickly. As his vision began to blur he wondered who would protect the people, who would protect Sophie, if he died?

His blood pooled wet and sticky around his feet and the comforting blackness of unconsciousness beckoned to him. He'd just started blinking rapidly to stay conscious when he heard Lilith cry out and felt her head fall still in his mouth. Spitting her out, he looked down to see Sophie holding a bloody dagger. He stared at her in disbelief for a moment, but his injuries were too great for him to ignore.

His legs collapsed underneath him as a series of blood-filled coughs rattled his body, but the smell of jasmine comforted him.

"A...dagger?" The question was strained as he fought to breathe.

"It was laced with Firesting wasp venom."

His chest shook with silent laughter.

Sophie knelt down in front of him and laid his head across her lap. "What can I do, Reuel?"

The numbness had enveloped his entire body now. Looking into her eyes, he saw the sparkle of unshed tears and the sight almost made his heart stop. "You're safe and that's enough."

"No, there must be something..."

"She did too much damage to my body and took too much essence for me to heal. There's nothing left." As if proving his words, he fell into another bloody fit of coughs.

Her hand moved to stroke the scales above his brow as she looked away from him, her eyes searching out the night. “You could take it from me.”

He felt nauseous just thinking about her suggestion. “I won’t, Sophie.”

“I’m offering it.”

“It’s too painful.”

“I survived her taking it from me, and I’ll survive you taking it.

“She took a thimble, I’d need so much more. I won’t do it.”

“There must be something.”

He shifted back into his human form, a process that used most of his remaining strength, but it was worth the cost just to feel her skin on his once more.

“Please Reuel.” She pulled him closer to her, holding him in her arms.

He could see how much pain she was in. Her aura was so black he could barely see her light. “I can’t take your essence, Sophie.” He paused, thinking carefully about what he was about to say. “But there is another way.”

“Tell me, I’ll do it.”

He almost couldn’t say the words. He was so scared she’d say no. Not because he’d die, but because of what the word would mean. “The bond...”

“Okay.”

Relief washed over him. “It’s forever, Sophie. There is no going back. No going our separate ways.”

Her kiss was the only answer he waited for. Wrapping his arms around her, he wove their auras together until there was no separation between the two. Now he was free to use her energy without stealing it. Feeling his magic begin its healing, he closed his eyes, welcoming the comforting blackness of exhaustion.

Chapter Eight

Reuel wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the sun shone brightly as he woke in the bedroom of Sophie's abbey. There was no mistaking the delicate arm that was thrown over his side, nor the distinct smell of jasmine. Rolling over, he found Sophie soundly asleep, her hair in beautiful tangles on the pillow.

He nuzzled her neck as he stroked her thigh with a hand.

"Hmm..." She rubbed her eyes and blinked at him several times before smiling. "You're awake."

"I am."

She kissed him gently, her mouth warm and inviting. Unable to resist, his hand made its way to her breast, waves of desire flooding through him as he coaxed her nipple into a taut peak. It was one of the more pleasant side effects of the bonding. With their auras joined, he could feel her emotions as if they were his own, just as she would his.

She moaned softly as she opened her body to him.

"I'm sorry." He pulled away from her teasingly. "You probably have questions, want to know what happened, what's going to happen?"

She smiled rakishly as she ran her hand up his inner thigh. "Oh, I know what's going to happen."

He couldn't help but chuckle at the brazen statement. She was nothing like the human females he'd read about. She didn't wilt under pressure, manipulate or practice deceit to get what she wanted. No, she faced things, himself included, head on and on her own terms.

"I love you, Sophie."

Her smile went from merely rakish to one of pure wickedness as she stared at him. "Do you now?" Propping herself up on one shoulder, she leaned over him until her mouth was a breath away from his ear and her breasts were pressed against his chest. "Then stop talking and show me."

He heard her gasp of surprise as he pushed her over and pinned her hands above her head. "These stay here." He let go of her imprisoned hands to see if she'd follow the command.

"And if they don't?" Immediately, she moved one hand to his torso, her fingers sliding down his skin, leaving a trail of fire. The woman had no need of magic; her fingers were capable of setting his blood on fire without it.

"Then I'll tie them to the headboard." He grabbed the wayward hand and put it back. "Your choice. Now, are you going to be a good girl?"

He could see the dangerous light in her eyes as he waited.

“I’m many things, dragon of mine. But a good girl isn’t one of them.”

“Oh, I was hoping you’d say that.” Jumping off the bed, he grabbed a length of silk and gently bound her hands before beginning his exploration of her body with both his hands and his mouth.

She writhed under him as he made his way down to the flat plane of her abdomen, his tongue teasing every inch of her skin. He loved the way its salty taste combined with her soft scent. Loved the way she moaned when his tongue dipped into her navel.

When he’d worked his way down to the black curls that hid her desire, he looked up at her briefly, his eyes locking with hers.

“Reuel...”

Her voice was heavy with passion.

“Please, I can’t take...”

The sentence ended in a gasp as he lowered his mouth to the sensitive skin, his tongue seeking out its liquid heat.

The wave of desire that swept through him almost sent him over the edge, but he fought against it, fought to regain control before he sought out the delicate bud again. Sweeping over it with just the tip of his tongue, he heard her moan as she spread her thighs for him welcomingly. An invitation he was all too happy to take advantage of.

When neither of them could take anymore of the teasing, he made his way back up her body. Her skin glowed and he could feel her heart racing with desire, but she was still bound. His hands deftly untied the knots before he continued.

“I can use my hands now?”

He could sense her confusion, but he just smiled. “Next time, my love.” He stared down into her eyes. Storm clouds paled in comparison.

Her hips came up to meet his as he thrust into her warm depths, their bodies moving in a perfect rhythm. He watched her face as her eyes clouded with pleasure, couldn’t take his eyes off of her as she threw her head back and moaned throatily. And when her body clenched around him, her nails digging into his back, he focused on only her. She was the only thing he desired, the only thing he needed more than the air itself. Finally, when he could take no more, when his body was screaming for release, he relinquished control.

After his breathing had calmed and his heart slowed, he shared one last, languid kiss with her before lying down next to her.

She settled into his arms, kissing his chest as she nuzzled against him. He listened to the slow rhythm of her breathing and felt her skin cool, all the while thinking of ways to heat it again. But, as they lay there, he began to feel the stirrings of anxiety from her.

“What’s wrong, Sophie?”

“Are you going to leave?”

He smiled at the directness of the question. “Where would I go?”

She lay perfectly still on his chest, like she was afraid he’d disappear that second if she dared to move.

“Home.”

“And where, might I ask, is this illusive home?”

“You know what I mean, the Dragon Empire.”

“I just killed the Queen’s healer, pretty much sentencing her to death in the process. I don’t think I’d be welcomed back with opened arms.”

She arched her head back so her gaze would meet his. “I’m so sorry, Reuel.”

“I’m not. I knew what I was doing.”

Her gaze turned uncertain, filling him with the need to reassure her. “My home is with you now.” A small nagging thought pushed itself into his contentment.

“Then this will be our home.”

He didn’t mean to, but he tensed at the statement. “What about the church, do you think they’ll accept your bond to me?”

“Turns out, this is one of those villages that doesn’t care if I’m church-sanctioned.”

“And how do the villagers feel about dragons?”

He felt her relax against him, her sigh one of contentment. “I don’t know how they feel about dragons in general, but they think you’re okay.”

The feeling of her body next to him was intoxicating. “Are you sure you’re not exaggerating?”

“I’m sure. After Naryn regained consciousness, he confessed to what was going on. Well, most of it, at least. He conveniently left out the parts that made him a complete monster.”

“How big of him.”

“It was enough.” She snuggled into him, her head rubbing against his chest.

“And did he survive this confession?”

“Just barely. They decided to send him back to his church to stand trial for heresy and murder.”

“That’s for the best, I guess.”

“And how does your family feel about humans?”

He winced as he thought about his family. “I don’t know, but I can tell you how they feel about me.”

“So Lillith was telling the truth?”

He hated the thought of her hearing what the dragon had said about him. “My grandfather discovered the healers were using criminals as energy sources. It’d been going on for centuries. Everybody just looked the other way, figured it was another way for them to repay their debt.”

“But your grandfather couldn’t look the other way?”

“No, he thought it was stealing. And it was. Unfortunately, he could never see healing as anything but stealing, taking from one to give to another.”

“But you don’t steal, wouldn’t steal even if it was to save your own life.”

“That you know that is enough.” And it was. “You know...” His hand made its way to her hip as they lay together. “It’s traditional to get a tattoo of your mate’s house when you bond.”

He felt her shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Really? And what would my tattoo be?”

He thought about the question for a moment. “I don’t know. My family has the scales of justice.” His throat tightened with disgust as he thought of the symbol, but the feeling of her lurching next to him brought him back to the present. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. When you talk about your family, I feel....” She stopped, confusion swirling around her.

“You feel what I do. It’s the bond.”

“I see.” Her voice was soft, reflective, as she relaxed again. “Well, given how you feel about your family, I think we should pick a symbol of our own.”

He relaxed as her understanding flooded through him. “A new symbol for a new family,” he said softly.

“I like that idea, a new family.” Her eyes caught his, her brow puckered in thought. “What about a dragon? A black one, flying high in the sky?”

He smiled as he pictured the dragon flying across her slender hip. “Sounds good to me.”

“You’ll get one too?”

“If that’s your wish.” As his eyes closed again, he couldn’t believe how remarkably right she felt in his arms.

Epilogue

Sophie ran her hand over her large abdomen as she tried to meditate. It'd been a rough year. Getting the villagers to work together again had been almost impossible. Those who'd stood behind Naryn had found it hard to win back the trust of the others, especially when the full nature of the plague had been revealed. But a good harvest and having Reuel there to insure there would be no more plagues had gone a long way in healing the wounds of that night. Her finding out she was carrying his child had been the final blessing that'd carried her through that dark time. She still thought of the village children as hers too, some more than others, but this was different, it was a little piece of Reuel and a little piece of her. It was a child of her own, one she'd be able to raise with Reuel.

Who'd have thought being excommunicated would work out so well? She chuckled to herself lightly.

"Mommy Sophie, mommy Sophie!"

Sophie looked down at the small girl who was barreling down the aisle, running full speed at her.

"Yes, Tasha, what is it?"

"Papa Reuel said I could plant the spring garden this year!"

She laughed at the girl's joy. "He did?"

"He promised."

"And what will you plant?"

"Berries, and flowers, and melon."

"She doesn't want any vegetables, though." Reuel's deep voice made her smile.

"And I suppose you told her that was okay?"

"Did you honestly expect me to be the bad guy?"

Sophie chuckled softly at his words, her stomach jiggling with her merriment.

"And what of Marcus? Did you two have a good day?"

The sparkle in his eyes disappeared at the mention of the girl's older brother. "He's coming around. But his scars are far deeper, his nightmares more real."

She nodded her agreement, but her smile suddenly felt stiff. "He'll get there."

"He's been through a lot. I don't hold his feelings against him."

It was comforting for her to know he understood and wasn't losing patience with the sometimes-wild boy. She wanted nothing more than for her family to be whole, but it was enough for her to know they were working on it.

Reuel continued to speak, but the meaning of the words escaped her as her abdomen cramped, the pain almost bringing her to her knees. In an instant she felt Reuel's strong arms wrap around her, giving her support.

"Are you okay, Mommy Sophie?" The girl was right with them, her eyes bright with worry.

"I'm fine sweetheart. I think the baby's ready to come. Isn't that wonderful?"

"How long have you been having pains?" Reuel stroked her hair as he brought her down to sit next to him, her head leaning on his chest for support.

Looking up into his eyes, she shook her head. "Most of the day, but that one was stronger."

"But I've been keeping a close watch; you haven't been worried or anxious."

"Why would I be worried or anxious?"

His shoulder's shook with silent laughter. "I've just heard most women are."

Another contraction took hold of her but as the pain peaked Reuel swept a hand over her abdomen, taking the pain with it.

"Reuel?"

"Silly woman, when will you learn? I'm a dragon."

She relaxed into his arms as the contraction ended.

"Maria!" Reuel's booming voice carried through the entire abbey. "Maria!"

When the woman burst into the room, she was breathless and her cheeks a bright red. "What is it?"

"It's time. Can you take Tasha?"

"If I take Tasha, who's going to birth the baby?"

Reuel looked at the woman, his head cocked to one side. It was a look Sophie knew too well; he was debating whether to answer the question bluntly or diplomatically.

"I am."

Maria looked a bit put off by his answer, but Sophie was relieved. There wasn't time for the arguments that always seemed to come with diplomacy.

"Are you sure? Women usually do the birthin' around here."

"He's not going to give on this one, Maria. Take Tasha out to play."

As the two left, Sophie felt another contraction, although this one didn't hold any pain. "We should move you to our room. You'll be more comfortable there."

She stood, but the urge to push came before she could take her first step. "I don't think I'll make it."

He looked down at her swollen abdomen and nodded. "You're right, he's already very low."

"He?"

"Yes, he."

"How long have you known?"

"For about six months."

“And you didn’t tell me!”

“You said you liked surprises.”

“Surprises...like flowers where there...was dead earth, or early spring warmth...” Her contractions were making it hard to talk.

“Now’s not the time to argue, Sophie.” His mouth twitched suspiciously, like he was suppressing a smile. “You’re going to need your strength.”

“You’re...right...” Her breathing was coming in ragged pants now. His magic may be able to take the pain away, but it couldn’t make birthing any less work for her body. “But I...plan on finishing this after...he’s born.”

“Let me help you get your breeches off.”

“Isn’t that what got...us here?”

He laughed at the joke as he undressed her, then guided her back to the floor. “Lie back, support your weight on your elbows, and when you feel the next contraction I need you to push.”

Keeling in front of her, he murmured inaudible words as she began to bear down and push with the contractions. Sweat beaded at her forehead and her legs were shaky with exertion when he spoke next.

“Wait, sweetheart, one second.”

There was a brief pause as he freed the shoulders and then the wonderful sound of a baby crying.

“He’s perfect.” Reuel’s voice was deep with emotion as he held the tiny baby.

Sophie looked up at him to see his eyes sparkling with tears.

“What should we name him?” She held her hands out, wanting to hold her baby.

“Jivan.”

“What does it mean?”

“Life.”

“Do you think he’ll be a healer?” Sophie felt the spike of fear mixed with anger, but didn’t react to it. She’d had plenty of time to get used to feeling his emotions through the bond. “Because I think it’d be great to have another healer to love.”

“Really? You’d be okay if he...” He paused and her heart contracted with his pain.

“I’d love nothing more.”

With that the fear and anger was swept away, replaced by the peace of acceptance.

“I don’t know. He’s got enough dragon blood to have some ability, but not enough for it to manifest at birth. It looks like we’re going to have to wait to see what he can do.”

She smiled happily at the thought of the coming years. “I’m willing to wait, I guess. Now, come here, little Jivan. I want to count your fingers and toes.”

Reuel handed her the tiny baby then moved to sit behind them, letting her lean on his chest for support.

“I love you, Reuel.”

“That’s good, because forever is a very long time.”

About the Author

With a background in psychology, Chandra Ryan has always had an interest in people, the interactions between them, and how these interactions are forged into relationships and trust. Though her worlds are based in a realm of paranormal fantasy and her characters may be of mythical origin, they come alive because of their humanity.

When not writing, Chandra spends her days with her family, finding inspiration from wherever it may come; playing with her kids, hiking through the forests trails with her husband, or watching the incoming freshman find their way while sipping her Spanish Latte at the corner coffee shop.

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*Human for half a month, dragon for the other half...
his salvation lies in the hands of a young, broken thief.*

The Dragon of Ankoll Keep

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Seeking a mythical treasure in a far-off land is, at best, a risky venture. And that's before Gamsin discovers an enchanted man/dragon thrown into the mix. He extends his hospitality, and generous spirit, to her. But, as Gamsin knows from bitter experience, there is always a price to pay.

Ankoll has been dragon-cursed for five hundred years and is desperate for someone to help him end his enchantment. Where Gamsin sees only hurt and pain, he sees a woman of depth and strength.

In his search for the master sorcerer who punished him in the first place,

Ankoll and Gamsin travel to the isolated Twilight Ranges and confront an evil previously banished from the world. Will Gamsin, a broken young woman, be strong enough to give Ankoll the support he desperately needs? And what of the man-dragon who begins to realize that a hated form may be the only salvation for their world?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Dragon of Ankoll Keep*:

Gamsin sat up in bed, gasping, her hand moving to her throat, feeling the soft cotton of her nightdress against her skin.

Nightdress?

She looked down at herself. She was in her bed, the blanket covering her. Around her, the furnishings of her chamber looked ordinary and mundane. One of her window's shutters was open, spilling bright morning sunlight into the room.

Sunlight?

But shouldn't she be at the top of the keep? And what happened to the dragon? She frowned, trying to concentrate. She remembered the dragon, remembered it turning into Ankoll and him approaching her. Oh, she had tried to do as he asked. Truly, he was an exceptional specimen of manhood and she wanted to show her gratitude for all he'd done—extending his protection and the peace of his keep to her. But he'd chosen the wrong deliverer. She was too weak and too broken to aid him and had said no.

What had happened then? She wished she knew, but a fog descended on her recollection.

Did they mate? Did he—?

Frantically, she moved a hand between her legs, but felt no betraying wetness. No, no man had found his own pleasure inside her body last night.

But if she had turned Ankoll down, who moved her to her room and changed her clothing before settling her peacefully in bed?

Gamsin threw back the covers and got up, dressing quickly. Hopping, she pulled on her boots then opened the door, flying down the stairs. She stopped on the second level when she heard sounds emerging from the kitchen, and approached warily.

“Greetings.” Ankoll smiled, turning at the sound of her quiet footsteps. He was carving a loaf of bread, laying thick slices on a platter, next to wedges of ham and yellow farm cheese. Beside the platter stood two mugs of ale. Despite herself, Gamsin’s mouth began to water. She’d tried her best for the past two weeks, but had to admit she didn’t have a tenth of Ankoll’s culinary skills. It was all she could do to hack off some inexperienced pieces of ham and wolf it down just to keep the hunger pangs away. In truth, she’d never eaten so well as when she dined with him.

“Breakfast will be ready in minutes,” he told her.

She moved to a bench and sat, still eyeing him with suspicion.

“You’re back to being human.” It was obvious, but the only thing she could think of saying.

He nodded his head agreeably, a smile playing on his lips. He looked the same as always, dressed in his usual open-necked shirt and dark breeches. His fingers were their usual lean lengths, not even slightly resembling flesh-rending talons. But Gamsin could not forget the night visions that had confronted her at the top of the keep.

“Will you...turn back into a dragon?” she asked, watching him.

Ankoll brought the mugs over to the rough wooden table, followed by the platter.

“No,” he paused. “Well, I don’t really know. Perhaps not.”

He helped himself to some food.

“But we didn’t...” Gamsin faltered. “I don’t remember...”

“We...came to a different resolution. The first part of the curse is lifted, I know that to be true. But I can still feel the spirit of the dragon within me.”

The spirit of a dragon...the sharing of one consciousness between two entities...

“What’s that like?” Gamsin asked, chewing on some bread. He’d made her two loaves before he changed, but they had only lasted a week and got hard and dry near the end. Now Ankoll was back, and she gratefully devoured a slice of the fresh, light loaf.

“To be a dragon?”

She nodded.

“It’s a fearsome beast, ruled by twin passions of greed and hunger. It’s difficult having such an unbridled spirit rule you for half of your life.” He drank some ale. “It frightens me to admit that such licentiousness can be liberating, until you hear the cries of people and realise that you’ve struck down one of their loved ones, or spirited away their only food for the winter.” He swirled the liquid around in his mug, watching it. “Maybe that’s what the sorcerer Beltrin had in mind all along when he laid such a curse on me—to show me the folly of ignoring my own people and putting my own needs above theirs.”

“But if the curse is lifted, then you can be ruler to your people again,” Gamsin countered. “You can bring the castle and your lands back to greatness.” It made her heart sink to say each word, but it was the truth.

Ankoll smiled and shook his head.

“I am centuries past doing this. My blood kin are all dust and my lands now belong to another lord. It is only the isolation of this castle—and the barriers I have put to its access—that keep me safe here. No, I have another task and that’s to find Beltrin.”

“The sorcerer who did this to you?”

“The curse is not fully lifted, I can feel this. I need to find him.” He lifted his blue gaze to Gamsin’s. “Will you help me?”

“I? Help you?” Surely she was the one responsible for the curse continuing instead of lifting. Hadn’t she done enough damage? “How could—”

“You are brave and smart, young Gamsin. You are also of this world and know more of its workings than I. My knowledge is centuries old and pitiful.”

“But how can you be sure Beltrin is still alive?”

Ankoll took a deep breath. “I can feel him still in this spirit world. His trace is faint, but I can track it. Tell me you will help me.”

She looked at him helplessly. Her, help a sorcerer? Surely he was jesting! But, then, how else could she make up for her betrayal?

“You have helped me once before,” he pursued. “You showed courage when none others, in hundreds of years, did. Help me again, Gamsin Thief. Please.”

Whore...gift...and unexpected ally.

Before the Storm

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Eden Trilogy, Book 1

In Dagra society, Alex is the lowest of the low—a “mare”, an object to be used by the nobility. When her owner, Stephen Garnath, gifts her to his greatest rival, she begins plotting her path to freedom. Nothing and no one will ever control her again. Not her degrading past, and certainly not her growing attraction to a man reputed to be an even crueler master than Garnath.

Robert Demeresna is instantly suspicious of such a generous gift. Yet she comes to him armed with only her sharp mind—a potent weapon he can use to defend his people from the enemy. And underneath, an unbreakable spirit that besieges the walls of his heart.

Slowly, Robert chips away at Alex’s defenses, striking sparks that make her begin to believe even a lowly whore like her could be worthy of him. Until Garnath springs a trap so cleverly hidden, war is unleashed before either of them sees it coming. A new kind of war fought with steam engines, explosives—and magic with a killing edge...

Warning: Contains violence, steam engines, steamier sex and multiple explosions of the unstable chemical variety.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Before the Storm:

At the end of the passage, Robert was in a window seat, looking down over the crude fortifications, but he turned to see her.

“Come and sit.” He swung his leg off the window seat to make room for her. “Is anything wrong?”

“Everything’s fine.” As fine as it could be under the circumstances. Alex felt awkward, because the window seat was short enough that she would be very close to Robert, but her body had already moved to obey and she seated herself.

“Not everything, or you wouldn’t have come looking for me. What is it?”

Now that Alex was closer, she saw the tired lines on his face and knew he had enough to worry about without her adding to it. But she couldn’t just sit in silence, and the polite meaningless chatter that had come to her so easily in Stephen’s castle was out of place here.

“I agree with Susanna about one thing,” she said. “We can’t win even a war of attrition, and if we flee to the Mistmarch, all Stephen has to do is to cut our supply lines and wait for winter. Then he could walk in and pick the skeletons clean.”

Robert sighed. “We can’t win *any* war, Alex. We don’t have the numbers. The Benevolent Ones favor large armies—I learned that much from my history lessons.”

“So you think we could all die?”

“I think that’s a distinct possibility, but one I’d like to forestall for as long as possible.” He did not look either terrified or bitter, and when he raised an eyebrow, it was an almost teasing gesture. “Is this how you imagined your life might end, fighting a battle with a band of renegades?”

Alex nearly smiled. “Renegade” was not a word she would ever have applied to Robert. “This isn’t too bad. How did you think you would die?”

“Oh, in bed at the age of eighty, with a big family clustered around me, bickering over who got what in my will. And from time to time, I’d hold my breath and stare at the roof, wait a minute and then sit up yelling, ‘Praise the gods, I’m still alive!’ until my family got so tired of it that they would hit me with a poker just to end the farce.”

That time she laughed—it was preposterous and funny and so much what she had come to expect from Robert. For a moment she could forget about the battle and the fact that he would die in the trampled, bloody mud outside Fulmion, if he was lucky.

“You’re a morbid woman,” Robert said, “giggling at a deathbed scene.”

“I don’t giggle.” Alex pretended to be offended. “Young girls may, but ladies do not giggle.”

Robert’s face grew serious. “Ladies also wouldn’t be caught in a window seat with a man to whom they weren’t joined. Did you know that?”

“Yes.” Alex wasn’t sure whether to meet his gaze or to look away. She could take a punch or even a beating, but she felt balanced on a tightrope, and one word from him would push her over.

“I thought you did.” Robert paused. “So why are you really here? Be honest with me, Alex—not only does it save time, but I hate guessing games. I don’t know how you feel about them.”

“I’ve never played.” Alex’s voice was suddenly hoarse, so she cleared her throat and looked at her skirts. It was true, she hadn’t. If a man wanted her, he asked Stephen, and if Stephen had something to gain, she undressed and did whatever was required. She had no idea how to convey her own interest, because she had rarely felt it before, and because it had been quite irrelevant when she did.

I’m making a spectacle of myself. I can’t just say out loud that I—that I want him. What if he still thinks I’m a spy, not to be trusted? And why should he be attracted to a mare?

The last word slapped cold sense back into her, because no respectable man would want a woman who had been used by countless other men. She swallowed, composed herself and looked back at Robert.

“Very well, I’ll be honest with you,” she said, her voice as strong as ever. “I think I was a fool to come here, not to mention forward and indelicate. I apologize for disturbing you.” She rose to leave.

Robert took her hand, his fingers closing around her wrist. Alex froze, uncertain whether to pull away or pretend that she hadn’t noticed.

“Sit down, Alex.” She obeyed, but he didn’t release her hand. “Forward and indelicate—what does that mean, exactly? What did you have in mind?”

Robert, don't do this to me! She stopped herself blurting that out with an effort of will, and she hoped he couldn't feel the corresponding rise in her pulse rate. Fine, if there was a battle to be fought, she could start it right now.

"What did I have in mind?" She glanced down at his hand. "Nothing that wasn't in yours, obviously."

He smiled, and she felt him stroke the back of her wrist with his thumb. "I've always liked that about you, Alex—you don't crumble at the first tap."

"You call that a tap?" Alex tried to ignore the light, rhythmic movements along her skin. She had taken threats and blows and magic, so she wouldn't let Robert disconcert her again.

"What do you consider a tap?" His voice was low and husky, and Alex felt her thoughts disappear while her skin prickled. She had to make him stop stroking her.

She grasped his hand and lifted it off her wrist, only to find that she couldn't let go. The ridged scar and the calluses on his palm felt rough against her fingertips, but his touch had been as gentle as if she were a kitten. Slowly, feeling that this was a dream which might end unless she was careful not to disturb it, she raised his hand and held it to her cheek. His palm curved to cup her face.

"That's a tap," she said.

"And are you close to crumbling?"

"Oh, no." She had never felt so nervous, and her heart thudded wildly. "That takes more than just one tap, remember?"

"I remember." Robert tilted her jaw upwards as he leaned closer. "May I give you another?"

Alex couldn't reply. She could barely think any longer, not when Robert was so close that she could have tipped her head forward and met his lips with hers, and in the next moment, that was what she did. Her eyes lidded as she simply let herself feel him, the tickle of his beard against her skin, the firm straight mouth against hers. It was the most chaste kiss she had ever had. Then he deepened it.

Alex gasped at the first touch of his tongue on her lips, lightly flicking against them, and when her mouth opened, Robert kissed her harder. His arm went around her waist, drawing her against his chest, and she felt the sudden softness of his hair under her hands as she buried her fingers in it, holding him to her. When his tongue brushed hers, she shuddered in startled pleasure, then returned the slow intimate touch with a desire that was rapidly burning out of control.

Most men had not bothered to kiss her first, but Robert did, tasting and exploring her mouth hungrily. And with any other man, that would have left Alex cold and untouched, but now her own passion met and matched Robert's. There was no need to feign her reaction. She slanted her mouth beneath his to take his tongue deep, drowning in the heat, a low longing sound in the back of her throat.

Robert broke the kiss, gasping, but before Alex, equally breathless, could recover, he was kissing her again. The corner of her mouth, her cheek, her earlobe, which he took into his mouth. She moaned when he found her ear, breathing into it, his beard brushing her skin like a fox's pelt. Then his mouth covered hers

again and Alex softly sucked his lower lip. She heard him groan even as he pushed her away gently.

“We have to stop,” he said.

All her desire chilled. “Why?”

Robert swallowed hard and looked away. “Alex, I don’t want you to think you have to do this. You don’t owe me anything.”

Him: hunter turned lover. Her: lover turned prey...

Summer-set

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At Prince Kaen's court, Ryuan holds a place of honor...and fear. He is wolf-born, and although he uses his shifter abilities to hunt down criminals who threaten the realm, he is considered more beast than man. Only in the chase and killing of outlaws is he truly free to be himself.

While tracking a rogue sorcerer, he encounters Calanthe, who not only is unafraid of him, but dares to tease him. Intrigued—and unaware that she, too, is driven by a purpose—he offers her a drink of water from his hands. It is an offer of more than a simple sip.

Calanthe accepts, for she has been sent by the sorcerer to distract Ryuan however she can, even with her body. Instead she finds herself giving in to the urge to make this grim warrior smile, then to something deeper. A summer of romance, rain and lovemaking.

When Ryuan awakes to find he has lost both her and the sorcerer's trail, he lets his wolf-born side loose with renewed determination. He will serve his prince and kill this sorcerer once and for all. But now, his true prey is Calanthe...

Warning: This title contains explicit sex, earth-shaking confrontations, a hero who could rip your heart out, and a romance that will put it back in.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Summer-set:

He had been hunting a man into exile when he first saw her. She was lifting water from a well. Against the dimming sky she was a seductive foretelling of the night, with her smoke-dark eyes, earth-dark skin and raven-dark hair, falling free down her back as no respectable woman would wear it. Gold glinted around her neck with the last of the sun's light.

Ryuan scented no danger, so he turned human. He wore nothing but a chain about his neck, from which dangled a signet ring. It identified him as well as his name would.

She looked up at his approach and her eyes caught on that telltale signet. Then her gaze slipped lower for a moment before she caught herself. She unhooked the bucket. "Water, my lord?"

Grown men blanched at the sight of him, knowing him to be wolf-born, while women turned away from his nakedness. She seemed unfazed. Intrigued more than thirsty, he cupped his palms and let her carefully pour water into them so that he could sip. "My thanks."

"You've been on a long road."

And no one ever spoke to him about his hunts. They were his business and the prince's, the execution of law, not fodder for gossip. "You know who I am?"

Her eyes flickered to the signet again. “The prince’s hunter. Lord Ryuan. No other man would be fool enough to wear that. And nothing else.”

Her forthright manner was more refreshing than the drink she had offered. “Your name?”

“Calanthe, my lord.”

“And what do you know of my journey so far, Calanthe?” He let suspicion harden his voice. He didn’t want her to be in league with the sorcerer, a sentiment that surprised him, but how else would she know of the path he had taken to track the man?

She wasn’t oblivious to the danger she was in—he heard her pulse grow faster—but she answered readily enough. “It started at the capital, did it not? Perhaps it’s shorter as the wolf runs, but for the rest of us, it’s more than a tenday away.”

He relaxed, chuckling at how he had overlooked the obvious. “My apologies for the interrogation. My journey did start there. And it has been long, even as a wolf.”

“And you are parched in either form, I’m sure. They always warn us about the hungers of the wolf-born, but they should mention the thirst.” She smiled and gestured for him to cup his hands again.

He did so, but this time he watched her instead of the flow of water. Her hands, like her figure, were slender and graceful yet strong. There was a sureness to her that he liked—not the arrogance of the court women, but an unaffected confidence that his presence did nothing to diminish. She spoke easily of him in his wolf-shape, made light of the wild-mind.

He wondered what this woman would be like in bed. Just as bold and teasing? A touch careless, though, in her attitude.

“You shouldn’t discount danger so easily,” he said. “Not from me, but there are men in this area who would part you from that gold.” There were lawless men in these parts. Ironically, it had been the death of one of them that had brought him here. Ryuan would deal with them if he encountered any, but for now he had greater prey to pursue.

“With the prince’s hunter here to serve justice?” She shook her head. “Surely there’s nowhere safer right now.” Was that a trace of banter in her voice, as though his prowess could be questioned?

“I am on hunt,” he said. “I won’t be lingering long.”

“You spurn my hospitality, my lord?” She tilted her head and looked at him in wide-eyed appeal, still playing her game of innocent challenge, and yet the thought of spending a night with her was a temptation.

It had been long—too many nights spent curled as a wolf in dens he had dug. There had been a court woman the night he had left the capital, but he had already forgotten which one it had been. Those were empty rituals of pleasure, enjoyable but always the same: some woman seeking the thrill of bedding one of the wolf-born, perhaps also trying to win the prince’s favor.

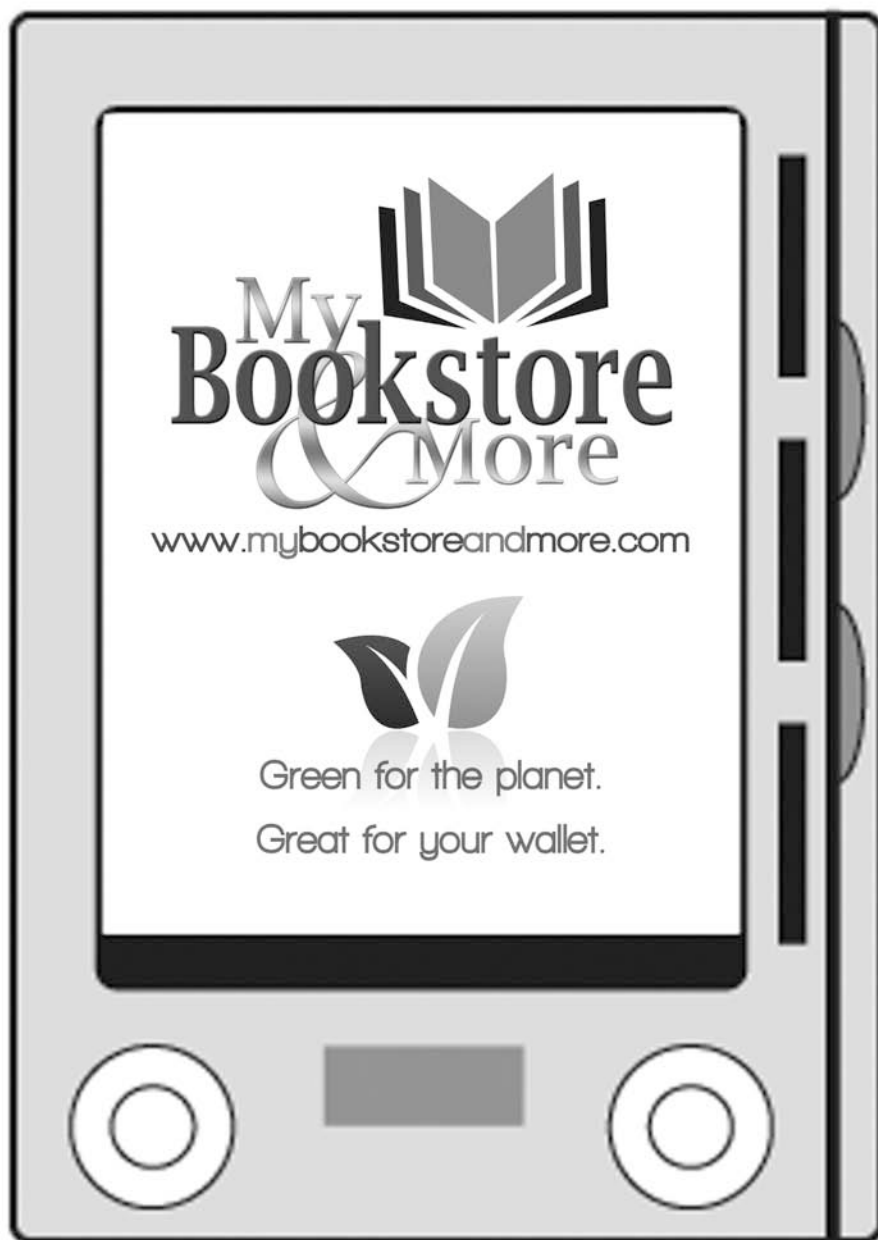
Calanthe would be different. He would stay a night, he decided, if this woman were willing to share more than a roof.

Ryuan nodded to the bucket and said, “I won’t spurn more water.” But this time, after she poured and set the bucket upon the rim of the well, he kept his filled hands still and said, “But I interrupted you just as you were pulling this up. You too should drink.”

There were two choices for her here. He was curious which one she would take.

She looked at him with a sudden awareness that hummed between their bodies. She wore her hair unbound, so she was neither a shy maid nor a wed woman and would know his words for an invitation. He didn’t move at all, though. There were simple ways out for her—she could deny thirst, or reach into the bucket with her own hands. That she was a free woman did not mean she was any man’s.

She was still unafraid, he was glad to see. Her pause was to consider him, and as her gaze moved over him, he felt himself stirring. An expression he couldn’t read passed over her face. Then she said gravely, “A generous gift, my lord. Offering water which I gave to you.” But the corner of her mouth quirked, and she slid her palms beneath his to steady them and drank from his hands.



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