



# BLOOD OF THE WOLF

BRYNN PAULIN



THE  
CRUENTUS DRAGONS  
SERIES

***Blood of the Wolf***  
***A Cruentus Dragon Story***

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Blood of the Wolf

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*For Karen, whose true love lives on in her heart.*

## *Prologue*

### **Four Years Ago**

Lucan Cooper tapped his fingers on the steering wheel of his midnight-blue Porsche as he navigated twisting mountain roads by rote. Though he should pay more attention to the familiar route, his mind lingered on the intimate scene he'd played out with Meda that morning after he'd woken from that horrible dream. She'd made that awful foreboding go away.

God, he loved her. Every day with her seemed the greatest gift a man could be given.

The love they'd shared this morning surpassed any other. He wanted to turn around and get another dose of that perfection.

That was his life. Perfection.

Great job. Fantastic woman. Wonderful home. A promising future... And hopefully soon, a family on the way. Not bad for a man who'd started out with nothing as an abandoned infant.

He navigated another turn which would take him east toward town. The sun was beginning to break the horizon, the glorious beams of dawn promising another balmy, cloudless, blue-skied day. Maybe he and Meda could eat outside on their deck tonight. It might be slightly chilly, but he was aching to use his new grill.

Absently, he pulled his sunglasses from the visor before the growing light blinded him.

"Man, it's hot this morning," he muttered. He rolled down the window, wondering why he was so warm when the forecast had called for sixty-degree weather. The fresh air rushing past the car did little to help cool him. As he went around a slight curve and sunlight filtered through the open window, he bellowed in pain.

*On fire!* He was on fire! His skin bubbled under the sunlight. Tongues of flame erupted down his arms, and he screamed, his voice a higher, more terrified pitch than he would ever have imagined. Almost immediately, his clothing ignited, and the scent of scorched skin and hair filled the vehicle. He clawed at his garments to get the material off his body and slapped at the blaze engulfing him.

Unable to recognize anything through the blinding pain and the desperation to make it stop, he couldn't avoid the guardrail designed to keep travelers from plummeting down sheer cliffs as they navigated hairpin turns. The screech of metal ripping metal melded with his shrieks as the car tore through the barrier.

Even through his terror and pain, dread and desolation filled him, empty finality filling his soul. As he fell and blackness overcame him, he knew he'd die. Just like in his dream. And he'd never hold his beloved again.

## *Chapter One*

**Now...**

“Lucan...”

Lucan looked up to see his brother, Janos, approaching him. He closed his eyes and bit back a groan at what he knew was about to happen. The discussion. Lucan had been avoiding it for weeks, dodging his brother, who also happened to be the leader of the Cruentus Clan.

Janos had an agenda, and Lucan wanted no part of it.

“No,” he said, glaring at his sibling. Though he’d lived here for only four years, since Janos and their brother, Niko, had rescued him from the fiery accident that had ended his old life, he felt a familial closeness that allowed him to stand up to the clan leader when few others would.

“You can’t avoid this,” Janos said, pulling a wrinkled piece of parchment from his pants pocket and sitting in the chair opposite Lucan in the great hall of the Cruentus compound. Four levels of balconies circled the cavernous space, and though Lucan was alone with his brother, he felt the curious stares of the other Dragons who lived in this community.

Lucan cringed. The dreaded paper. He knew exactly what it was. He’d seen Janos bandying it about, and Lucan had been having vague dreams about it for over a week. It was the list of Cruentus Dragons and the mates that had been detected for them by the Dragon council. Janos had been systematically going through the scanty offering, that in no way came close to covering all the clan’s members, and connecting his people to their matches.

“Stop right now,” Lucan told him. “I don’t want to know who’s on your list—”

“She’s your mate, Lucan.”

“I *have* a mate. I don’t need another one.” Meda would always be the woman for him. It didn’t matter what some magical scrying said. It didn’t matter that she thought him dead or that they could never be together. She was his one true mate, and the rest didn’t matter.

Janos tipped his head in acknowledgement. “I understand how you feel. I know how I’d feel if I was separated from Scarlett.” Scarlett was his woman, to whom he’d been joined a little over a year ago. “But you’ll feel differently about being alone in a hundred years or so. You’ll get...lonely. Trust me. I know. I’m far older than you.”

Older was an understatement. Janos was the spawn of their father’s first mating, nearly a thousand years before Lucan’s birth, but in Lucan’s opinion, that didn’t make his brother any smarter about what was going on in Lucan’s heart.

“I choose not to mate,” he said firmly. “If in a *hundred years or so*, I feel like I want to fuck someone, I’ll find someone to screw.” He stood and stared down at the raven hair so like his own. “But as far as lonely goes, I don’t think I can get any worse off. Another woman won’t make it better. That might make me a lovesick fool in your eyes, but the fact of the matter is, I committed to her and even though I’m dead to her, even though we can’t be together because of this stupid *curse* on me, I belong to her. Period.”

Turning on his heel, he marched off, heading toward his personal quarters—unfortunately a few doors away from his illustrious leader’s. Janos fell in step with him, and Lucan didn’t bother to suppress the growl that rumbled in his throat. At this rate, his scales would be sliding into place, and he’d be spouting fire at Janos. The Dragon inside him was just as agitated as the man who shook with the irritation of being told he had to take a woman he hadn’t chosen.

“It’s not a curse,” Janos said quietly. “It’s your species. Dragon shape-shifter. A gift.”

Lucan let out a burst of derisive laughter. “Gift? Are you for real? We have people trying to kill us—just because we exist and they don’t like it. Talk about xenophobia. Being able to become a Dragon isn’t all that great. In case you’ve forgotten, it hurts. Being engulfed in a ball of flame—involuntarily—the first few times, that was a bitch, too.”

“I know the molting is uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable?” Lucan muttered under his breath. Maybe if he kept walking, his “big brother” would leave him alone.



“And the shift gets easier the more you do it. You need to stop fighting it. That’s why it hurts.”

“I fight it because I don’t want it. You know what I want? I want to be normal. I don’t want to live for thousands of years. I don’t want to have scales and fly. I had a great life. That’s what I want.”

“Geez, Lucan, put on your big girl panties and deal,” a new voice enjoined.

Lucan glared at Janos’ twin, Niko—the brother who pissed him off more often than not. “Fuck off, Nicky.”

Niko growled. He hated the nickname, and Lucan knew it. “Perhaps the one who needs fucking is you, *Wolf*. Just take the damn name from Janos, go get your woman—poor thing—and get on with life. We’re all about done with the whining.”

“I don’t whine,” Lucan grated. “I just want to be left alone!” He pointed at Niko. “And don’t even start in on me about sulking. I do what I have to around here and keep to myself. There’s nothing wrong with that.” And that was how he’d gotten the nickname, Wolf. A year after he’d come here, people had taken to calling him the lone wolf since he spent most of his time away from everyone.

Janos gave Niko a pointed look. “Go away. I can handle this.”

“It’s always the same,” Niko complained. “‘Shut up, Niko. Go away, Niko. Blah, blah, blah.’ You guys need to lighten up.”

Lucan kept walking, ignoring both his brothers. His suite of rooms was on the top floor of the compound, and since he refused to shift and fly, he had a climb ahead of him. His leader continued on at his side while his other sibling shifted and flew off with a few muttered words of reproach. Though Lucan happened to like Niko a lot, today, he was glad to see him go, especially after his unfair words.

Yeah, Lucan wasn’t thrilled by the turn his life had taken, but he wasn’t sitting in a corner mourning his losses. He wasn’t listening to depressing, emo music and writing bad poetry. He was getting on with his life, doing his job in the Dragon’s community and trying to forget his old life. He even managed to keep the memories at bay for hours at a time now, something he’d once been pretty sure wouldn’t ever happen.

He and Janos continued on in silence for a few minutes.

“Lucan,” Janos finally said. “I fear I’ve left you alone too much.”

“I’m fine.” Lucan’s gaze shifted away from his brother even as he kept his face forward. “I’ve been busy.”

“I assigned you a weighty task.”

“There’s no one better to do it,” Lucan replied. “I’m the best web designer and information systems tech in our community. It’s taking time to build the network is all. It’s good ‘wolf’ work for me,” he chuckled.

“A Dragon called Wolf,” Janos laughed. “Who would have thought?”

“Around here, stranger things have definitely happened. I might be the most normal man in this place.”

“Perhaps. So...things are going well and you’ll be able to free up time soon? Maybe start working normal hours...”

Lucan’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “There’s a lot of work to be done,” he replied slowly. “Why are you asking?”

Janos shrugged, one side of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. “Meda might want more of your time than you’ve made available lately. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’ve been working from the time you roll out of bed until you crawl back into it—showering optional. For the record, you’re giving IT guys a bad name.”

“It’s not that bad and you know—” Lucan stopped and blinked. “Did you say Meda?”

His brother pulled out the parchment he must have jammed back in his pocket when they’d left the lower level. He glanced at it. “Andromeda Hutchens. That’s your Meda, right? I didn’t realize at first—not until Scarlett mentioned the name similarity and I did research. She’s always been Meda Cooper to me because that was your last name and you’ve never called her Andromeda.”

“She hates it,” Lucan murmured, pulling the paper from Janos’ hand. Dread and hope warred in his middle. Though his dreams, which he’d discovered were his gift, had gotten stronger since his change, he hadn’t seen this coming.

Was Meda really his intended mate? Could she ever forgive him for not returning to her once he’d recovered from his first molt? Worse, could she accept what he was now? *He* could barely accept it. How would she? He wasn’t the man she’d known, Lucan Cooper. He was Lucan Aventech, Dragon shifter, loner and stranger.

His finger traced her name. “She’s really my Dragon mate...” he murmured. His brow furrowed, and he looked at Janos’ arm and the sepia mating mark that covered his skin like a filigreed tattoo. “Then why don’t I have the mark? I thought it appeared after intimate exposure to one’s mate—or when a Dragon shifts in his mate’s presence.”

“You hadn’t come into your nature.”

“Right,” Lucan replied darkly. *Come into his nature.* D-day. Age twenty-five and three months. The day all Dragon’s molted for the first time. Janos and Niko had been watching for him to change.

Lucan had been lost as a baby, separated from Alexi, his own twin brother, his parents and his older brothers who were also twins. “Lost” he’d since discovered, was a euphemism for kidnapped. By the time, he’d been found, the kidnappers had abandoned him, and he’d been shunted from foster home to foster home, until eventually he’d been taken in by the Coopers who’d raised him.

When his true parents had found him, he’d been seven years old and settled in a loving family, adopted in good faith by a couple who couldn’t have their own children. His parents had made the most difficult decision of their long lives. They’d left him with the Coopers, knowing in eighteen years, he’d be brought back into their fold. Though they’d mourned the loss of their child, they’d known the wait was short for a Dragon. A blip in time.

Lucan glanced over at his brother. Janos was over a thousand years old. Eighteen years really was nothing—except Lucan’s parents, his biological parents, hadn’t survived until his molting. Just before his return, they’d taken a trip to the Dragon’s home dimension, had never returned and were feared dead.

And it had become even more important to the Aventechs to reclaim their lost sibling.

He looked at his arm, thinking once more of Meda. “So, now, if I’m near Meda, the mating mark should appear?”

“Unless this information is wrong, but I doubt it. So far, every match has been correct, and not just with our clan. The council leader sent Riven to find her, and he finally has. You should reclaim her as quickly as possible. It’s not safe for the Mates until they’re fully united with their Dragons.”

That was the xenophobia again. The Dragon enemies, the Djinn and Elvish, were bent on wiping out the population of Lucan’s people in any way they could. Since attacks were often

ineffectual due to the Dragons' armor and magic, the Djinn and Elvish went after the Mates who had neither protection until they were joined with their Dragons.

"Where did Riven find her?" Lucan asked then started walking again, the thought of another man near Meda causing his stomach to churn. Riven was an oddity, a half-breed of part Dragon and part Djinn. The Djinn were unaware of his mixed blood and his loyalty to his father's people. He worked as a spy, procuring information for the Dragons using dark, earth magic he'd learned from his mother.

Lucan trusted him, though several Dragons didn't.

"In a small town in eastern Wyoming," Janos answered. "She moved from Colorado after your, um, accident. She's teaching there."

"Around kids..."

Janos nodded, getting Lucan's meaning. Unprotected, Meda was in danger from their enemies, but so were any people around her. Lucan needed to bring her back here before anyone got injured or, worse, killed.

God, she was going to be pissed. And hurt. And *pissed*. He could take that. He wasn't afraid of her outrage, and he'd do everything he could to soothe the hurt caused by his supposed death and the fact he hadn't gone back to her when he could. Guilt had plagued him all this time. It had taken two years to complete the initial molting—uncontrollable bursts of flames that had made him a danger to everyone who didn't have scales. It had been impossible to go to her. He could have accidentally killed her. Then after...

Too much time had passed. The shame, the guilt and the determination not to disrupt the new life she'd built had worked together to keep him away. She'd hate him for everything she'd been through when she'd thought he'd died.

And then there was the part about being a Dragon. Shifters were things of fantasy, not real life. Meda didn't believe in what she couldn't see. She'd think he was lying unless he showed her the truth—then she'd be horrified and disgusted by what he'd become. She'd never want him again. Never.

He shook his head. How could she be his true Mate?

"Are you sure?" he asked. "That she's the one? She'll never accept this." He swiped a hand in front of his body indicating his unseen change.

“Lucan.” Janos stopped him, placed his hands on Lucan’s shoulders and stared into his eyes, his head bent forward slightly with his fervent intent. “She *will* accept you. You are her mate, and she’ll feel that, just as you’ll feel that. There will be anger, and definitely adjustment, but in the end, you two will be one.”

Lucan nodded. He wasn’t so sure, but for her life and the lives of the innocents around her, he had to try.

## *Chapter Two*

A mix of desire and regret pushed through Lucan as he stared across the potholed street at his woman. She hadn't seen him yet. When she did, all hell would break loose. And that would be in about thirty-five seconds.

Meda stood before a rundown school building, dressed in jeans and a button-down white shirt. Her hair fell around her shoulders in golden waves as she waved goodbye to a bus. She smiled brightly, but even from this distance, he could see the tinge of sadness around her. Perhaps that was his reptilian senses. Since his change, he picked up on things he hadn't before. Or perhaps he was projecting. Maybe she wasn't sad at all.

No, there was something. Her head tipped forward, and her hands went into her pockets. While he watched, her slim shoulders lifted in a sigh. The sun glinted on her hair as it swung forward in a sleek mass.

He couldn't wait to touch it once more, to feel her warmth against him, to breathe her air...

For that moment before she killed him.

Hell, finding out he was still alive would be traumatic for her. Then he had to cruelly rip her from the life she'd built over the past four years. She seemed settled and content. Lucan's heart ached for that and what he must do, but it was the only way to save her.

"Buck up, Wolf," Riven said beside him.

"Don't call me that." Lucan glanced over at the man. It was obvious he was a Cruentus Dragon, with his black hair and eyes flecked with yellow. Most of the men of the clan shared the look. Lucan suspected that somewhere, way back before the Dragons had come to inhabit earth, the same blood had flowed through many of the family lines comprising the community.

Riven chuckled, shaking his head at Lucan's growl, but their attention was riveted across the street. They silently watched the beautiful woman. She brushed her hair from her eyes, looked into the distance, then with a shake of her head, turned toward the school building. Lucan longed to feel those silken tresses along his skin once more and to absorb the heat of her sky-blue gaze as she hungrily watched him.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Riven continued. "She tries to kill you? Your dragon armor will keep you safe."

The worst that could happen was that she'd hate him.

As she went, Meda waved goodbye to the another group of preschoolers who were leaving with their parents. The children's welfare alone was reason to step back into her life. The Dragons' enemies wouldn't think twice about collateral damage, even if that damage was a child. And since Lucan was a full-blood Dragon and she, though she didn't know it, was his mate, that made her a target.

Meda.

Just being this close to her stirred his blood. He could sense, as all males of his race could, that she had Dragon's blood running through her veins and marking her for his people. Strange that he hadn't felt it like this before they'd been parted, but as Janos had said, Lucan hadn't yet come into his nature before.

But it was more than the Dragon's blood...

She was his, and he could feel it with a deep gnawing in his gut, a gnawing that grew to a painful need at being this close to her. The need, stronger now, had plagued him for years. It could have been worse. If he'd been a full Dragon before they'd parted, the pain of being separated this long would likely have killed him. At very least, it would have driven him mad.

"How do you want to do this?" Riven asked.

"What?" For a moment, Lucan had been so consumed with Meda, he'd almost forgotten the other man stood beside him.

"How do you want to take her? You can't just walk up to her and say 'hi' then bring her home to the compound, Wolf. She thinks you're dead, and I expect she'll cause a problem about going—they all do. I haven't met one yet who hasn't."

*They being Dragon's mates.*

"Well, actually..."

“Lucan!” Riven rasped as Lucan started across the street. Meda was alone now, and approaching her might truly be his best course of action. He didn’t feel particularly comfortable leaving her unprotected in this somewhat seedy area—and that had nothing to do with his enemies. His blood pounded as he drew nearer, coming up behind her as she turned to go inside the building. A tingle ran up his arm as he lightly touched her shoulder. The first touch after so long...

If only the change and his fear of her revulsion hadn’t kept them apart.

Startled, she swung around at the whisper of fingers on her shoulder. “Can I help—”

Her eyes went wide, the color draining from her face.

“Meda,” Lucan whispered, greeting, claiming and longing all wrapped up in that single word.

She shook her head as if she couldn’t believe what she saw. Her legs wobbled, and he reached out to steady her, but she scrambled a few steps backward.

“No,” she breathed, putting voice to her disbelief. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am.”

Her head snapped from side to side. Her spine went rigid, and her eyes narrowed to outraged slits. “Who...are...you? And you sure as hell had better not try to say ‘Lucan’.”

“Meda...” he pleaded. “It’s me. Love, please... It’s me.”

“No,” she denied, rejecting the possibility.

“Yes. I’m Lucan.”

She backed toward the ramshackle door to the school. It looked as if it wouldn’t keep out a rabid raccoon, much less a full-blooded Dragon. Her bottom lip trembled, her shock palpable as she stared aghast at him and appeared a breath from screaming.

He couldn’t blame her. He’d been “dead” for four years.

“You’re not...Lucan,” she whispered. “Lucan is... Lucan would never leave me and let me think he’d been killed in a car accident. A *horrific* accident. He’s dead. And you’re...I don’t know who you are. You’re...cruel—despicable to even *try* to make me believe... Just...just get away from me. Stay away from me!”

Her pain shredded him. He’d always known it would. He’d felt it. Meda’s presence had never left him as he’d adjusted to being a Dragon and gone through the ugly, painful molting.



Like a phoenix, he'd risen again, stronger and harder, nearly invincible, but he was empty save for loneliness and the burning flames of desire for this woman.

"Get away from me," she yelled as he took a step forward. Her hand whipped out of her pocket. Suddenly, a stream of liquid shot into his face, blinding him. His eyes burned, but the pain was far less than what his body had endured during molting. Valiantly, he fought to keep from shifting into his Dragon form, which was his natural defense and the only thing that would instantly disable her assault. Yet, that would terrify Meda, so instead, he reached for her, but the rickety door slammed before he caught her arm.

A deep, very male, very amused sigh sounded beside him. "Well, that worked," Riven commented as he grasped Lucan's arm. "Come along, Wolf." He pulled Lucan away from the doors. "Okay, shift. It's safe."

Trusting Riven because it was too damned painful not to, Lucan changed to his Dragon form. The burning on his face and sinuses instantly cooled as the reptilian armor slid over his human skin, he grew a half foot in height and gained about fifty pounds of muscle. Impatiently, he counted to ten then allowed himself to shift back. Breathing heavily against the familiar agony that came with the change, he waited for his body to shrink back to his smaller shape and for the discomfort to alleviate. Others assured him that the shape-shifting would eventually be painless, but so far, that wasn't the case.

"Nice plan," Riven laughed.

A growl built in Lucan's throat.

"Shut up." Saints, he'd screwed that up. She might not physically harm him, but she could skewer his soul. "Pepper spray. She sees me after four years, and she fucking pepper sprayed me."

"Take a look around. This is hardly a safe, gated community."

"But she knows me!"

"Does she? She looked at you as if you were a demon. Or else, she must really *love* you, mate." Riven chuckled. "Mmm, yes. Pepper sprayed for love. That sounds about right. I told you *they're* always trouble. Mates... Can't live without them; hell of a time getting them." He sighed, and Lucan suspected Riven was thinking of his own woman, who was so far from reach Riven would never have her.

Riven raised his brow. “By the way, she’s hightailing it through the building, probably heading for her car in the lot on the other side.”

“How do you... Never mind. It’s your funky Djinn-sense, right?”

His companion made a face at him. “Sometimes you are *so* human.”

“Thought I was one until I was twenty-five.”

“Open your ears man. You can hear it, too.”

And Lucan could. Meda was running down the tiled hall that ran the length of the building, her low heels clicking with each step.

He went back around the corner and stared at the door that wouldn’t keep him out for more than the moment it took for his shoulder to connect with it. She wouldn’t make it out the other end of the school before he had her in his arms and airborne as he flew them to the Cruentus compound.

“Time for round two,” he muttered.

“Don’t screw up this time. I’ll see you back at the compound tonight after my meeting with the Dragon Council.” At the mention of the governing body, he glanced at his watch.

“And...I’m late. Wish me luck. They’re not as laid back as your brother, our elder.”

Lucan shook his head. He’d heard numerous rumors of the council head’s benevolence. Since Riven reported to that man, Lucan was sure the halfling was merely being dramatic.

With a puckish grin, the Djinn-Dragon stepped backward and, again using his Djinn-inherited abilities, opened a portal and disappeared from sight.

*Don’t screw up*, he’d said. Lucan wouldn’t. Though he’d feared otherwise, he’d made the mistake of hoping Meda might be happy to see him. Stupid of him. Of course, happiness wasn’t the first thing to come to mind.

He wouldn’t fall into that trap again. A steep path lay before him on the way to earning her trust and, if the ancient ones ordained it, her love.

A scream split the air, tingling across Lucan’s skin and shoving him into action. Meda!

He didn’t pause as he launched himself at the door, his scales sliding into place over his body as the wood and glass splintered around him. A wide hallway lay beyond the doorway with a multitude of rooms on either side. Saints! Which one was she in?

Growling deep in his throat, he stormed down the tiled corridor, quickly scanning classrooms as he went. Another scream and a flash of blue light pulled him to a doorway, halfway down the passage.

Meda was trapped in a far corner, her burnt shoulder showing through her ripped sleeve as a dark-haired, olive-skinned woman advanced on her. A few small fires burned nearby where Meda had apparently evaded the female Djinn's attack. The flames raced along the room's dry wood. The place would soon be engulfed. He had to get Meda out of here.

Enraged, he dove between the two woman, instinctively thrusting out his arm and shooting off a power wave that rippled the floor's large tiles and shoved the attacker backward into a wall of flames. He was so sick of the "war" crap. He just wanted to live his life, and he was pretty sure most of the Djinn, who hadn't become automaton warriors for the Djinn king, felt the same way. At least, that's what Riven said, and Lucan believed it.

The Djinn screeched and levitated out of the fire, tongues of the blaze licking at her pant legs. A light-blue energy field slid over her body extinguishing the flame. She glared at Lucan, obviously irritated to have her easy mark interrupted by a Dragon. Lucan bared his teeth at her. Her irritation should have been terror. No solitary Djinn, without special weapons, could outclass his kind in a battle—even a young Dragon like himself.

He placed himself directly in front of Meda.

"Stay near me," he growled when she started to back away. Of course, *of course*, she didn't listen. Using his extra reptilian senses, he managed to keep himself between the Djinn and Meda though he couldn't see her.

A rumble started in his chest as he stared at Meda's attacker and tried to judge her next move. His chest expanded then his belly hollowed and fire exploded from his mouth in a blazing streak. The Djinn dodged and hurled an energy ball. It exploded over his head. He wondered at the poor aim until Meda cried out at the ricocheting sparks. She pressed close to his back and Lucan nearly moaned from the feel of her, but there was no time to luxuriate in the pleasure of her touch.

Swooping out his arm once more, he slammed the Djinn into the far wall with a psionic wave then lifted her and tossed her to the opposite side of the room. Spinning, he captured Meda against his chest and protected her within his wings. He completed the rotation and, once more, confronted the enemy. And got a face full of blue flames.

His arms and wings full, there was little he could do but roar at the outrage. That rage roiled again in his chest. He narrowed his gaze on the enemy, staring at her, feeling her. The slightest muscular movement would be her end. And there it was. She started a move to the right, but he anticipated it, already knowing her direction.

With a blast of flames from deep in his chest, the fight was over, he and Meda the victors and the Djinn a sizzling mound of cinders.

They weren't free of danger—at least, Meda wasn't. The classroom's blaze would soon be an inferno.

"We have to leave," he growled, pulling her toward the doorway.

"No!" she yelled, shoving against his chest and trying to wiggle free of his wings even as the oppressive heat came at them.

"We have to leave," he repeated.

She yanked again. "Yes, I have to get out of here," she argued. "But not with you!"

"This building is about to come down around us. Now is *not* the time to fight," he grated. "Fight me later."

He grabbed her in a flash so quick he knew her vision would blur. She gasped as he captured her tightly in his arms, and they shot into the air.

"Put your face against my chest to protect it," he told her, hoping she fully understood him in this form that distorted his voice. They were going up and out, and he wasn't stopping until they were free of the building. Maybe not even then.

Shielding her with his body, he crashed through the ceiling and rocketed toward the overcast sky. The two of them needed to hide and quick. Already, he heard sirens in the distance. A crowd would gather as soon as they realized it was the school ablaze.

"Is anyone else in the building?" As much as he was loath to leave Meda alone for a moment, duty would force him to save others if there were any.

He nuzzled the top of her head and wished for the intimacy they'd once had, but she bent away. Right. He was in his Dragon form. She'd be repulsed by it. Just as he'd feared, she'd hate what he'd become.

"No. I was the last one there. Everyone else was going to a Friday, after-work get-together."

She wouldn't like it, but everyone would assume she'd perished in the fire, consumed by the flames. Between his magic and the Djinn's there wouldn't be much left of the place. If the Djinn's body wasn't completely obliterated, officials would think it was Meda. It worked well for his purpose of starting a new life with her. But life wasn't all about him. He wanted her. He needed her. Still...he had to consider what she wanted.

This wouldn't be easy.

Meda Hutchens couldn't begin to wrap her head around what was happening. Her day had started out normally then, this afternoon...it had all turned into a surreal weird-fest.

First, a guy had shown up at the school, claiming to be her dead husband. The man had been the spitting image of Lucan, too. Then that...that...witch had attacked her in the classroom with some sort of weapon Meda hadn't seen. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't witnessed the woman floating six inches above the floor or if she hadn't been accosted with those blue-fire missiles. Meda's shoulder burned, but she didn't doubt she'd be dead if this...*beast* hadn't stepped in to rescue her.

A dragon? That's what she supposed the creature was, though it was outside her realm of belief.

"I've lost it. I've finally snapped," she muttered. A witch? Magic? Lucan? This...this...thing? And now they were flying? Had she gone utterly mad?

Maybe. Maybe she'd lost it long ago when she'd decided to continue teaching preschool though the aftermath of Lucan's accident had left her unable to ever have children of her own. That had been a blow, but she was finally seeing past the blackness. Why the nervous breakdown now?

"You're completely sane," the creature answered, interrupting her thoughts.

"Not likely," she retorted. This just wasn't...lucid. Neither was the strange calm sweeping over her. As the creature helped her, almost cradling her against its massive chest, she felt completely...safe. Perhaps she was growing accustomed to the situation; perhaps it was something exuded by this creature carrying them. She didn't know. Crazy people usually seemed content in their situation. Maybe it was even that... People had always claimed she had abnormal strength and courage. Maybe it was foolhardiness. It could be that rigidity had been mistaken for strength, and the brittleness inside her had just snapped.

“Meda, it’s okay,” the dragon said. “I promise you, you’re not going insane. This is just something your world isn’t aware exists.”

“Right. Like vampires, fairies, werewolves and elves.”

“Unfortunately,” he growled, “a breed of elves does exist. Rotten, vile creatures.”

Not comforting in the least. Obviously, though she hadn’t mentioned it, shape-shifters were also real. The nerves in her belly clenched and fluttered as ice water seemed to trickle along her spine. This wasn’t right on so many levels, and even though she didn’t want to admit it, she was getting the sickening feeling that she was completely, soberly, in her right mind. Crap.

Taking a deep breath, she glanced at the wispy clouds and matchbook sized houses racing below them. Feeling bile roll in her stomach, she squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her face to his chest, ignoring the sound of approval that came from low in his throat.

“Where are we going?” she whispered.

“Home.”

“My home?” she asked tentatively.

“Our home.”

Oh hell. This couldn’t be good. He was dragging her off to his lair.

He started their descent before she could protest or come up with an escape plan—which was pretty impossible since they were flying high enough that escaping him would mean plummeting to her death, unless she sprouted wings and that was entirely likely being that the world had just turned upside down.

She fought for control of her nerves as she started shaking. Her breaths came in huge gulps. Would he kill her here? Were there others here, waiting for their victim. Didn’t dragons...eat people.

“You’re getting hysterical,” he commented, his voice level, calm and almost mocking. “Take a few deep breaths. This will all be fine. I promise.”

“Fine?” she exclaimed. “*Fine?* And how would you describe *fine?*”

“Breathe, Meda. No one will hurt you here. Calm down.”

Who the hell was he to tell her to calm down? Even if she *was* getting overwrought? Who could blame her?

Annoyed that he was making light of this while she feared she might be in peril, she scowled and turned her face away from his solid, blackish-green scaled chest. His hand traveled

up over her back to her cheek. He turned her to rest against him once more. A strange stuttering erupted through her. Fear? It had to be fear. Except...she wasn't frightened. Not exactly. Not anymore. Momentary hysteria aside, the more she was with him, the more comfort seeped into her. And the excitement, the racing pulse, the warmth from solicitous care...she couldn't identify why it quivered in her middle.

Her body jolted as he alighted onto a mosaic tiled patio. A tall wall surrounded the area. To one end, a small waterfall bubbled into a clear pool. Lounging furniture was scattered throughout the space. Over the brick fence, the hulking shape of mist-shrouded mountains filled the landscape.

Turning to the back wall, leading inside the mountain where they landed, she found he had taken them to his cave, just as she'd suspected. Well, it *was* a dwelling. Biting her lip, she eyed the doorway carved into a side of a mountain. Cave was a gross injustice. The entrance was covered in glass and steel, showcasing the inner, remarkably posh portion of his home.

He elbowed open the unlocked door and stepped inside. He set her on her feet then shut the door. Meda looked around, stunned by the plush interior. How had he gotten overstuffed furniture and sports-bar sized electronics to a...well...cave?

She knew these mountains. She hadn't lived far from here when she'd been married to Lucan, but she'd moved to another state after the accident that had taken his life and changed hers. She'd been unable to bear being near the place where a sharply curving road had brought his demise.

As well as she knew the area, the thought of dragons here was more than her mind could fathom, even with the proof before her. In all the years she'd lived around here, no one had reported seeing scaled, reptilian monsters. To think, creatures like this one lived here—had apparently lived here for a while—was inconceivable. It was as if she'd found Big Foot and discovered he was highly domesticated with a big screen TV, plush furniture and a fridge full of beer.

"I'll call a doctor for your arm," he said.

"A doctor? You have a..." She shook her head. This wasn't Big Foot. She'd slipped into a weird version of Planet of the Apes.

"Of course," he laughed, a deep rumbling much like the one she'd heard just before he'd shot fire from his mouth and fried the witch-thing. She backed away.

His head tilted momentarily then straightened as he shook it from side to side. With what sounded like a sigh, he stepped a few feet away. “You’re going to see this sooner or later. That was half the point in me coming to you...” His body seemed to shimmer like a heat mirage. “It might as well be now.”

Suddenly, his scales slid, collapsing on themselves and slipping away into nothingness. A man stood before her—an ordinary, heart-shattering man, his dark hair mussed and his beautiful, green eyes full of pleading.

“Cool, huh?” Lucan said quietly.

Her pulsed raced out of control, and she couldn’t breathe.

No... It wasn’t cool. Not at all.

Black spots speckled her sight, the dark walls of disbelief closing in on her and shoving her off balance. She swayed, her body and soul seeming to separate.

In the face of all the bizarre things that had happened today, it wasn’t the shape-shifting that stunned her. It was the man. A man she’d denied earlier. A man who’d been dead for four long years. A man she could no longer deny was very much alive.



## *Chapter Three*

Lucan dove for Meda as she fell. He caught her in his arms, terror stuttering his heart though he knew she'd just fainted. His body vibrated in response to having her so close without his armor between them. Her warmth seeped into him and spiked his arousal. God, he'd missed her. Having her in his arms, having her this close, was pure bliss.

He carried her to the couch as a staccato beat sounded on the front door of his chambers. He knew who it was. Because of the close mental connection shared between wingscion, or scion as the Dragons often called their fighting partners, Maksim Genjhury knew Lucan needed his aid. Just as his scion fought by side by side in battle, Maks would help Lucan in this challenge. He was closer to Lucan than Lucan's own brothers, and Lucan knew he could trust Maks with his life and the lives of those he loved.

*Maks*, he silently called. *Come in.*

The dark-haired Dragon entered, in his human form and still wearing the business casual clothing he'd worn to the conference that had kept him from joining Lucan in Meda's retrieval.

"I think she's fainted," Lucan commented, the back of his hand testing the warmth of her forehead.

Maks squatted beside him. His hand hovered six-inches over Meda as he skimmed the length of her body and scanned her injuries via Dragon magic. Each of the race had their own special abilities. Maks' were medical while Lucan had dreams—useless dreams.

"She's just in shock and has a nasty burn. Nothing life-threatening," Maks confirmed. "I'll have her right as rain in no time." He carefully moved aside the edges of Meda's torn sleeve to visually examine the wound. "What happened here? Looks like a Djinn attack."

"Exactly." Lucan looked away, sickened with anger at the sight of the scorched skin.

“You took care of it?”

He nodded. “Dead.”

“It’s a good thing you went when you did. I’m sorry I had to be at that healers’ enclave. Bad timing. I should have been with you.”

“You would have if you’d known.” Lucan shuddered at what could have happened. Meda would be dead if he hadn’t gone when he had. Then the Cruentus Dragons would have gone on a full-out offensive against the Djinn—and heaven help that race if that ever happened. Overall, despite their cunning and audacity, the Djinn were the weaker party. The Dragons knew they had superiority in magic and brute strength. Aware they could wipe out the Djinn, many of whom were innocents caught in their leaders’ political agendas, the Dragons worked secretly to overcome the Djinn without full-out battle.

But Lucan was part of his clan’s ruling family. The death of his mate would mean retribution—retribution and obliteration.

“Riven is the one who urged Janos to finally tell me her location, to step up the timeframe, I suppose. His sources revealed the Djinn were tracking her, but Riven didn’t think they’d actually found her yet.” Lucan looked down at Meda. Her complexion was so pale, and dark circles marked the skin beneath her eyes. A halo of thick, blonde hair flared out around her head.

“Was your trip successful?” he asked absently, more taken with Meda than his friend’s work.

“It was informative,” Maks said. “I got supplies. Learned a few new tricks, too. Nothing of use here—Meda’s wound is pretty basic. Why don’t you move her to your bed while I get my things?”

Lucan gathered her close when they were alone. His lips grazed her temple as he rocked her gently in his arms and carried her into his bedroom. Carefully, he sat on the edge of the bed, wishing she’d wake, wishing they didn’t have so much between them, wishing he could tell her everything had been a bad dream four years ago and today. Despite his hopes, he realized there was no way she’d easily forgive him for their separation. Saints...when he thought about that four years, his gut twisted. She could have married. She could have been killed by another of the Djinn.

“Lucan?” she murmured as she stirred.

“Right here, love. I’m not going anywhere. Never again.”

She turned in his arms and hugged him close. Her face pressed into his neck, and she started to kiss the skin there. He knew she wasn’t quite fully conscious of what was going on. Once, she returned to her full senses, she’d hate him.

As much as he knew he shouldn’t, he took advantage of the situation. Tilting her head up with his fingers, he claimed her lips. He parted them insistently and delved inside to taste her. Mint and Meda. Pure heaven.

Heat raced through his body—heat and an overwhelming sensation of belonging. Need. Home. Lust... Love.

His arms crossed behind her, and he tipped backward on the bed so she straddled him and had control. They feverishly kissed, the years of separation binding them together with intense desire. Her fingers twined in his hair, as her tongue hungrily dueled with his. Her thighs gripped his sides, her pelvis grinding slowly against his. He groaned. He needed to be in her. He needed to be part of her. He needed to—

*You need to ease up for a few minutes and let me heal her*, Maks interrupted.

Lucan pulled his mouth from Meda’s with a shuddering gasp.

“I’m so mad at you,” she whispered.

“I know,” he answered. He swallowed. Beyond the hot desire, a plethora of pain clouded her eyes—pain he’d put there. It didn’t matter that he’d had no choice.

*There’s always a choice*, his conscience prodded.

Maks leaned against the dresser while Lucan sat up again and shifted Meda to lay against his pillows. She grabbed his arm, clarity in her stare. Her senses had returned. No doubt, she was about to skewer him.

“Who are you?” she rasped.

“Lucan,” he replied in surprise, his brows drawing together.

“No. *What* are you? Explain. Because my husband most certainly wasn’t a...” She waved her hand toward the doorway, indicating what she’d seen in the living room. “He wasn’t a...shape-shifter—that’s what it’s called, right? A shape-shifter?”

“I was one. I just didn’t know it. Not until the day I first changed.”

“So you left me?” she demanded. “Because you become...a what? A dragon? You put me through hell. You let me think you were dead—”

“I had no choice.” Lucan glanced over his shoulder at Maks who pretended preoccupation with the pictures and frippery on the dresser.

“Why?” Meda insisted. “Because suddenly you sparkle in the sunlight or something? I’ve seen you in the daytime. You *don’t* shine.”

From her derisive tone, it was clear she thought him lower than a slug. He felt just about as good.

She scooted away from him and climbed off the far side of the bed, wincing and holding her arm as she looked around the room—for an escape route, no doubt.

He got up and started around the bed, afraid she’d hurt herself. He didn’t want to have this argument in front of Maks, but it looked as if he had little choice. He and Meda needed to hash this out before she got any angrier.

“No, I don’t sparkle, glow or shine. But on the day Dragons first shift, we burn. Our skin incinerates. It’s called molting. Two of my brothers found me and brought me back here.”

“And they just *knew* where to find you? Do burning dragons put out some sort of Bat-Signal? This is all crap, Lucan, and you know it! If you didn’t want to be married, if you wanted to go out and sow your wild oats or whatever, you should have just told me. Divorce would have hurt a lot less.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, he drove the fingers of both hands through his hair then blew out a hard breath before looking at her again. One of them had to remain calm.

“It’s not crap. And I would never divorce you or be willingly parted from you. Meda, listen to me.” He pulled her resistant body into his arms. She could pummel him and scream her rage, but he still needed to hold her. “They were watching me. As a child, I was lost to my people, and when they found me, they didn’t want to take me from my human family. Dragons live hundreds of years. Painful as being separated from their child might be, my natural parents believed they had plenty of time with me. My people waited...until I was of age. The young of our race appear completely human. Even a doctor can’t tell them apart. But at age twenty-six, we change—”

“You were twenty-five,” she exclaimed.

“Twenty-five years and three months. Twenty-six from conception. I’d like to say it’s not an exact science, but it never fails to happen at exactly twenty-six years.”

She was silent for a few moments, her lips pressed together. Pushing against his arms, she carefully extracted herself from his embrace then crossed her own arms over her middle and stared at the floor. Her head nodded twice as she thought then she took a shuddering breath.

“Can Lucan and I be alone for a minute?” she quietly asked Maks, and Lucan wondered if she’d just remembered the other man was there.

“Of course,” Maks told her. *Good luck*, he shot to Lucan then disappeared into the hallway, closing the doorway behind him.

Meda pinned Lucan with an outraged glare. Her low tone was as cold as ice. “And at twenty-five and *three months*, you forgot you had a wife? A pregnant wife, by the way. You forgot there was someone who would just about die at the news of your crash. It wasn’t just an accident,” she said through her teeth. “The car was so twisted it looked like wild things had shredded it apart and so burned-out it was barely recognizable. But...” She pressed a hand over her mouth. “There were charred bits of...you. And your wedding ring was there in the middle of it. Do you have any idea what that’s like?”

Her grief slashed through him, and he knew he could never apologize enough for what had happened.

“No, I don’t know” he conceded, shaking his head then asked, “A child?”

She nodded. “I miscarried. They say it was from the stress, but something was wrong. It almost killed me. I can’t have children.”

He stared at her, as the blow hit him. He’d lost a child and, worse, almost lost his wife. As much as he might have wanted children, Meda’s death would have decimated him—oh God, like “his” had done to her.

“I’m sorry—”

“Why didn’t you contact me?” she interrupted. “I mean,” she blew out a breath, “obviously, this place has the means. You’ve got a damned, big-screen TV in your living room.”

“The change is ugly. Unpredictable.” No explanation would ever be enough. To his ears, his words seemed feeble. “That first time is the onset of many more molts for two years. You wouldn’t have wanted to see me. It would have been *dangerous* to see me.”

“Wouldn’t have wanted to see you?” she echoed in disbelief. “How could you believe that? You were alive. Breathing.”

“But not the same man,” he returned. “Can you honestly tell me you would have easily accepted that I’m not fully human? I’m not even close?”

She stared at him in silence, the condemnation remaining in her eyes. The same anger clearly said he should have given her the chance. “And after?”

He took a deep breath and looked at the ground. In the face of what she’d told him, how could he tell her that he’d been scared she’d reject him? That he loved her more than anything—anyone! She was everything to him.

She punched him hard in the shoulder, knocking him out of his thoughts.

“I was your *wife*,” she yelled.

His gaze shot up. “You *are* my wife.”

Her head tilted slightly to the side, and her eyebrows inched up slightly. A bitter smile mocked him. “No,” she said. “You’re dead. I’m a widow. You lost your rights when you deserted me.”

“Meda, don’t do this.”

“I’m not the one who ‘did this’,” she nearly screeched. “You left me alone. You let me mourn for you—do you know how much that hurt, knowing the man I loved more than my next breath had died? That I’d never touch him again—”

“I’m here,” he interrupted, pleading.

She shook her head. “You’re dead. We can’t go back.”

Possessiveness speared deep into his core. “You’re still mine. You haven’t been with another man. I can tell—”

“Yet,” she snapped. Turning on her heel, she marched for the door.

“You’re my wife,” he yelled.

Maks chose that moment to return. *This isn’t going well, Wolf. We’ll get you ‘undead’. Niko can do it in a snap. She’ll still belong to you.*

*She does anyway.* Lucan clenched his teeth, and a proprietary howl clawed at his chest. Meda was his!

“Meda,” Maks said, redirecting her attention. Lucan wanted to growl at the man’s smile. His scion would never try to steal her, but at the moment, Lucan felt like a rabid dog. With a massive strength of will, he forced back his hackles and tried to relax as Maks guided Meda back

to the bed. “Let’s get you lying down, and I’ll get your arm fixed up. Were you hit anywhere else?”

“No,” she answered.

*My woman. My woman. Mine,* Lucan’s head screamed, as he shoved his hands into his pockets to keep himself back.

*Yeah, I know,* Maks retorted drily. *Dial it down, would ya? You’re gonna give me a headache.*

After Maks had her reclining, he turned. “Lucan, I need you in the kitchen.”

Meda shot upright, panic in her face. Despite her anger, she grabbed Lucan’s arm. “Don’t you leave me, Lucan. Don’t you...” She trailed off, the lost look on her face skewering him.

“You’d better not leave me,” she whispered.

“It will just be a moment,” Maks soothed, easing her back against the pillows once more. “I don’t know my way around his kitchen, and I need him to help me with this, uh, medicine. You need to stay in bed and rest. He’ll be right back.”

Her teeth sank into her lip and she nodded. Her arms defensively crossed over her chest.

Lucan turned to his scion. “Maybe I should stay.”

“For God’s sake, Lucan,” Maks breathed. He shoved him toward the door. *I need your blood for this elixir!*

“My blood?” Lucan asked once they were in the hallway, the door closed behind them. Partway down the corridor, Maks stopped beside an alcove table, and Lucan spied a cup and a large vial set out on the shiny surface. The healer withdrew a dagger from his jacket. “Do you really want anyone else’s blood flowing through her?”

Immediately, Lucan held out his wrist. His would be the only blood she’d have.

“I didn’t think so,” Maks said. He opened the vial and poured the amber liquid into the cup. “The mate marker in her genetics will make healing her much easier.”

Though Lucan was thankful the marker would hasten her recovery, he didn’t care if she had the correct signifier or not. He loved her.

“Your blood will activate the potion,” Maks continued. “Then it will interact with her system to quickly heal the burn. Just don’t drink any of her blood in the next twenty-four hours, or you’ll inadvertently change her without her consent.” He pressed the silver knife to Lucan’s

wrist. “Now focus. You can’t shift when the pain hits or the wound will close before we get what we need.”

Lucan thought of Meda. The child they’d lost. The time they couldn’t recover. The razor-sharp blade was nothing in comparison to what he’d done to her. He deserved any pain doled out to him.

Maks pulled Lucan’s hand over the cup and squeezed until he decided enough blood had joined the mixture in the cup. The potion bubbled, and Maks murmured a few words, passing his palm over it to imbue the Dragon magic that added power to the concoction.

“All set,” he said.

Lucan nodded, his wrist already healed. He was still a bit uncomfortable with supernatural aspects of this existence. It had been part of his life for the past four years, but it remained foreign to his human-taught brain.

He followed his scion into the bedroom where Meda had gotten up and was examining the room.

“Meda,” he said, getting her attention. She surprised him by walking straight into his arms. She hugged him tight, pressing her lips to the middle of his chest.

“You have a picture of us on your dresser. The same one I have at home.”

“During my first change, before you knew about the accident, my older brother sent Maks to our house. You were at work. He made copies of some of the photos, hoping to make me feel better.”

“But they didn’t,” she said, obviously picking up on a bitter note in his voice.

“Tokens of our life together weren’t the same as being with you. Really, they just hurt.”

“Let’s get this medicine in you,” Maks interrupted. “You two can talk after I’m gone.”

He handed her the cup. Meda looked at Lucan, and he nodded. “It’s safe. No one here would ever hurt you.”

Clearly unsure, she looked at the concoction she’d been handed then sniffed it. “Fruity... Something else...”

“Herbs,” Maks supplied.

“Do you want me to drink from it first?” Lucan asked.

She shook her head. “No. You wouldn’t have saved me from the fire and that...thing...if you meant to kill me.”



“A Djinn.”

“Whatever it was.” She took a deep breath then brought the cup to her lips and gulped down its contents. Afterward, she made a face. “Tastes like pennies.”

Maks raised an eyebrow. “Suck on pennies often, do you?”

Lucan shoved him. “Get out of here.”

“Fine, fine, fine. Use me, then kick me out.” Maks gathered up his things while Lucan turned to Meda. He lifted the fabric away from her wound and watched as it healed before their eyes, much like ice quickly melting in the sunlight.

“Oh my God,” Meda murmured.

“Even though I’ve seen this a few time, I still think it’s pretty cool,” Lucan answered.

*Night, Wolf*, Maks called telepathically as he left the room.

“Why did he call you Wolf?” she asked. “Wait! Why could I hear him in my head?”

Lucan paused, blinked then stared at her. She could hear Maks?

“It was the potion. It’ll wear off...I think,” he told her. *I hope*. He’d never heard of a mate gaining the ability to hear her partner’s wingscion. That could be bad. Very bad.

“Good. I don’t want to hear inside some strange guy’s head. Your thoughts could be interesting. I mean...wouldn’t I like to hear inside your head? I’m sure, there might be another asinine explanation as to why you’ve done this—” She pointed at him. “And I’m not even close to forgiving you, so don’t think I am.”

“You’re babbling,” he said. She did that when she was overwhelmed.

“Hmph,” she replied. “Look. I...I’m crazy to say this, and womankind would probably revoke my emancipated girl card if they heard me say this, but I don’t want to argue with you. I just want to hold you.” Her eyes dark with soft desire, she stepped into his arms. They gratefully closed around her while she pressed her ear over his heart. She sighed and close her eyes. Her hands smoothed along his lower back. “We’ll fight later.”

## *Chapter Four*

Meda relaxed against Lucan as she pushed back her hurt and fury and acknowledged the lame explanation he'd given her. He seemed gutted by the separation and by the miscarriage, completely remorseful for her pain. Shouldn't she try to look at things from his point of view before she made a final judgment? She didn't understand this world he'd been cast into. Her instincts told her she'd leave him when she had the chance. Still, her fractured heart begged her to take this intimacy with him and think later.

"Why do they call you Wolf?" she asked. The solid beating of his heart rocked through her, assuring her of his vitality. "Is it because you have a pack of women hidden away someplace?"

"You're my only woman," he growled.

"I'm not yours," she whispered.

"Wanna bet on that? I'll win," he rasped.

She gasped at his tone, deep, growly and possessive.

His fingers speared into her hair. He angled her head, bending her to his hungry kiss. The sensation of his firm lips shot through her to knot in her belly. He consumed her, his mouth pressing hers open before his tongue surged inside to reclaim her.

Long dormant arousal shifted in her pelvis. The first tremor took her by surprise then pushed her on as her pulse began to race. A low flame kindled and a rush of moisture dampened her pussy. Sweet lord, please!

She'd never thought to feel his solid body moving against her again. To feel his large, slightly callused hands stroking over her skin. To hear his deep, velvety voice saying her name. Growling it.

She'd have him. There was no question that she'd let him take her body, but after that... She wasn't sure she could trust him again. The last time he'd had her heart, it had been pulverized.

"Why do they call you Wolf?" she asked again, trying to get her footing in an avalanche of emotion. She pushed out of his arms, breathing deeply. "I mean you're a dragon or something—God, that is so weird to say." She rubbed her hands over her face. This was all so nuts. "Calling a dragon Wolf makes no sense."

His gaze bore into her as he followed the steps she'd taken, not letting her more than an arm's length from him.

"No, not really. When I came here, I couldn't stand being around people. Everything I knew and wanted had been ripped from me and this is, well, you have to admit...it's weird and really outside the realm of what you and I believed was possible. I was alone, even with my new family. My brother, Niko, called me 'the lone wolf', and it stuck. Only now, mostly, they just call me Wolf."

"I like Lucan better," she said as he crowded her to the bed. His yellow-flecked, green eyes certainly appeared wolf-like as he stalked her then tumbled her backward onto the mattress. Immediately, he straddled her hips and leaned over her. His fingers burrowed into her hair as he brought his mouth to hers. Her lips parted and his tongue slipped inside, tasting the place that had always belonged to him.

Meda trembled at his touch. Just his presence after so long nearly brought her to climax. Her whole being seemed to fold in on itself, until there was nothing but the sharp point of passion for this man. Nothing mattered but his hands on her, his lips covering hers, his essence filling the air she breathed. His palm cupped her breast, and she gasped. She felt him grin against her mouth while his fingers rolled the needy peak through her shirt, drawing sonorous groans from deep in her chest.

Tiny bolts of lightning seemed to skate over her skin. Had it always been like this? So electric and urgent?

"Yes," she hissed as he pulled open her blouse. She couldn't account for her desire to have him rip the material from her. She just needed him now. Her pussy was damp with that need. She felt it as she moved beneath him, straining for contact with the hard ridge of his desire.

It didn't really matter what she'd said to him earlier or what might happen later. This was her husband. Right now she needed him in her. Deep. Pounding. Proving he was alive.

He pulled down one bra cup and latched onto her nipple, drawing hard while his fingers fumbled for the fastener on her jeans. The fabric parted, and his palm skimmed over the nylon barrier of her panties. His hand hovered there, not quite touching as she nearly screamed for him to get on with it.

"Tell me it's okay," he said.

"If you don't get on with it, I swear I'll kill you," she gritted out.

His eyes seemed to turn reptilian, his pupils looking more like slits than circles, then animal hunger filled his stare. A growl, low and menacing, rolled from his throat as his grip fisted in the fabric at her waistband.

"Do it. Lucan, please," she begged. "Yes," she cried at the hiss of rending material that followed as her panties were destroyed. His fingers shot over her folds, parting her then rasping possessively over her clit. The movement emphasized how wet she was, as he slid easily over her. He circled her opening with his fingertip while her channel clenched with the need for more. She needed him in her. No teasing. No delaying. No recriminations over anything that had happened.

"Don't wait," she pleaded. She shoved at his shirt and ripped it open with no care to the buttons that flew around them. She could only get it halfway down his arms. Abandoning the task as well enough, she moved to his pants.

She protested as he stopped touching her to pull her jeans from her and shrug out of his shirt. She opened her legs and yanked him toward the cradle of her thighs. They both groaned as he settled against her. His fingers resumed their exploration.

"Mine," he breathed against her ear as two of his fingers sank into her.

"Yes..." Her hips worked against him, welcoming him. Thick need coiled tighter. There was no stopping any time soon. She leaned up and pressed her lips to his ear. A strangled gasp rushed from her as he hit the internal bundle of nerves that sent stars rushing across her vision. "Don't wait," she breathed against his temple. "We have so much time to make up for."

"Come first," he replied then turned his head and captured her lips. Hungrily, he kissed her. His taste filled her—warm, clean male, mint, and a strange but faint tang that reminded her

of burning leaves. Autumn. The new Lucan taste reminded her of who he'd become, and oddly, her pussy clenched at the idea of the shape-shifter loving her.

"God, yes. So tight," he muttered as his fingers kept shuttling in and out of her clutching folds. The first strands of the golden spiral that would rip her out of control licked at her. With a cry, she thrust her hips into him. Her eyes squeezed shut; the world swung sideways.

"Lucan," she gasped.

Lucan watched Meda's face as he witnessed the beauty of her orgasm after four endless years. He hastily shoved down his pants. The gate between heaven and hell greeted him as his cock knocked to her wet opening. Slowly, he pushed inside her trembling sheath, savoring the return to his lover. Her warmth gloved him and squeezed tight. Made for him. She was made for him.

Her nails dug into his back as she cried out, her lithe thighs sliding along his before her legs wrapped around his. She thrust against him. "Don't stop," she begged. "Never stop."

"Never," he echoed. He'd hold her forever. No one, nothing, mattered more than she did.

Fire seemed to rip through his veins as he continued his deep jabs into her. It burned away the detritus of their separation. They were one, soldered by the desire that had never waned between them.

Grabbing her hips, he drove hard and bent to grasp her nipple in his teeth.

"Lucan," she screamed as the rough possession shot her over the edge. He suckled fervently, never easing his momentum. She twisted with helpless cries. Her body undulated beneath his, brushing, retreating, pressing as she moved mindlessly, riding wave after wave of the climaxes that gripped his cock.

Gritting his teeth, he fought culmination. It was too soon. He needed more, but the siren call of her body ruled him. With a grunt, he stiffened, driving deep and emptying his hot cum into her fiery depths. His canine teeth lengthened.

*Take her blood*, his senses commanded. One bite. One taste. She'd be his forever. His belly contracted with the need for that essence.

His fingers clenched in the sheets, fighting. He couldn't change her without her permission. He'd been warned. One taste and he'd break the unwritten covenant—she had to say

yes before he could make her fully his. Groaning, he bit the pillow under her shoulders. His chin nuzzled her neck as his teeth pierced the unsatisfying cotton.

“Lucan,” she repeated, this time as a whisper. Her hands smoothed over his biceps, satisfaction on her voice. If only he could...

With difficulty, he forced back his teeth then gazed down at her. Her lips were drawn into a smile, her eyes still closed for the after-tremors quivering along her limbs. She kissed his shoulder.

With a content sigh, she sank into the bed. Lord, how he wanted to have her on his tongue. Instead, he fell sideways and pulled her with him. Meda snuggled into him as he drew up the sheet.

She'd said they'd fight later. Thankfully, that wasn't now.

\* \* \* \*

As dawn drew near, Lucan leaned against the headboard and stared down at the arm that wrapped around Meda—his entirely normal, non-marked right arm. Dread settled in his middle. It should be there, the indicator that Meda was his. The corresponding tracery of filigree should have appeared on her left arm. He ran his thumb along her skin as the limb in question curved across her torso, below her breasts.

It was one of the first things he'd learned when entering the Dragon community was that those intended as mates, developed marks almost immediately after close proximity, intimacy or when the male shifted in the female's presence. He'd experienced all three with Meda, yet no mark.

They'd made love over and over all night, here and in his hot-spring fed tub. They'd been in constant contact. No matter what they'd done, Meda had found a way to touch him. She seemed unwilling to break contact for even a moment. Even now, she used him as a pillow while she rested.

He hadn't relaxed since shortly after he'd taken her the first time. In a instant of pure terror, he'd realized her left arm was a clear creamy white. Not so much as a freckle marred the pristine expanse.

Once more, prickles of dread spread up his spine and across his tense shoulders. If the signifier hadn't appeared, did that mean they weren't truly destined mates, magically connected through the genetic links in their blood? He closed his eyes, feeling a little sick and violently

determined. No one would take her from him. They wouldn't be parted again, mate mark or not. Meda was his, and if he had to hide this problem, he would.

Meda stirred and looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sensing his unease.

"We have to leave this bed soon, but I don't want to share you," he told her. It was a half truth. He didn't want to be with others, but he especially didn't want anyone seeing her arm.

"I would like to see where you're living now," she replied, then pressed her lips together to hold back a smile. "I'm afraid I don't have a thing to wear, though. My shirt has a burn hole in it and it got a little ripped last night."

"One of my shirts should do. My sister-in-law will probably have something you can borrow."

"You could take me back to my apartment—"

"No."

Her eyes narrowed at his snapped word, and her smile faded. Flattening a hand in the middle of his chest, she pushed upright.

"It's not safe yet," he told her, cutting off her protest.

"I have to let people know I survived the fire," she argued.

Lifting her hand, he pressed his lips to her knuckles then turned it and kissed the middle of her palm. Distraction was his main objective, but at the first touch of lips to skin, his desire flared. His eyes drifted to her firm, rose topped breasts.

"Not yet," he replied. "Just be mine for now."

Unable to resist, he leaned in and drew one peak into his mouth. Meda groaned. Her fingers speared into his hair, holding him there while her back arched to push her closer to his fiery cavern. Flipping her onto the mattress, he bent over her. Relentlessly, he laved the taut flesh. Occasional nips and tugs drew cries and pleas for more. His tongue traced the edge of her nipple then dipped down the slope. Suddenly, he sank his teeth into the soft flesh on the underside of her breast without breaking skin.

Meda screamed, her hips jerking as she climaxed.

His sweet, strong woman. Her tough as nails façade hid a need for rough sex, and he was always happy to indulge it as often as they came together. Shifting, he transferred his attentions to her other peak.

His hand flattened on her belly. Toned muscle undulated beneath his palm as she writhed. If he tested her, she'd be wet. Her cream would coat his fingers and welcome his cock. He wanted to taste her, but knew if he did it would be even harder not to bite. Instead, he moved his hand lower then circled her honeyed opening with two fingers. Her breath caught as he sucked hard on her nipple and pinched her clit in unison.

"Fuck me," she begged.

Grinning, he propped himself over her on both arms. "No."

She blinked then stared at him. Confusion then embarrassment filled her face. "What?"

Leaning down, but careful not to touch anywhere but her lips, he lightly kissed her. "Oh, I want to. But not here. I have something else in mind... You'll like it. Promise."

She scowled. "I just want you. It doesn't matter where."

"Just trust me."

"I shouldn't."

He closed his eyes. He deserved that. She was still unsure of him because of his leaving. "Meda..." He swallowed. "I *love* you. I will not leave you again. Never. I promise."

She nodded. "Okay."

Despite her concession, he heard the reservation in her tone. Somehow, he'd prove himself. She was trying. She'd had lots of opportunities to restart the fighting, but she was being all Meda about this, so much like the woman he'd originally married who gave people a chance even when they didn't deserve it.

"I won't fail you," he promised and climbed from the bed. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her out after him. "You need the tour. This place is the Cruentus Clan's compound. All the Dragons live in clans."

He rooted around and found her pants. She'd have to deal with no panties, but at least, this part of her clothing was intact.

"What you've seen so far," he continued, "is my quarters. Each of the Dragons—and their mates if they're joined with someone—has their own space."

Lucan pulled on his own pants then went in search of shirts for them while Meda put on her bra. The most likely choices were T-shirts, but they wouldn't cover their arms. Hands on hips, he stared at his closet then chose a dark blue button-down for himself. He shoved his arms



into it then surveyed the clothing selection once more. Toward the back, there was a long-sleeved shirt. The cuffs had always come too high on his wrists. Maybe it would work for Meda.

Her slight form would swim in it, but that would be expected. Everyone knew she'd been pulled here unexpectedly. She didn't have any of her things. No one would think anything of her wearing the long-sleeved, too-big clothing.

Feeling smug, he returned to the bedroom and stopped short in the doorway. Meda stood before the dresser, brushing her lustrous blonde hair and wearing just her bra and jeans. Of course, those were the only clothes she had, but the sight still hit him hard.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured.

She smiled and glanced over her shoulder at him. She nodded at the shirt. "Is that for me?"

Wordlessly, he handed it to her then fell to his knees and kissed her just below her breastbone. His arms went around her like bands.

"What—"

"I'm so thankful you're here," he said, pressing his face to her soft midriff and hiding his emotion.

Her hand petted his hair in soothing, slow strokes. "I was always there, Lucan."

"I know," he whispered. "It was torture."

She stilled. Silence surrounded them until she tipped up his head. "Hurry up and get dressed. I really want you to make love to me, but since you have something in mind let's move it."

Lucan stood, and she shimmered in his vision. He blinked to rid the moisture there, then smiled ruefully. Here he was, a big tough Dragon, and she'd caught him teary-eyed. Not macho. "This will be the fastest tour ever."

## *Chapter Five*

The Dragons' compound both amazed and charmed Meda. Holding Lucan's hand, she tried to take everything in. A multitude of floors circled and overlooked a vaulted open area as if they were stadium sections looking down on the main field. The bottom level, which Lucan referred to as the main gallery, was the gathering place for the clan.

The cavernous structure, built within a mountain, was a combination of modern and ancient design. She wasn't an architectural expert, but she could recognize items from modern time periods and constructions that were old—and most of the compound was old. Very old. That blew her mind. This civilization had been here for quite some time. If the Greek and Romanesque edifices were any indication, they'd been here long before the Europeans settled the New World.

“Hey, kids.”

Meda looked up to see an unfamiliar man coming their way.

Lucan stepped closer to her. His hand clasped hers behind their hips. “Janos,” he said. “Meda, this is my older brother and the clan's leader, Janos Aventech.”

So this was one of the brothers... “Pleased to meet you,” she greeted with outstretched hand.

Janos looked at it almost curiously. His gaze flitted to Lucan then back to her. Embarrassed, she let her hand drop to her side. Had she broken some Dragon rule?

“Excuse me for not shaking,” Janos explained. His brow furrowed and his look skated over to where Lucan had their hands linked behind their hips. “I...can't touch you, not without bringing you pain or making you feel sick. It's the mating. Once you two are fully united, that passes.”

She blinked at him. He might as well have been speaking Greek for all she understood.

“Lucan!” Janos chided. “Haven’t you told her *anything*?”

“We’ve been busy,” Lucan retorted.

Janos grinned. “I remember Scarlett and me.” He nodded at her. “We’ll talk soon.”

“What was that about?” she asked Lucan as Janos stepped into a side corridor.

He sighed. “Damn siblings.”

“You hated being an only child before.”

“Yeah, well, now I’m finding brothers somewhat inconvenient.” He led her toward a small grouping of chairs and a loveseat then pulled her to sit beside him. Idly, he played with her fingers, tracing the place where his ring had once been. “You and I are mates,” he explained. “Destined mates. There’s something in your blood that matches mine. Because of it, our systems will force us to be together. Until we’re fully united, you’ll be physically repulsed by any other man who touches you, even if it’s just on your hand.”

She stared at him. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she finally managed.

“Because it’s not important. Because you’ve always been mine and I have no intention of ever being apart from you again. I’ve been telling you that. I need you to believe it. I love you, Meda. You’re my life. Whether there’s some biological drive bringing us together or just our emotions, it doesn’t matter. The Dragon mating is just a side thing. You’re mine.”

His declaration shook her, even though she knew he was downplaying the physical change in her body. She sensed it, but it was his fervent avowal that resonated.

“I can’t have children anymore. Surely, you want kids.”

“It’s irrelevant to how I feel. If we’d been together all this time and something had happened to you—infertility, an accident, paralysis, a sickness—it wouldn’t change what’s inside me for you. Neither does this.”

Her lip trembled, and she bit it. Lucan drew it free with his thumb then stroked the pad of his finger over the abused flesh. She leaned toward him.

Suddenly, the heavy swoosh of large, flapping wings drew their attention to the open area on the other side of the banister lining one side of this floor. A Dragon alighted a few yards from them and changed shape to a man. Meda watched with wide eyes as he nodded in their direction then headed into one of the rooms down the passage.

“Look,” Lucan said quietly and tipped his head toward the main gallery. Other Dragons shifted and flew, changing back when they landed. Some fully became other creatures while others just formed wings to make their ascents easier.

“This is...astounding,” she breathed. It was a whole new world. This was where he’d woken after the accident, she realized with vague understanding. It must have been like Alice falling down the rabbit hole.

“There’s more,” he told her. Without warning, he grabbed her from the seat, took three giant bounds toward the rail then vaulted up and over it, plummeting toward the gallery.

Meda screamed into his chest in pure terror as air whistled past them. Even the sound of powerful wings failed to pierce her horror. She was shaking, her heart slamming against her ribs, as they landed lightly rather than spattering on the gallery’s white marble. Still, her body jarred from the shock of their impromptu flight.

She shoved him away then stumbled as her knees buckled. Lucan caught her in his muscular arms, his wings disappearing as she watched.

“That was a bad idea,” he muttered.

“You think? If you ever do that—”

“I won’t. Sorry.”

She took a few deep breaths and struggled to get her body under control. “You said there was more to see?”

“This way.”

During the earlier part of his tour, she’d seen numerous corridors branching off each level, but he hadn’t taken her down any of them. Now, he pulled her toward one of the halls then down a stairway. All the warrens reminded her of a castle, and she was as captivated as a child exploring a new play land. Everywhere she looked, strange sights met the eye—mystical creatures, otherworldly lights, odd contraptions she couldn’t come close to identifying.

“I’m so lost,” she admitted minutes later as he led her through a fourth passage that curved and forked, the walls getting more and more cave-like.

“You’re with me. Don’t worry,” he assured her. He made a sharp turn and started down yet another set of stairs. These were rough and uneven as if crudely cut into rock. Lucan steadied Meda as they went, catching her when she wobbled on one narrow foothold. She leaned into his strong embrace.

“This is a lot of work for sex,” she grumbled.

His laugh echoed on the stone walls. “We’re almost there. And we’ll be totally alone. No one comes down here.”

Muted lighting glowed from below, and as they approached the landing, she heard the soft lapping of water against a shore. “Is that...”

“An underground lake? Yes.”

Excitement filled her, and she rushed ahead. Her gasp sounded around the cavern as she burst into the chamber. Multi-colored lights illuminated stalactites throughout the space, making them appear like icicle chandeliers over a smooth, clear lake. Beneath the surface, green and white lights shone from the depths. Water trickled down the walls and into the lake from several locations around it.

“It’s beautiful,” she exclaimed. Her voice bounced off the walls as she turned back to him.

He reached for his buttons. “And this is the place. I want to hear your cries all around us as I make you come.”

His shirt dropped to the dry slate floor. Crossing to a row of cabinets that had blended into the wall so well she hadn’t noticed them, he pressed his palm to one and opened it. He pulled out a blanket then came back to her. “Sometimes I sleep down here or just stay down here for hours,” he told her. “So I keep some of my things nearby,” he explained.

“Lone wolf,” she murmured.

“Well, when I was randomly bursting into flame, it was handy to be here. Nothing flammable unless I got out a blanket.”

Meda frowned, envisioning Lucan here alone, unsure when he’d burn again and thinking of her. She believed him when he said he’d wanted to be with her, even though she didn’t understand why he’d waited so long to come back after the molt had ended.

“I wish I could have been here for you,” she said.

“It wasn’t safe—”

“I know.” She glanced toward the entry then reached for the hem of her shirt. “Let’s do something a little unsafe now.” The garment was tossed aside and she slid her hand along her slim midriff and belly. “Everything’s so tight and needy in here, I think I might die if you don’t do something about this soon.”

A light seemed to kindle in his eyes as they homed in on her. He stepped forward. His hands clasped her hips and dragged her to his hard groin. She felt his erection, and her pussy clenched.

“I’ve got something dangerous for you right here.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing at him. “That is so cliché. But I’m thinking...” She hooked her fingers in his belt loops. “I’d really like to ride on the wild side of that.”

He snorted half-laugh. “Now, who’s being clichéd?”

She chortled. “Maybe we should stop talking.”

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth. His tongue flicked over the flesh before he let go. “Like this?” he asked then kissed her, ending all conversation.

Her fingers curled into his biceps as he guided her down to the blanket. His lips never left hers as they moved. She groaned as trembles cascaded through her. His mouth was like...an addiction. She couldn’t get enough of his taste. She linked one arm behind his neck as she arched into him, kissing him with as much fervor as he did her.

As if a switch had been flipped, the simmering arousal they’d both held in check flooded forward. It overwhelmed Meda in a deluge of need, overcoming any thought or reservation she might have had. The past didn’t matter. The location didn’t matter. Only his mouth on her, his hands on her skin and his body moving as one with hers was of any importance.

His lips traveled down over her shoulder as he unhooked her bra. Immediately, he cupped her breast, thumbing her nipple in the way he knew she liked. A comfortable heat joined her urgency. It was safe with him, this man who remembered so much about her. He knew her likes and dislikes. He knew what set her off and when she was getting overwrought. He knew how to drag her deep into the abyss of mindless sensation.

“Lucan,” she breathed as he twisted a taut peak. He sucked the other tip deep into his mouth. Flutters took her belly as the muscles there repeatedly tightened and released, stoking the fire already flaring to life. Her thighs parted as heated moisture filled her pussy. Had any other man come close to the desire Lucan inspired in her?

He opened and pushed off her pants then dispatched his with the same, almost painful urgency she felt. She needed him skin to skin, deep inside her once more.

“Touch me,” she begged though his mouth had never left its treasure.

"I'll never let you go," he promised. His fingers trailed over her, lifting goose bumps across her skin. She shivered at the sensation, moaning her pleasure. The sound reverberated around them, filling the space with the noise of not one pair of lovers but many. The echoing cries caused her channel to clench, a fresh torrent of cream filling her needy cunt.

At last, he cupped her pussy. Deftly, he parted her folds and one, long digit slipped inside. He stroked over her, tracing her opening and sliding through her arousal with just enough friction to have her arching from the blanket. She needed him inside, yet he teased her.

Lightly, he flicked over her clit. Her sharp cry flooded the air, ping-ponging around them. Her hips thrust upward as she wordlessly urged him to give her more. She needed fierce, intense, hard... This feather-soft torment might drive her mad.

Her fingers fisted in his hair. "More, Lucan. I need *more*."

He lifted his mouth from her breast but paused to gently trail his tongue over the over-sensitized flesh. His intense gaze met hers, and slowly, he pushed two long fingers inside her, and she moaned in approval.

"Like this?" he asked. As if to taunt her further, he began an unhurried, even piston. His thumb alternately circled and scraped over her clit.

"You're a jerk," she growled. Her nails bit into his shoulders

He jabbed a bit harder, drawing a guttural cry. "Better?" he asked.

She would *so* pay him back for the teasing. But not now. She reveled in the sensation of him finally giving her what she'd begged for. His mouth returned to her breasts, where he left little bites along the slope, inflicted in unison with each thrust.

Meda smoothed her hands down his back to his hips, but when she reached around for his cock, he pushed her fingers away.

"None of that."

"But I want to touch you, too."

He brushed his mouth over hers. "Nope."

"Lucan," she groaned as he shifted between her thighs. The needy sound of her breathy cry still echoed as he shoved deep, filling her with his long, wide cock in one rapid drive. A frenzy shot through her. Anxiously, she worked against him. Every ion of her being reached for him and the soul-searing climax he'd bring.

His teeth scraped her shoulder, near her neck, and he moaned deep in his throat as if in pain. His hips thrust faster. "I need to taste you," he muttered.

"Yes," she replied.

His hands fisted in the blanket on either side of her shoulders. "God, don't say that."

Meda wondered at his vehemence but was soon lost in his passion. The exchange seemed to have deepened his drive for release. Together, they climbed, bodies undulating as one. Meda wrapped her legs around his powerful thighs, opening herself to receive him deeper.

Her orgasm built like a storm, sending lightning strands to her extremities until finally, it exploded. She froze, arched against him, as pleasure whirled through her veins in a blast of perfect energy. Above her, he groaned, and she felt his seed filling her.

Together, they collapsed to the blanket. Lucan turned to his side, pulling her into the curve of his arms. She rested her head on his biceps as they each struggled for breath.

"Don't ever leave me," he whispered, pushing strands of damp hair from her face.

Her consciousness gasped though outwardly she made no sound. "There's so much to learn," she murmured. "You've changed. You're not the same person you were; I'm not the same, either."

"Where it matters we're both the same," he refuted. "Meda, I'm asking for forever." Lucan sighed. "Just think about it, okay. Right now, I guess we should get back to the main part of the compound. Janos is expecting us for dinner. The family wants to meet and welcome you." He reached out a hand and helped her to her feet.

A menacing laugh came from the darkness. Meda flinched and Lucan immediately stepped in front of her.

"Look what we have here," came the voice. "A Dragon all alone with his mate."

Terror screeched through Meda as five sets of glowing blue eyes shone from the dark shadows. Lucan growled. In a split second, dark green, almost black, scales slide over him, cascading like a waterfall. His body grew taller and wider, his legs becoming as thick as tree trunks and his wings unfurling around her as she stood close to his back. Spinning, he drew her into his arms and rushed for the stairs.

Five blasts of energy slammed into them. Lucan took the brunt as the attack sent him sliding across the slate on his back. Immediately, he leapt to his feet. Fire flared from his mouth as he sprayed the bevy of Djinn with flames.



Another strike propelled Lucan into a wall, and terror slid through Meda. The cavern that had so recently echoed with the sounds of passion now resounded with the cacophony of mayhem. Lucan shook with each barrage, but refused to give quarter. He'd seemed so invincible before, but now, the attackers had him outnumbered as their power held him pinned to the wall while they continued to strike as one, their strength quintupled by their number.

"You Dragons think you're so special and so superior," one of the Djinn ground out. "You're nothing but bullying squatters. Before your kind came here, *we* were the kings of the underground. The caverns and the subterranean warrens were our domain. Then you Dragons," he spat. "You came along and pushed us from our homes, started mating with the Elvish, our women and *human* women. Then you protected your dwellings, the homes your people stole from us, with your magic."

"We stole nothing," Lucan replied evenly. His arms tightened around Meda, making it clear he believed *they'd* steal her.

"For a long time, your spells kept us out," the leader continued as if Lucan hadn't spoken. "But Dragons must be lazy. Complacent. All we had to do is wait. And finally, your wards began to crumble. We can get inside your lowest levels. Before long, we'll infiltrate your entire compound. Too bad, you'll be dead and unable to tell anyone."

The enemies closed in, but there was nothing Lucan could do to escape while he held her protected to his chest.

"Just let me go," she pleaded. There was no way, both of them could survive this confrontation, but one of them could. He could live. He could warn his people. Obviously, they wanted her. Their kind had attacked her at the school, too. She knew there was a connection.

"Never," Lucan responded. With some difficulty, he turned under their onslaught though they pummeled him with their fiery balls of energy. With his back to the Djinn, his wings opened, unfurling behind him. Lucan gathered her high against his chest, protecting her with his arms and the curve of his body. Wind whistled harshly around them as his large wings propelled them into the air. He headed for the doorway that would lead them from this place.

"Aim for the wing," the one in charge commanded. "Follow my lead."

Meda screamed as a net of glowing energy landed over them. It seared into her flesh, and sizzled around Lucan, hampering his flying but not bringing him down. Suddenly, an explosion of blood rained to the cave floor beneath them. Lucan bellowed, and they careened at breakneck

speed for the ground. She saw part of his wing already there, still slowly moving but beginning to curl on itself.

Lucan landed on his back, and she flew from his arms. Her cries echoed around the cavern as her skin scraped the rock. The Djinn who seemed to be in charge raced to her. His hand closed on her arm, roughly yanking her to her feet. Frost seeped into her body at his icy touch. He dragged her further from Lucan as his men closed in on her husband. Now, from the distance, she could see they'd sheared off half of one of his wings. His scales curled from much of his back, exposing bruised and bleeding skin. He was barely moving, though he struggled to get to her, his gaze locked on her.

The Djinn scooped one of the shirts from the floor and shoved it at her.

"Finish him," he instructed his men, "then follow."

"No!" Meda screamed. The Djinn pulled her backward as the others stood around Lucan. Their hands raised, and four thick streams of energy flowed forward to twine into one. It wrapped Lucan's neck, squeezing tight and cutting through his scales.

The leader yanked her into a swirling chasm of dark clouds. It closed around them, stealing Meda's air and vision as they were sucked through an otherworldly pneumatic passage.

## *Chapter Six*

*Maks! Maks, help!* Lucan screamed through his thoughts as he prayed that the cavern wasn't too far from the main compound for his scion to hear and locate him. Panic tore through him as the band around his throat grew tighter, but it was terror that overrode all. As Lucan's vision dimmed and the energy lash sliced into his throat, the Djinn leader *transported* with Meda.

Lucan's attackers pulled their power lash even tighter. It cut through his throat, disconnecting him from his body. As his pain disappeared, it left Lucan in complete despair as death loomed a moment away. His vision grew dark, his last sight the enemies' self-satisfied looks of victory.

\* \* \* \*

It was cold. She was freezing. Meda shuddered as she regained consciousness beneath a pile of thick blankets. She should be warm because of them, but she wasn't. Instead, she was chilled so bone-deep, she thought she might never be warm again.

And it didn't matter. A sob shook her as her last vision assailed her—Lucan, nearly ripped apart and helpless, struggling to get to her as she'd been sucked into a vortex. She'd been conscious then, but remembered nothing after the opening had shut and the air closed in on her and the Djinn who'd grabbed her.

She did a mental inventory of her body, unsure how much she could or should move. She didn't want to attract attention, and she couldn't tell if she was injured. The pain she'd felt earlier from the energy net and the skid across the floor had disappeared. To her surprise, other than the deep cold, she didn't ache.

Cautiously, she looked around. Now that she'd assessed her physical condition, she needed to determine her situation. To her surprise, she was in an opulent room, adorned with precious gems and infused with glowing light, though she couldn't identify the light source. It actually appeared to be coming from the walls. She was lying on some sort of settee hewn of onyx but covered with numerous soft pelts. Brilliant gems lined the upper edge of the seat back. Similar furniture had been placed around the chamber, along with tables that appeared to be made of gold and were also inset with gems.

So...the Djinn really were some sort of underground royalty. And she was alone in the room. Carefully, she sat up and found none of the aches returned to her body. Her brow furrowed. She should have burns, scrapes and bruises. Someone had dressed her in Lucan's shirt, and she pulled aside the edges to look at her body. There were no battle signs. Her body had been healed. Was it Djinn magic or a residual effect of the medicine Maks had given her earlier?

The thought of Maks brought images of Lucan and what she'd seen when she'd been stolen away. Tears filled her eyes as emotional pain slammed through her body. They'd killed Lucan. She'd just gotten him back, she hadn't told him how much she loved him—she hadn't even told him she'd stay with him—and he'd been ripped from her life again. And to God knew where.

Determined to find her way out of here, no matter how nice the surroundings, she climbed off the settee, shuddering at the cold beneath her feet. Though someone had clothed her and placed her under the blankets, the Djinn had proven more than once that they didn't have her best welfare in mind. They wanted to kill her. Not if she could help it!

She'd only made it two steps, when the door creaked open. The leader of the Djinn party stepped inside, now dressed in a sapphire-blue tunic and loose pants trimmed with silver threads. Against his swarthy, olive-toned skin with his dark eyes and black hair, he appeared to be a wealthy Middle Eastern sheik. His eyes perplexed her, but she had no time to think on their difference.

She backed away as he came inside and shut the door behind him.

"I thought perhaps you'd be awake by now," he said. "Humans have no tolerance for *transporation*."

He swept an arm around him, and she cringed having seen the killing power emanate from her hands.

“Welcome to my home. I’m Tawren.”

“Why am I here?”

He smiled, but she didn’t sense anything truly pleasant about the gesture.

“Would you care for something warm to eat?”

“No.” She wasn’t eating jack from this place.

“You’re chilled. It will help your temperature adjustment. Your body will soon acclimate, and you’ll be quite comfortable here.”

That gave her pause. It certainly didn’t sound as if he planned to kill her. At least, not right away.

“Why am I here?” she repeated.

Tawren sighed and crossed to an armoire she hadn’t seen before. He opened it and withdrew a bulky, crimson-colored dress. She eyed it. It had to be several layers of thick velvet and she wondered how it would feel if she put it on. Warmer than the thin button-down she wore now. She didn’t want to remove this shirt. It smelled of Lucan, and was all she had of him.

“I’m claiming you,” Tawren answered.

“Like hell.”

“I’ll make it like heaven. Far better than that Dragon could have provided.”

“*That Dragon* was my husband,” she spat.

Tawren shook his head. “Strange. You don’t bear the mark of a mate. I checked.”

What the hell? She drew the shirt closer to her, and backed further away. What had he done to her?

“On your arm,” he clarified as if she were a small, stupid child. “You know nothing of Dragon mates?” He laughed. “How amusing.”

His eyes started to glow blue and terror strung through her. This was the look of a killer. He’d eliminate her as he had Lucan. Once more, sorrow hollowed her out. Lucan was dead. Again. Wrenched from her life when she’d only just regained him. Now, she’d be killed, too. At least, she’d find her ending with the man she’d always loved.

Tawren shot out his arm and a stream of dark-blue light shot out. It wrapped around her, cold but not painful. It pulled her back in his direction and propelled her onto the settee where she’d awoken. His other hand lifted and a separate bit of power pulled one of the pelts around her.

He took a seat across from her and crossed one leg over the other, his eyes going back to their normal dark color.

She forced back her mournful tears, knowing she'd cry plenty as soon as she was alone—if she lived. She wouldn't give this man, Djinn, whatever, the pleasure of seeing how deeply he'd wounded her, how much he'd taken from her.

"The mark of a Dragon mate," he said. "You don't have it. The intimate contact with *him* should have brought it out." With a sweep of his hand and a slight glow of his eyes, he brought up a hazy image of an arm with a light-colored, filigreed tattoo wrapping it from the back of the hand to shoulder.

Yeah, she would have noticed that. Still, the Djinn could be lying to manipulate her. She and Lucan belonged together. Some mark couldn't dictate that. Lucan would have known—

The memory of the way he'd hidden their hands behind them when they'd spoken with Janos contradicted her initial thought. He had known. He hadn't let it stop him.

"But," Tawren continued, "I can feel you're a Dragon mate, and you must have ingested some sort of Dragon blood. It's the only way your wounds could have healed right before my eyes. No matter. It will leave your system soon. I won't let that taint deter me."

"How benevolent of you," she muttered.

His eyes glowed fiercely blue and suddenly he was crouched before her, merely disappearing then reappearing in a blink. His fingers gripped her chin. "Make no mistake," he growled. "I mean to claim you. A Dragon mate is fated to unite with a Dragon. Not if someone else takes her first. Many of my people are turning to a new race order. My order. Killing women who bear the mate markers isn't necessary. We'll take you for our own—"

"You hate humans. Your people have made that clear."

That self-serving smile returned. "A means to an end. How will the Dragon-kind react when they learn their future is laced with Djinn blood? We mean to procreate to spawn a new race. The Dragons will not tolerate our ilk, and it will mean their end."

Bile rolled into Meda's throat. And it meant, he intended her to be his slave. How much farther into unreality would she spiral before this nightmare ended?

\* \* \* \*

"Lucan. Can you hear me?"

"Maybe he was without oxygen too long."

“Even if he was, his regenerative systems would have repaired his brain.”

“Gods, he’s beat up. I’ve never seen dragon scales so flayed.”

“Why hasn’t he shifted back to human form?”

The questions circled around Lucan, but he couldn’t respond. His body wouldn’t react to his commands to move. He recognized the voices of Maks, Janos and Niko, but couldn’t open his eyes to see them or where he was. Maybe he was dead and no longer corporeal.

“He’s got too many injuries to shift,” Maks said. “If he changed, they’d kill him. Give it time. His head was nearly severed when I found him. Thank goodness they didn’t realize they’d left a few threads or he’d be gone.”

“How did this happen?” Janos demanded. “They were inside the compound.”

*Maks*, Lucan thought weakly, suddenly remembering he could communicate telepathically with his scion and hopeful it would work, despite his state. *Maks, you have to find Meda.*

“If Riven did anything to cause this—”

“Oh thank heaven!” Maks exclaimed. “He’s conscious.”

*I can’t move.*

“It’s okay,” Maks replied. “Your body’s still repairing.”

*It wasn’t Riven*, Lucan reported. *The wards around the compound are aging. The Djinn got underneath the lower edges.*

Janos swore as Maks relayed the information. “I’ll gather our mages. This is unacceptable. I will not allow attacks in our people’s homes. Niko, contact the council and have Riven recalled. We’ll need him here. Let them know that the other clans need to check their wards. If this can happen here, it can happen at the other compounds. Ours isn’t the oldest.”

“On it,” Niko replied. He placed a hand on Lucan’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re going to be okay, Wolf. You’re a pain in the ass, but I’m glad you’re my brother. Can’t lose you so soon.”

*Ditto.*

“He says ‘ditto’,” Maks relayed. Niko gave Lucan a gentle squeeze before Lucan heard him leave the room.

*Meda?* Lucan prompted. *The Djinn took her.*

“We’ll go after her,” Maks assured him.

“She’ll be fine,” Janos asserted, but Lucan wasn’t so sure. The Djinn would do anything to exterminate the Dragon race, even hold an innocent woman hostage. They’d use her as bait, knowing the Dragons would come after her. She could already be dead, and his people wouldn’t know it until it was too late.

No! She couldn’t be. Shredding sorrow and dread swamped him as he tasted the horror she’d lived four years ago when she’d thought him dead. What had he done... And now, she was exposed to this.

Fear for her filled him, twining with the frustration that he couldn’t yet move. The longer he laid here like a lump of clay, the more danger Meda was in. He needed to get to her. The thought of someone hurting her twisted in his gut. He’d rather die than have her subjected to who knew what.

By sheer will, he forced his eyes open and took the first deep breath he’d taken since before the attack.

*How much longer?* he asked Maks, who stood over him, his hands enveloped with gold light and moving slowly six inches over Lucan’s neck and chest.

“Don’t know. I’ve never worked on a nearly decapitated patient.”

“Should I have Jonah come add his power?” Janos asked, speaking of his scion who was also Maks’ brother.

Maks shook his head. “He’s hours away. I think I’ll be done here before he could arrive.”

Janos gave a single sharp nod. Concern colored his gaze as he looked down at Lucan. He squeezed the shoulder Niko had earlier and Lucan wonder what damage was on the other side.

“Heal well, brother. We have a battle to wage, and we will win. Meda will come home safely.” Turning on his heel, Janos stalked from the room, intent on his mission.

Lucan closed his eyes and fought to remain calm as Maks continued his effort to aid Lucan’s natural regeneration. What no one was saying screamed loudly in Lucan’s mind, and that underlined the fear for Meda already assailing him. With the *trasporation* portal, the Djinn could have taken Meda anywhere. It was a big world to search for one Dragon mate, and they didn’t know all the Djinn dwellings. He prayed Riven would have some clue as to where she might have been taken.

\* \* \* \*

“Eat.”



Meda glanced at the opulent table set between her and Tawren. Though somewhat unfamiliar, the food didn't appear unappetizing, but there wasn't a prayer she'd eat any of it. Though her stomach growled, she wasn't giving the Djinn the opportunity to drug or poison her.

Tawren scowled and his dark eyes took on a faint blue glow. "Fine," he grated, then took a bite of his food that had been dished from the same bowls as hers. "Do you think I'd eat this if it was harmful to you?"

She remained silent. He'd killed Lucan and kidnapped her. Who knew what Djinn were immune to that would adversely affect humans? She wouldn't share her thoughts. He'd only take satisfaction in her barely suppressed agony over Lucan's demise. Poison aside, food held no allure. All she wanted to do was to crawl under the blankets and cry out the first waves of the grieving. She'd survived before, and she'd make it through again. But this time, she knew about the Dragons, and as soon as she found her way out of here, she'd join them and fight against this common enemy.

She shifted, adjusting the long skirt enveloping her legs to her ankles. Cold had forced her to relent and change into the dress he'd offered earlier. Besides the warmth it offered, she felt more protected with the thick layers covering her. Somehow, it also seemed to emanate heat and cut into the stinging ice that had filled her. Having the cold dissipate made way for an unsettling sensation in her belly. It seemed to coil around her channel, driving her to an unwelcome arousal.

Meda swallowed and kept her eyes from Tawren. Heaven help her if he saw the intensity in her gaze. She didn't understand this. She didn't want *him*. But suddenly, she felt like a cat in heat, willing to rub against anything to ease her desire—anything but him. That thought brought acid to her mouth. She might be sick if he touched her.

Thankfully, the sensation was coming and going like a hormonal hot flash. If she could get through this... In a few minutes, she'd be fine.

Tawren reached for her hand, and she recoiled. Her sleeves covered her to her fingers and she wondered how much more her skin would have crawled if he'd touched bare flesh. Her stomach heaved and she covered her mouth, covering her reaction with a sob.

He leapt to his feet, upsetting the table and sending the dishes clattering to the floor. "Am I so hideous?" he exclaimed.

She shook her head, unwilling to infuriate him and cause reprisal. Tawren was actually stunningly handsome, with dark aristocratic looks. Aside from his mercurial temper and the fact

he'd killed her husband, he was charming and solicitous. He'd seen to her needs, even when she'd rebuffed him and refused his offerings.

He approached her, and she turned away in a panic. His arms went around her, pulling her back flush to his chest. Her stomach roiled as he splayed his hand over her belly to hold her against him. His erection jutted against her buttocks while he pressed his lips to her neck. His dark, earthy scent enveloped her. Though it wasn't an unpleasant smell, his proximity raked across her body. Her body jerked as she fought to control the sickness exploding through her. She breathed through her teeth, struggling for air and choking on his essence.

Desperately, she yanked away from him. She stumbled away, putting the settee between them. "You just had my husband killed," she exclaimed. "Don't touch me! Don't *ever* touch me, you monster!"

His chin lifted as he regarded her. She saw a flash of emotion cross his eyes, but it was gone too quickly for her to identify it. His jaw locked, whitening near his ears. "I see," he grated. "You have feelings for him, though you're not mated."

"He's my husband! What do you think?"

His nostrils flared. "He's a Dragon," he said derisively. "Your feelings will change."

Turning sharply, he stormed for the door. He slammed it with shattering force, leaving her alone with the mess and her overwhelming sorrow.

## *Chapter Seven*

It was the longest five hours of Lucan's life. Every minute was spent worrying about Meda. And once his body regained its ability to move, the excruciating pain settled in. His systems had focused on repairing the life-threatening damage first. The burns, oozing wounds, broken bones and the regeneration of his severed wing had been left as secondary.

Finally, he was able to shift back to human form. He groaned as he doubled over. He needed blood. It gnawed at his gut as if he hadn't eaten for years. The thought of feeding from anyone but Meda turned his stomach. He fought back the need, vowing to sustain himself with a bit of the emergency supply of bagged blood Janos kept on hand.

Straightening, he reached for his pants which had been tossed over a chair next to the infirmary's bed.

"Lucan," Maks gasped. His eyes were riveted on Lucan's right arm. His brow furrowed and his gaze shifted upward to Lucan's face. "Why aren't you in pain?" he asked slowly.

"What I've just endured wasn't enough?" Lucan replied flippantly.

Maks shook his head. "You should be...*aching* for Meda."

"I am." Maybe skirting the obvious would get him out of here without interrogation.

Not so. "Not like that. You know what the mating does. You've seen what happens when mates are parted before they've formally united." He grabbed Lucan's arm. "Did you think no one would notice? You've changed in front of her and had sex I don't want to know how many times. Still not even a faint trace. This isn't something that can be hidden."

"I'm not giving her up again," Lucan growled.

"And what? You can't unite with her. If you tried, it would kill her. You can't join with anyone but your chosen woman."

Lucan yanked away. “She’s mine! And not you, not any council, no one is going to tell me otherwise. I am not giving her up again in favor of what the Dragons want!”

He stormed from the infirmary, ignoring Maks’ verbal and telepathic calls. He wasn’t going to argue the validity of his mating with Meda. He had more important things to attend. He had to find her, and he could think of only one way. The dreams that came with his blasted Dragon “gifts”.

Angrily, he headed for his personal quarters, disregarding anyone who tried to speak to him along the way. He stopped briefly in the compound’s main kitchen to get a bag of blood. He gulped it down then grabbed another, already feeling the power surge through his veins. After a third, he headed out into the main gallery. His gait held purpose, and he would not be deterred. Fully fueled, he sensed the vibration of his body absorbing its sustenance. Good. He’d need his strength if he hoped to dream. Despite a nagging ache in his middle, he’d regained top form.

He shifted then flew to the level housing his home. A moment later, he was inside. He clicked the lock firmly in place behind him then made sure the door to his courtyard was secure as well. The fence wouldn’t keep out nosy Dragons who flew, but no one would break into his personal dwelling space.

In the bedroom, he pulled out a soft, white T-shirt and slipped it on. He stripped out of his pants which had been spattered with blood during the battle and found a low-slung, faded pair of jeans. Comfortable, he settled into a curved lounge chair and closed his eyes.

He only hoped he could do this. He’d practiced since he’d been here, but never under such critical circumstances.

When Lucan had first come to the compound, Janos had taught him breathing techniques to sink him into a meditative state. Now, he brought his body to full relaxation, forcing himself to go slow. Rushing wouldn’t work. He had to take his time, even if his urgency begged otherwise.

Finally, it was just his breathing echoing through his head like a deep, resonant song. He reached out for Meda. His being searched the path to where she’d been taken. Land spread out before him. Mountains then flatlands. A wide ribbon of water with a riverboat drifting down it. All at once, he was pulled past a cave and into a second. His being was thrust along the passages, before it paused before a wall. In his mind’s eye, he saw how it opened then he was on the other side and descending into a gallery beneath the upper cavern.

Suddenly, he burst into a room containing two people. His heart lurched as he saw Meda held in the arms of the Djinn who'd stolen her. Anger rose inside him as he forced himself to watch, but his rage was too much and the vision evaporated. He lurched awake.

Panting, Lucan lay frozen as he brought himself under control.

The Djinn...

Fury burned through Lucan.

The Djinn had been wooing Meda, the woman he'd stolen from Lucan. The fury turned to rage. She was his!

He surged from the chair. At least, he knew where to find them. He recognized the place. He'd been there as a child. Hannibal Missouri, residing along the Mississippi river. The first cave had been the famous Tom Sawyer cave. The second with the secret door was the Cameron cave, a natural, untouched cavern.

The Djinn was in his sights, and he was dead.

He strode toward his courtyard. Outside, he paused beside the pool and shifted.

"Going somewhere?"

He turned to see Maks lounging against the wall. His scion hadn't shifted, and he lifted a brow as he waited with arms crossed over his wide chest.

"You weren't thinking of going somewhere without me, were you?" Maks asked.

"Don't try to stop me," Lucan growled.

"Don't try to go without me," his friend countered. "I tuned into your dreams—"

"That's unethical."

Maks shrugged. "You can thank me later, after we've saved Meda from that mate-stealing asshole. And before you ask, no, I didn't tell Janos. I think we'll need something more subtle than an army for infiltrating their lair."

"And the Djinn will be more than happy to let them know if we fail," Lucan concluded darkly. But they wouldn't fail. Fate couldn't be so cruel as to part him from Meda now that they'd finally been reunited.

\* \* \* \*

Meda wished she had a watch. The chamber Tawren had left her in had no windows or way for her to know how much time had passed. She'd dozed at one point but soon roused.

Unease was her constant companion. She didn't trust Tawren, and she trusted his fellow Djinn even less.

She'd restlessly prowled the room while alone and inspected corner of space. There wasn't much to it—a few pieces of furniture, the armoire and a few decorations. She didn't know what she looked for. A weapon, perhaps. A clue to her freedom—and that wasn't through the doorway. Two huge, dark-suited Djinn guarded the portal. They'd snarled at her when she'd opened it, hoping against hope that it was unattended. No such luck. She was trapped with no weapon—well, almost. She'd secreted a sharp knife in a pocket of the dress before a pair of young female Djinn had come in earlier to clean up the mess Tawren had made in his spate of anger. She doubted she'd have much chance to use it, but if he came close again, she'd jab him with it. Well, she prayed she would. She'd never stabbed anything, let alone another living being.

Desperation drove Meda. Tawren seemed determined to claim her; she wanted nothing more than to leave this freezing tomb and him. Especially him. He'd killed Lucan.

What if she could escape this place and alert the Dragons to its presence? They'd want retribution for their fallen brother. She'd have a hand in avenging his murder.

Tawren's entrance startled her from her fantasy of bloody revenge. She darted behind the settee, wanting that barrier between them. He glared at her as he firmly shut the door. His face twisted into a sneer, and he sent out a spout of energy, blasting the piece of onyx furniture into a shower of fragmented stone.

She gasped, covering her face to protect it from the shards plinking to the floor around her. His boots crunched on the black pebbles as he approached her, with no heed to the precious stones crushed between his feet and the rock floor. His hands closed painfully on her arms, and he yanked her against his chest.

"Enough of this," he bellowed. One hand fisted in her hair as she struggled against him and tugged back her head. His mouth flattened over hers, his cold filling her as he forced apart her lips. She clawed at him as sickness rose inside her. She shook as the revulsion overcame her, blurring her vision as her whole being protested his touch. Her stomach heaved.

He shoved her away, his glower fixed on her. His chest rose and fell heavily. Spinning from her, he went to the door. He reached outside and one of the guards handed him a parcel. Returning to the room, he opened the bundle of fabric to reveal a dark blue dress adorned with sapphires. His gaze challenged her as he draped it over one of the remaining chairs.

“You will be my bride this night. Prepare yourself. If you are not ready when I return, I will let the guards ready you.”

“No,” she whispered. This couldn’t be happening. Her life was as shattered as the onyx. First, Lucan and now she was to be the chattel of this man, a pawn in his personal agenda to eliminate the Dragons.

“I warn you. Do not cross me,” Tawren told her. He approached her once more. He reached out to trail his fingers down her cheek.

Horried, Meda cringed away.

Frustration darkened his eyes. “You do not need to hate me. I will give you a good life.” Right. His treasured battle prize, the trophy hard-won from his enemies.

“You would give me no time to grieve?” she countered.

“I’ll replace your sorrow. When we leave this place, I’ll give you fine children and treasures to fill our castle. Let me make you happy.”

She shook her head. Turmoil swamped her. Should she tell him now that she could have no children and meet instant death? Could she still escape? Should she endure the torture of being with him in hope of eventually breaking away or ending his life by her own hand? His life for Lucan’s.

Slicing pain slammed through her core at the idea of sleeping with Tawren. A whimper escaped her as she fought to stay upright. Her legs trembled, and sick goose bumps crawled over her skin.

He frowned. “Prepare yourself.”

She fell to her knees as soon as the door closed behind him. Her arms curled about her abdomen as she doubled over, her forehead to the rough ground. She drew in shuddering breaths as the pain alleviated in his absence. Need filled her, flooding her pussy and confirming she’d indeed gone crazy.

Her hand slid to the knife in her pocket. She’d use it on him or on herself before she’d part her legs for him.

\* \* \* \*

Lucan and Maks arrived at the Cameron cavern just before the three PM tour was to begin. They landed in the trees near the campground and shifted back to human form. Stealthily,

they moved into position to see the tour enter the cave's mouth, several of the participants holding lanterns aloft. The Dragons waited several minutes before creeping to the same entrance.

Agitation filled Lucan as they approached. Meda was so close, yet so far. It all depended on him finding that passage without detection by the humans. As the brownish walls closed around them and their eyes adjusted, the memory of Meda in that Djinn's arms filled his thoughts. What if she preferred the Djinn? She hadn't appeared to struggle.

*Stop it!* Maks ordered, intruding on his thoughts once more. *You have to trust her more than this.*

Lucan breathed in a burst of air and cleansed his thoughts. *You've seen yourself that she doesn't bear my mark. Nothing binds her to me,* he replied.

*She loves you. You know that,* Maks chided.

He didn't actually. *I asked her to stay with me and she shied away from it. Without a bond, I don't know she'll stay.*

Coming close behind him, Maks smacked the back of his head. Hard. *Cut the self pity crap. You've lived on her love for four years. Pull up your Dragon panties already.*

Lucan growled low in his throat. *You're a jerk.*

Thankful for his scion's levity, he focused his eyes on the walls. It was merely nerves that brought on this worry about Meda's faithfulness. In truth, he was far more worried for her safety.

He looked for the familiar indentations he'd seen. The entire wall looked the same. As they walked, it didn't change. None of it looked like what he remembered.

Suddenly, he heard the tour's voices coming their way. Grabbing Maks, he yanked him down the first side passage he came to. They pressed flat to the wall. Lights soon bobbed past their hiding spot, but they were deep enough in shadows that no one paused.

*Are you sure this is the right place?* Maks asked.

*Yes. It's a sub-cavern beneath this system. I'm sure of it.* He just didn't know where. He could feel Meda. Her heart seemed to beat in his ears. It eased the ache that had plagued him the past few hours. He hated being apart from her. If anything happened... He sighed. But he was far more worried about her than his own well-being. He'd been the lone wolf for years. If necessary, he could do it again, though with far more of a hole in his heart.

*Visualize it,* Maks urged. *We can wander around here for hours or we can take a few minutes and get some direction.*



He nodded and closed his eyes then he heard it, the grinding noise of stone against stone. Beckoning to Maks to follow, he allowed his Dragon armor to slide into place then headed for the sound. In the distance, two Djinn came through an opening in the cave wall.

“Stupid humans,” one of them grumbled. “Always traipsing around our caves. No idea how easily we could kill them all.”

“Tawren won’t allow it,” the female with him protested.

“He wouldn’t notice one pudgy human gone missing.”

Lucan wondered if anyone would notice an obnoxious Djinn gone missing. Reining in his loathing, he silently hid in the shadows and watched the pair disappear. His battle wasn’t with them, though his kind called all Djinn enemy.

When he was sure they were gone, he crept forward. This time, he easily found the correct portion of the wall. The notches were shoulder width apart just as he remembered. He slipped his fingers into them and felt for the levers. He didn’t feel anything! Damn it! Would it take magic for the portal to open?

He glanced at Maks. *You have more experience with this than I do...*

Maks raised his eyebrows. *With breaking into a Djinn stronghold? Are you crazy? This is the first time for me, too.*

Damn. *My guess is we need Djinn blood to activate the lock,* Lucan offered. *It would be the most effective method.*

In unison, they looked up the passage in the direction the Djinn couple had taken. The sound of what they were doing, echoed down the passage. Need for Meda gripped Lucan once more. The compulsion was so strong, he feared he’d do anything to get to her—then fuck her no matter the dire circumstances.

Where had that come from? He shook his head, refocusing.

With the Djinn couple distracted, he and Maks could easily overtake them. Distaste filled Lucan. He didn’t have stomach for war and killing, but the pair were the most likely keys into the underground caverns.

No. He wasn’t the cold-blooded beast their enemies accused his people of being. *As nasty as the male sounded, I can’t just kill him,* he told Maks. *Even if their kind nearly killed me.*

Murder would do nothing to further the cause of peace, and that was what the Dragons wanted. They didn’t want the constant battle with the Djinn and Elvish.

*We could knock through it,* Maks suggested. *Magic might act as the lock, but the door is only as strong as the rock.*

*Not very subtle. They'd hear us coming.* Not to mention, hapless humans might unknowingly find their way into dangerous Djinn territory.

*Our options are narrowing. It's all quiet up there. Mr. Djinn must be a speed demon.*

Lucan jerked his head toward the ceiling. It was tall enough, he and Maks could hide in the shadows and watch the pair reenter—perhaps catch the door before it fully shut.

Unfurling their wings, they flew several feet over the door. They clung to walls and waited. To their surprise, only the male returned.

“Bitch,” he muttered as he fastened his pants. “Try and blackmail me, will you?”

He pressed his hands to the grooves where Lucan had placed his just minutes ago. The door immediately clicked open.

*Djinn blood,* Maks said, echoing Lucan's earlier thought.

*But where's the woman? I have a bad feeling about this,* Lucan replied.

The door swung shut at a speed that could only be magical. There was no intercepting it, not without losing a hand, fingers or a foot.

*We need to find the female,* Lucan said, dropping to the floor. Maks leapt down beside him and they raced up the corridor. The woman was sprawled naked and wide-eyed, her throat slit. Her mouth moved as she tried to breathe.

“Can you heal her?” Lucan asked.

“She's a Djinn...”

“Can you heal her?” Lucan repeated.

Maks sighed. He shifted back to human form. “At least, get some of her blood on your hands so you can open that door.” He looked at the woman. “I expect your help after this, or I'll kill you myself.” Withdrawing an army knife from the pocket of his jeans, he slit his wrist open and held it against the woman's mouth as Lucan ran one hand along her throat. He smeared it onto his other hand.

“Drink,” Maks rasped. “If you want to live, fucking drink!”

Slowly, weakly, the female's lips moved. After a few moments, Maks pulled back and partially shifted so his arm would heal then immediately shifted back. As Lucan watched, his

scion's hands glowed a faint gold color and he ran them over the woman's neck, as he had Lucan's body earlier in the day.

Minutes later, she sat up nearly fully healed aside from a dark red mark across her skin. Lucan knew from experience, the scar would fade to nothing within the half hour.

"My name's Amara," she murmured. "I was a servant to Lord Tawren." Her head bowed and she placed a hand over her chest. "I'm at your service."

"Was that Lord Tawren?" Lucan couldn't help asking.

"No! That was my lover—ex-lover—Claive. Lord Tawren is...well, he's actually somewhat...kind." She glanced over at them then added, "To our people."

"Why did Claive try to kill you?"

"He's been stealing. I was trying to convince him he should stop—now, I am cast out. I am as good as dead to them, but I would rather find a way to live out there," she waved a hand toward the entrance of the cave, "than be dead."

*It's an archaic society, Maks told him. Men are dominant and their women are belongings. Her lover's action makes her worthless. She can't be part of their society any longer.*

"Amara, will you help us get inside?" Lucan ventured.

"Why?" she asked hesitantly. "I cannot help you hurt my people."

"My wife has been stolen—"

Her eyes went wide. "Tawren's woman. I cannot..."

He held back his growl of frustration. It would do no good to frighten the woman. "We won't hurt him," he promised. *Not purposely, anyway.* "And when we leave we will let you come with us."

"Lucan!" Maks protested.

"We can't let her out on her own," he told his scion.

*I don't like it.*

*We have no choice. She won't help us inside otherwise.*

"Okay," Amara said. She glanced at Maks, and Lucan saw interest in her gaze for the first time. Of course, Maks was still in human form, and she had his blood flowing through her for the moment. "We must hurry. Lord Tawren plans to join with your woman at dusk. If that happens, there is no hope for you."

Fury gripped Lucan. No one would touch Meda! She was his!

*Dial it back, Wolf, or even the Djinn-girl will hear your thoughts,* Maks chided.

“This way,” Amara said. She led the way deeper into the cave, and away from the door they’d been trying to get through. “There’s a less used door over the servants’ quarters.”

*Should we trust her?* Maks asked.

*Do we have a choice?* Lucan replied.

After a few minutes, she paused. “Remember you promised not to hurt anyone—though if you happen to maim Claive and cut off his inadequate member, I wouldn’t consider it a breach of our agreement.” She shook her head. “Trusting Dragons,” she muttered. “What next?”

Maks leaned close to her. “You know, I’ve been told you should never ask that.”

She lips turned up sadly then flattened as she pressed her hands to the wall. Slowly, a great panel of rock slid inward, revealing a narrow stand of stairs beyond. A faint green light glowed at the bottom.

“Follow the wall at the bottom of the steps. It will fork. The one to the right will lead you to the main gallery. Take it, but stay to the shadows. Follow the gallery wall to the left. Take the first passage. There will be two guards to get past, but that is Lord Tawren’s quarters.”

“Stay with her,” Lucan told Maks. One of them would have an easier time getting through undetected than two.

“Lucan, no!”

“I’ll stay in communication with you.”

Maks scowled, but didn’t disagree. With a sharp nod, he stepped back to allow Lucan unimpeded access.

Amara caught Lucan’s arm just before he stepped inside. Sickness plowed through him. It was as if no one could touch him but Meda. And he needed her more than life...

Beside him Maks growled. It was then, Lucan glanced down at the hand holding him. Filigree laced up it.

“Oh Maks,” he breathed, glancing at his scion’s arm.

Maks looked down at the same time. “Shit!”

Apparently, this was “what’s next”.

Amara yanked her hand away from him as if burned. Lucan watched in mesmerized fascination as Maks tugged her to his side. She gasped then blue fire blazed in her eyes as she looked up at him.

His hand buried in her hair and his mouth lowered to hers. Lucan coughed, and they both startled from their trance.

“Be careful,” Amara murmured, her eyes continually darting to Maks, her confusion obvious.

“Go,” Maks said. “Talk to me as you go, so I know you’re safe.” He turned back to Amara. “We need to get your clothes. I don’t want anyone seeing you naked. Then we have to come back here so I can help Lucan if necessary.” He growled. “I suddenly want to kill Claive.”

*Now who needs to dial it back?* Lucan chided as he started down the stairs.

*She’s my mate*, Maks grated through his mind. *Meda’s just your...*

*Mate*, Lucan asserted. *She’s my mate.*

## *Chapter Eight*

Leaving Maks and Amara, Lucan stealthily headed for the green glow at the foot of the stairs. There was no movement shadowing the light, but he worried about what he'd come upon at the landing.

As it turned out, the room was a kitchen and long deserted if the dust was any indicator. Amara had said to follow the wall. One direction ran to a corner; the other went through a doorway. Hoping he'd understood her, he crept along the path and through the opening. He found the green glow came from some substance in the walls and wondered if this section of the Djinn's stronghold was unused. Everywhere dust and cobwebs hung in thick swaths.

Finally, he came to the fork. Heeding the directions he'd been given, he headed to the right. The walls emitted less light here. The further he moved, the more the illumination diminished under the soot that covered the surfaces. Deep shadows hid him, and the faint flickering of flames showed at the end of the passage. Someone had a fire in the gallery, but it wasn't enough to fully brighten the whole space. Perfect.

Though he felt safer in Dragon form, he shifted. His human visage would be less noticeable.

*Maks, he called.*

*Are you all right?*

*Yes. Meda could hear your voice before. Try to direct your thoughts at her now that the door is open and see if she can hear you. Tell her I'm on my way.*

He heard Maks trying to call her several times but with no response. *I think your blood's worn out of her system,* Maks told him.

Lucan couldn't help a small pulse of satisfaction though the development was inconvenient. He didn't want Maks in Meda's head. Still, it would have been helpful.

At the opening to the tunnel, he darted to the left as Amara had directed. So far everything she'd said had proved true. But he had yet to make the final turn. A trap could await him around the next corner.

Gathering his wits around him, he scanned the room. Several small fires had been built, with large groups of people around them. A bevy of Djinn danced and played instruments around the flames while those watching clapped. An array of colorful, swirling fabric reminded him of gypsies. He could fully imagine the scene taking place beneath a star-filled night with their caravan wagons waiting in the distance.

And everyone was occupied with the frivolity. A few serving women wove amongst the people, filling cups and doling out food. Everywhere, he spied shadows of couples making love as the celebration quickly moved toward sexual free-for-all. The tension from it hung heavy in the air, energy waiting to explode into action.

The Dragons never had anything so orgiastic, yet he could imagine him and Meda writhing amongst others, his cock deep in her as other bodies rubbed against them in their own sexual experiences.

Good heaven, he needed her *now*.

As he watched, more and more Djinn split into groups around the fire. The sounds of passion grew as the coupling escalated. He suspected if someone yelled, no one would hear it or they'd think it was part of the sexual experience. Perfect.

Men seemed to outnumber the women. His hand rubbed over his cock at the sight of one woman between three men, the look on her face pure bliss. He wanted to see that expression on his own woman—not that he'd ever share her with one man let alone two. Breaking away from the sight before he further delayed his mission, he slipped closer to the final passage to Lord Tawren's chamber.

Just as reported, two black-suited guards stood outside a doorway. The hideaway of an enemy. His destination in view, he assessed the challenge. One of the guards was engaged with a woman, obviously wishing he could be part of the celebration in the main gallery. Lucan wished he'd just go and join the others. Taking down one Djinn warrior would be easier than tangling with two.

Suddenly, a man in a tunic and loose pants came around the corner from the other direction. Gems glittered on his clothing as he walked. His eyes simmered light blue as he focused on the door. Stopping there, he spoke to the guards. A moment later, they headed Lucan's direction while the man entered the room.

Lucan sank into the shadows, until they passed.

Of course. The Djinn thought their stronghold was safe. Meda was being guarded from other Djinn and from escape. With Tawren in residence, there was no need for guards. Obviously, he planned to be there for awhile, or he would have had them wait.

Rage twisted in his belly at the thought of Tawren—and he knew it must be—alone in the room with Meda. He hated this feeling, the hatred, the furious anger, the feeling he'd rip apart the man if he so much as breathed Meda's air. He'd seen it in mates who hadn't been joined yet—it was common in them—but he wasn't marked. He'd never felt this possessive, territorial and filled with the need to be in her and taste her. He nearly shook with the desire. Anyone who claimed Meda wasn't his mate was a fool.

He closed his eyes for a moment to gather himself. He had to get in the room then get out. He had no plan of escape. Unless he took out Tawren, the man would sound the alarm and all the Djinn would be on Lucan, not just the five who'd overcome him before.

Tawren had nearly killed him, and he'd stolen Meda. He deserved what he got.

\* \* \* \*

"I told you to prepare yourself!"

"I'm not one of your chattel to be ordered around. I am not and will not be your property," Meda spat. She glared at Tawren, her jaw set and her arms crossed over her chest. His glower would not deter her. She wasn't doing one thing to make this easy on him. And she knew the Dragons were nearby. Though she dared not hope Lucan was with them, she'd heard Maks' voice in her head along with a bunch of gibberish about locks, strongholds, mates and blood. But somewhere in there, she'd heard "Wolf". She knew of only one Dragon called that name.

Her blood throbbed anxiously through her, knowing she would soon be back to her rightful place—and what was that? Until Lucan had reappeared, she'd thought it was in Wyoming, teaching preschoolers. But what they'd said to one another in the cavern...she was supposed to be with him. She *wanted* to be with him. And she wanted to finally tell him that.

Her body fairly vibrated with her urgency to touch him once more.



Tawren shot out a lash of energy and dragged her to him. Cold pain cut through her body, and she knew he intended her to feel his power. Bile rose in her throat as his hard body pressed to her. His cock was rigid against her thigh. Releasing the band of power, his hands went to the buttons running from neck to waist of the red gown he'd given her.

She cried out as his icy fingertips touched her skin. Flailing, she fought him, her fists landing anywhere she could reach. He jerked her hard against the wall.

The hiss of fabric filled the room along with her scream as he shoved the dress down her arms and trapped them inside the material.

"Get it through your head," he rasped. "You're mine."

"No," she pleaded as his mouth pressed to her upper breast. Suddenly, a shadow darkened her vision, and Tawren was wrenched from her by the neck.

"No," an irate voice growled, "get it through your head..." Tawren was slammed against the wall, forehead first. "She's mine."

"Lucan," Meda gasped. "Oh my God, Lucan!"

He gave the Djinn another bang into the wall then dropped him. The man slumped unconscious to the floor. Meda and Lucan stared at each other breathing heavily. Even with Tawren unconscious beside them, she wanted nothing more than to jump Lucan.

"I thought you were dead," she whispered.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Takes more than almost cutting off my head."

Her eyes went wide.

"Tell you later," he said. "We need to get out of here, then I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to fuck you until we can't move."

"Sounds perfect to me." Divine. Her body softened at the thought of him entering her again soon.

His eyes darkened as he looked at her bared chest. "Are there other clothes here you can change into?" he asked.

"The gown he wanted me to wear for the joining." She pointed at the garment still hanging over the chair.

"Perfect. Matches his clothes. Change while I do this then rip some strips from that dress you're wearing now." He groaned as he knelt beside the Djinn and started to undress him. "I'm so hard for you right now, getting out of here will be a challenge."

“I hope you mean me, not him,” she laughed, spying a glimpse of joy for the first time since she’d been there.

Lucan chuckled. “You’ll pay for that.”

“I hope so.” Her mouth watered as she watched him undress then put on Tawren’s clothing. Thankfully, the loose design had enough room to accommodate his larger frame. The boots fit perfectly. In the shadows, Lucan would look just like Tawren.

As she finished changing, Lucan shifted to Dragon form. A spiral of flame burst from his mouth and he burned his clothing, leaving it in a pile of ashes beside the helpless Djinn. She watched mesmerized, seeing the way his scales glistened like muted emeralds beneath shiny coal. Both man and Dragon were beautiful in her eyes.

“Don’t want to help his escape,” Lucan said as he looked down at the naked man. Meda used the knife she’d stolen to rip thick strips from the red gown. She handed them to Lucan who gagged Tawren then bound his wrists and ankles. Since the man’s hands were so dangerous, he tied extra strips over them and up his arms to the elbows.

“That’s really gonna be stiff when he wakes,” Meda commented without remorse.

“Let’s go,” Lucan said. He reached for her hand. She gasped when a streak of pleasure-pain sparked up her arm.

He opened the door and peeked outside. Just as they exited, a band of people moved near the lighter end of the passage.

“Is that the way we need to go?” she asked.

He nodded. “This way. Tawren came from this direction. There must be something there.”

As they went, the passage got darker and darker, and Meda grew more and more sure this was probably a bad idea until, there in the pitch black, Lucan dragged her into his arms and kissed her as if the very taste of her was all that could sustain him. Her lips parted, and his tongue slipped inside. Hungrily, he took her mouth with all the intensity he put into fucking her. Eagerly, she surrendered to his domination in that kiss.

His fingers dug into her shoulders as he pressed her to the wall.

“I could take you right here,” he rasped. “This need for you is stronger than my self-preservation.”

She groaned, knowing that right now there was no way they could fulfill their desires. Her belly cramped with her overwhelming drive to have him. It hurt. It hurt so bad. If only he'd just take her.

He brushed his lips over her temple. "But not stronger than my urge to protect you at all costs."

"Lucan," she whimpered, her body protesting his pronouncement. She rubbed against him, wondering at the heated need that prickled in her pussy and tightened her nipples to painful nubs. Her breaths came out as choppy gasps as the desire clouded her mind.

"I know, baby. I'm sorry. I'll make it better as soon as I can." His voice was tight, as if he suffered the same. He scooped her into his arms and ran further down the passage. He took twists and turns with such speed she knew he could see though she was blinded by the darkness. She pushed her face to his neck, breathing in his essence and kissing his exposed skin as he darted through the warren of passages. They passed through numerous caverns, the sound of their movement changing as they echoed in the open spaces. Each time, Lucan rushed into the next closed-in pathway, never lingering out in the open as he searched for a way out.

After some time, he paused and swore under his breath.

"What?" she asked.

"There's nothing here. Tawren must have *transporated* from somewhere else."

"Are we lost?" she asked, already knowing they were.

"I don't think even the Djinn could find us."

She took a shuddering breath. Even through her mindless desire, she knew she didn't want to die, lost in a cave, even if it was with Lucan. "Do you have a plan?"

Since her face was still to his neck, she felt him nod. "We wait," he said.

"Wait?" she asked incredulously. How could he be so calm?

"Maks is up above. I'll let him know the situation. He'll contact Riven. He's the one who helped me find you at the school. Riven is half Dragon and half Djinn. He's also Maks' half brother. And he's been gifted with the ability of finding just about anyone."

"Even if they're lost deep in a cave?"

"Even."

"And?"

“And what?” He sat down and brought her around to straddle his lap. The dress hiked up and his cock rubbed against her naked pussy, his pants the only thing separating them. She knew he could feel her damp heat though the thin fabric—she could feel him vibrating against her hardened clit.

Her head dropped back as she reveled in the sensation and clenched her hands on his muscular shoulders.

“And what are we going to do while we wait?”

His lips pressed to her neck, his tongue laving and his teeth scraping over the place where her jugular throbbed. Slowly, he worked his way to her shoulder. He sighed. “We talk.”

“We...what?” she asked, sure she’d heard wrong. “No, Lucan...I...can’t...”

His arousal, his kisses and the way he grasped her hips in an iron grip didn’t lie. He needed her as badly as she needed him. Why was he delaying when the arousal was so painful?

“It’s important. I...need to tell you...more...about Dragons.”

“Couldn’t you tell me later?” she begged.

His hands tightened as if to impede her escape. “I need to tell you *now*. When I take you this time, I’ll bite. I won’t be able to stop it.”

“Why?” she gasped. To her shock, she was intrigued not horrified. The deeper she sank into this new culture the more she wanted to know everything. She wanted to understand this life that had reclaimed Lucan—one she knew she’d now lived. No matter what he was, she wouldn’t leave him.

It surprised her that his revelation did nothing to chase away her need. She wanted him just as much—more. With every second that passed, the arousal tightening in her groin drove her to nearly scream for him. Her pussy dripped with the thick evidence of her desire. She pulled his hand to her folds, wanting him to part her, to drive inside, to make her cries echo against these rocky walls.

“I need to taste you,” he confessed, his fingertip scraping back and forth over her clit. She rocked against it, seeking as much relief as she could obtain from the paltry motion which was nowhere near enough but more like a Band-Aid on her titanic craving.

He’d said that before, in the cavern beneath the Dragon compound. *I need to taste you...* Now, she suspected she’d horribly misunderstood. She bit her lip.

“Your blood,” he added. Making his meaning all too clear.

Despite the blinding lust, she was cognizant enough to experience a little worry.

“Like a...vampire?”

Lucan’s hand stroked down her back, soothing her and reminding her who he was. He was her husband, not a thing of nightmares.

“Vampires don’t exist,” he murmured. “Stories of them are greatly exaggerated and based on convoluted legends about the Dragons. We drink blood to support our regenerative systems—but only from those carrying the mate marker like you do. Only from those who allow us to bite them. But we eat real food, too. We’re not nocturnal and the sun doesn’t hurt us. Neither does garlic, holy water or crucifixes. The coffin thing is out too. We live in caves for safety and because the temperature and humidity is ideal for our bodies.”

“And you live forever.”

“We live for a really long time. My brother, Janos, is over millennium old.”

“Shut up!” she exclaimed. “But you’re thirty, right? Or are you way older?”

“No, just a year older than you are.”

“To him, you must be barely more than an egg.”

He smacked her ass, and she jerked against his cock, groaning at the friction.

“Dragons are born, not hatched,” he laughed then grew serious. “We mate for life. And once we join, the only blood we drink is from that mate. It’s the perfect composition. There’s no need for much or for any other.”

“Okay...” she prompted, wanting more information. It was so hard to talk when she felt as if her veins might explode from the racing fire pouring through them. Her thighs quivered with the need to lift and take him inside, cloth and all.

His mouth brushed her shoulder, sending a shiver along her skin. “It’s highly erotic,” he murmured. “Always during sex—at least, for mates.”

“That’s better anyway. And we’re...mates?” she breathed. “I heard Maks talking to you about it earlier, but I only heard his side and it didn’t make much sense.”

“Damn it. Maks,” Lucan swore softly. “Hang on.”

## *Chapter Nine*

They sat silently, the tension building around them. Her hands splayed on his chest, feeling his firm pecs through the thin, silky shirt. Deftly, she found his nipples and rolled her thumbs around and over them. Lucan's arousal jabbed toward her in reaction. One hand dropped, and she wrapped her fingers around the long shaft, feeling the hot steel beneath her grasp.

*Got it, she heard Maks say. I'll find Riven. And, dude...don't be too wild down there. There might be Djinn looking for you.*

So he knew what they were doing? For some reason, it turned her on that someone might be privy to the intimacy between her and Lucan. It surprised her; she'd never been an exhibitionist before. Now, she wanted the world to witness this love between them.

"It will be a couple hours, at least," Lucan told her. He buried a hand in her hair and bent back her head, exposing her neck. He kissed roughly along the length, scraping his teeth and nipping without drawing blood. She sensed how much he wanted to sink in his teeth, and against all reason, she wanted him to do it.

She pulled her palm along his length.

"It's so dark...maybe you can distract me. And..." Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, knowing she was about to jump over a precipice. "And...you can bite me—if you want."

He chuckled and she heard his relief. "You like it a little rough anyway, don't you?" he supplied, his voice a low intimate growl. "I promise you, you'll never regret it."

Her cheeks heated, and she wondered if he could see it with his amplified vision. She groaned as he moved her hand from his cock then shifted his hips against her. A spike of heat filled her pussy. This level of arousal was beyond the pale. She literally felt as if she'd go crazy if she didn't get relief soon.

Fighting to gain some rational thought, she took a deep breath and tried to ignore the sensations gripping her. She needed to understand this situation she'd sunk into. Something told her she was missing a big piece of the puzzle—something that would affect her for a long time to come.

“Explain. About mates...” she urged. *Tell me about mates, then fuck me until we can't move.*

“True mates are destined,” he told her. “They're created by nature specifically for each other. And, yes, I believe we are mates. There's no question in my mind.”

“Is there question in someone else's mind?”

He blew out a breath through his nose, the warm air teasing her sensitized skin. She shivered and bit her lip to keep from interrupting his explanation.

“After close contact, mates develop a mark on their skin. It happens almost right away, but we don't have it.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed.

“There are other indicators. After time spent together, a kind of agitation takes place—”

“It makes you sick if anyone but your mate touches you? It's painful, out of control, almost out of your mind need that you don't understand and can't control?” she asked. It had to be what this was. She'd never felt anything like it.

“Oh baby, I'm sorry,” he said. His hand moved beneath the flared skirt of her dress and breached her drenched folds. Without hesitation, he thrust two fingers inside her.

“Yes,” she hissed. Lifting up to her knees, she shoved down the loose pants he wore and freed his shaft. Holding it in place, she slowly impaled herself on him. She cried out as the fat tip pushed inside her, forcing apart her swollen tissues. The wide shaft drove deep then, suddenly, for the first time since the Dragon compound, a calm shrouded her. A unity and rightness. This was where she'd always been destined to be.

She rocked her hips, feeling him in her. So deep. So full. Lazy pulses of lightning speared from cunt to nipples with each contact of her clit to his pubis.

“Lucan,” she gasped, his name a mantra, a reminder that her man had really returned to her arms. “Lucan...”

Suddenly, his mouth was at her shoulder, his teeth sinking into her skin. She jolted at the quick stab of pain then he groaned, and she sighed. Heat poured from the site, driving through

her and obliterating the calm until a new agitation clawed at her. Fiery heat snaked through her veins, pricking every nerve ending. Frenzied, she ripped at his clothes, desperate to feel his skin. Quickly, he tugged off the shirt then pulled the dress over her head.

Immediately, his mouth returned to her shoulder. His long teeth sank deep once more, and she rode him hard. She craved his essence and knew it would trigger her own orgasm.

“Lucan, please,” she begged, as she leaned back and drew him over her. She writhed without a care that it was rock beneath her. She needed him to pound into her and claim her as his own. She needed his weight pressing her down and dominating her smaller frame. She needed to feel his irrefutable claim and know there was no backing away from this moment. She was his, claimed by his body and through her blood.

Her hips pumped upward onto his thick cock, fucking him with the full fury of passion.

Streams of pleasure spiraled around her middle, twining and knotting, surging and exploding. Reaching between them, he pinched her nipple, hard, and she screamed. Her climax star-bursts before her eyes, showing her brilliant colors in the darkness. She gushed around him then suddenly, his heat filled her, and utter peace eclipsed the whirlwind.

“You taste like the sweetest nectar,” he murmured against her ear. “You feel so good around me, squeezing my cock.”

She groaned, desire already rebuilding. Lucan chuckled, and she felt his cock flex to life inside her. “We can’t possibly...already...” she gasped.

“It’s the mating call. It won’t stop until my seed takes or we’re joined.”

“It’ll kill us,” she breathed.

“What a way to die,” he replied, already pistoning his hips forcefully into her.

Meda cried out, wishing his seed really could take but reveling in fucking him. She could fuck him forever without complaint. Who cared about anything else? Her channel quivered then sucked tight around him.

“Yes, baby...” he groaned. His face pressed to her neck. The hot breath feathered the hair at her nape. She shuddered as the tickle sent a reaction down her back. Her whole body seemed to be a charged pool of electricity, everywhere he touched causing a spark within her. Closing her eyes, she rode the waves of this second mating, stroking him wherever she could reach. It didn’t take long before they both dove over the edge to oblivion once more, his teeth deep in her again.



Her hand cupped the back of his head, holding him there. Pleasure flowed through her, as did the knowledge she could give him this, a perfect composition, only for him from her. Lucan cried out against her skin, the sound muffled from his position, as his cum filled her once more.

A strange peace calmed the agitation that had ridden her since the first time they'd made love.

"Lucan?" she said. "Before...you asked me to stay with you."

She felt him nod.

"This is all so...strange. Unexpected. I never would have imagined there were Dragons and Djinn and other things battling each other for a foothold in a world that doesn't even know of their existence. And you're part of it. As much as it hurts me to know you were alive all this time, I..." She sighed. "I understand."

His fingers lightly traced over her cheeks and into her hair, but he didn't say a word.

"And, well, I see now how dangerous it is, too—"

"And you want no part in it," Lucan said quietly.

"Lucan," she whispered. "You asked for forever. I'll give you as much as I have."

"Meda," he breathed. "You mean..."

The shock and happiness in his voice was undeniable, and Meda knew she was making the right decision. She loved this man, *her* man, and no matter the danger and weirdness of this new life, there was nowhere else she could be but with him. Even there, lost in a cave and full of uncertainty about their immediate future, she knew ultimately she would be with him. Because they were *destined* to be together.

"I love you," she told him. "I think we should join as soon as we can. What do we have to do?"

"It's simple—"

"Dragon!"

They both startled at the bellow that roared through the passages of the cavern, echoing around them and building as it traveled.

"Tawren," Meda whispered.

Lucan leapt to his feet, and she heard him straightening his clothing. The dress was shoved into her arms. Frantically, she pulled it over her head as she looked around. It was still

dark as pitch, and she couldn't see a thing. If Tawren found them, what would he do? She wouldn't be his, and she was terrified of what he'd do to Lucan.

A moment later, thick Dragon arms pulled her to the safety of her man's embrace. "I'm feeling better," he chuckled, his words slightly garbled by his form. "Let's see if we can find our way out."

He moved slowly and purposefully through the rocky corridor, and she couldn't help wondering if his senses were stronger now that their lust had been subdued. Suddenly, they rounded a corner, and a sharp pinpoint of light caused her to gasp as it pierced her sensitive eyes. She blinked rapidly, adjusting as Lucan headed for the beam.

A flash was the only warning they got before a blast of energy slammed Lucan in the back. He stumbled forward a step before he set Meda down then turned on the Djinn, putting himself between her and the enemy.

Lucan stared at Tawren, whose face was twisted with fury. He'd pulled on a plain black tunic and pants, and his entire body seemed to glow blue with his rage. Behind him, stood two more Djinn—who looked suspiciously like the guards who'd been outside the place they'd held Meda.

So, it would be another battle where he'd be outnumbered. And once more, he'd have to fight without his wingscion at his side. Maks had been training with him since Lucan's molting had ended and he'd been cleared to start learning war skills. But nearly everything he'd learned were based on partners fighting. When the Djinn came on him alone, his main defenses were fire and brute strength. That hadn't worked so well last time.

Attempting a feat he'd learned for tandem battle, he extended his arms, fingers fisted and knuckles together, then thrust them forward and apart until they reached his sides. A surge of white energy whirled toward the Djinn, growing in power as it moved. It knocked them from their feet and peeled rock from the walls. It tumbled onto the trio burying them under a mound of rubble.

Without waiting, Lucan grabbed Meda and ran for the light. Their only hope for survival was to get out of these caves. They couldn't wait for Riven to find them—if the halfling had even been located.

Lucan refused to fall to the Djinn. He wouldn't let them have Meda. They had too much to live for—and she'd agreed to stay with him. It annoyed him that he hadn't been able to enjoy the moment, but instead had been forced back into combat. They would get away from here, and they'd celebrate their union. He'd make Meda completely his, once and for all.

*Even without the mark, Lucan?*

Behind him, he heard the rock shifting above the Djinn. He whirled and blasted a spiral of fire, sealing the stone before the Djinn pushed free. It wouldn't stop them, but it would slow them.

The light was just ahead. A few more yards and he could fly. He'd be out of the Djinns' reach. He skidded to a halt and Meda screamed as three vortices opened before them. Tawren and his lackeys stepped forward, eyes and hands glowing. Meda buried her face in Lucan's chest.

"I love you, Lucan. Leave me. Let them have me, and run. Don't let them hurt you."

*No fucking way.*

At such close range, all he could do was protect Meda with his body and blast fire at the trio. He'd leave them as simmering pools of muck. No one was touching Meda.

He held her tighter lest she try to do something stupid like run between him and the Djinn. Behind him, he heard another vortex open and dread plowed through his middle. Four to one. Surrounded.

Two heavy thuds echoed as the travelers stepped free. Before Lucan could turn to confront them or get better battle position, a blast of fire flared over his shoulder and incinerated one of the Djinn guards.

Maks!

Lucan glanced back to see Maks and Riven both in Dragon form.

"Thanks for the calling card," Riven called taunting the attackers. "I was having trouble finding them."

Lucan backed toward the open portal, watching Tawren as he moved. They weren't out of this yet. Tawren looked genuinely confused. Dragons didn't possess the skill of *transporation*—not that he apparently knew of. His look would have made Lucan laugh if not for the fiery white-blue glow swirling around the man as he prepared a full body attack. He meant to missile into them.

Riven grabbed Lucan's arm. "Hold her tight so we don't lose her inside."

With Riven's yank, the vortex closed around them, just as Lucan heard a screaming whistle hurtling their way. Then there was nothing but the rush of air as Riven's portal dragged them home—at least that was where Lucan supposed they were going. His attackers couldn't follow because they lacked Dragon blood. By now, Janos would have seen to the repair of the wards.

He gasped, his head throbbing as the tunnel dumped them out in Maks' living room, the four of them landing in a heap.

"Maks!" Amara exclaimed, leaping on him as the Dragons shifted back to their human forms. Maks dragged her mouth to his, the two kissing and moving against each other as if no one else was in the room.

"Excuse us," Lucan said drily as he picked up Meda, who'd fainted on the way through the portal—humans usually did. Amara and Maks didn't respond.

*I see the mating call's in full swing.*

*Fuck off, Lucan.*

Lucan laughed. *Thanks for coming to get us.*

*Any time. Now, get the hell out unless you want an eyeful.*

"Oh that's just..." Riven trailed off as he stared at Maks and Amara. "Wait. Is that a Djinn?"

Lucan prodded him toward the door with Meda's legs. He really didn't want to see his scion in the throes of passion, and he didn't want Meda waking to it either. She was already stirring. She'd probably come to before they reached his quarters.

"Hmm..." Riven muttered as they stepped into the main corridor and closed the door behind them. "Maks and a Djinn—"

"Her name's Amara."

"Interesting."

Lucan pressed his face into Meda's hair, not nearly as *interested* in the others as he was his own woman, though he knew Riven's fascination stemmed from an attraction to his own Djinn woman.

He paused and looked at Riven. "You don't bear the mark."

"No. I noticed you don't either."

"I'm not giving her up." His arms tightened around Meda.

“You know if you try to join with a woman who isn’t your true mate, it will kill her.”

“I know.” And he’d thought of it almost as much as he’d thought about his future with her. Unfathomable times. “When I gave her my blood to heal her after the attack at the school, she heard Maks’ voice in her head. I don’t know of any mate who’s had the same happen. Meda and I are closer than most.”

They entered his dwelling. Lucan knew he should put Meda on the bed to rest, but after her kidnapping, he didn’t want her out of his reach. He sat on the couch and drew her head to rest on his shoulder. She made a small noise and cuddled close. He smiled, knowing she’d wake soon.

Riven sat opposite them. “Look,” he said, resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward. “I get sent all over God’s green earth in search of mates. I’ve been to all the large Dragon compounds, and some of the smaller settlements, too. I’ve been able to get a bigger picture of things than most others of our race. I’ve seen a few oddities our doctors don’t note.”

“So you don’t think it’s dire that Meda and I haven’t been marked?”

“No,” the halfling snorted. “Rinda is my destiny. I don’t have a single doubt,” he said, speaking of the woman he loved. “I’ve known her since we were both babes in our mothers’ arms. It nearly killed me when she was claimed by the Djinn king and forced to marry him. I wanted to kill him. It wasn’t just jealousy; it was instinctual rage—probably a lot like you felt when you thought of Tawren touching Meda.”

“Anger and pain so strong it almost made me sick,” Lucan agreed.

“It was my hatred that sent me to the Dragon council with the idea of acting as their spy.” He shook his head to push away history he obviously didn’t want to discuss. “Neither Rinda nor I are marked. We don’t suffer from the mating call, thank the stars. I believe it’s because I was close to her for so long before I first molted.”

Meda made a small sounds and rubbed her face against Lucan. “Like an allergy,” she said sleepily. “Like an immunity built from exposure.”

Her voice triggered Lucan’s desire once more, though it didn’t feel abnormally strong or out of control. His cock stirred beneath her leg, and his reptilian senses picked up on her heightening arousal.

He pushed back her hair and kissed her behind her ear.

“It’s...um...exactly like that,” Riven replied. He stumbled to his feet and knocked into the table as Lucan turned and pressed Meda to the sofa. “Newlymates,” he muttered.

“Riven,” Lucan called as the man rushed for the door. “Thank you—for finding us and for assuring me this is normal.”

“No problem. I owed Tawren a thing or ten. It was my pleasure.”

The door slammed behind him, and Lucan looked back at Meda.

“You...gave me your blood?” she asked. Thankfully, she didn’t appear disgusted or outraged. She wiggled beneath him to align his cock to her pussy. Fire vibrated through his veins, rushing the heated lust through all of him until he shook with the desire to fill her once more.

He pushed her dress to her hips, baring her.

“I should be mad you did that...” she sighed. Her eyes closed and she arched. Her knees bracketed his hips as she rubbed against him. Her nails scored his arms through the thin tunic.

“It’s what healed you.”

She nodded, seeming more engrossed in their bodies than their words. “That was cool.”

“So, faker, how long were you awake?”

“Not long. I heard things, but I wasn’t really with it.” Her teeth gritted and she moaned. “Lucan, I’m so hot. I need you...please.”

Scooting away, he tore off his clothes. Kneeling over Meda, he grasped the wretched Djinn joining gown. He ripped it from neckline to hem then shoved it down her arms. Lifting her, he carried her toward the bedroom.

Meda groaned as Lucan walked. Her cunt pulsed with its wet need—she wanted him now. A bed didn’t matter.

To her surprise, he bypassed the bed and headed through another door. They entered the most opulent bathroom, she’d ever seen. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the huge, natural basin. Large enough for at least ten, it steamed as a waterfall cascaded into it. Soft illumination emanated from the walls, giving the room a muted glow.

Lucan set her on her feet beside the tub. “I want Tawren’s scent off us,” he said, stroking her hair back from her face. “I want this to be just us. You and me.”

He stepped into the water then helped her into the warm pool. The heat seeped into her, and she sank down with a groan. He reached for a nearby bar of soap. Lathering it between his palms, he watched her, his eyes dark with promise.

“Stand up,” he told her. His hands glided over her body as she rose. Thoroughly, he cleansed her, washing away all traces of her kidnapper and his lair. With gentle urging, she submerged herself in the water.

Her skin tingled from his ministrations, but Lucan was far from finished. Now that she was clean, he focused on arousal. His hands scraped along her body, searching her erogenous zones. Pressing, rubbing, scratching, pinching...whatever would draw forth her sighs and moans. With a growl, he plucked at her nipples until tension stretched taut between the sensitive tips and her cunt. She cried out, shoving her hips toward him.

Defly, he pressed her against the wall. Her legs wrapped his hips as water cascaded over them. “Yes,” she screamed as he surged inside her. Her back slid on the smooth surface behind her, and he caught her hips to hold her in place.

“Mine,” he rasped as he drove into her clutching folds.

“Yours,” she sighed.

“I love you,” he told her, then bent his head and sank his teeth into her shoulder. Meda cried out, pushing her fingers into his hair as she reveled in the sensation of him taking from her. Lava flooded through her, pooling in her pussy and filling the place where they were so carnally joined. She bucked against him wildly as she climaxed, bright lights flying before her eyes.

Lucan stiffened, pouring himself inside her. Lifting his head from her, he roared his completion as he stumbled back to rest on the edge of the basin while still lodged deeply inside her.

Lifting his hand, he partially transformed then drew a sharp claw over his chest just above his heart. Meda looked into his eyes.

“I love you,” he repeated. “Forever.”

“Forever,” she whispered. Without him saying so, she understood she’d need to drink his blood. His hand cupped her head as she leaned forward and took a tentative taste. Coppery like pennies. Fiery like her love. Filled with love for him and the awesome realization that they’d have an eternity, she drank of him.

Suddenly, the bottom seemed to fall out of her reality. Her eyes went wide, and she felt herself falling as she stared up at Lucan, her vision growing dim and the expression on his face telling her this wasn't the way things were supposed to go.

"Love you..." she murmured. Then the world went dark.

\* \* \* \*

"Meda, baby? Can you hear me?" Panic filled Lucan as he stepped out of the tub. He grabbed a fluffy white towel from a nearby rack and wrapped her in the oversized length.

"Meda? Come on, love. Don't do this. Wake up."

"Mmmm." She stirred and reached for him. "What happened?"

"We joined and—well, I think we joined. There wasn't..." he trailed off as he noticed the pale, sepia mark spiraling up her left arm. Joy brought tears to his eyes as he traced it with the fingers of his right hand, a similar filigree circling his skin as well.

"It's so pretty," she whispered.

"Once upon a time, when we were dating, you told me you'd never get a tattoo."

"But this is different. This means I'm yours," she answered as solemn reverence in her voice. Her gaze slid up to his. "Forever."

He nodded, his hand slid over her belly. He smiled as a waking vision showed him their future and the children they'd spawned. His blood had healed more than her burn. They'd have a family, an unusual birth for more reasons than one. They'd have triplets, one of them the first female Dragon born to the clan in a millennium.

Meda would need to feed to gain more strength. The wound on his chest had already closed, so he drew a sharpened nail across his wrist to open the vein there.

"Drink," he instructed. She'd had so many shocks, he'd tell her about the children later. Now, he wanted to relish their time together. Man and woman; Dragon and mate; one.

As Meda looked into his eyes and took her first draw of his blood, golden light enveloped them, surrounding them with the blessings of Dragon magic and anointing their union as complete.

Lucan was no longer the lone wolf of the Cruentus Clan. He was Meda's mate. And nothing would part them again.



### *About the Author*

When it comes to books and movies, Brynn has one rule: there must be a happy ending. After that one requirement, anything goes. And it just might in her books.

She lives in Michigan with her husband and two children, who love her despite her occasional threats to smite them. They humor her and let her think she's a goddess...as long as she provides homemade chocolate chip cookies on a regular basis. Brynn has conducted workshops at several writers' conferences around the country and enjoys mentoring and meeting new people.

According to Brynn, her writing success can be attributed to an eclectic collection of music, her local road construction crews, a trusty notebook, and of course, her husband, Mr. Inspiration, who puts up with a lot in the name of research.

Brynn loves to talk to her readers and can be found at [www.brynnpaulin.com](http://www.brynnpaulin.com).

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Reluctant Dragon Elder Janos Aventech's vacation in New York is about to come to an abrupt end. Riding on the subway, he stumbles across a Dragon mate—one of the few human women with whom his people can unite and be truly happy. And his people's enemies are out to get her. As his attraction to this woman grows, he knows he must find her mate and see her safely into that man's arms. It's destined. But as every minute passes in her company, Janos begins to see he'll never willingly let her go, mate or not. If only she were *his* mate...

On the subway, Scarlett couldn't stop staring at him—then he turned crazy. When he essentially kidnaps her off the train, she knows she should be irate and terrified. Instead, she finds her initial attraction growing. But what's all this stuff he's spouting about mates and enemies? She only wants to return to her life, not get caught in the middle of a war. But it's too late for that. She's destined for a Dragon's bed, and in Janos' arms, she can only hope it's his.

***Red: A Seduction Tale* by Maddie James**

Garnet Boudreaux is going home. Not back to her nice little apartment in New York City, but to her childhood home in the bayou. She doesn't want to go, and isn't certain what will be waiting for her when she arrives. But standing there in the voodoo shop on Bourbon Street, in the middle of one helluva party, she's told by Madame Madeleine Dupuis that she has no choice. She presses two pouches into Garnet's hands, wraps a red cape around her, and tells her she must go—and go now—to see to her grandmother.

Max LeBlanc spies the lovely red-head across the street and knows in a heartbeat she is the one. A rougarou always knows when he's met his mate. Some may call him a lycanthrope, a werewolf if you will, but in Cajun bayou lands he's known simply as *The Rougarou*. He'd waited several

hundred years for this moment, and for her. There is nothing left for him to do but mark her and claim her as his mate. Soon.

### ***Immortal Curse* by Bronwyn Green**

Cursed by a witch, Ian O'Meara has been trapped between the world of the living and the spirit realm for the last hundred and fifty years. Annoyed by having his eternity interrupted by amateur ghost hunters, he reaches through the veil to Emma Boulton, knowing she can see and hear him even if the others can't. When he discovers she can also feel him, he decides Emma is the most exciting thing to happen to him in the last century. Suddenly, escaping his miserable curse isn't quite so appealing.

Much to her dismay, Emma has been able to see ghosts ever since she was a child. Most of the time she ignores them, but Ian makes that all but impossible. With his dark good looks and his brooding personality, he's a gothic novel hero come to life...so to speak. She knows she should help him toward the light, but the only place he seems to be interested in is her bed. Falling in love with the charming spirit is all too easy, but is a future together possible between the living and the dead?

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