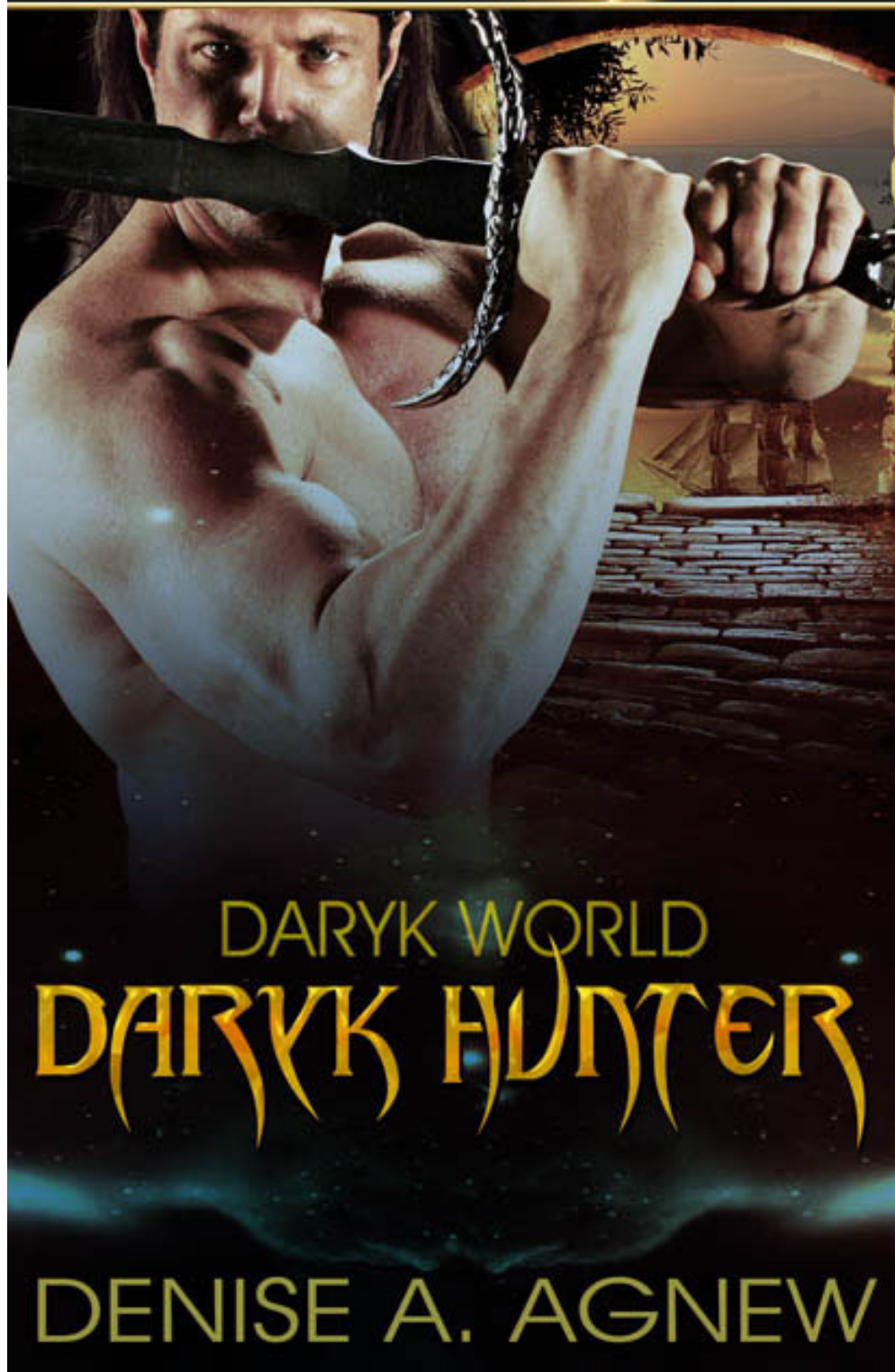


ELLORA'S CAVE REON



DARYK WORLD
DARKK HUNTER

DENISE A. AGNEW

Daryk Hunter

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Daryk World, Book One

When Magonian archaeologist Ketera Aldrancos' father is imprisoned, she's determined to save him. Before she can do so, her ship is wrecked. Water laps at her, a man's strong arms surround her. His husky voice soothes her. Then she realizes she's on a foreign beach in the arms of a dreaded Dragonian. A man who looks nothing like the men she's known. His closeness, his touch sends waves of need through Ketera's core and shame runs through her. After all, passions are sinful.

Dane Charger, a Dragonian Daryk One, cradles the woman in his arms. He aches to introduce her to the headiest lovemaking imaginable. But his eyes flame red and a growl vibrates his throat when he realizes he'll need to protect her from marauding slave traders led by a vicious rogue—who just happens to also be his half brother.

Two people whose supercontinents are separated by ocean and two thousand years of prejudice and fear. Two people who may be the secret to saving a race from extinction.

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Daryk Hunter

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DARYK HUNTER

Denise A. Agnew

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Chapter One

Planet Croan

Supercontinent Dragonia

Near the Protican Ocean

Her father's execution was scheduled. Soon he would be murdered.

Ketera Aldrancos gasped as she came to full consciousness and reality returned, heartless and sharp.

Icy water lapped at her toes and her body ached with a dull throb. The rushing whisper of the ocean filled her ears and lulled her backward into the darkness as it threatened to return her to blessed oblivion. Rain delicately touched her skin and wind ruffled across her body in a gentle caress. For a moment she almost relented and opened her eyes to see why the elements coaxed her so sweetly.

But clear, relentless rage rushed in to choke her.

Father.

Everything she loved would perish if she couldn't—

She sobbed and then heard a rustling, a deep voice. She didn't understand the language at first—a strange, guttural spilling of vowels.

Seconds later someone dropped onto the sand near her. A deep voice rumbled, husky and soothing. "Who are you, sprite?"

Ah, the language was clearer now. Odd. The pronunciation different, the accent peculiar, but still her language.

A Dragonian. The enemy.

A warm touch glided over the pulse at her neck. She wanted to move, to fight, but her entire body throbbed. She couldn't move.

The man grunted. Then with strong but gentle hands hauled her upward into his arms. His thighs beneath her buttocks felt rock-hard, his arms powerful enough to shelter her from the ocean and weather.

"Wake," the man said, his voice rough with command. "You breathe, therefore you live. Come on now, that's it. Another deep breath. Don't fade on me."

She obeyed, hearing the relentless, almost angry demand in his tone. "Where—?" she rasped the word, her throat sore, her voice raw. She coughed and choked.

"Easy. You're safe. Here. Drink."

A container with cool liquid touched her lips and she drank with greed, her thirst tremendous and her throat aching for relief. Water, all around her rushing. She remembered the terrible tempest that had swallowed her ship.

"Slowly." His tone was harsh. "You'll take ill."

She sipped until he drew back the container. "More."

"No. Open your eyes."

She sighed, the sound resentful to her own ears. "No. I..."

By the god, she ached to the bone with fatigue. The gruff man caressed her hair. His big hand wandered down over her upper arm then skimmed her legs with impersonal attention. With a hot jolt, one piercing thought came back to her.

Father. I must save him.

It took three tries, but her eyelids peeled open.

Her gaze landed on the man holding her. And her breath stopped. He watched her with a strange feral intent. A thick tangle of dark auburn hair cascaded around his broad shoulders. Thick, dark lashes framed eyes as green as a tyrant stone from a mine in Opali. A few days' growth of red and gold stubble darkened his handsome jawline. His nose was bold, but not obnoxiously so, and his mouth hardened in heavy concern. His long, impressively carved arms were bare, but he wore a strange, hard metal chest plate over his torso. She couldn't see his legs.

"There," he said. "What is your name?"

She glanced past his shoulder and saw the ship mast towering upward not far in the distance. Its torn sails flapped in a persistent wind.

She blinked as her vision fogged. She reached up to rub her eyes. "My name?"

His arms tightened. "What are you called?"

Her head throbbed if she thought too hard. "Ketera Aldrancos."

She sucked in a pained breath. Her ribs ached.

"Easy. You're ill and hurt. I'll take you back to the castle."

A word launched through his lips she'd never heard before, but it sounded like a curse. He eased her onto her back. He stood and withdrew a huge knife from its sheath.

Terror gripped her heart with a sharp talon. He meant to kill her.

Oh god Magon.

She closed her eyes as weakness eased like liquid into her limbs. She felt almost as if she sank into the sand, her body heavy. Heavier. She opened her eyes, desperate to meet her enemy head-on and show him she wasn't afraid. If she would die, then she'd face her executioner by looking him in the eye. He turned away from her.

She made an effort to move and found her protesting muscles cooperated. She stifled a deep groan of pain as she struggled to sit up and succeeded. Determination pushed her to rally. She wouldn't die when her father needed her.

From the back her rescuer stood tall and broad-shouldered. His arms coiled with muscle, a long knife gripped tight in his right hand.

Across from him an equally tall, powerfully built man with spiky, short blond hair stood at the ready, an animal spring-loaded and eager to pounce. His ugly face was distinguished by a lightning bolt blue tattoo zigzagging across his right cheek.

"The spoils can be shared by all." The lightning-bolt man sneered. "By Draconus there are plenty of riches to go around, including the woman."

"You're right." The man who stood near her shifted on his feet. "It's a shipwreck, but the spoils go to no one. Especially not this woman."

"Are you saying you're claimin' her as your own?" Lightning Bolt asked.

"I'm claiming her." The man who'd stood over her walked away toward the other man.

Where was her knife? She looked around for her shoulder pack but didn't see it anywhere. More than anger stirred inside her. Panic rose up to choke her. She couldn't lose the pack. Her father's life depended on her keeping the documents within safe.

"What if I say I'll take her from you?" the other man asked.

"I'm a Daryk One. If you think you can take anything from me, you are mistaken."

The other man paused before saying, "Beggin' your leave, Daryk One. Are you in league with Drakus?"

"Never. This woman will not be his slave."

The blond man chuckled. "But she'll be yours to breed with?"

Her body tensed. Breeding? No. She couldn't help her father if she was enslaved.

She reached for a jagged piece of wood lying on the ground. Nobody would be taking her anywhere without a fight.

Lightning Bolt roared, charging her rescuer, his sword held aloft to strike. Her protector echoed a similar growl, this one filled with heat and death of battle as he rushed forward. Her body tensed, uncertain what would happen. Her rescuer only had a short knife. She surged to her feet and pain spiked through her ribs. Dizziness swamped her and she fell to her side, eyes closed as the world undulated and the ground seemed to heave.

Metal clashed then she heard a strange gurgling, gasping. A body fell.

She struggled to open her eyes, and with supreme effort shoved herself into a sitting position. The Daryk One walked toward her across the sand. Behind him lay the other man, sand beneath him turning red. Crimson droplets fell from the Daryk One's blade. Horror strangled her breath. She'd never seen killing like this before and it chilled her straight to the marrow.

He sheathed his deadly knife into a scabbard at his waist. "You are safe now."

How could she be? He'd killed the other man. She struggled to rise to her feet. She wanted to run, to escape now that the god had chosen that she live. Weakness ebbed the will from her limbs and she fell to her knees onto the sand.

Before she could protest, he knelt beside her and cradled her in his arms once more. He rose to his feet and carried her. She could wrench from his arms and escape, but to what and where? She parted her lips to speak, but nothing came out. Weariness swamped her senses and, to her anguish, the darkness she fought against swallowed her whole.

* * * * *

Darkness lifted slowly, bringing Ketera to consciousness when she took the next breath.

She heard the gentle rumble of a man's moan. Irresistible scents of pleasant flowers teased and tickled. Needs bombarded her, washing like a warm, intoxicating drink into her system. She realized a blanket was drawn up over her body. A broad chest pressed against her back, a hard, powerful arm draped over her waist, hips tight against hers. She shook with a needful sensation she'd tried many times to suppress over the years and failed. Maybe she was dreaming. She was back home in the safety of her bed, cocooned in softness.

She tried to regain mastery over confusion. Seconds passed, perhaps a few minutes when panic edged around the fuzzy feeling in her head.

Where was she, and who dared touch her in an intimate fashion? Memory surfaced.

The Daryk One.

As confusion slid closer toward fear, she felt something hard press against the crease of her buttocks. She understood the long, thick hardness so intimately snuggled where it shouldn't be.

His manhood.

Though she had never felt an erection pressed against her, she had heard about the mating act and had spent a good deal of time wondering about it. Hovering in the moment, she allowed feelings to rush through her like a river, her defenses wavering precariously.

Hot, shivery pleasure trickled into her lower stomach as his warm breath wafted over her left ear. *No. I should not feel this way with this brute of a man.* The quickening in her loins must not be acted upon.

A woman's desires displease the god Magon. Women's pleasure was sin.

She did not believe a moment of such admonitions, but her culture demanded unwavering compliance with chastity among unmarried women.

Defiance of such a rule meant punishment would be swift and painful.

"Awake are you? Stop squirming, sprite. Do not tempt a Daryk One or pay the consequences." Again his breath touched her ear. "Make no mistake. I could seduce you in a heartbeat."

Indignation roared inside her. She'd never been helpless, from the time her father first taught her to read. Seduce her? This hard, ruthless son of a wastrel? Not likely.

The masculine voice was familiar from earlier, though she couldn't say how much earlier. Silky and persuasive, his voice gave her all she needed to know. His hand, big and strong, slid over her belly.

Her intelligence cried out for her to move away, to fear a man she didn't know and couldn't see in the dim light. Her body betrayed her. Again that sweet, swirling sensation circled inside her lower belly then moved between her legs to tingle. She quivered, amazed by the quickening of her breath, the yearning that grew. Her lips parted on a sigh. Could such wonderful feelings truly be a sin?

His hand slid upward, smoothing over her skin with a demanding touch. His palm circled in light exploration. The man wanted her, no doubt about it. He had rescued her and he must feel sex was his reward. A man as big, as potent, as dangerous as this would always take what he wanted. No woman would resist him. Males in her land took what they wanted with ruthless plunder. Why would this Daryk One be any different? Then another thought intruded that wore away at her heightened arousal.

Murderer. The man had taken another life and she lay with him like this? That was where the sin lay. Dalliance with a murderer.

She should have cringed, but the man rotated his hand in warm circles over her belly and her hips, and the soothing, welcoming massage kept her pinned to the spot and wanting more. Comfort and a languorous pleasure spread throughout her limbs. She could feel and hear everything with pin-drop precision. She expected fear to explode, to give her the strength to spring from the bed with a demand that he keep his hands off her.

That didn't happen.

His touch drifted even lower, to the top of her pants. She sucked in a breath, her body shaking from within. She waited to see what he'd do next. His hand stopped just above the hair over her mons. He drew her closer against him, one arm moving beneath her, his fingers enclosing her breast with gentle insistence. Before she could speak, he clasped her nipple between finger and thumb and twisted lightly. Pleasure sideswiped her as her nipple tingled under each quick, gentle tug. A gasp exploded from her. She wriggled, the shocking intimacy thrilling beyond any imaginings she had fantasized over the years.

"Open your legs," he whispered, his voice filled with husky demand.

She lay perfectly still, unwilling to move and too weak to protest.

Ketera squirmed, and the Daryk One threaded his fingers into the hair over her mons, slipped his fingers down, down until he found the silky wetness between her legs. She gasped again, startled as his touch smoothed over the moisture, then slipped within her channel. He didn't reach far inside her but teased with two fingers. Shocked, she waited as his touch caressed and new and amazing sensations swirled within her center.

He groaned. "Oh, by the god you are untouched. Soft. Wet." He licked her ear, whispering hotly, "Open for me. Open."

He pushed deep, she felt something give way and realized that slight sting meant only one thing.

He'd taken her maidenhead with his fingers.

Her heartbeat banged in her chest at the implication. No. No.

If anyone on Magonia found out she'd released her virginity to this man there would be consequences to pay.

He pushed his fingers deeper and the pleasure of being filled drew a soft gasp from her. Oh god Magon. She'd expected this to hurt, and the minor discomfort had already disappeared. Excitement spilled into tiny gasps for breath as she whimpered at the astonishing pleasure. He found a spot deep inside her and concentrated his caresses in one stroke and then another. One soft pull at her nipple made her hips writhe back against his hardness. She pushed into his palm, aching for a completion, a release from the teasing, fiery feelings. Again and again he tugged on her nipple and his touch between her legs worked her relentlessly.

"Please." Her gasp could have been a shaky request to stop or a plea for more.

Her hand slapped over his, but he didn't halt the seduction. Again and again his fingers caressed between her legs, each stroke more shattering than the last. She gasped for breath, hovering on the edge of indescribable discovery. She could not believe how quickly he'd taken her to this incredible plateau. Pleasure sang, called to her until she shook. His fingers eased from her sensitive inner tissues and brushed upward. Sharp sensation pulled a moan from her lips as he stroked the bud at the top of her slit.

One breathy moan escaped her throat. "Oh!"

He swirled his fingers over the tiny pleasure center in a tight circle, increasing the caress as her breath puffed between her lips and heat filled her face. She writhed, whimpered like an animal lost to reason.

When he slipped two fingers back into her channel and rubbed, her body would no longer hold back. She screamed as the mind-altering pleasure exploded from deep in her core. Her body rippled over his fingers, clenching him inside, aching for more. She shook and pleaded with gasps, with words that made no sense. He didn't stop, his magic touch insistent, drawing another shuddering reaction from her aroused flesh.

She drifted in a land of insentient pleasure, and when his hands pulled away from her most intimate flesh, he whispered huskily in her ear, "You are sweet and have pleased me well."

The insistent probe of his cock against her backside warned her if she didn't take action soon the Daryk One would also plunder her precious virginity.

Too late. He already had.

Shame catapulted through her. *How could I have let him do this? I do not know him.*

She opened her eyes and her vision sharpened on the gray stone wall across the room. Muted light flickered from a candle burning on a nearby table. Heavy, ornate furniture graced the room. She couldn't take this intimacy any longer and she pulled

away from him, practically falling from the soft bed onto a stone floor. She gasped and stood up too fast, and dizziness rolled in a sickening wave in her head. She reached out and caught a table end. The candle on it wavered and she moved to steady it. Light from the candle flickered, sending dancing golden shadows over the room and across the brutish man on the bed.

He rolled onto his back, his eyes closed. The blanket slipped down and tangled around his waist to expose a broad expanse of strong, naked chest sprinkled with auburn hair. The hair stole a tantalizing trail down a muscular stomach. Other than being so obviously large, his overall aura shimmered with dangerous possibilities. She had rarely seen men without a shirt, and his powerful musculature set off stormy heat inside her. And suddenly she didn't think she liked being here anymore.

His eyes popped open and he sat up.

She gasped in surprise, and that was when she realized the drawstring pants and long white tunic that flowed around her body didn't belong to her. In fact, they looked nothing like the clothes she wore or had ever seen before now.

His eyes flashed as he blinked, a grin touching his mouth. "I wondered how much longer you'd sleep. You've been unconscious two days."

Two days. Panic threatened. She couldn't have been here two days when her father wasted away in that rodent-infested prison. She would find a way to slip past this creature – this loathsome seducer – and escape.

His voice rumbled gently, a husky quality that sent heat through her body. His intense gaze wandered along her body with a brazenness that caused her breath to catch. Her face heated – she might be an innocent, but today she had tasted forbidden passion. The insanity racing around in her mind confirmed that the warnings were right. Sexual pleasure was a sin if it could disconcert and fluster a person this much.

"You're as beautiful as a sleek cat and as responsive as any woman I've had," he said.

"You have not had me." Her legs trembled with weakness.

"A mere technicality. Your sweet smell and cream are driving me mad." His smile held a carnal edge and enough arrogance to make her jaw clench in anger.

She ignored his statement. "Who are you and why am I here?"

"Who are you and why are you here?"

His echo puzzled her and she opened her mouth but refused to say a word. Then she remembered she'd already given him her name in a moment of weakness. Damn. Damn the heavens.

He stretched, his body a long length of male animal. Masculinity poured off this mysterious man, and despite the shakiness threatening her, she couldn't deny her fascination with him. She'd be damned to the four levels of Magon's hell if she let this strange man take advantage of her any more than he already had. She stood as tall as she could and schooled her face into a frown.

She backed up, her gaze sliding across the room. She shivered with cold, but impressions bombarded her in one huge, painful barrage of memory.

He groaned and then stood in one sweep, the blanket falling away from his body. He wore loose trousers of gauzy blue, but they did nothing to hide his masculinity. He owned powerful legs and between his thighs she noted a thick bulge. She could see how tall he really was—he would tower over her. He advanced toward her, each step a predatory glide.

“Sprite, what’s wrong? Are you afraid?”

“No. Why should I be afraid?”

“Because I am between that door and your escape. Any maiden would be afraid. You are within a man’s abode. A man who isn’t a family member or your husband. There is much danger for women who are left unguarded with a man. What I did to you a short time ago is evidence of that.”

His words shook her. She’d never heard of such a thing on Magonia. Ever. Yes, women were sheltered, but not from danger. On Magonia, the other supercontinent on Croan, only men were allowed to experience the full range of feelings and process them. Only men could enjoy the pleasures of the flesh within the confines of marriage.

All of it was dragon dung of course.

She was afraid and she hated it. Yet at the time he made her feel extraordinary safe. How could she feel both ways simultaneously?

“Tell me who you really are, Daryk One. Or is that a lie?” she asked to distract herself from the unanswerable question of her jumbled emotions. “Perhaps you are no more than an animal herder.”

A smile slid over his mouth, wicked and filled with a heat she understood but had never seen in a man’s eyes for her. “I have herded a dragon or two, but that is not my main purpose. I am a protector of the innocent and the helpless, sworn to uphold our laws.”

“You have a strange accent I’ve never heard before.”

“We have many accents here. An icy, clipped tone in the glacier region of Imekland, a mild and timid cadence for those who survive the Ithyca desert, a hot and slow accent for those who live within these castle walls and outside in the Tarrian jungles.” He smiled again. “A smooth and regular voice for Daryk Ones, who are home to no place at all.”

It was then the truth sailed out to meet her, and she didn’t want to know it or feel the wave of stunned realization. She hadn’t dreamed that she’d crashed on the shores of Dragonia. She didn’t want to believe her ship had drifted that close to Dragonia, and the huge storm had driven her to this forbidden place.

“You don’t know where you are, do you?” he asked.

“Dragonia.” The word escaped as a rasping whisper in her sore throat.

"Yes. You will come to no harm at my hands. If you step outside this room, however, outside this castle, I can't guarantee your safety."

Hearing him confirm it tightened her throat and wadded her stomach into a knot. She launched into the only defense she knew. "You must think I'm an imbecile, sir, to believe a murderer."

His gaze turned cool, and the danger she witnessed in his eyes returned. "I've murdered no one. Only killed to protect."

"That man on the beach? You can't tell me you did nothing to him. I saw what you did."

He nodded. "Yes, I killed him."

"Why?"

His expression stayed matter-of-fact. "To keep you safe."

She'd managed to scrape her way out of a few dangerous situations but had never had a man kill another for her sake. Guilt speared deep inside her, hard and painful. "Murder is never right."

He grunted. "Is that so? You would rather I allowed him to take you and rape you?"

She couldn't exactly argue with that, but this arrogant man made her angry in a way no man had made her angry before. "Yet you claimed me for yourself."

"Only as a way to prevent you from being harmed."

She frowned, grateful for that at least. Still she couldn't bring herself to thank him for that when she didn't really like him. She switched topics, curiosity moving her forward. "Who is Drakus?"

"A rogue Daryk One who has terrorized this region recently. He takes innocent blood to sacrifice to our god. He breeds with Magonian women to repopulate our continent. At least he keeps trying."

"Trying?"

"It hasn't worked. None of the women he's taken have become pregnant yet, so far as we know. He heard that our scientists have a new theory and that started the raids to steal Magonian women. He heads a fleet of slaver ships that are pirating and looting Magonian ships and taking Magonian women. I'm afraid a war between Armen's men and Drakus' men will come soon. Other castles in other regions of Dragonia are considering what side they're on."

She shivered. "War. I cannot imagine it."

"Do not try."

She glared at him. "Everyone in Magonia knows you are stealing our women for sinful passions and yet nothing is being done about it. Magonia has no army."

His eyebrows winged up. "There are far more lawful men in Dragonia than lawless who have no morals. Or do you think us all heartless?"

Trepidation sizzled up her spine and seized her breathing. "Do you believe you need Magonian women to breed?"

He didn't acknowledge her question at first. Finally he said, "It's possible. But there are few who want to mingle with Magonians. After all, Magonian women are all passionless, dry virgins who wouldn't know how to please a man. What man wants that for a wife?"

She grunted with indignation. "Magonian women aren't allowed to exhibit passion, which is true. No one is passionate beyond what it takes to bring children into the world. And only in marriage. You act as if you've never heard these truths before."

He snorted. "I see. Magonian women are repressed and cold. Perhaps we're better off leaving this world than coupling with the likes of you."

Anger stirred and rose in her throat at the insult. She almost blurted that she wasn't cold. Her passions, her needs ran as wild as his.

Did they?

Her strong response to him as they lay in bed took the whole concept of passionless into question. She didn't know all his passions, and if she did, could she handle whatever acts he would demand? Whatever wifely duties he wanted? Her blood seemed to heat as her nipples tightened in reaction at the forbidden thought. She'd enjoyed the passages in her father's texts that described the sexual proclivities of Dragonians. Part of her had recoiled at the concept while another part wished she could forget what she'd read and forget that she craved a man's touch. Dragonians were so different. So wild. So...free.

Like her.

Isn't that what is wrong with you? What everyone says is wrong with you? She often wondered where her feral streak originated. In frustration, she folded her arms over her chest. Her feet were freezing on the stone floor, and yet she felt glued to the spot by his attention.

"Never you mind," he said. "Now, is your true name Ketera Aldrancos? Or are you really just a sprite come to haunt me in a long dream?"

"You have my true name. And by the god, what is a sprite?"

"A little thing. A gentle soul. That's what you are, right?"

She sniffed. "Hardly. I am neither little or gentle."

He stalked closer. She backed up until the wall stopped her. When he stood in front of her, barely a few inches between them, she didn't flinch, unwilling to allow him to see how much he affected her.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Dane. Dane Charger." He placed his hands down on either side of her, so close she could smell his enticing masculine scent. "You need not fear me. I'd never hurt a woman. I much prefer to share my passions with a female. Discover the pleasure we can find together."

Her heartbeat seemed to flutter as she remembered the amazing sensations he'd produced in her body. "Do you share your body with many women?"

His eyes narrowed. "You speak plainly for a defenseless woman."

"I'm not defenseless. Women aren't defenseless or weak."

One hand slid up to her neck and lodged under her jaw. "A funny statement from a woman who lives in a land where females are pure chattel. You are, aren't you?"

She tensed. His hot fingers didn't press, but as he held her there, she knew it would take one squeeze from his strong hand to kill her.

"If I wanted you dead, you would be dead," he said. "I could have finished you on that beach. I could have tossed you to that scum and soon you'd beg for your god to take you." His eyes flashed, his words harsh. "Do you want death now? I could do it so painlessly you wouldn't suffer."

Despite her determination to show no more fear, she shuddered uncontrollably. Then she stiffened her spine and lied. "You can't kill me. I won't allow it. I have a mission and I will not be stopped."

Dane's eyes were icy and dangerous yet somehow smoldering with volcanic heat. "You are a spy sent to lure Dragonian men to their death with your evil potions and wiles."

His touch along her neck became caressing, and his eyes smoldered with something intoxicating. His eyes burned with that verdant green so lush and deep, the irises encircled by a dark ring. How extraordinary. She fell into their spell, her breath coming deeper and quicker.

She smiled. "Perhaps by touching me, you are already poisoned."

To her surprise, he didn't remove his hand.

"Perhaps I am. Magonia women are toxic, no?" He leaned in and took a long sniff, almost touching her neck. "Mmm. You are beautiful. Enough to stir my cock into a pillar again. Perhaps I won't feed you to a dragon."

She almost spat at him. "Beast."

He chuckled, but the sound held hot, erotic tones that sent a new kind of shiver coasting up and down her spine. His eyes went darker, liquid with a sultry passion that sent another coil of craving stirring low in her belly. "I would eat you...but not the way you think." His fingers caressed her throat gently. "You are a small, thin creature with the slightest hint of womanly curves. Legends tell us Magonian women are large and ungainly. Yet you move with grace. And our scouts and spies tell us there are many ugly women on your continent."

She didn't flinch and refused to allow his disparaging remarks to draw her ire. If she wanted to escape, she needed to plan, to outthink him. From his size, she couldn't defeat him in combat. She could use his sexuality, she supposed, to secure his cooperation in helping her rescue her father. Distasteful indeed. But she could do it.

"What else do your legends tell you?" she asked.

He chuckled and the low sound sent another wave of heat through her. "Magonian women are almost men. They have short, dark hair and prefer sex with all their clothes on. You, though, seem different. You're taller than most of the women I know. Lithe." His fingers slipped away from her neck and touched the thick hair that fell over her breasts. "With the prettiest tangle of golden-brown hair I've ever seen. And eyes like a blue moon."

His hand so close to her breast sent an indignant gasp to her throat. Heat rushed to her face. "How dare you speak of...of sex with a woman you are not joined to?"

His eyebrows went up. "I just did. Tell me, are you wasting your life with a Magonian male? Becoming a lifeless vessel for his weak sperm? You aren't what I would have expected. And you aren't as immune to me as you claim. You speak one thing, but your body tells of banked passion. You came with my fingers deep inside you, my touch on your little bud. Can a Magonian male do that for you?"

Anger spilled over inside Keteria as a blush filled her face. "You've never met a Magonian woman before and yet you claim to know what is in my mind and how my body feels? You are a toad, sir." He didn't move back, his body still way too close for comfort. "I'm not married, and Magonian women do not...take sperm from any man but their husbands."

The Daryk One's laughter sounded like silk and sin. "Keep telling yourself that Keteria Aldrancos."

She almost sputtered, a rage she couldn't remember feeling before stirring inside her until it threatened to reach a perilous boil. "I know of what I speak. Back away from me."

"Then you have heard wrongly. And I can't let you go. If I do, you won't last a moment in the castle alone."

"That is dragon dung. I won't be detained here."

He lifted one eyebrow. "What do you know of dragons? Have you ever met one?"

"Of course."

"What color are they?"

"Black like the deepest levels of all the hells."

He threw back his head and laughed hard, the sound throaty, deep and filled with a huskiness that rasped over hidden places inside her and filled Keteria with heat. "You lie. They come in all the colors of every rainbow. They are big and small, fat and skinny. Just like Magonian women."

A fuse lit inside her. She swung at him, and he grasped her wrist in a firm grip. She made a little growl in her throat and twisted, but he held tight. Still, his touch didn't hurt her. She knew the Daryk One withheld his true strength. No doubt he could break her wrist.

"You say you despise violence but you just showed you're willing to fight a man much larger than you. Are you feisty or foolish, I wonder?" His eyes held a challenge. "Why do you want to escape? Do you have some other mission?"

She doubted telling him about her father would help her situation. If she had to lie repeatedly, so be it. "My ship was blown off course by a storm and a terrible wave sank it. Many perished. There is nothing more sinister to my presence here than a storm."

"You are lucky that you washed up on shore and didn't drown first."

Memories of being tossed in the water, strangling as the waves pummeled her, assaulted Keteria. She didn't want to remember the moments when she was sure she would die.

Insecurities assaulted her. She resolved to escape this madness.

Dane backed away and pointed to an arrow slit window across the room. "If you must see the truth for your own eyes and understand that you can't escape..."

She stalked across the small expanse and peered out the slit. In the dawn of a new turn of the sun, rays poured over a landscape she only imagined and never thought she'd see. She pressed as close to the wall as she could to obtain a decent view. It was difficult. Beyond the great curtain walls, a jungle spread out for as far as she could see. Huge trees forested a tall canopy, their vines and leaves gargantuan. The forest was forbidding, a landscape so alien she couldn't comprehend it at first.

"Beasts live in that forest," she said.

"How do you know? Do you have such places in Magonia? I thought your land is parched and without extremes."

She nodded, still staring at the trees. "Extreme desert and heat. Harsh. And beautiful." She frowned and turned to look at him. He'd retreated across the room. "Have you been to Magonia?"

"I've studied Magonia."

She shook her head. "We don't study you. The scribes tell us everything we need to know." Her chin tilted upward. "You are a cruel horde of barbarians."

He laughed, but no humor laced the throaty sound. "We are. And proud of it."

Real fear threatened to ease its way up inside her, to destroy the composure she held by a thread. For she had never intended to come here, never known the storm would throw her ship off course. Tears she couldn't afford blurred her vision as she turned back to the window and stared out at the primordial jungle. What she didn't know about this hostile continent streamed out ahead of her in a terrifying wave of possibility. "By the god, I shouldn't be here."

A great roar rumbled out of the forest and she started. She thought she heard screams below. "What was that?"

Dane rushed to a chest by the wall and dragged it open. He dropped his pants and his firm, naked buttocks caught her shocked attention.

She clenched her fists in frustration. "What's happening?"

He didn't answer but drew out a skirtlike garment and strapped it around his waist. He jammed his feet into boots and slammed on shin plates of shiny copper-colored metal. He yanked a sleeveless leather tunic out and dragged it over his head. On top of that he placed the metal breastplate she'd seen him wearing on the beach.

"Dane—"

Another roar echoed out of the forest. "No time to explain." He grabbed a sword off a wall bracket and charged for the door. He pointed at her. "Stay here!"

She rushed forward as he opened the door. "What is it?"

"Dragon!"

He exited and slammed the door.

Astonished but excited at the same time, she ran back to the window and peered outside, straining to see through the slit. The very little she'd read about dragons in her father's texts drove her curiosity.

Treetops swayed but not all of the forest that moved was propelled by a strong wind. Only one or two trees swayed.

Ketera saw the creature emerge from the forest, its wings spread and mouth open for another angry bellow. She had a fleeting impression of gray scales, a red stripe running down its back and fiery golden eyes.

Ketera made an impetuous decision. Her captor's order for her to stay in the room warred with her curiosity. She would not stand here meekly. She found shoes by the bed, and although they were a bit large, she pushed her feet into them. She hastily rummaged around the room, looking for a bag, anything she could find that would carry supplies. When she located a knife with a long, serrated edge, she hesitated. She'd never resorted to violence, but what if many beasts lurked in the jungle? She must have some protection. Jamming food, a water skin and the vicious-looking knife into a large pack, she headed for the door.

Time to escape.

Chapter Two

Ketera ached as she hurried down the stone spiral staircase, her body reminding her she'd survived a shipwreck. She slowed her steps, well aware one slip on the unforgiving stones could mean disaster. She came to a dead stop outside the wooden doorway of Dane's stone abode. Impressions rushed at her at the same time as her heart pumped with fear. Was the dragon dangerous? She'd heard conflicting stories from the texts her father had located in his archaeological dig.

More information rushed to the forefront of her memory. Where was her copy of the forbidden texts?

Oh my god Magon. What happened to it? She couldn't believe she'd forgotten it.

She'd had her pack anchored to her when the storm came. She'd lost it. She halted for a moment and mourned the loss of the precious texts. She needed it to save her father. It proved he'd been correct about the Dragonians all along.

Fright mixed with overwhelming inquisitiveness as she watched people around her and marveled at strange differences. She wanted to run at the same time she longed to explore.

A horrendous roar from the beast outside the castle walls broke her reverie. Reality rushed back. People scampered about the enclosure outside the tower. Women shrieked, their voices piercing. Children cried out. Men shouted. Carts of goods overturned in the mayhem. Around her the massive castle rose into the sky on all sides, the curtain walls far above her head. Towers guarded at intervals. Through the chaos, she searched for Dane. Several men dressed just as Dane ran by, their muscles gleaming with sweat.

Eager to escape, she darted and dodged through the sea of people, running alongside one wall until she reached an opening. Daryk Ones stood across the opening. Of all the hells. What to do now?

When another roar, this one loud and throaty, burst through the air, she scampered along the wall toward another opening not far away. Her legs trembled, her heart pounding. Her heart leapt in excitement when she saw a small opening unguarded. She could just fit.

As she squeezed through and stood outside the curtain wall, she came to a stop.

Trees swayed as the dragon stood at the edge of the jungle, its wings flapping and creating a great wind. Then it folded its wings back along its lengthy body. Its form didn't look quite like the texts described. A flash of blue rippled down the ridge along the creature's back. As it lumbered in an ungainly fashion over the red earth, its clawed feet took up huge swaths of ground. She noted the massive head, a strange, sharp

reptilian skull more in keeping with one of the lizards that gave a savage bite in Magonia. As it lowered his head and uttered a high-pitched noise closer to a huge bird crying out, it exposed razor-sharp teeth lining its jaw.

Movement below caught her eye. Several warriors exited the castle and raced toward the dragon. They looked like insignificant specks against the hulking monster bellowing its anger. She watched, entranced, as one of the men led the pack running toward peril. Dozens of other people scampered toward the castle, caught out in the open with the rampaging creature.

Her hands clutched at the wall as she recognized one man running toward the dragon rather than away. "Dane."

Dane charged the beast, and Ketera held her breath. Before she could turn tail and escape in the other direction, the dragon ran toward Dane. Would she see Dane killed before her eyes? A curious panic constricted her breath.

As the dragon and Dane came within feet of each other, Dane lifted his sword and threw it with tremendous force. It tumbled over and over as it flew through the air. Stunned into immobility, she watched and wondered how on Croan the sword could make a mark in the huge beast.

Everything seemed to slow down.

An ear-splitting growl erupted from the dragon and it took to the air. She watched, paralyzed as the dragon flew straight toward her.

Dane saw the blue stripe dragon fly toward the small figure standing near the castle wall.

Ketera.

Alarm screamed through him. His sword had hit the mark right above the dragon's belly in the most vulnerable section between the thick plates of armor that protected the creature. Yet it hadn't done enough damage to prevent the creature from heading right toward Ketera.

He ran toward the castle and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Ketera! Get down!" He waved his arms at her, hoping she could see him. "Get down!"

He saw her duck as the dragon's tail smacked the wall near where she stood. Pieces of the wall flew in all directions.

Ketera darted back into the castle, and he took a breath of relief. At least in the castle she might be safe. He prayed his sword throw would slow the creature. A spear would have pierced the animal more efficiently, but neither he nor the other men had expected a dragon to approach the castle so blatantly. It was a female dragon, significantly larger than a male.

Other Daryk Ones followed him in his mad rush to the drawbridge over the huge moat.

His heart pounded with the rush, the excitement. Battle lust erupted through his veins.

The dragon flapped its huge wings as it landed in the courtyard, scattering people as they tumbled over and over.

Dane cursed as he came to a skidding halt inside the castle.

A young Daryk One near the commotion launched a sword at the dragon, and it sailed across the wide expanse and missed the creature.

Metal clanked against the ground near to —

Ketera.

She pressed against the wall near the bottom of the steps. Her eyes widened as the dragon turned her way. Blood trickled down the side of her face. Fierce protectiveness reared inside Dane. The sprite looked defiant, much as she had with him — but he also saw the dawning fear and her lips drawn into a tight line. The dragon pinpointed on her despite the incessant din of screaming people running to escape.

The dragon turned, wings sweeping out with a tremendous whooshing noise. Ketera froze, apparently unable to act.

“Ketera, get out of there!”

Courage reflected in the depths of her eyes. Admiration surged inside him, but she had no experience with dragons.

One false step and she’d die.

Then he saw why she stayed where she was.

A screaming child not older than three sat next to a fallen woman not far from one of the dragon’s feet. Before he could react, Ketera ran toward the beast rather than away. As she careened toward the child, Dane’s heart froze in his chest.

Ketera snatched the child from the ground and barreled away from the dragon. The creature roared and turned toward Ketera, its foot miraculously missing the woman lying on the ground. A Daryk One darted between the dragon’s legs and retrieved the woman, lifting her in his arms and running away.

Ketera was trapped against another wall as the dragon leaned toward her.

“Over here, you scurvy bastard! Here!” Dane flapped his arms.

The dragon looked his way, and when it did, Ketera moved to an alcove along the wall and stuffed herself and the wailing child inside it. No way the dragon could reach them in there. Thank the god this type of dragon didn’t breathe fire. Bellowing its displeasure, the dragon turned on Dane and charged.

Dane ran for all he was worth toward the gatehouse. As he left the castle, he hoped the dragon would fly back over the walls. He grabbed an abandoned sword off the ground. The dragon took flight and came after him over the wall. Roaring its displeasure, the gargantuan female sailed downward toward the drawbridge with incredible speed. Dane knew he had one more chance.

Now or never.

Battle lust surged inside him again, as primitive as the feral desires that pumped inside his ancestors. He growled and hurled the sword with all his strength toward the beast's vulnerable stomach. Howling with pain, the beast crumpled, weight coming down square on the drawbridge.

Incredibly, the drawbridge held.

The creature started to tumble into the water. As the dragon's tail sailed by Dane's head, the force of the wind blew him off the drawbridge into the water.

* * * * *

Ketera heard the horrible commotion outside the castle walls and people yelled in surprise. The woman, who'd almost been crushed underfoot by the dragon, ran toward Ketera and yanked the child from Ketera's arms. She dashed away without even acknowledging that Ketera had saved the young one. Panting for breath, Ketera didn't care. Satisfaction and relief at having rescued the tiny girl made everything else fade to the background.

As a tremendous rumbling came from outside the castle, people streamed toward the drawbridge.

Ketera rushed forward, eager to see how Dane fared. Her heart pounded so heatedly in her ears she could barely catch her breath and her hands shook. She muscled through the crowd, beseeching people to let her through.

"He must be dead," a man whispered as she came to the drawbridge opening.

No.

The dragon floated in the moat, but only for a few moments before it started to sink. Near the massive body, a man swam toward the shoreline, his movements sure and strong. Ketera smiled as she recognized Dane sluicing through the water. Two other Daryk Ones tossed a rope over the edge of the moat and hauled him to the surface. As he crawled up and stood, water cascaded down his face, his hair and over his entire body. A great cheer went up from the crowd as they saluted his bravery and the kill. People chanted his name and pumped their fists in the air.

Ketera wanted to feel revulsion at the violence she'd seen, but when she couldn't, she realized she felt relief that he'd made it out of the battle alive.

He smiled, his eyes bright with triumph as his friends pounded him on the back. Attraction swirled low inside her at his smile. Instantly the smile faded, and he searched the crowd. She knew, somehow, that he looked for her. She started forward, her legs still shaky. When his gaze caught hers, his nostrils flared. His eyes smoldered a startling red, filled by the pure hunger she gauged in his steady attention. He stalked toward her, steps assured, his powerful body enhanced by the water that dripped over each muscular angle. As his strides brought him close, alarm broke loose inside her.

Trapped. She turned, careful not to venture too close to the drawbridge edge. She ran for the jungle.

Idiot. Idiot! She'd waited too long to escape.

She didn't make it far before his hand clamped on her upper arm and swung her about. She slammed into his chest with a gasp. His arms bracketed around her with a strength that could be crushing but only steadied her. She looked up, way up into his face.

His eyes burned, his lips parted. "Are you hurt?"

She blinked, surprised by his concern and even more startled by those red eyes. Why did his eyes glow like that? "No." She squirmed. "Let me go!"

He cupped her chin and tilted it upward. "There's blood."

"I'm fine."

"Umph." His grunt came out rough as his gaze continued to roam her, as probing and searching as a physical touch.

He drew his hands away from her and clenched his fists. His chest moved up and down with the fury of emotion. Real fear catapulted upward inside her.

Before she could take another breath, he yanked her back into his arms.

He buried his face in her hair and whispered close to her ear, "Follow my lead and you'll understand in time."

She didn't have time to ask what he meant.

His lips came down over hers. Surprised, she drew in a sharp breath. Firm and aggressive, his kiss wasn't the sweet, light kisses she'd witnessed men and women sharing on Magonia. No. His mouth took, twisting over hers from side to side then sealing securely to taste. His tongue slipped inside immediately, and she jerked in amazement. Cheers went up around them as Dane devoured her mouth, each stroke of his tongue along hers sending incredible sparks dancing in her body like touches of embers from a fire. Liquid heat spilled through her middle, charging her body with a craving that abolished her fear in a wash of desire.

Her hands gripped his shoulders convulsively.

Yet as his fingers speared into her hair and his other arm tucked her tighter against his body, many of the things she'd learned started to dissolve like sleeping powder in water. Fire licked her body as a strange dizziness overtook her. Her limbs felt weaker, her mind fuzzy with a sensual daze. Her nipples tightened and tingled, and a treacherous ache built between her thighs. Strange, undulating calls came from the crowd and instinctively she recognized this was somehow expected. His kiss gentled, and as it did, she heard the cheers around them die down. He drew back, and she saw a strange red glow pulsate in his eyes, and when his lips parted, she sensed he still wanted more. Something deeper, more feral. More dangerous to her very being.

It frightened her in a way that didn't have a name.

His arms fell away from her.

Ketera stared at him in amazement, her jaw slack. She quivered, her body alive with every sensation she could remember having in her life. Rolls of heat cascaded through her. Tears rose to her eyes, but she didn't feel sad so much as shocked.

Bewildered, she spoke through trembling lips. "How dare you?"

Now that the trauma had died down, new aches tortured her muscles. All around her, normalcy started to return. It surprised her how calm people now seemed, their smiles returning. The drama of the event pulsed with dull, painful thuds. He grabbed her arm. Before she could protest, he swept her up in his arms.

She gasped in indignation and kicked her legs. "Put me down. I can walk. I've been doing it since I was very young. My legs are fully functional."

His arms around her felt secure and those wild feelings he'd aroused with the kiss continued to tremble within. She tried tamping down the feelings, but her body didn't care what her mind thought. Her skin flushed upward into her neck and face as she thought about how she'd reacted. Angry with herself for allowing him to take liberties and responding to his impudent embrace, she pushed at his shoulders and continued to kick her legs. He was so strong it didn't faze him. Frustrated, she almost screamed. Most of the men she knew couldn't withstand blows like this without dumping the abuser on the ground.

"Women are not allowed to face down dragons." He almost growled the words as he walked. "I told you to stay in the tower."

His imperious tone, spoken in a clipped fashion, didn't surprise her. But fury grew even higher regardless. "So this is how you treat women here? Putting women in their place? Not allowing them to flourish?"

"Wherever you got your information, it is flawed. Women on Dragonia have every freedom. You've seen in this castle how they walk around without escort. Do you see any of them led around by the nose by men? They sell goods at the carts and run their own households. There are few single women, but that is because there are so many more men than women and the competition for wives is furious. I find it strange that you come from a society as restrictive as yours and yet you condemn what you think is restrictive in ours."

Guilt twinged at her. He continued, contempt clear in his voice. "There are many hazards outside our castles. Women go where they will, and the elements, the hardships and those men among us who are not honorable often kill them. Brigands and thieves." He chuckled. "Then again, there are just as many women who are brigands and thieves. A law was almost put into effect a few years back that would curtail many freedoms for women. It was voted down. Women weren't willing to give up their status in order to be safer."

Startled that what she'd read about women in the texts appeared true, she said, "And yet you felt compelled to order me to stay in the tower room."

His mouth hardened into a grim line. "Damn it, Ketera. You aren't from here and you don't understand everything you need to know to survive. Allowing you freedom at this point is throwing your life away. The dragon could have killed you."

"It didn't."

"Wait. You didn't leave because you wanted to see the dragon. You thought you would escape the castle."

She would not admit it. "Put me down. I won't try to run now."

To her surprise he dumped her quickly onto her feet. His big hand latched around her right biceps as they marched along.

Silence gathered for a moment as they continued through the crowd. Finally he said, "You did a good thing in saving that child. You showed bravery beyond most men."

Her lips quirked in a reluctant smile. Receiving a compliment from him, she imagined, was hard-earned. "Thank you. I didn't think. I just did it."

"Is that a problem you have? Impulsive nature?"

"My father said as much."

She caught his quick grin. It disappeared just as fast. "Maybe some arrogance?"

"What?"

"You think you know so much about Dragonia, but how could you? You judge us based on your own culture, on what you assume is right and wrong. You condemn before you understand why we are the way we are."

Shame threatened, but so did defensive instincts. "I've always prided myself on open-minded discourse. So few of my people do. It's caused me no end of trouble."

"You're scorned where you live?"

"Not exactly. I'm left...alone."

That loneliness still resided in her heart, growing deeper with every second when she thought about her father so far away in Magonia.

"Why are you alone?" he asked.

What could she admit without sounding the fool? "Men do not want wives who think. At least that's what I've heard. Besides, I do not want a husband. I don't like..."

"What?"

"Wifely duties." The words held scorn and sounded dirty in her mouth. "Men do nothing but paw."

"You didn't mind my pawing."

"Sex for pleasure is a sin. That's what the scribes tell us."

He chuckled, the sound dark and carnal and filled with complete disbelief. "Then you believe what you and I did this morning was a sin?" His voice went husky. "There is so much more we could do together. I could make you scream with pleasure you have never —"

"Don't!" She put her palms over her ears. "I do not want to know. Such beastly need is sin."

He snorted loudly. "What fool taught you that?"

"It's written in the Chronicles of Magon."

"Your god."

"Yes."

He shook his head and continued into the tower. He urged her to climb the steps ahead. "You're complaining about suppression of women and yet your people tell you women should remain sexually restrained. I don't think you're any better than we are."

She pursed her lips but didn't say a thing. How could she argue with logic that sound? Defense still came to the surface. "You don't know me. You have no idea what my education is and what I understand about your people."

He threw her an exasperated look and started to strip. "Enlighten me."

She looked away immediately as he peeled off his clothes.

She stopped and considered if she could enlighten him. No. If he knew too much about why she'd been on that ship—

Better to leave things as is for now, and she'd take the opportunity to escape when it came. Perhaps tonight when he slept.

He pulled off his breastplate and tunic in quick order. "Come. Undress and bathe. It will soothe your muscles."

His chest gleamed with sweat. His hair hung limp and wet around his shoulders. He undid the tie around his waist and dropped the garment to the floor.

Ketera could not believe her eyes. Though she'd seen part of him naked, his blatant display shocked her. She looked away again, but those several seconds of bare skin imbedded in her mind like a brand.

Wide, hard shoulders. Strong chest. Powerful arms. Stomach rippling with muscles. That secret bulge she'd never seen naked on any man before...lying between his thighs. While she had responded to his masculinity when she'd seen him earlier, there was nothing more disturbing than seeing all of it exposed. His long, thick cock was nestled in dark hair and was semi-erect.

She couldn't resist another look to confirm if what she saw was real.

Oh my. Yes. As she watched, his cock grew longer, harder and rose upward toward his stomach. The head grew rosy with color. Something primal unwound inside her, a furling of sweet, hot need she couldn't resist. Her gaze snapped to his, and that red gleam was back, the intensity of his stare so overwhelming she trembled with longing. Suddenly a strange and sensual awareness seemed to surround them. She could hear his breathing quickening, see his chest rising and falling more deeply. She sensed struggle within him.

"Don't look at me like that." His voice roughened. "After a dragon fight, a Daryk One is hot to fuck."

"Fuck?" She almost gasped the word.

He stood close, his hands clenched into fists as if he feared he might snatch her against him. "You have never heard the word?"

She swallowed hard, her heartbeat picking up the pace. "Yes, I have heard it."

He lowered his voice to a husky whisper. "I am tired, and if I fuck a woman it revives my energy, reaffirms my life power."

"Oh." Her voice wobbled, her throat dry and tight. "Do you always have a woman after a dragon fight?"

"Often enough." He licked his lips, and the sight of it reminded Keteria of his tongue stroking over hers. Her lower body clenched in reaction. "Any other woman would succumb right now. Beg me to take her."

His arrogance did not surprise her. Her reaction to it did.

Her nipples tightened, brushing against fabric with unbearable sensitivity. Her mouth watered as the secret place between her legs grew moist and ached for more.

Dane's nostril's flared. "I can smell you."

"Smell me?"

"Your need. You want me."

He stalked toward her, and she back against the wall, startled. "What are you doing?"

"I will not take you against your will, but I will take from you what you'll give."

Still confused, she did not expect his next move. He scooped her into his embrace and his mouth came down upon hers. With a swiftness she didn't resist, his tongue took her mouth. Instantly the heat inside her grew like a fire in a forest, leaping forward. Her tongue answered his, stroking his with abandon. She writhed in his hold, half afraid, half maddened with a need to reach that same plateau she'd found in his bed.

With a growl, he tore his mouth from hers. He threw his head back and a feral growl issued from his throat. When he looked back at her, Keteria hovered on the edge of a new revelation. His passion was enough to see them through to the next step. If she would take the next step. Before she could sort the confusion in her mind, he slipped down along her body. With a low moan, he drew her pants down her legs. She gasped, and when his tongue found the top of her slit, she gasped again.

She almost pulled back. Almost stepped away from temptation.

Her body didn't listen, weeping the moisture of sin-filled desire he'd drawn from her once before.

Dane did not part her legs. He buried his face in her curls, and his tongue flicked out in a swift stroke over her bud.

"Dane!" She couldn't prevent the cry, her back arching as she threw back her head and fell into a mind-melting pleasure. "Please – I –"

"Give me this one thing. I'll take only this little bit." His tongue lashed again, flicking with a single burning stroke over the bud.

He feasted, each lick a languorous taste. Mindless, she opened her legs wider, her fingers sliding through his silky hair. Fluttering his tongue rapidly over her bud, he ate at her like a man starved, a desire out of control.

As if her mind was possessed, taken over by a strange demon, she was unable to control the escalating pleasure.

His breath came faster, each hot puff heating her skin and adding to the fire. Finally the rising excitement inside her hit a high and she fell into it. Writhing, she leaned back against the wall. Her hips pressed forward, forcing his mouth deeper between her legs. His tongue stabbed into her channel, lapping at her in a ravenous fashion that heightened her arousal so acutely, she could not take it any longer. Here was a beast, the kind of man who took and yet gave so much back she was filled with it, her mind torn apart by his seduction.

His thumb brushed over her bud as the soft, relentless flutter of his tongue inside her broke her apart.

Ketera shook, her breathless cry a mere whisper.

She couldn't speak, awash in enormous pleasure so acute it felt as if she had imbibed in forbidden drink. She quaked with it, trembled so hard tears leaked down her face.

Shame followed close behind, acknowledgement of her weakness spreading through her almost before ecstasy faded.

As he released her, she slid down along the wall. She looked up at him, breathing hard and a flush spreading across her neck and face in a hot reminder of what had just transpired. Dane's eyes remained afire and his cock was fully erect. Admiration for the male animal washed through her, something she had never truly felt before. She ached somewhere around her heart. What would happen next?

Uncertainty and sanity forced her speak. "No."

Awash in red, his eyes did not calm. "I could ask you to take my cock in your mouth, to suck me until I burst down your throat. But it would not be an honorable request when you are filled with doubt." He drew in a deep breath and his chest heaved. "But I will not take from you what is not freely given."

"But I—" She drew herself into a standing position, averting her eyes from his body. "You already have taken from me."

He reached out and cupped her chin, turned her gaze to his. The red fire had diminished to a mere glitter. "I took nothing. If you had said no, I would have stayed away from you. Your body wants me, no matter what your mind and ridiculous teachings tell you."

Angered and embarrassed, she jerked away from his touch. "You unspeakably arrogant boor."

He laughed, but the mirth was absent from his eyes. "Few people, men or women, are brave enough to call me such. It will do you no good, you know. It makes me want you even more."

When she stayed silent, he shrugged. "Never you mind." His gaze cut away from hers. He strode back to the table. "The cut on your head needs cleaning. Strip and wash in the bathing room." He gestured toward the small room. "I'll wash too. The moat is dirty and holds disease."

He grabbed a linen towel off one shelf and rubbed along his body until he was dried. She witnessed all of this out of her peripheral vision.

He reached into a cupboard and brought out a long tunic of a stunning blue. He slipped it over his shoulders and it fell to mid-calf. Once more he dug around in the cabinet and came out with a sash he tied around his waist. He found trousers and slipped into them and retrieved a pair of boots for his big feet. Now that he was covered, she took a chance and looked at him again.

When he turned around, his face retained a hard demeanor that she couldn't help but fear. The intense blue tunic was cut low in the front and sleeveless, revealing part of his strong chest and sinewy arms. Even without armor, he presented invincibility. After all, he'd killed a beast far larger than himself. Reluctant admiration filled her.

His face was carved with a deep frown. "Hells and damnations. You took my old pack, didn't you? Where is it?"

She shrugged. "I think I dropped it while dragon slaying."

He laughed, full-throated and rich. It sent pleasant vibrations up her spine and tingled in her stomach. "I'll be back soon." He nodded toward the huge tub on one side of the bathing room. "Take a bath. There is a spigot that allows some warm water to come out." He put his hands on his hips. "I'm warning you again not to leave this place. You'll be safe here. No one dares enter a Daryk One's abode without permission. Now promise me you won't leave."

When she stared at him and didn't answer, he shook his head and reached for a key ring hanging near the door. "Very well then."

She stood as he opened the door and walked through. When the door clanked shut and the key engaged in the lock, she ran for the door.

She pounded on the heavy wood with her palms. "Hey! Wait! Don't lock me in here!"

But he'd already gone.

* * * * *

Ketera drifted into her dreams, sailing toward a memory of not so long ago.

Ketera stood at the railing of the sailing ship, watching the unusual storm grow stronger over the last half-hour. Her newfound friends Mia Griffi and Xandra Shorenus also gripped the railing, their faces etched with clear anxiety. Angry clouds roiled on

the horizon and the sea tossed and pitched in ever-increasing agitation. Though she'd been on sailing vessels before she'd never been through a storm at sea, and the vulnerability she felt scared her on a deep level she'd never reached before this moment. Top that off with her father's imprisonment, and her reserves promised to come crashing down any time.

"Those clouds," Mia said as her long black hair whipped about her head in the frenzied wind. "I've never seen anything like them."

Xandra's blue eyes filled with anxiety. She pushed one hand through her mussed red-blond hair that trailed around her shoulders. It wisped about her heart-shaped face in the rising humidity. "We don't have this much water where I live."

Ketera tried to smile at Xandra's half joke about living at the mines in Opali where the hottest, driest part of Magonia could kill a person if they stayed outside too long during the day. Ketera knew it had taken significant courage for Xandra to escape the mining city. She wouldn't tell her or Mia everything about why she'd fled Opali at first, but she hinted at a bad relationship and an upcoming marriage she didn't want. At first Ketera and Mia had expressed surprise. After all, marriage was marriage. It was necessary at some point. Whether one wanted marriage or not didn't matter. Xandra confided she couldn't quite stomach betrothal and marriage to a man older than her father. She didn't say it, but Ketera knew she meant marital relations. Again, sex meant begetting children as was expected.

Then Ketera had remembered what she'd read about the Dragonians in her father's texts. The illicit, unusual descriptions that suggested Dragonian people engaged in sex outside marriage and found pleasure in it. Sinful pleasure. When she'd read the texts and the descriptions of acts she couldn't even imagine, her heart had pounded and strange needs moved through her.

Mia remained equally reserved about her background, mentioning only that she'd left scribe school for personal reasons. Mia seemed spring-wired most of the time and perhaps paranoid.

Then Ketera and Mia had seen Xandra with a tall, imposing older man who spoke harshly to her. When they asked Xandra about it, she confessed that the man was Taris Elian, the betrothed she'd escaped from in Opali. He'd caught up with her on this ship and was taking her back to Opali. Xandra told the women she'd escape him again, somehow. Some way.

Ketera hadn't said a thing about the bag she kept so close to her side and the precious texts within it. Still, over the long days of this trip, she felt closer to these relative strangers than she had to anyone else outside her father. The loneliness in her heart had eased somewhat, and though she might never see these ladies again after they docked in Aramandi, she wished them well.

Ketera tried to hide her growing unease. "It's just a storm. Nothing else."

Then, before they could move away from the railing, they saw the wave. It rose out of the water like a beast with a mind of its own, rushing from nowhere and rolling toward them at incredible speed.

“By the god,” Mia whispered, her voice barely audible as the water sped toward the large ship.

Crawling, terrible dread came first. Then a heart-stopping terror so profound Ketera couldn’t speak, her feet rooted to the deck as the realization of what would happen splintered her ability to act.

A warning horn went off somewhere on the ship as the captain spit out orders to his hands. But it was too late.

“Mia! Xandra!”

She reached out for them and they for her, but in a blink they were torn from each other’s grasps.

The wave engulfed them in rolling, choking blackness.

Chapter Three

Ketera awakened with a gasp, the nightmare's terror firmly lodged in her throat. She was breathing hard, her heart pounding. She looked around frantically. She wasn't on the ship, but safe in Dane's room.

Safe. A relative term she'd learn not so long ago.

The scrumptious scent of roasted meat distracted her as her stomach growled. Her right arm went out automatically, but the bed was empty. Good. She didn't want the reminder that she slept in the same bed with Dane last night. Apparently he'd come into the room late, after she'd already fallen asleep. Damnation. She'd planned an escape after he'd fallen asleep, but her exhaustion had overwhelmed her. She needed a better plan to get out of there.

She sighed long and loud as she rolled over onto her right side and opened her eyes. He sat at the table, eating out of a wooden bowl. Her stomach growled again. She sat up slowly.

Dane swung his gaze toward her, and his eyes remained hard and implacable. Nothing like the teasing, light man who had mingled with the stern yesterday. Certainly he'd been fiery yesterday and had driven her insane with his touch. Today...today he glanced at her and a flash fire smoldered in his gaze. If she'd thought his feral need would be forgotten, she had been wrong.

"Bad dream?" he asked.

"Yes. I was on the ship when the storm came and then there was this huge wave towering several stories above us. We couldn't escape." She shivered as the memory snaked up her spine with horrible clarity.

"I'm sorry you had to face that. It's beyond incredible you survived."

"Yes. They...no one else was found washed up on shore, were they?"

"Only the dead."

Tears pricked her eyes, and the weakness drove her crazy. "I'd met two women on ship named Xandra and Mia. I was hoping they'd...made it." She hated feeling this out of control. "Dragonians cremate the dead, don't they?"

"Not always." His eyes softened for one moment, as if he understood her grief for the women who'd befriended her for such a short time. "The bodies on shore weren't women."

The tiniest ray of hope filled her soul. "Do you think they could have survived?"

"Not likely. But anything is possible. You lived." His eyes went stony again and he said briskly, "Come and eat."

She slipped from bed. She'd wrapped an extra sheet around herself last night. The tunic and pants she'd worn yesterday were dirty, and her Magonian dress hung over a chair, drying on a linen towel. She'd washed her Magonian clothing last night after taking her own bath and then discovering how to drain the tub and refill it. The entire time she worried Dane would stumble in and...well, want something from her. Despite the passionate physical responses he seemed to draw from her with little effort, she still feared what she'd never experienced. But the way he'd looked at her before and after he'd kissed her and caressed her, Ketera was awash in a soul-stirring curiosity. After he'd fought the dragon and kissed her, their relationship had altered. The hunger she'd seen in his eyes had burned hotter and brighter until the threat of physical connection seemed to hover between them at all times.

Would the excitement that stirred in her belly, the unrelenting ache between her legs relent if she allowed him sexual congress? The mystery of the act drew her. Her body wanted to know and experience, though her mind said it would ruin her and strip her of integrity and dignity.

He'd dressed in his blue tunic again, and she couldn't help staring at his chest. She liked the way the hair on his chest swirled lightly over his pectorals and scattered downward over those amazing muscles and into the waist area where she couldn't see anything else. She jerked her gaze away and took a plate filled with meats and cheeses. She bit into the meat, not caring if it was satarn meat. Even that repulsive creature would do when a body was starving. No, not satarn. It tasted far sweeter. Did they even have satarn on this continent?

She sighed and popped a piece of meat into her mouth. He passed her a wooden fork and she took it. Embarrassed, she smiled. She'd been so ravenous she'd used her fingers to eat. As she thought about her situation, uncertainty plagued her. At the same time, determination pushed her forward.

She took a deep breath. Perhaps, just perhaps, the only way she could procure his help was to tell him some of the truth. "I must return to Magonia."

His head jerked up. "That's not possible."

She looked him in the eye. "I have to find a way to return home. I can't stay in Dragonia. I don't belong here, and I won't abuse your hospitality. You've been...extraordinary, and I can't thank you enough for saving my life. Twice it seems." She smiled, but his expression had hardened rather than softened at her praise. "You could have left me for dead."

"I would never do that." His voice was hoarse and touched with emotion. He tossed his spoon back into his bowl and leaned back in his chair, his eyes defensive.

What had gotten into him?

She continued. "My father is imprisoned in Magonia near the mining town of Opali. He worked on an excavation near there and was arrested. I'd traveled to see him and was on my way back to Aramandi with one of his artifacts for safe-keeping when the storm hit our ship. I'd planned to go back to Opali after I stowed away the artifact."

His brow crinkled. He stood and came around to her side of the table and crouched beside her chair. "What was he imprisoned for?"

"I can't tell you."

"You don't know why he was jailed?"

She sighed. Suddenly she had no appetite left and she pushed back her chair, turning toward him. "I know the reason, but I can't tell you. His life is in jeopardy. They said he would be tried and convicted and that if found guilty—" She sucked in a breath as mental pain saturated her.

Dane's frown deepened, his eyes dark with concern. "What happens?"

"He'll be..." She swallowed hard. "He'll be executed."

Dane stood abruptly and prowled the floor. "How do you propose to free him? Do you possess evidence of his innocence?"

She looked down at her hands. "You see, that's part of the difficulty. He's guilty."

He stopped eating up the floor with his long strides. Emotions flickered over his face. Uncertainty. Concern. "Guilty or not, you can't leave here. There are no ships that sail to Magonia. If your ship hadn't been destroyed by the storm you wouldn't be here now." He sighed. "Unless you were waylaid by a slaver ship and brought to Dragonia to fall prey to men like the one who wanted you on the beach."

His straightforward approach with the facts bothered her. She stood, keeping her hand clasped around the sheet so it wouldn't fall from around her body. She approached him slowly. "I could hire a boat. I have to return."

"No."

Anger bubbled upward. "That is your answer? I'm supposed to be resigned? Would you allow your father to rot in jail and face death?"

He moved in on her until he stood within a hairsbreadth of touching her, his eyes blazing. "Even if you could leave here, how do you propose to break him out of prison? And if he's guilty, why shouldn't he pay for his crime?"

She swallowed hard. "Because he's guilty of something that no one should have to pay for."

"I say again, what is his crime?"

"Telling the truth."

"That's ridiculous."

"I agree, but telling the truth on Magonia will send the Truth and Order Police to your door."

He planted his hands on his hips, puzzlement drawn on his face. "How is that possible?"

She could see he'd need more of an explanation if she hoped he'd help her. She walked away, the sheet dragging behind her. She stood in front of the arrow slit

window where she'd first seen the jungle. She wondered if more dragons would appear and shatter the peaceful day. "I was an archaeologist on Magonia. Just like my father."

"What is an archaeologist?"

"Someone who explores ruins, looks for the items that peoples centuries before have left behind. To better understand our past."

"No one does that here. Most Dragonians live for now. Not for what happened in the past. We don't have ruins because every castle on our land has been here hundreds of years and is maintained to perfection. Simple abodes for common people are never dug up for study. What good would it do us to see what our ancestors did? We can see the results. We are the products of what came before."

She smiled and kept her gaze on the jungle. "The Truth and Order Police decided right about the time my father was arrested that this same thought was very logical. Most people on our continent are too afraid of the past to give it much thought. The Truth and Order Police decided that telling the public what archaeology discovered was too risky. It gives people ideas."

"Ideas?" He sounded puzzled.

She rubbed her forehead as a headache started between her eyes. All right, here it came. How could she explain this without telling him everything about her father's incarceration? She sighed and abandoned trying to hide it. She'd have to trust someone on Dragonia if she wanted to save her father. "If people question what they're told by the scribes, they are reprimanded. Archaeologists who tell the truth about what they find are rare. Those who do tell the truth, as my father did when he found a certain artifact, are imprisoned."

She turned back to Dane. He stood too close again. His eyes, though, held great understanding and even sympathy. All the inflexibility she'd seen earlier had vanished.

"Truth is conditional on Magonia on a grand scale," he said.

She smiled. "That is the way of it. It's amazing how one group of people can claim to be arbiters of maintaining truth yet they do all they can to hide the truth."

His lopsided grin acknowledged that he understood. "In this land, we don't hide what we find. We just don't look that hard to find it in the first place."

She returned his smile. "Perhaps there is a middle ground there that would work better."

"Perhaps. What did your father discover that was so damaging?"

His gentle tone softened her toward him. "If I tell you the rest, you must swear to help me leave here."

"I cannot do that."

"Then I cannot tell you what he found."

He walked toward her. "Damn it, sprite—" She took a step back, startled. His hands clasped her bare shoulders, and the heat in his eyes could have been anger or passion. "I won't help you if I don't know the whole story. And I guarantee if you try and leave

me again, you'll only find trouble. You cannot help your father if you're kidnapped or killed or injured."

Tears of frustration prickled her eyes. "Then what do you propose I do? I won't stand by and let him die. I won't."

"You had a plan? If he's guilty, then what evidence or help could you possibly give him to save his life?"

She put more trust in Dane, but wondered if she'd regret it. "My proof may be lost at sea. I had it with me when my ship went down. As it is, if anyone else finds the texts, they may sell them for a great deal of money."

"Texts?"

"Documents that were buried over two thousand years ago that tell how the supercontinents were divided into Dragonian and Magonian land."

"What truth is that?"

"You've never heard it?"

"Magonians and Dragonians evolved apart. We cannot agree to live peaceably, so we live on the two continents. We have nothing more in common but our language."

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Then our combined histories are not a mystery to you?"

"No. Why would they be?"

By the god. Could it be Magonians were kept in the dark by their leaders and Dragonians knew the truth? Stunned, she managed to speak. "Then you know Magonians refuse to believe anything but what the scribes have told them about Dragonians. We are sheltered. Kept in the dark. It keeps us in hate of you."

He stayed silent for a few moments, as if processing what she'd dared reveal to him. "That's why you wouldn't tell me right away about your father. He wanted to release these sacred texts to the Magonians so they would know the truth of your past."

She nodded, a great weight lifting from her. "Yes."

"And that got him arrested when the authorities found out he had the texts."

She nodded, misery gathering inside her. "One of my father's coworkers decided to leak the truth to the authorities, but Father had already sent the texts to me for safe-keeping. When I heard of his arrest, I wanted to save him. I thought maybe if I turned in the texts he might be spared."

A sneer touched his mouth. "You preach nonviolence yet your society would kill your father for speaking the truth?"

She nodded, a sense of shame coming over her. "Yes."

"Our society never kills anyone for speaking the truth. Only to protect the innocent."

"You are all so wild. So out of control. I can hardly believe what you say."

He shook his head. "As I told you, our history is very transparent. We do not worry about lying because we don't lie." He smiled. "Much."

She made a small, derogatory sound of contempt. "All of this doesn't help me if I can't find the texts."

He pressed her shoulders. "Then there is no way to save him."

She yanked away from him and stared blankly at the wall. Tears stung her eyes and spilled over her lashes. "Forget I ever mentioned all this. You think I should give up on my father and I won't. He's all I have." She wiped at the moisture on her face. She wanted to kick and scream at him for being so hard-headed, matter-of-fact and perfunctory about what she couldn't do. "Or maybe because you live for today with no past or future you'd let your own father perish."

He clasped her shoulders again. Dismay and consternation filled his face. "We live for today on Dragonia because this is an uncertain world, and we may not have tomorrow. Saves us from too much planning and too much regret. As for my own father, he's already dead."

Tears continued to rain down her face, and she hated it. She'd never cried in front of a man—not in front of anyone—and it twisted inside her like a knife to the gut. "Do you always let things happen to you, Dane? Or do you have any say in what occurs at all?"

His hands caressed her shoulders. "Of course I plan what I do—you're taking what I said all wrong. Dragonians don't fear the truth like your culture must."

"No one here hides the truth or tells lies? That can't be so."

"Our lives are on display. The truth is there for most people to see, no matter how much it might hurt."

"Then you've never lied to anyone?"

He gave a mock laugh. "Ha. Right. I lied last evening when people asked about you. I'd planned originally to say you were a relative. But that all went to the levels of hell when..."

"Yes?"

"When I kissed you in public, I erased any chance of people believing you are related."

"Then they think we're living in sin."

"Living in sin? What sin?"

"Man and woman living together without marriage."

He snorted. "That is not a sin here. I will tell others that we are mated."

The tears that had rained down her cheeks still kept coming. She drew in a shaky breath. "Mated? As in..."

"Mated mentally and physically. Compatible sexually on every level. Dragonians usually, though not always, find one person who is compatible this way. But when people see us in public, you must be willing to play the part as my mated one."

Aghast, she said, "That's ridiculous. Why would I want to lie about something like that?"

"Because if you don't another man will try to stake a claim."

"Because he thinks I'm his mate?"

"No. Because he wants you sexually. Plain and simple."

"I'll just tell him no."

He made a sound of disbelief and his hands tightened on her shoulders. "It's not that easy. Men claim what they want without hesitation. You remember I said that there are many more men than there are women? Men here are territorial about females because this world is dangerous and life often fleeting. Women bring life into this world...or at least they used to."

"Used to?"

"Remember I told you that we're almost sterile. Women aren't having many children anymore. And most of those babies born are male. That makes women precious and rare. We are going slowly extinct, and if we don't discover why so few children are being born, we will eventually vanish. Now that I've kissed you and pleased your body, no other man who knows that I've taken that kiss will approach you. But if you in any way show that my claiming isn't real and that our feelings for each other aren't real, another man will try to take you for his own. And he may not be honorable about it."

His hands went up to cup her face, his thumbs brushing away fresh tears. He looked into her eyes and there she saw compassion, and it undid her thread by thread.

"Are you honorable, Dane?" Her voice trembled.

"I am. Most Daryk Ones are honorable, but not all."

"What makes Daryk Ones so different from other men?"

He sighed. "We are picked from our early years because of our height and strength. We are trained to protect the citizenry and to serve feudal lords who rule enormous castles and surrounding townships. We are the only ones who can fight dragons and win."

Her eyes widened. "It all sounds most fairy-tale-like."

"Fairy tale?"

She sighed. "A tale told to small children to teach them a lesson or entertain. I'd heard of castles and dragons but never saw them before I landed here. My father's research told him such abodes and animals existed, but I wouldn't have believed it unless I saw it for myself." She paused only long enough for a breath. "Who is the lord of this castle?"

"Armen Helnak. His family has owned this castle for five hundred years. My father was born here, my grandfather also. Generations have lived and died here."

The quiet pride in his voice filled her with calm but not complete assurance. Tears continued down her face. "And you think Dragonia will eventually make war on Magonia?"

"That isn't the wish of the majority on Dragonia." One of his eyebrows lifted. "I think the only war that is likely to happen now is civil war in Dragonia."

She sighed. "And we are peaceful as a society. We know little about battle and how to fight."

The more she discovered about him, the more passionate she felt about escaping. He confused her more than any person ever had in her life. When he drew her into his arms and hugged her, she stopped crying. The warmth of his embrace and the security she experienced, stunned her. He pressed her head against his big shoulder and held her there.

"I just left a society that lies and now you want me to tell more untruths." She lifted her head from his shoulder, a question burning inside her she must know. "Why did you kiss me after you killed the dragon?"

His lips thinned into a tight line, as if he restrained himself. His arms stayed around her, and they tightened. "As I said once before, to keep you safe. And...when a Daryk One finishes battle, he is often lusty and in need of a woman. You were there."

His explanation pricked her ego. "I was convenient for your lust."

He looked away. "Yes."

Somehow she didn't like that explanation, but raw feelings punctured her control. She stepped out of his arms. "I don't care about the rules of Dragonia because this isn't my land. I don't belong here. I need to find my way back to Magonia, and if you won't help me I'll find someone who will."

"No. You won't." He stated each word with precise syllables, and he crossed his arms.

Arrogance rolled off him, and Ketera wanted to smack the imperious expression from his face. How dare he think he could control her and that she'd do whatever he wanted without question? Despite all the intriguing things her father's texts told her about Dragonians that she found enlightening and encouraging, this was one thing the texts hadn't been wrong about.

Men here thought they knew everything.

But then they did on Magonia too.

By the god.

Resentment twisted inside Ketera. She shouldn't have said anything to Dane about her father. Now she'd ruined her chance to sneak away when he least expected it. He'd be on guard to keep her with him every moment.

Defiance boiled her blood and she encroached on his personal space. "I'll run away whenever we're out. You can't watch me all day, every day."

His eyes flared hot. "I can and I will."

"How? You plan to tie me to the bed?"

"Tying you to the bed is a pleasure I would like to experience."

"Oh!" She growled her contempt. "I thought you considered women to be precious. It sounds to me like you want to control us, order us around, break our spirits."

"Huh." He uncrossed his arms and took a step closer to her. "As if that isn't what men on Magonia have already done to their women? Forcing you into marriage devoid of pleasure and emotional attachment?" He lifted one hand and cupped her face with an incredibly gentle touch. "How is that cherishing their women? Isn't that control?"

His eyes blazed with something like anger or perhaps a scorching desire. On Magonia grief and emotional displays stayed shoved to the background. Sharing feelings with others—well, if they were bad feelings—were best kept hidden. They were too inconvenient and messy. Dane permitted his emotions to erupt for all the world to see. Right now she couldn't mistake the full effect of his desire or the way he touched her.

She simply didn't know how to react. How she should feel.

She knew that his declarations, his emotional display started a firestorm of yearning in her mind and heart, and an untamed craving in her body. "At least on Magonia I don't have to feel anything."

He groaned. "You are maddening. You feel, everyone does. You just don't acknowledge it. You'll be the death of me, Ketera Aldrancos. But there is one thing I know for certain, you aren't going to run from me."

"I just told you I would."

He cupped her face in his hands, his attention hot on her face as he leaned closer and closer, devouring her with a look so passionate she couldn't find her breath. "You won't. Because when I get through with you, you'll want to stay with me."

She scoffed, grabbing hold of his forearms. Her covering started to slip and she grabbed it with one hand. "That's impossible. How could you make me want that?"

"Like this."

And his mouth came down on hers.

As Dane's kiss took her, Ketera thought about resisting. But at the first warm, exploring touch, she realized she wanted to experience more. Now she could explore what she'd never been allowed on Magonia. Discover more about the secrets of passion between man and woman. She wanted to know the heat and hardness of his body taking hers regardless of affection.

Hot, shivery delight danced in her belly, and she groaned and leaned into him, eager to understand and feel. With a muffled moan he pulled her into his arms. He kept his kiss gentle, teasing as he brushed one corner of her mouth then the other. All

thoughts drifted away on an ethereal haze as his kiss settled more firmly upon her lips. Dazed, she released her death grip on the sheet and allowed her hands to slide up around his neck. She groaned into his mouth.

With slow seduction he coaxed open her lips and his tongue dipped into her mouth. He stroked her mouth with a carnal rhythm that built sweet fire. She responded without hesitation, wanting more as she allowed her tongue to dance with his.

Suddenly she felt his hands along her naked skin. The sheet trapped between them, and as it slipped open in the back, she almost pulled away. Almost.

The sheet parted more. More. Until his hands explored along her bareness, his touch light as he slipped down to cup her butt. She gasped into his mouth in surprise and jerked. He calmed the kiss until he drew his lips from hers. She stared at him, startled by the intimacy yet craving it.

"You want me, Ketera. You may speak words of denial all you want, but your body betrays you. When my fingers explored you, when my tongue was between your legs, you did not think about what others say is right. You only felt what was now. What was real between us."

He gave her no time to think as he teased the sensitive skin between her neck and shoulder, each brush of his lips over her flesh a startling revelation in pleasure. She quivered, caught up in needs both scary and exciting. Her breath quickened as she wriggled in his arms. His grip tightened on her butt enough to anchor her hips to his body. His erection grew hard against her belly. She squirmed, her hips pumping in a rhythm he soon mimicked. His lips traveled along her neck and searched her skin just as his hand came up and cradled her naked right breast.

His big palm and fingers held her flesh. He massaged, encompassed her as if she were a delicate, beautiful prize. He plucked at her nipple and sharp pleasure radiated from the beaded tip and straight to the secrets between her legs. She ached to experience the hot pleasure she knew he could give. As he continued to tease her nipple, fear resurrected. She jerked out of his arms, gathering the sheet and wrapping it securely around her.

Breathing hard, he stared at her, his gaze lightning hot. She stared back, her own breath unsteady and the thumping of her heart testimony to the acute and beautiful feelings he'd created inside her. Her body was in a riot, and confusion about all these wonderful feelings made her dizzy.

I must return home to Magonia before this man overwhelms all that is me. Before I surrender to dreaded physical needs I'm not sure I can resist.

"Get dressed," he said. "If you're so damn determined to rescue your father, I know just how you might do it."

His abrupt change from passion to practicality stunned her. "What?"

"We're going to meet a friend of mine. He might help us rescue your father."

Chapter Four

A loud guffaw behind Dane jerked him out of a self-induced stupor. As Ketera and Dane waited for his contact to arrive at the tavern, they drank ale and didn't talk. After that last kiss, Dane didn't know what to say to her. His body and mind hadn't been this confused in a long damned time. She sat next to him on a bench, her elbows on the wood table, her hands wrapped around a half-full tankard. She stared into the drink, her eyes haunted, her mouth sullen.

Pipe smoke drifted from one corner of the room and assaulted his nose. He sneezed. He drew his tankard up to his mouth and took a healthy swallow. Not a good time, if he was honest with himself, to become a raving sot. But it would take far more than one tankard to souse him. He decided to relax, hoping the place would drain off the heady lust still singing through his veins for the woman next to him. The tavern nestled into one side of the castle, its crude stone construction an afterthought in design. Loud and boisterous, at least it served its purpose. Utter distraction.

Men milled about the congested tavern, doing what they did every day and night there, talking, drinking and whoring. Someone played a Stigian hornpipe and another a Bodgian drum. An ancient love melody spilled from their instruments. He recognized the song as one his mother used to play on her hornpipe. A deep pang touched his soul. *Mother, if only you were here now. You could tell me what to do with Ketera.*

By the god, he knew what to do with her body, and he still ached with need to sink his cock deep inside her hot cunny. If he had his way, if she'd only surrender to his desires, he'd show her so much pleasure she'd be dazed for hours.

When he'd kissed her after battling the dragon, he'd recognized the blood fever upon him...and the natural lust. The one that said she was his prize and therefore his to take to bed. When he'd held her naked in his arms, he hadn't wanted to stop. With her inexperience, he deduced he would have succeeded in bedding her, but it would have been wrong. She was an innocent, reluctant, and besides that, guilt racked Dane. He understood her searing pain at losing a loved one, and he knew if he didn't try to rescue her father, she would attempt another foolhardy escape in her desperation. If she left his protection, she would die. Plain and simple.

The problem was he didn't know if he could rescue her father.

Not when his physical need to possess her pounded in his skull, in his heart and in his gut. He drew in a deep breath. Ketera aroused him with an almost overwhelming pull that frightened him to the core. Whether he would admit it aloud or not, kissing her for the entire castle to see declared more than a ravenous need to slake desire. He'd staked a claim.

No honorable man who'd seen the kiss would dare touch her, and he'd see to that or die trying.

Now that he'd tasted her intimately and brought her knowledge of a woman's true desires, he couldn't release her. The other night he had almost thrown away personal integrity to seduce her into lying with him. He'd wanted to thrust his cock in her so far she would never forget him. To the deepest hells, he would never forget Keteria's sweet taste as she had spilled her pleasure over his tongue. He'd wanted to take her up against the wall, to fuck her until he poured his lust deep inside her in a final claiming she would never wish to escape.

He put his head in his hands and groaned. His father had described the mating lust to him when Dane was a boy.

"You will know, son."

"How, Father?"

"The lust will seize you more strongly than anything you've known."

"More strongly than battle lust?"

"Much more. You will want the woman now. But without restraint you'll be nothing more than an animal wishing to breed. Remember that when the time comes and you find the woman who is the one."

About that time Dragonian numbers had started to dwindle, and yet it had taken a generation to understand the true impact. His lust to breed grew hotter at the thought, a need to populate their continent stronger with each driving day. Yet he couldn't do it with any woman, and he knew that.

His father's words hadn't made much sense to him then, and in the intervening years he'd almost wondered if the mating lust could be a myth. Most every man he knew, especially Daryk Ones, wanted sex when they wanted it and the drive could be pretty extreme. Yet he'd seen other Daryk Ones and more ordinary men succumb to the mating lust for one woman. It must be true. He'd just never imagined it for himself.

But this...oh this. He'd never wanted a woman as violently as he wanted Keteria. His drive to keep her safe had slammed into him from the moment he'd seen her lying on the sand with the ruins of a great sailing ship piled around her.

He looked around the room at the comely women who would comply in a heartbeat if he tossed them coins, took them to a back room and lifted their skirts to take them. Not one of the women tempted him. Wenches strode along with platters of food and drink, some of them wearing low-neck blouses designed to show all they had to sell. One young woman of around twenty-five years came his way. She'd served him drink before. Like most women, her clothing was simple, either tunics or long skirts or filmy pants that flowed along their legs.

"Can I be of service, Daryk One?" the woman asked.

Well aware that Keteria watched closely, he stated the truth. "Nothing for me, Samhala."

The young woman's gaze traveled to Ketera. The woman frowned and strutted away.

One of Ketera's brows rose and she pursed her lips before she spoke. "What did she want?"

"Samhala is mated and doesn't tempt me. Don't worry about it." He smirked and then took a big swallow of ale.

She sniffed and pushed her hair back from her face. Her eyes sparkled with something that almost appeared like jealousy. Good. He wanted her jealous.

"As if I cared who you copulate with."

He chuckled.

To his surprise, her frown grew deeper. Good. He liked the way her eyes sparked when he made her angry.

"Have you had...relations with her before she was mated?" she asked.

Satisfaction flowed through him. She was jealous. The slightly petulant turn to her mouth and the glitter in her eyes gave her away. "Why does it concern you, Ketera?"

"Because I—" She cut herself off then her lips tightened. "I'm curious about this place. There are so many men and women playing with each other I wasn't sure what was expected here."

Playing? He glanced around and realized she meant flirting. Somewhat more than flirting, if he paid attention. One wench sat on a man's lap, her bottom planted firmly, the man's arms around her waist. From the woman's heavy-lidded expression and the man's slack-jawed, glazed expression, Dane figured a lot more was going on under the woman's skirt than anyone could see. The tavern didn't have rules against public sex. Suddenly the woman on the man's lap gasped, her body coming up then slamming down on the man. The man surged upward and growled like a beast from the jungle. The woman's expression held pure ecstasy.

"This is a normal tavern," he said. "Nothing more or less."

She wrinkled her nose as she stared at the copulating couple. "Disgusting."

He smiled. "Why? Because men and women are free to express their desires? Or because you find the place exciting? Perhaps you want to express your desires in the same way? Do you hate this place because it makes you feel something you don't want to feel?" He leaned toward her, drawing in her clean scent. "Perhaps you'd like me to show you how it can feel to express your needs with an audience?"

She tilted her small nose upward and speared him with a glower both queenly and annoyed. "Never."

That's it, sprite. Keep telling yourself that.

Truth be told, he didn't want their first time together to be in front of any audience. He wanted her all for his own. A softening occurred inside him he didn't understand. When it came to her, he felt off balance, possessive. In the grip of a longing both

staggering and gentle. He should have warned her that he would try to seduce her at every turn. Perhaps not. She'd already rejected his declaration that she was his.

Mine, the feral call kept echoing in his head. *She's mine*.

He leaned nearer, lowering his voice to a whisper, staring directly into her eyes. "All right, you want the truth? I'll give it to you. There is a fierce, almost unstoppable need within me to take you to my bed."

Her mouth dropped open and the indignation on her face spread into a full-scale glare of a woman filled with scorn. She shook her index finger at him. "You, sir, are the last man I would ever consider giving my body. You couldn't seduce me."

He drew in a deep breath, staring her down, daring her to say anything that might break his shaky control. He wanted to kiss her again, the desire acute and almost painful. "I see. My fingers and tongue inside you does not count as giving me your body? If you think that is not sex, you have a lot to learn. I could take you in the next room and fuck you so hard you wouldn't be able to stand."

He could see the fire rising inside her, knew his words made her angry and aroused at the same time. A flush glowed in her cheeks, making the delicate lines of her face unbearably delightful to him.

"I know what constitutes sex you...you boorish..." she sputtered, her frustration obviously blunting her ability to speak.

"You know my name." He smiled, enjoying the heat that seemed to flow between them even when they argued. His voice lowered to a rasp. "And I'd like to hear you scream it when you come around my cock."

She gasped and looked around, apparently afraid their conversation would be overheard. "You bastard."

A huge hand came down on his shoulder, and Dane jerked a dagger from his waist holster. He came around with a growl.

"Whoa! Whoa there, old friend! It is I, Minilos." The shaggy-haired man standing over Dane smiled down with an amused and genial expression, his grin half hidden by a gold and red thick beard and mustache.

Minilos Willburi's generous waistline spoke of indulgence in establishments such as this. His curly and unruly hair, had long ago earned him the nickname of "lion".

"Fuck you, Minilos."

The hearty man burst out in laughter, throwing his head back and roaring to the low ceiling. Everyone ignored Minilos, used to his boisterous personality.

"Good to know I'm still your friend, Dane. For a minute I thought you'd skewer me on your dirk."

Dane snorted and took another drink. "You're not my type."

Another booming laugh left Minilos' throat. "How long has it been since we've seen you around here? A good month? What have you been doing? Wenching in the Tarrian

region? I hear there are ripe women there. Strong and capable who escaped their men long ago."

"If there are, I haven't seen any. Besides, we're in the Tarrian region. I don't have to go anywhere to wench with ripe women."

Minilos sat down on the bench across from Dane, his too-full tankard sloshing drink onto the large man's hand. "Too true. It's boring around here lately. So calm." The man eyeballed Keteria. "Then again, I see you already have a wench. My apologies, good friend."

Keteria's lips went tight, her eyes hard. "I am not a wench."

Dane smiled. "This is Keteria Aldrancos. Keteria, Minilos."

"Charmed." Minilos held out his meaty hand. He captured Keteria's small fingers and brought them to his lips for a smacking kiss. "Charmed indeed."

She jerked her hand back but didn't reply to Minilos' overwrought statement. "He can help us?"

Minilos grinned. "I can help you with anything you need. I stake my golden reputation on it."

Her ire chilled but her eyes held suspicion. She glanced around. "We can't talk about this here. What if someone hears us?"

Dane grunted. "Not likely. We'll keep our voices low. The very fact we're in a tavern like this takes away any suspicion."

"Why do we need him?" Keteria asked.

Dane's smile became brittle. "Because he is an old friend with expertise." He turned his attention back to the robust man. "Besides. He probably hasn't had enough murder and mayhem to suit an old Daryk One, eh?"

Dane realized in an instant he shouldn't have mentioned Minilos' age. He was too damn sensitive about it.

The older man grimaced. "Just because I don't patrol with you feckless young ones anymore doesn't mean I can't pound sense into a cretin."

Shaking his head, Dane said, "I can see you have your hands full here. Leave the battles outside of Grimmald Castle to me."

Minilos nodded, apparently placated. "So tell me, what goes on outside the castle walls these days? I burn for news."

"The other castles are still making up their minds which side they're on. Armen's side or Drakus' side."

"How many castles are on this continent," Keteria asked.

Dane counted them off on one hand. "Grimmald, Austos, which is in the Ithaycan desert, Leadios, which is in the glacier lands of Imekland, and Bardannia, which is also in Imekland. I think most of the castles will maintain their honor and see that stealing women from another country is not the way to do this."

Minilos snorted. "Perhaps we can convince Armen we need to send an emissary to Magonia to talk sense into them. That we need to mix our lands and people to survive. But I doubt it will work. Magonians have no sense."

"I beg your pardon?" Ketera asked with undeniable rancor.

Dane smiled. "Ketera is from Magonia."

Minilos looked bashful for a second then his gaze took in Ketera with a whole new light. "Really? My apologies, my dear."

Dane threw her a teasing glance. "She's very sensitive, Minilos. Watch your tongue."

Minilos winked. "Have you been watching yours?"

Dane laughed softly as Ketera's cheeks went red.

Minilos sipped delicately from his own tankard in direct contrast to his usual copious consumption. "Forgive my rough ways, little lady. I've had a lot of work to do lately with this tavern. Fights almost every night. Drunken bastards wrecking my property. It's hell, I tell you. Hell."

Dane grinned. "Which one?"

The hairy man groaned. "All of them. Perhaps the deepest level. Seventeen, I think."

"Right. And when are you going to find a real job?"

Minilos possessed a good sense of humor, thank Draconus. He glared at Dane with mock seriousness. "Running this tavern is the best occupation I've ever had. Keeps me out of trouble."

"Uh-huh. If you call drunken brawls every night peace and quiet."

Minilos quirked one eyebrow. "And that's only the Daryk Ones who come in here every night to find drink and a woman. I swear I don't remember feeling the need to fight as you young ones do. Is it something new?"

Dane rolled his gaze to the ceiling in mock disgust then looked at Ketera. "New he says. That is a lie and you know it. There is nothing new in Dragonia."

Minilos looked morose as he stared into his tankard. "Are the rumors true, Dane?" He lowered his voice to a whisper that Dane could barely discern. "Are rogue Daryk Ones threatening this castle?"

"Keep your voice down."

Minilos lowered his voice even more. "Tell me. Is it true?"

"Rumors say Drakus is planning to move in on our position here and destroy us." He shrugged. "I'm not concerned. He will raid and we will repel. Nothing penetrates our walls, remember? Not even a siege engine, and I doubt he has one of those." When he saw the doubt in his old friend's eyes, he continued with, "He owns a ragtag army of miscreants who never should have been allowed into the Daryk Ones in the first place."

If he tries to attack the castle, Armen will be forced to see that he must fight Drakus head-on and take him down."

Minilos peered at him. Drink hadn't clouded the serious expression in his eyes. "It pains you to think of any Daryk Ones willing to harm another Daryk One and hurt women?"

"How can you ask that? Of course it does."

Minilos sighed. "It does cut deep. But it was to be expected. With our diversity of beliefs and peoples, the extremes will always try to win out. You understand as well as I do. I'm surprised we've gone this long without worse happening."

As much as Dane wanted to pretend that their continent didn't verge on fragmenting into more warring factions, he couldn't. Dane closed his eyes and wished the topic would dissolve, but he couldn't bury it. "Peace would be wonderful."

His friend tilted his head to the side. "Peace you say? Are you insane? Peace has never been and never will be. It's in Dragonian blood to fight."

Dane sighed. "I've been a warrior most of my life. My blood is tired."

"Really? I hear your blood is actually up. The way you attacked that dragon will be a legend for much time to come, no doubt."

Dane grunted.

Minilos laughed and then swallowed a mighty gulp of drink. He grimaced as the liquid went down his throat. He wiped his mouth with his tunic arm. "Are you saying you want to quit being a Daryk One? The heat is too high for you?"

Minilos sounded scandalized, but Dane saw the humor lurking in his eyes. "Never." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "What other occupation would give me a chance to kill dragons?"

Minilos slapped the table. "Exactly. Now, before this drink overwhelms me, tell me what sort of wretched plan you've involved this beautiful young lady in. And by the by, you really should keep your kissing to yourself. Everyone in the castle saw you snogging her after the dragon fight. They assume you've shagged her."

Dane wanted to pop his friend in the jaw. "By the god, I could rip your loose tongue out by the roots."

Minilos laughed and clapped Dane on the back. "Perhaps you should go home and screw her blind. That'll cure what ails you both."

Ketera stood up, her face pink. "Excuse me. Is there a facility for ladies? I'll return in a moment."

Minilos pointed it out, and she strode away. Dane kept an eye on her as she wended her way through the crowd of boisterous tavern goers. She made it to the back room safely.

Ketera left the bathing room with one hand over her stomach. She didn't really feel that steady. Maybe the meat pies she'd eaten earlier hadn't agreed with her. The tavern

was stuffy and she needed a bit of fresh air. Anything to get away from the noisy, smoky, crowded interior for one moment.

An open door down the hall to the left allowed a cooler breeze to waft inside the building. Night sounds echoed from the jungle. Just a moment or two to compose herself and she'd go back inside and face Dane and Minilos.

She stepped outside and drank in the clean air. A bench beckoned outside the doorway and she sat down. This was better.

For one moment, as she'd left Dane and Minilos, she'd considered running. She'd find her own way. She wasn't stupid and her guts would go far. She knew her way around people, despite every effort her society made to keep her in place. As much as she would miss bantering and fighting with Dane, she wanted to find a quicker way off this Magon-forsaken continent and back to her own country.

Oh Dane. Yes, she would miss the passion he'd inspired in her. But surely if she returned to Magonia she could forget his touch. His kisses. And the maddening and forbidden pleasure he'd created within her.

Still, she knew she couldn't do it.

Dane was right about one thing at least. This was a dangerous country and she was unfamiliar with it. She needed his help.

She sighed and gazed through the semidarkness.

The small township stood but a few hundred yards outside Grimnald Castle in a clearing surrounded by jungle. Night had fallen, but two huge Croan red moons dwarfed the treetops at the horizon. Torches lit the area, probably as much to discourage animals as to prevent any other crime. Crime. The very word intimidated.

Her mind spun with what she'd witnessed in the tavern. Men and women copulating, women's breasts hanging out for all to see, vice of every imaginable kind save robbery, murder and – well, she supposed those might go on there as well. Yet Minilos had seemed like a nice enough man at the core, even if his crass demeanor spoke of broken former glory. And Dane. Well, Dane had stolen her breath when he'd suggested she might want to try public sex with him. Oh lord Magon. Her face heated even in the coolness.

From the darkness, the sounds of a call to prayer warbled in the night. She'd read in the texts her father had found that Dragonian townships had a center of worship, a chapel to the god Draconus. Every eight hours a call to prayer would wail above the township and remind those most faithful to stop and reflect on the goodness of Draconus. She'd yet to see what this god was supposed to look like. Perhaps they didn't allow the deity to have a form, just as Magonians refused to depict their god.

Curious to get a slightly better angle so she could see the huge moons better, she stepped around the corner of the building.

A dark figure sprang at her. An arm grabbed her about the waist, slinging her into an alleyway. With crushing force, the man jammed her against a wall. Her breath caught, seized by the pressure of the man's body against hers and pain spearing

through her ribs. At first she thought the hard grip might be Dane, but the man's nasty breath instantly proved it wasn't, and the brutal grip on her arms hurt. Fear sliced like a knife through her.

Instinct brought her knee up into the man's groin. The man yowled and ducked into a ball of pain. She poured on the strength and tore away from her attacker. With a growl the man reached for her, caught the sleeve of her tunic. It ripped but held, and his other arm corralled her waist. He slapped her across the face, and a cry escaped her as her ears rang and pain sliced her cheek as if a beener bug had stabbed her. Crude words spilled from his lips that she didn't understand.

"Bitch! Don't defy me!" His raspy voice growled in her ear.

She tried to knee him again, her hands coming up to gouge his eyes. He jerked his head back. A second later her head thunked against the wall behind her and a flash of white penetrated her skull like a needle. Pain staggered her. By the god, he had to have split her skull. Regret came too late. Perhaps she shouldn't have left Dane. Weakness made pudding of her limbs, and as her knees buckled, the man tossed her over his shoulder. She tried pounding on his back but couldn't muster strength to do more than gurgle in outrage.

"Let me go," she managed to cry out. "You milksop!"

He slapped her ass, a guttural laugh echoing in the knight. "Be still, bitch. Your eagerness is encouraging, but we have all night."

She wriggled, but the pain in her head sent her into a twilight where only voices penetrated her mind.

"What you go there, Bantu?" A man's raspy voice echoed nearby. "Can I get me some?"

"Back off, Tweed. She's not your kind. Got me a rare find."

As the man called Bantu ran with her into the night, Tweed ran alongside. "Truly? Can I have a bit of her?"

"She's going to be my bitch. At least until I get tired of her." He laughed, and the rough sound swam through her head as she bounced along on his shoulder.

She wanted to scream for help, cry out for Dane. But her throat wouldn't work. Breed for the disgusting man? She would die first.

Her last thought before darkness ate her up was, *Magon save me. What have I done?*

* * * * *

Minilos grinned widely. "She is a fiery one, no? They say she looked as timid and cool as a virgin when you kissed her. But the way she faced the dragon, she must be hot and tasty." Minilos rubbed his hands together.

Searing jealousy screamed through Dane's mind, and he growled, "Don't ever speak of her in that way again." Heated anger spilled through Dane. He pointed at Minilos. "She's mine."

Minilos' stunned expression turned to understanding. "Ah, I get it now. Sorry, my friend. She's to be your mate for real, isn't she?"

Trembling inside with a bizarre rage, Dane slammed back the rest of his drink and didn't answer the question.

"Be careful, Dane. You'll scare the poor girl with that look. You can't have her for your mate if she refuses you sexually."

Once more Dane gave his friend a hostile look. "Thank you. I know that."

If it had been any other woman they talked about, Dane easily could have spilled to his friend the details of the seduction. He wouldn't have felt embarrassed to tell Minilos how Keteria had screamed in orgasm when he'd tasted her sweet pussy with his tongue or used his fingers to fuck her tight channel.

Telling his old friend how beautiful she'd been while ecstasy rushed through her body –

No.

It did not feel right.

"If you don't mate with her within a few days, she'll refuse you forever."

"I know that," Dane gritted out between his teeth.

"But you can't frighten her into doing it –"

"I know, damn it." He leaned over until he was in Minilos' face. "You think I'd even dream of hurting her in any way?" Dane jammed one hand through his hair. "Maybe she isn't really my mate. Perhaps it's just been too long since I had a woman."

Minilos' eyes appeared calm and his gaze solid with understanding. "A Daryk One isn't like everyone else in Dragonia. You've trained all your life to recognize evil, brigands and other outlaws. To sense when you're needed. You can scent your mate, but more than that, you can feel her in your soul."

"Yeah. Thanks for the advice. When was the last time you even lay with a woman?" Dane asked.

Over the din of the hornpipe, Minilos' eyes shined with memory. "Not since old Tessala left me. You know, I don't understand this mate thing."

"Join the crowd."

"Then why did you say she is yours? No man says that unless –"

"Shut up and let us talk business."

No, Minilos wouldn't understand. There were a few Daryk Ones, like Minilos, who never found a woman they connected with on a level this profound. They had sex, they may even have sincere affection with a woman, but nothing as life-altering and gut-wrenching as the burn that seemed to eat away at Dane's control. Maybe he did need to find a woman to slake his lust before he seduced pretty Keteria. Before he understood what to do with her. Suddenly, the thought of taking another woman...any woman other than Keteria felt repugnant. Almost nauseating.

Ah, hells.

Dane shoved away his troubled feelings and concentrated on the task at hand. Dane asked Minilos to stay mum, demanding the man speak of Ketera's need to return to Magonia to no one. When Minilos asked why she would want to go into that forsaken desert land, Dane explained that her father had become a prisoner based on opposing beliefs. Minilos took his word and said he'd make the arrangements for them to sail in two days.

Dane's eyes narrowed as he searched the crowd for Ketera, a crawling suspicion inside him. "Where is Ketera? It shouldn't have taken her that long."

He left the table without another word to Minilos, his heartbeat pounding, anger and worry mixed together. If the little wench dared leave without him—

She couldn't have. A woman, once mated, would always feel a staggering pull toward her man. If she was young and hadn't been bedded by her mate, the pull should be so harsh she couldn't leave the building without him.

Unless, because she was Magonian, the pull wasn't harsh. Wasn't there at all.

What if he was the one ensnared?

He stormed toward the back area, pushing past a few patrons before he crashed through the opening to the ladies' facility. "Ketera!"

No sign of her. Damn the little wench to the high seas and the hells.

Full-blown fury was matched only by the skewering loathing he had for himself for not realizing Ketera planned to run yet again. Draconus, he'd been a lust-filled fool. Somewhere inside another horrible feeling gathered. He longed for her still, he ached for her with a soul-binding desire that sealed his fate.

"Dane?" A commanding male voice alerted Dane someone was behind him. Again he whirled, dirk at hand.

Anger and caution flooded him as he recognized fellow Daryk One Rayder Tyrus. Rayder strode toward him. He hadn't seen nor spoken to Rayder in the year the man had turned rogue. The same height as Dane, Rayder was lean but still powerful. His dark hair fell around his shoulders, always looking messy. A few days of beard lent a piratical appearance to his face. Dane's defenses came up. Rayder had once been his friend. Now he was in league with Drakus and a slave trader himself. What the hells was he doing here? Dane kept his hand on his dagger, muscles tensed.

"Minilos says you've got trouble," Rayder said. "Can I help?"

"Maybe I should just kill you now and have done with it." Dane glared. "Are you here to spy for Drakus?"

Rayder grunted. "I'm not in Drakus' camp for war but for money. I wouldn't fight you."

"You're a fuckin' traitor to your people. Never would have thought you could do it, Rayder." Dane growled. "Bah, I don't have time for this. I need to find my woman."

Rayder's dark brows went upward. "You got woman dilemmas again?"

"Yep. And this time she's a handful."

Rayder smiled, a hint of worry in his eyes. "Sounds like the best kind of trouble. Found some trouble of my own just the other day when I took the *Beast* to sea during the storm." Before Dane could reply, Rayder continued. "Rescued a woman from the sea."

Dane's head snapped around as he gave his fellow warrior a hard stare. "Did she say she was from Magonia?"

Rayder's mouth tightened to a hard line, his eyes as dark as the eyes of the deadly rarelian reptile. "How did —"

"Never mind. It's a long story." Dane's mind whirled as he headed back to the main room, Rayder in tow.

Rayder jogged after him. "How did you know she was from Magonia?"

"Can't talk now. It's complicated."

Rayder called out as Dane left the building. "It always is."

Dane charged from the tavern into the night, dagger in hand and sword at his waist, his heart pounding with a fear he didn't remember feeling before this night. Before he'd met his sprite.

Ketera was his mate, whether he liked it or not. He would find her, and she would be his.

Now Dane knew, without a doubt, he was in a world of trouble.

Chapter Five

Dane glanced this way and that, looking through the darkness in hopes of seeing Ketera anywhere. His throat about closed at the thought of her alone in the dark alleyways and dusty streets of the Grinnald township. Stupid girl. What had she been thinking?

Girl. No, she was not a girl, but a full grown young woman with fire in her heart and eyes, and enough power over him to twist his gut into a thousand knots at the thought of anything happening to her.

A moment later Rayder's tall form jogged toward him, and Dane cursed. "Dragon dung. What are you doing here? I told you I would take care of this."

"Minilos explained you're looking for your mate and might need assistance. If she's been grabbed by slavers, I might be able to help." Rayder held his hands out in supplication. "Besides I know how the drek think. For old times' sake, let me help."

Placing his hands on his hips, Dane ground out his words. "Right now I don't have the fucking time to deal with you. But I swear to Draconus if you've ordered her kidnapping our old friendship won't mean dragon dung. I'll cut your heart out."

The Daryk One didn't look fazed. "Fair enough."

That's when Dane saw a strip of cloth from the long-sleeved tunic she'd worn to the tavern lying near an alleyway. He lunged for the evidence and his stomach dropped.

"Fuck." Dane glared at Rayder. "She's been taken. She hasn't run away."

Rayder didn't seem disconcerted by his old friend's deadly glare. "It may not be slavers, but we need to hurry." He clapped Dane on the back. "Don't worry, we'll find her."

"Shut up." Dane started running. "We don't have any time to lose."

"Never thought you'd go under, Dane."

"What the hells are you talking about?"

"You know what I speak of." Rayder's voice held sarcasm. "Finding a mate, much less falling for one."

Dane gritted words through his teeth, not wanting to admit anything out loud. "I'm watching after an innocent woman."

"You honestly expect me to believe that? A Daryk One doesn't go after a woman unless he's mated to her."

"Maybe you don't." Dane wanted to kick his fellow warrior's ass as they checked each alleyway, used Daryk Warrior tracking skills. "Did you forget you're a Daryk

One? Sworn to protect the innocent and helpless against harm? Or have you been a fucking slave trader for so long you don't remember your roots?"

Dane didn't see the man's reaction, but heard the strong grunt of derision. "You don't know shite about what I've done for the last year."

Sharp anger rose inside Dane, shoving aside his worry for one increment. "I know that you left the Daryk Ones and haven't been seen since. We thought you'd perished. Then rumors abounded that you're a pirate and slave trader on the *Beast*."

Rayder didn't confirm or deny. "Shall we put that aside for now? Time is wasting."

Despite his vow to remain calm, for the first time in his thirty years, Dane didn't know how to feel other than an all-consuming desire to find Ketera.

"I swear to the god, if she's been hurt..." His throat went tight, the rage growing.

"I have a plan. When we find who has taken her, we'll need to make them think you and I are true enemies."

"We aren't?"

Rayder shrugged, a smile touching his lips. "Not this day. If I tell you that I'm going to fight you for her, play along. We'll use it as a distraction."

Dane narrowed his eyes. "Don't get any ideas about taking her for real."

Rayder nodded. "I wouldn't dare. Rest easy. We'll find her, old friend. We'll find her."

* * * * *

"There now, little girl, wake up."

The gravelly voice made her want to burrow under the covers. Peeved and aching in every joint, she opened her eyes. She wasn't under covers and she trembled with cold. Her head ached.

And found her wrists and ankles tied to a bed. She glanced around quickly, squinting into the semidark room lit only by a white pillar candle in one corner. Shadows danced off the stone walls. Impressions started to bombard her foggy mind. Dampness. Cold. An eerie feeling she couldn't place and didn't want to understand. Sequestered in a small room, Ketera felt swallowed by the stone walls, the drooping blood-red drapes on two medium-sized windows near one side of the room. Where was she? Her head throbbed with questions, the pounding in her temples only drowned by the ache in her limbs, neck and back. What was she doing here?

For a moment she panicked, uncertain how she came to be a prisoner. Uncertain of her name. Then she remembered and panic surged higher.

I'm Ketera. Ketera Aldrancos.

Magon, she'd made a mess of things leaving the tavern even for a moment. Movement to her left made her flinch. She realized a shadow in a chair near the door

wasn't a shadow at all, but the bulk of a man in a cloak. Her heartbeat thumped loudly in her ears.

"There you are, girly."

The tall man threw off his cloak and it fell on the floor. Now that he'd taken off the cloak, she could see the breastplate over his black tunic. The marks looked similar to the pirate slaver who'd tried to snatch her off the beach. His tunic was long enough to reach to his knees. Black boots similar to Dane's reached to his mid-calves. His black hair was tied back in a dark, thin queue, his hairline receding. The man's face matched his muscles. Everything seemed to bulge. His big nose, his ears.

He stood, revealing a muscle-bound frame. He walked toward her. "Welcome to my abode, my dear."

She tried to talk, but her throat was so dry it came out as a croak. "Let me go."

He laughed, a booming sound. "Right, my dear. Let you go? Why would I take you just to release you?"

"Because my mate will come for me. And I guarantee he'll be furious."

She said the words with conviction, half sure that Dane might not look for her. Perhaps he was even happy to be rid of her. Even as she hoped he might consider looking for her, how would he ever find her?

No. She needed to get herself out of this mess. She tested the bonds on her wrists and ankles. Not as tight as she'd expect. The ropes kept her firmly in place though, and getting free wouldn't be easy.

The man sat on the right side of the bed. "What's your name, little girl?"

"Ketera Aldrancos."

"And this mate who will come for you? Give me his name, so I will know his kind before I kill him."

Fear rose inside her like a wave. Though Dane was a large man, this guy was equally as big, perhaps larger. "Never fear. I am powerless to hurt him. Until he tries to rescue you."

She squirmed inside. Could this man hurt Dane? She doubted it. "My mate slayed a dragon outside Grimnald Castle. I doubt you could do as well."

"Ah. I heard of such a man. A man powerful enough to slay a dragon must be a Daryk One. Tell me his name or I shall have a taste of you before I sell you."

Fear spiked, but she forced it back. "Sell me? You're a slave trader."

"Exactly. Now tell me his name."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Tell me." Anger filled his voice as he leaned toward her.

Bulbous and ugly, his nose seemed huge. His eyes were flaming red, and she shrank back against the bed. By the god Magon. Those eyes.

"Who are you?" she asked, tugging against the bonds.

"Bantu Warrens of the Drakus clan."

She wanted to scream at the piece of filth. "You snatch women off the streets to sell into slavery?"

"Slaves for sex mainly." His eyes faded from red to solid black. Black seemed almost more menacing than the uncanny red.

Magon help her. Time to steer the conversation away. "Why are your eyes sometimes red?"

She knew the answer, but maybe if she kept him talking she'd find a way to escape. He leaned over her, his hand touching the bed on the opposite side of her waist. She held her breath.

"You are very strange, young lady. So innocent."

Innocent? She hated that word, didn't like that purity was so stained on this continent. "What is wrong with that?"

His big shoulders shrugged. "Nothing. It's quite unusual. I suppose you're a virgin."

She gritted her teeth. "What is it to you?"

His smiled, and his spotted teeth made her stomach roll. "Virgins sell well. I will check to make sure of course."

With a jolt, she remembered Dane's fingers inside her and how he'd pressed deep. Dane hadn't taken her, but perhaps his touch had done the deed. A flush filled her cheeks. "I'm not a virgin anymore. My mate has seen to that."

His dark, slashing eyebrows went up. "Has he? Still, it is up to me to test all of my women before they are sold."

Her heart slammed in her chest at the thought of this man taking her virginity, of using her. She couldn't hold back a shiver.

"Please just let me go and I won't tell my mate what happened and he won't kill you."

He grunted and said nothing. Perhaps she'd continue to play ignorant. Throw the man off guard.

"This Drakus," she said, determined to make this man think she had no wits at all. "Why is he taking women for slaves?"

Bantu sighed. "You truly are a dimwitted girl, aren't you?" He scoffed. "Everyone has heard of Drakus. Where have your parents hidden you? In the cupboard? Very well. Drakus wishes to bring peace to our land. To build our world by taking Magonian women and breeding with them."

Hearing this from a slave trader chilled her blood. Dane's description of Drakus' plan felt more real to her. She knew what she had to say. "I'm not Magonian. I cannot help you."

He leaned over her, breath putrid, smile evil, his eyes glowing red once more. "Maybe you are. Maybe you are not. I don't give a shite. You're mine for tonight. If Drakus wants you after that, so be it. I can always find another wench, Magonian or Dragonian."

She couldn't help her reaction as she practically hissed at him. "That will never happen because my mate is going to come for me."

Oh god, if he only would. Did he think she'd run away? Would he just assume she had and not think to look for her?

He laughed, and once more his laugh echoed in the chamber. "Tell me who your mate is."

She was tired of playing with Bantu. "Dane Charger."

Bantu's eyes widened, but she saw no fear with their dark depths. "A formidable foe. But not unbeatable. You shouldn't feel so much confidence in him, little girl." He scratched his stubbled chin. "Then again, a Daryk One's mate is precious to him. He won't be able to resist the need for you."

She doubted his assertion—after all, Dane saw her as property to seduce. To trifle with. Emotions ran deep within him. She'd seen that.

She decided to switch tactics. "Draconus cannot find what you do admirable. Are you not worried about repercussions from the god?"

He laughed again. "You jest, little lady. I don't believe in Draconus. Few people in Dragonia do. Are you religious?"

She almost said no. "Yes. Very."

He stared at her, eyes narrowed, and sudden fear threatened to overcome her bravado. He smiled. "Dane Charger. Do you know his past, Ketera?"

She swallowed. "Of course."

He grunted then left the bed. He crossed to the window, separating the thick curtain to look outside. "Tell me his past."

She drew in a slow, tortured breath. "Why?"

"Where was he born?"

"He didn't tell me." Lying was coming very easily to her now.

"Who is his family?"

"What?"

"Drakus' father kidnapped a woman from Magonia who had a child by him. That child turned out to be Drakus. That same woman escaped Drakus' father and was rescued by Dane's father."

She swallowed hard. "And?"

Bantu turned back to her. "Dane and Drakus are half brothers."

Shocked, she wondered if Dane already knew this.

He returned to the bed, his eyes glittering. "Enough of this other talk! A good fuck is a good fuck."

Repelled by his rough talk, she wanted to turn the talk away from coupling but couldn't think of another subject. "You Dragonians think of nothing but..." She could say it if she tried. "Fucking."

He laughed, throwing his head back with mirth. "The god! You are a strange woman. It's a wonder Charger has the least interest in you. He's always liked lusty, bawdy women."

Hot fury spread inside her, a feeling that overwhelmed common sense. She didn't want to think about Dane in another woman's arms. Having relations with her...fucking, as it was called. No, she didn't like that at all.

"Now that I know you're Charger's woman, I will deliver you to Drakus. He'll take great pleasure in breaking in Dane Charger's woman."

Defiance burned in her gut. "Why?"

Bantu's grin, dirty teeth and all, sent revulsion curling in her stomach. "Because he has special business with the man."

Before she could retort, the hut door burst open and banged against the wall.

Chapter Six

Ketera flinched as two large men leapt through the door. Bantu drew a dagger from his waist and jumped onto the bed. He held a blade to her throat. She gasped in genuine surprise and fear. Her terror changed into stark relief.

Dane had come for her.

Dane stood a few feet in the doorway, his gaze feral red, anger clear in the set of his mouth. Instead of using his dagger, he'd drawn his sword. The same one he'd used to kill the dragon. Behind him stood a man almost as tall as Dane, eyes equally red, the handsome lines of his face grim and assuring that he'd come to wreak havoc. He wore a sleeveless vest decorated with silver metal motifs depicting savage beasts she'd never seen. He wore belted brown leather trousers that hugged his body with enough love to hint at powerful thighs and calves. The man's body bunched with lethal tension. She tore her attention away from him to Dane.

Dane caught her gaze in his, and for a few seconds the fire left his eyes. Aggression vanished and reassuring warmth replaced it. For a few seconds she felt safe despite the fact Bantu had her tied to a bed and a knife at her throat.

Dane's eyes blazed red again, and he practically growled the words, "Get away from her. Now."

"Best do what he says," Dane's companion said with a rumbling deep voice that held hints of smoke and sinful nights. "You don't want to cross him, and I'm afraid you're already in bad shape. Charger is the most vicious bastard I know." He shoved one hand through thick, wavy black hair that fell to just the top of his shoulders. His nonchalance took her off guard. "Charger is deadly."

"Don't listen to him," Dane said with a sneer. "Rayder Tyrus is far more dangerous."

Bantu snickered. "Rayder Tyrus. I've heard of you. Big, bad Daryk One who became a slave trader."

Slave trader? Dane was with a slave trader?

The man called Rayder scrubbed at his stubbled jawline. It looked as if he hadn't shaved for days, but it only made him more handsome.

"I'll take her off your hands," Rayder said to Bantu."

When Dane didn't protest, a chill spread all up and down Ketera's body. Uncertainty turned her stomach. Then she saw the quick smile that passed between Dane and Rayder. Perhaps Rayder and Dane were playing at being enemies? She could only hope so.

"I ain't giving her up to anyone." Bantu's sneering answer growled over her head. "She's mine until I turn her over to Drakus."

"You will not survive that long." Rayder's voice became deeper, a hint of anger around the calmness.

"I'd rather see you fight for her," Bantu said. "Whoever survives will fight me for her. The winner takes the spoils."

By the god, they are fighting over me as if I were a piece of meat.

"Best you let her go, mate," Dane's companion-at-arms said. "My friend has a bloodlust upon him."

Bantu laughed. "It will make the fight all the more sweet."

Dane shifted, and Bantu brought the knife nearer to her throat. Ketera gulped in a breath as Bantu pressed closer. "Stay back or I'll cut her."

"You know what we can do to you, man." Dane's voice held pure poison, as gravely as rocks rolling together. "You work for a Daryk One. You've seen his worst."

Bantu grunted. "What of it? She's mine now."

"I want her back. And neither of you will touch her." Dane's hushed voice defied either man to take ownership of her.

A strange relief passed over Ketera. Dane did care. He would get her out of this jam. At the same time, part of her chafed at the idea she hadn't thought of a way to escape this mess herself.

Rayder turned to Dane, his casualness cut in half by that red eye glow. "Fight me for her."

Oh my Magon.

Dane glared at Rayder, body tight, muscle tension obvious. To Ketera's amazed eyes, they took their attention off Bantu.

"Are you insane?" Dane asked his so-called friend.

Low laughter echoed from Rayder's throat. "Some say so."

"Bloody well get on with it," Bantu said.

With a swiftness that made her mind spin, Dane and Rayder broke into battle. Swords clashed, the harsh clang ringing in her ears. Bantu's laughter echoed. She flinched, squirming as she twisted in her bonds. The knife at her throat scratched her, and she cried out at the slight pain. Bantu drew the knife back from her neck, intent on the battle. The rope around her left ankle loosened. Yes! Perhaps if she just worked at it harder...

The Daryk Ones twisted, moved with a speed she'd noted while watching Dane kill the dragon back at Grimnald Castle. She'd never seen a man move so quickly on Magonia and wondered what magic worked upon these warriors.

Sweat beaded on their foreheads, muscles bulging as they shifted on their feet. Fear rose so high in her she thought she might strangle. She glanced at Bantu. He wasn't

paying the least attention to her, an eager smile on his face. An erection pressed against his trousers. Her stomach roiled.

Anger made her wrench at her ties and suddenly her feet were free. Bantu jumped and pinned her to the bed. She screamed, the sound more a yell of defiance than fear. She kicked out, caught him straight in the balls with her foot. Bantu screamed, fell off the bed and writhed. Satisfaction blended with her fear.

"Take that you...you—!" She didn't know any really excellent curses, so she added one she'd used before. "Bastard!"

Dane and Rayder's blades came together. A grunt came from the both of them as they surged toward the bed. Her eyes widened. Both men turned toward Bantu. Dane sprang forward, his motion a blur. A second later Bantu yelled as the sword found its mark into his chest. A growl issued from Dane's throat.

"Bastard of a dillianas!" Dane stood over Bantu with a look so hateful that Ketera almost cringed.

"Dillianas?" Her voice rasped in her own ears.

"Never mind." Dane turned toward her, the red in his eyes increasing. "It's a creature we eat on Dragonia."

She glanced at both Daryk Ones and realized something that startled her to the core. They had erections. Their cocks pushed hard and full against their breeches. Her mouth opened as she stared at Rayder's long length. Startled, she had no words.

Rayder chuckled. "Charger, I take it you haven't explained to Ketera what happens to Daryk Ones after a fight or battle?"

Dane glanced at Rayder. "She's heard of battle lust."

Rayder grunted. "Perhaps she doesn't understand what it means exactly."

Dane sent a glare toward the slave trader. "Shut up."

Rayder only laughed. "A fine shot, my lady." Rayder smiled at her, and the charm in that grin completely took her off guard. "I think even if Dane hadn't insisted on rescuing you, you would have killed him yourself."

"Never," she said with defiance, trying not to glance at his cock. "Murder is a sin."

"I never murder anyone. Anyone I kill deserves it," Rayder said as he reached for her hand and kissed the back of it.

A rush of heat filled her face. No matter that she found Dane beyond attractive. Rayder was too. And that worried her. After all, if he was a slave trader, he was scum.

Dane threw a glare at Rayder. "Release her."

Rayder let her go and smiled. "As you wish, old friend."

Ketera looked down at Bantu. "Is he dead?"

Dane nodded. "Dead."

She shivered uncontrollably, mixed emotions filling her. Anger topped the list, and she wanted to scream at Bantu for terrorizing her. One glance at Bantu's motionless

body assured her she wouldn't have to worry. The sword stayed in his chest. She looked away quickly.

She rubbed her wrists and for the first time she took stock of Dane's expression. Fierce anger still boiled in his eyes. Perhaps some of that ire was directed at her and not at the slaver who'd stolen her.

Rayder headed for the door. "I'll leave you to it. I'll get the magistrate to clean up the mess."

"Will you get into trouble?" she asked them both.

Rayder turned back for a moment. "Never, my lady. We are Daryk Ones, protecting the innocent. We can do no wrong."

Dane made a sound of contempt. "You are a bloody slave trader. The magistrate will arrest you."

Rayder's smile was carefree. "I think not. I trust you'll be well, Ketera. See you again soon, Charger."

Dane snorted. "Not likely."

Rayder's gaze, no longer red, didn't look the least perturbed by Dane's tone.

"Wait." Ketera had to know something. "If you're a slave trader, then maybe..." She swallowed hard. "Two of my friends were on the same ship with me. A passenger ship named the *Hydrasoseles* sank after we were hit by a huge wave. I think I was the only survivor, but perhaps you know of any people picked up from the water or the beach. Their names are Xandra Shorenus and Mia Griffi."

Rayder's eyes flickered. Hands on hips, he scanned them both for a long moment. "Xandra Shorenus is on my ship. I was on the way back to the ship when I stopped at Minilos' tavern for food."

Relief spilled through her. She covered her cheeks with her palms. "Oh Magon. That is such good news. Is she...is she all right?"

Rayder's eyes held doubt and a few other emotions Ketera couldn't read. "She is well enough. I will tell her you inquired after her health."

"You rescued her?" Dane asked. "Or is she now your slave?"

Rayder smiled, and the stubble made him look more piratical than ever. "It is a matter of opinion."

Worry returned to Ketera. "If you dare harm her —"

"What will you do?" Rayder asked as he moved toward the door again. "You are not in a position to give orders, my lady. On the other hand, perhaps I should be frightened. After seeing how you took down Bantu, I think you are a formidable foe."

"Rayder..." Dane swallowed hard, as if having difficulty with his next words. "Thank you for helping me rescue her."

Rayder nodded. "Be well, Charger. Take care of your mate."

With that, Rayder departed and closed the door behind him.

She shook her head, unable to imagine being bonded to this man permanently. "I'm not your mate."

"Damn it, Ketera," he said with a growl, his expression thunderous. "Don't you understand? If anything had happened to you, I..." He drifted off, his mouth working but nothing coming out.

"What?" she finally asked.

"Never mind." He took a huge breath then let it out with a shudder. "What in the four levels of hell did you think you were doing leaving the tavern?" Dane placed his hands on his hips and glared.

Unhappy, she slid off the right side of the bed so she wouldn't step on Bantu. "I would thank you for the rescue, but your attitude—"

"Attitude?" He stalked around the bed and stood over her. "Do you realize how close you came to being beaten and raped or worse?"

She started to walk toward the door, unwilling to put up with his overbearing stance.

He came after her, moving in a quick blur that caused her to gasp in surprise. He clasped her forearm gently and turned her around. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from you. Your violence appalls me, you're friends with a slave trader, and now you're berating me. I do not intend to take this treatment." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not staying in this room with a...a dead man."

He kept his grip on her arm. "You used violence too."

She sniffed. "Only to save my life."

Contempt streaked across his features. "Uh-huh. So violence is all right as long as you don't kill?"

He stopped her in her tracks. She swallowed a bitter pill. "I've never had to defend myself from a man until I came to this Magon-forsaken continent."

"For what it's worth, you did well for a sprite."

She didn't feel like taking compliments. She felt ill-used and exhausted. "Let me go."

He frowned. "You'd rather subject yourself to the same dangers you just encountered than take my protection, wouldn't you? I thought you were more intelligent."

Suddenly fury rose inside her as she'd never experienced before. She poked Dane in the breastplate. "For your information, I only stepped out of the tavern for a moment to get a breath of fresh air. I didn't think Bantu was going to just pop out of the shadows and snatch me. And I'm not going anywhere with a man who kills and consorts with slave traders—"

"What would you have me do?" He grabbed both her shoulders and held them in a strong grip. "Did you just want me to forget you? To let this man take you to rape,

dishonor and kill you? You'd rather be with that scum-sucking bastard than take your chances with me? As for slave traders, Rayder used to be one of my best friends."

She knew he spoke the truth, but twenty-five years of her life she'd lived in a world where murder never happened. Where people did not kidnap or rape or otherwise harm each other physically. Mentally...well, no one had discovered how to prevent that yet. Sometimes she thought that was worse.

"Used to be your friend?" she asked, brushing hair back from her face.

"It's a long story. One we don't have time for now." He rubbed her shoulders. "Sprite, we had to do it. Rayder and I planned what we'd do when we came in here. We knew the only way to take you from a slave trader was to kill him. It took a hell of a lot to find you." He glanced over at the bed toward Bantu's body. "As it is, the only way we located you this quickly was Rayder's tracking skills." When she kept quiet, tears backing up in her throat, he said, "We didn't have a choice."

"How could you know that? He could have given himself up."

Dane released her, closed his eyes for a moment, and sighed. "No, he wouldn't have."

He took her arm again. "Come on. We'll stay the night at Scullidig Inn."

"We can't go back to the castle?"

He opened the door and looked both ways. "It's too long a walk after what you've been through."

Though she wanted to balk, she was tired, feeling bruised and rattled. Whether she considered herself tough or not, she wasn't used to this.

They left the building and she realized Bantu had housed her in a small, crude stone and thatch hut. She couldn't see well, but the moon hung over the land, bright and beautiful. Once more Dane's eyes glowed red. All around her the night was alive. Strange creatures hooted in the dark. The twitters and hisses and buzzing of insects came from all directions. The humidity lay heavy upon them, perhaps more so than at the castle. Surrounding the clearing, she saw the outline of huge trees swaying in a slight breeze.

"Is this the...jungle?" she asked, half in awe and half afraid.

"Yes."

"Can you see in the dark?" she asked as he hauled her along by the arm.

"Yes. All Dragonians can. Our eyes adjust to whatever light there is."

She dared to peer straight into his eyes as he stopped for a second and returned her perusal. His eyes had softened, the red glow not so fierce, not as intimidating as before.

"The texts didn't tell me that," she said.

He grunted. "Could be your precious texts are wrong about a lot of things."

"No they can't be."

He made one of those guttural sounds that seemed unique to him. "Why would you ever think a few texts could tell you everything you need to know about a people?"

He was right. Damn him, he was right. She swallowed her pride. "Of course not. Do the Dragonians know everything about the Magonians?"

"Some think they do. I've never assumed I know everything about Magonians. It doesn't make any sense to malign a group of people based on rumor."

What he said made sense, even if part of her railed against it. Shame leaked around her defenses. "I'm sorry, Dane. I...my father taught me so much about prejudice and how wrong it was, and when we found the texts and realized the scribes lied to us about so much..." She cleared her throat. "I don't want to be one of those people who maligns someone else. But I've spent all my life in a culture that tries to control what others think."

She couldn't see his face in the dark, but his grip on her arm loosened. "It's all right."

His voice didn't sound as if he thought it was all right.

"Can we not talk about this right now?" he asked. "Whatever you do, do not try to escape. I could find you again, but it would take awhile. There are millions of poisonous insects and other creatures in the Tarrian jungle. You would not last the night out here alone. Plus, there are dragon lairs nearby."

Dragons? By the god, she didn't want to run into one of them anytime soon.

Anxiety threatened along with perturbation that he had brushed aside her apology, but she shoved it to the back of her mind as hard as she could. He must have felt her fear because he transferred his grip to her hand. "I'll protect you, but you must listen to everything I say and do everything I say without question."

"Are you immune to poison?"

"Yes. That is one of the reasons why I was trained as a Daryk One. I am stronger than the average man and more intelligent. I am immune to the poison."

"But what if I am bitten or stung by something poisonous?"

He paused long enough to stare down at her with those hypnotic red eyes, eyes as dangerous as an animal's. "My kiss will protect you. If you feel weak at any point on our journey, you must tell me."

Astonished, she asked, "Are you making this up to have an excuse to kiss me?"

"Hardly. It's one of the ways a Daryk One protects his mate. His kiss transfers his immunity, but only to his true mate."

"Permanently?"

"No. I'd have to kiss you each time you were bitten or stung."

Her face heated as she remembered their intimate encounters. "That means we would need to be with each other almost all the time."

"Your little nose is curling up. Do you hate the idea so much?"

"Of course. I don't wish to be restricted."

He sighed and glanced up at the dark sky. "Ketera, it isn't restriction. It's protection. Don't be daft. In fact," he said as he swung them around and drew her into his arms, "I will kiss you now."

"No—"

His lips took hers with ravenous attention, a hunger that swirled her upward into instant desire. Between her legs a deep, aching want started, one that floored her with intensity. How could this happen so quickly, so fast unless she was his true mate? By the god, she didn't want to be but his heat destroyed her and put her back together again. His tongue delved into her mouth as his hands cupped her ass and squeezed. He lifted her, settling his cloth-clad erection against her pussy and pressing. Her legs went around his hips automatically. She groaned into his mouth as he moved his hips slowly, the slightest rotation to keep his cock rubbing along her sensitive tissues. A rush of dampness between her legs startled her. Magon, she wanted him.

Wanted what?

Yes, she'd read about how people mated, but she still felt she didn't understand what honestly happened. From illustrations in the texts, she realized a man's erection entered a woman. Still, it seemed odd. How could a man inserting his cock into her make her feel pleasure?

Before she could respond much more, he eased his mouth from hers and lowered her to the ground. Her entire body seemed to throb with unresolved tension.

Dane's breath puffed in and out. "Draconus. You are ripe for my taking."

Without another word, he pulled her along again.

Chastened, she clammed up and allowed him to lead her. Right now she was too tired to protest, her mind beginning to feel foggy, her steps plodding. As they pressed on, he used his sword to cut a path through the jungle. They continued on for what seemed an hour before they broke into another clearing. The night was quiet except for jungle sounds—several large stone buildings centered around a courtyard. A few huts lined the outskirts.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Minor village. I know the man who owns Scullidig Inn. We'll be safe there."

He slipped his arm around her for a moment then drew his sword. She tensed under his touch. "Is this town dangerous?"

"Everywhere is dangerous. This world is violent but beautiful. Savage but lush. Everything is a contradiction."

"I'll say."

It was almost as if he described himself. This man was definitely a part of his world, a part of what he'd described. Perhaps that explained why he frightened her and yet made her feel so protected. It made no sense.

Scullidig Inn's sign creaked as it moved back and forth in a sudden strong wind. The wind was cold, an unusual feeling after such humid heat. At two stories tall, the inn dominated the other buildings. Made of stone and wood, the building nevertheless had a strange, lopsided look, as if it had been made inch by inch without benefit of a good design. At the same time the disorganized appearance gave it a coziness that screamed safe haven. She hoped so.

Dane sheathed his sword, releasing her long enough to open the front door. It squeaked loudly, and she winced. The downstairs was rough, with a tavern area directly to the left where several loud male customers drank and laughed. Lamps and torches here and there assured the place was brightly illuminated. The other patrons didn't pay attention to either Dane or herself. To the left was a sitting area with benches and tables. Directly ahead of them was the staircase. From behind the staircase came a large man wrapped in a vest made of rough, dark material, the armholes circled by some type of fur. His trousers seemed to be made of the same material. His bushy, frizzy blond hair was cut short, and he wore an equally untamed-looking long beard.

The man smiled brightly, welcome true in his blue eyes, and he walked toward them. "Damn. Is that you, Dane Charger?"

"Scullidig." Dane shook the man's hand. "Been awhile. See you haven't fixed that squeaky door yet."

The man snorted. "Why would I do that? No other way to hear when someone's coming inside. And who is this fine woman?"

"My mate." Dane said the words with complete assurance, and she almost contradicted him. Instead she kept her mouth shut. She was too tired to argue right now. "Ketera Aldrancos."

"Pleased to meet you, my lady." Scullidig extended his hand and she shook it.

"Honored to meet you...Scullidig."

The big man, who stood even taller than Dane, laughed. "It's Manny Scullidig, but don't tell anyone."

Dane smiled. "Yeah, his mama obviously didn't like him."

She lifted one eyebrow, her sense of humor still intact. "Manny is a perfectly nice name."

The men laughed softly.

Scullidig's eyes narrowed. "Here now, she's been cut." The man's blond brows shot up and he gave Dane a narrow look. "How did that happen?"

Dane slipped his arms around her shoulders. "I just got her back from a slave trader. He hurt her."

A glance at the men said they understood each other.

"By Draconus." Scullidig looked genuinely concerned. "Well then, you must be tired and hungry. Now, what will it be? Food or bed or both?"

"Are you hungry?" Dane asked Ketera.

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"Well I'm hungrier than a mooseswine." Dane kept his arm around her. "Could one of the wenches bring us a platter of food right away?" He tossed coins to his friend. "Will this be sufficient?"

Scullidig gave his money back. "Your coin is no good in here, friend. Keep it."

"But —"

"No good." The blond man held his hand up. "No good." He handed Dane a key. "Take room eight. It's yours for as many nights as you need. Winderia will bring your food immediately."

That's when Ketera realized that she'd have to spend a night with Dane again. A man who'd killed for her, whose sexual prowess demanded gratification and whose eyes blazed sudden red. She knew instinctively what he'd want, and that scared her to bits.

"Scullidig?" she asked. "I'll need my own room."

Chapter Seven

Scullidig and Dane stared at her as if she'd gone mad.

She straightened her spine, which wanted to sag. "What is wrong?"

Scullidig started to speak, but Dane threw him a perturbed look. "Well, um, my lady..."

"Oh." She put her hands on her hips. "You think because I'm his so-called mate I'm not interested in my own room?"

The blond man's brusque attitude came to a complete halt, his mouth open.

Dane took her arm. "One room."

He started to march her upstairs, but she pulled away. "Two rooms."

Scullidig's gaze danced from Ketera to Dane rapidly, as if assessing who would prove the least dangerous when he inevitably crossed one of them. "Sorry, my lady. There's only one room left."

With that, the innkeeper turned on his heel and disappeared into the common room.

All her gratitude slid away in an uncharacteristic desire to fight Dane all the way. She kept her voice low as she hissed out, "Why are you doing this? I need my own room."

Dane's jaw muscles worked, and she could practically hear his teeth grinding down to nubs. "You've never had your own room. Every man in the inn took a look at you when you walked in here."

She took a defiant stance, placing her hands on her hips. "That is preposterous. They didn't notice me at all."

"They did. You just didn't see it. You don't seem to understand what a precious commodity you are to Dragonian men. And I'd rather not kill any more men tonight."

Wearied and tired of fighting, she decided that tonight she would let it go. They both had to be exhausted. What chance was there he'd try to seduce her? Not much.

She sighed. "All right. Only for tonight."

Looking relieved, Dane led the way upstairs and located their room. Once inside, he locked the door. While she looked around at the small room, Dane pulled back one dingy red curtain and peered outside. The room had all the luxury she would have expected for a backwoods hole. The bed was clean enough, she supposed, but the tables were dusty and the wood flooring dented and scarred. Everything about the room, including the limp curtains covering two windows, gave an air of neglect.

Outside, she heard a loud roar, the sound both frightening and forlorn and she flinched. "What was that?"

"The cry of the carnalan bird. It's nothing to be afraid of. They sound awful, but that's their mating call. Let us hope he finds a mate soon tonight or there will be more of that raucous noise."

Dane turned toward her and placed the key in one trouser pocket. The gesture brought her gaze straight back to a very prominent feature. His erection pressed against his trousers, just as it had earlier. She'd felt its pressure when he'd kissed her in the jungle, and the red hovering like a flickering flame in his eyes refused to depart.

She gestured toward him. "Are you going to be like that all night?"

Plain confusion crossed his face. "Like what?"

She gestured again, her fingers pointing but not actually pointing. "That...display of manhood that seems to always be on...display with you."

Dane's furrowed brow cleared as he glanced down at his trousers and laughed. The sound purred out of his throat, a smooth laugh that made her tingle in places she didn't know could tingle.

"It won't disappear unless I get relief. One way or the other."

Curiosity overwhelmed her caution as she walked toward the bed. "One way or the other?"

With no regard for propriety, he lifted his tunic and revealed his trouser front. He started to unlace his placket.

She put her hand out. "No. I mean...this isn't..."

"Comfortable?" He sneered then let his tunic drop back over trousers. "Do not worry. I wasn't going to disrobe right now. I needed to lessen the pressure." He cupped his erection with one hand. "I shake with lust, Ketera. If I do not fuck you soon, I will take matters into my own hand. Literally. And unless you plan to hide your face, you'll have to watch."

Her face flamed so quickly and so hotly, she put her hands to her cheeks. "By the god, Dane. You are so...so..."

He slowly walked toward her. "Wretched?" His voice held the rasp of velvet over skin, so silky and deep it called to everything most primal within her. Her heartbeat thumped with apprehension and anticipation, a combination so foreign to Ketera she wondered if she'd gone mad. "A beast? Because you make me feel this way, Ketera. And there isn't any way to stop it. You aren't in Magonia anymore, Ketera. You can't live the way you did there, hiding from your real needs, your real emotions."

He came to a halt not six inches from her, his cock now tenting his shirt and making it even more impossible to ignore. She gulped. "All right then. I'm not so cruel as to leave you uncomfortable."

Those eyes flamed again, only this time the red was so hot she thought perhaps she was looking into Vendala, the star that warmed their planet and brought life each day. "Are you saying you'll come to my bed?"

"No. I'll cover my eyes and you can do what you must."

A low purr, this one so low she wondered if he imitated a creature on this supercontinent that she'd never heard or seen before. Whatever the sound, it sent a fire licking over her skin, made her eager and itchy for something. What, she didn't know. She dared take in his face, really looking for the first time all night. His mouth held disapproval in its carved lines, his stubbled jaw, intimidating and strong, his auburn hair tumbling over his shoulders in a thick cloud. Everything about him made her angry and yet filled with a yearning so strong it staggered her.

He reached below his tunic and freed his cock. She'd never seen his cock up close—she'd averted her eyes whenever the chance had presented itself before. This time she couldn't ignore it.

While she had nothing to compare his manhood to, it fascinated her. The thick root grew from a patch of dark red hair, its length and breadth intimidating. Veins pulsed under his skin, and she wondered shamefully at the texture. What would it feel like to the touch? Would it honestly be that hard? He wanted to put that into her? Before she could protest that he couldn't fit that instrument inside her body, he drew his hand up and down his cock.

"Winderia will be here soon..." She let her words drift off as enthrallment distracted her from a protest.

Ketera watched as he drew his hand up and down in a slow, pumping rhythm, his cock slipping in between his fingers in a steady movement. Between her thighs an answering thrum made her press her legs together. She ached in there. Ached where she knew he wanted to put this thick invader. Fascinated, she couldn't look away. If she did she might burn in this desire forever. She wanted to know, as much as it shamed her Magonian sensibilities, what it meant for him to take care of his needs. There was no time for a bath, for eating, only a primordial release.

A knock sounded on the door. A scant moment later the door sprang open. A young woman with dark, long hair entered holding a tray laden with food and drink and balanced upon what looked like fresh clothing. She stopped cold, her gaze catching on Dane's self-pleasuring.

To Ketera's mortification, she couldn't think of a thing to say and Dane didn't stop.

"Oh," the young woman said, her eyes wide. She smiled. "May I watch? I have never seen a Daryk One take his pleasure."

Dane stared straight ahead, his attention plastered on Ketera. It was as if he didn't know the young woman had entered the room.

"Get out." Ketera wouldn't allow this debauchery. "Leave the tray on the table."

As Dane's breath became more labored, a soft moan issuing through his throat, the woman placed the tray on the table near the window and the clothing on a chair. The

woman returned to watching Dane. Her eyes, a shade so bright and violent blue, showed undeniable lust. Just like that, this woman wanted Dane.

I'll be thrown to the god Magon first before this girl gets her hands on Dane.

She marched toward the woman, grabbed her arm and spun her around. "Get out."

The young woman stumbled out the open door as Ketera slammed it behind her. To prevent any other surprise entries, she shoved a chair under the doorknob. The twit had opened without knocking. Such appalling manners.

Then she heard Dane working hard, groans issuing from his mouth almost painful sounding. Was he truly in pain? She turned around and continued watching his efforts. Heat washed over her again, but this time not from embarrassment.

Dane stared at Ketera rather than at his hand doing the work. Her gaze caught his, noted the blaze within and found herself captured in his eyes. As he stroked, the movement as hypnotic as it was sensual, a daze came over her. She tore her gaze from his, compelled to watch him stroke with ever-quickenings movements. His big fist pumped, his breath quickened as it rasped between his lips. By the god, he was not like any man she'd known or imagined in any fantasy. His grip worked over his cock, smoothing the drop of moisture at the tip over the rest of his length. She ached, longing for something she didn't understand, didn't care if she was tired anymore. She wanted. Wanted so much for—

He growled, his head thrown back, eyes closed. His fist moved faster. Faster yet, until with a final loud cry he turned to the side and let forth a long spray of white liquid from the tip. He shuddered, his entire body going into a convulsion that would have sounded painful if she hadn't seen the smile of relief passing over his face.

Without looking at her, he walked to the tray and snatched a cloth. He worked to clean the floor where he'd released his essence then cleaned himself. He tucked his cock back under his tunic, but to her surprise it stayed erect. Still astonished, she couldn't think of a word to say. He picked up a slice of bread and stuffed it into his mouth. He ate with a ravenous quality that reminded her of an animal.

"Come. Eat." He passed her a plate. "Scullidig is a good man. He sent us clothes too."

"That was..." How could she say it? "What you did...that woman came in here and you let her watch. You kept on without a hint of concern."

With a slow, beguiling smile, he said, "A Daryk One takes his pleasure as often as he can. And when his mate is unwilling, he will take it quickly and with great enjoyment in some other way."

Jealousy raised its head and she winced. No. She couldn't possibly be jealous.

He tore off a piece of white-looking meat, speared it with a fork and chewed quickly. "Once mated, a Dragonian never wants to be with another. That doesn't mean I care if a woman watches."

The thought swam in her mind that being mated with him, being subject to his power and purpose could snuff the independence and life from a woman. Just as such an agreement did to Magonian women. She didn't want that.

"Would your mate have to do everything you said?" She tried a piece of the white meat and the taste burst on her tongue. She didn't know what she was eating.

"No." His answer came quickly. "I told you our women are free."

Surprise followed her. "But your culture is barbaric. You were willing to take pleasure in front of two women at the same time."

He shrugged as he reached for a tankard and sniffed the contents. "You have much to learn about our ways. Give yourself time to get used to it."

"I do not want to get used to it. You make it sound like I'm staying in Dragonia forever. I must get back to my father."

He smiled and took a long swallow from the tankard. "Scullidig finds the best drink." When she gave him an impatient look, he answered, "My mate is the only woman I could or want to fuck." As she licked one finger of juice, his nostrils flared. "And after tonight, I have to admit the truth to myself. I didn't want to believe it."

She eyed him with caution. "What truth?"

"That as much as I've denied it, you are the woman who I am meant to be with all my life. You are mine."

"Ridiculous." Alarm raced through her, as well as a treacherous warmth that flooded from her loins and straight into her chest and face. "I must go back to Magonia and save my father. I can't stay here with you."

He lifted one eyebrow. "I saw how you shoved that woman out of here. You did not want her to see me take my pleasure. Why?"

She sputtered. "Because you...I..."

He wiped his hands on a cloth and came toward her. He lifted his hand and tilted her head to the side, his gaze on her neck. "I think it's because you care for me. You did not want another woman to touch me. If I'd been alone, if I wasn't mated, I would have let her suck my cock, or perhaps if she'd been clean, I would have fucked her."

No. By the god, he wouldn't look at another woman. She wouldn't allow such intimacies with that wench. "No."

Oh no.

To feel this out of control around him, to want him with an ache that bordered on painful, she'd have to harbor feelings for him. Carnal and personal feelings. "I've never felt like this before. It's odd. It... I don't understand it."

"You're awakening to your sexual side, Ketera. The one the Magonians have denied you. You think Dragonian mates are barbaric, but they are not. As I've told you before, our women enjoy all freedoms except putting themselves in danger. Magonians deny you school, play, clothing, enjoyment, everything we can provide. We are alive. Magonians live day to day in a skeleton world of half promises and lies. You know this

from these texts. You've told me so yourself. Do not deny what you've found here with me."

Speechless, she watched as he returned to the table, reached for a cloth and dipped it into a salve that sat on a small dish. "This is for your cut. It will heal in a few moments." His touch stayed gentle as he cleaned her, the slight sting gone. "There is a bathing room through that other door if you'd like to clean up."

She quaked inside, stunned by his change about. They'd gone from sex to baths in a heartbeat. "Yes, of course."

Ketera rummaged through the clothes the woman had brought and found a woman's purple tunic and shirred pants with wide legs. "Too delicate for a jungle journey."

"Indeed. But at least you have clean clothes."

Realizing she didn't have a choice, she hurried away from him, eager to remove herself from the power in his gaze, the seduction in his touch. Watching him spill his life force had been amazing. Forbidden. Tempting as a cake eaten in the morning rather than saved for an evening meal.

The narrow door opened, and she reached for a candle lit upon a table. It barely illuminated the room, but she could see well enough. She closed the door and noted there was no lock. If Dane wanted to enter and see her nakedness, he could do so with no problem.

While Ketera explored the bathing room, she tried to grasp what she'd experienced since leaving the tavern near Grimnald Castle. She turned to the basin attached to the wall and used it to wash her hands and face. Several thick cloths lay stacked on a small wooden table by the basin, and she used them to dry off. After using the commode and stripping naked, she pulled the cord on the wall that allowed water to rain down from a pipe. It cascaded over her in a warm spray, which she hadn't expected. At home she'd become used to cold water. She didn't take long to wash her hair with the soap provided, and quickly lather and rinsed her body. She felt so much better. A little lightheaded in a pleasant and sleepy way, she dried off again. She stepped out of the bathing room and found Dane standing by a window, looking through parted curtains.

When he turned to look at her, she shivered, but not from the cold of her damp hair or the cool night. Heat invaded her at his look—a look that suggested he'd never seen anything more beautiful, more edible than her. He would devour her, she knew, if she didn't take care. A man, a warrior like this, apparently didn't have the social manners she'd become used to on Magonia. Getting used to that fact would take more time.

"What are you looking at?" she asked, full knowing the answer.

He grinned but didn't speak. Without another word Dane stripped off his metal breastplate and unbelted his tunic. He tossed the belt on a chair and the breastplate against the leg of a chair. The tunic ended up on the chair too. Bare-chested, he reminded her of what attracted her in the first place. Sheer animal power. As she watched without thinking, he unlaced his trousers. Once more his thick erection was

bared, and she couldn't help but look. She jerked her gaze away as he drew his trousers off his legs. He'd apparently removed his boots while she cleaned up. Watching him undress shouldn't do anything to her. After all, she'd seen him do it before. This time it had a significance she couldn't articulate.

He walked past her and into the bathing room. After he closed the door, she yawned. She was so tired, her body aching from the ordeal. She lay on the bed and turned over on her right side, her heartbeat pounding as she allowed his naked body to form an image in her mind over and over. Water splashed in the bathroom, and she closed her eyes. Before long she felt the bed sink down beside her. She was too tired and sore to care, hoping that Dane wouldn't either. His arms came around her, pulling her close so that he cradled her back against him. Within moments the heat of his body eased her.

His hand brushed over her hair, his warm breath teased her ear. "Rest, sprite. No harm will come to you in my arms. Rest."

No harm will come to me in his arms, just a lot of tossing, turning and trying to figure out why I feel all squirmy and so hot. That was her last thought before she forced her eyes shut and hoped that sleep would erase the image of his hand sliding up and down his cock.

Chapter Eight

Ketera awakened to warm palms sliding over her with sweet attention. She sighed at the comfort, mixed with an aching arousal that already built between her thighs. Dane's powerful arms turned her over on her back, and as she opened her eyes, he propped on his right forearm and looked down at her. His other arm bracketed her, making certain she couldn't escape. She hovered between asking him to release her and falling into his eyes, never to return. Curiosity burned with a solid yearning she battled hard to suppress. She wanted to know what it felt like under his touch, to experience passion once more, to discover what it would feel like with his long, hard cock inside her.

She glanced to the curtains and the dim light showed enough to prove morning had arrived. Time to move on, to finish her quest, no matter the cost.

What of Dane? Would he vow to continue his help? His eyes blazed red, but then softened to a glow more golden than fiery. Within them she saw genuine affection, and it warmed her to the core. She lifted her arms and slid them upward over his forearm, upward to his biceps, testing muscle as she went.

When she reached his broad shoulder, she caressed. "There's so much about this world I don't understand."

"Stay with me and I'll teach you."

She shook her head. "Even if I wanted to, I can't. My father needs me."

He nodded, and for the first time she thought she saw more understanding inside him than she ever had. "Very well. I would rather help you than have you run off. And you are certainly clever enough to do it. I warn you though, if you stay with me I'll try to seduce you at every turn."

"You can try, but I'm not one to be intimidated by an aggressive man."

She licked her lips, remembering that Bantu had told her some strange things. Was now the time to tell Dane?

Before she could speak, he lowered his head and kissed her. As his palm slid down to the side of her breast, her skin prickled with awareness and sensitivity. She gasped into his mouth and shivered.

He drew back. "Stay with me. Let me give you pleasure."

"I need to get to my father."

"Not yet. You're tired. You need to rest a while longer."

"Is kissing me a part of my rest?" Doubt colored her voice.

With a grin he dipped his head and gently brushed his mouth along her jaw, sprinkling small kisses until he reached her ear.

"Yes," he whispered into her ear. "Yes."

His affirmation sounded like urging, like a demand to do his bidding. She squirmed under his touch. "Please."

"Please what?" His voice rumbled, an animal urging her to allow him to devour her with pleasure.

His tongue touched her earlobe, his hand cupped her rib cage, his other hand tangling in her hair. "Tell me anything, Ketera. I will listen."

"There's so much about you I don't know."

"Then ask me and you'll know the answers."

She yawned.

He laughed. "Perhaps we should leave this until tomorrow, after you've slept."

"No. There are things I have to understand."

He didn't loosen his grip on her, but the fire in his eyes lessened. "All right."

She blinked, trying to decide what to ask first. "You never explained why people mate up. How is a man certain a woman is his mate?"

"I mentioned that before. The physical reaction."

"So the draw is instant?"

"Yes."

"Then you knew from the time you found me on the beach that I was your mate?"

He sighed, closed his eyes and waited so long to answer she was certain he wouldn't. He opened his eyes. "Yes. And no. I felt a tremendous pull toward you. But I also knew you were Magonian. That made me wary because of the differences between our cultures. It made me want to deny how strongly my body craves yours. I know it sounds barbaric to you, but when I realized that your body and soul belonged to me, there was no hesitation. No denying it. You will be mine."

Anger started slowly. "Regardless of what I want."

He grimaced, a short burst of understanding mixed with impatience. "I will honor what you want. You want to rescue your father, and I'll help you. But not at the risk of your life."

"Magonians do not have this mate thing. We don't crave others sexually."

"You don't?" His eyes narrowed. "Then how do you procreate?"

"In marriage of course."

He shook his head. "I don't believe it. Some of your kind must want sex outside of marriage. It isn't normal."

"Just because you say so doesn't mean that it isn't normal. Dragonians do not know everything. What is right for one people may not be for another."

She half expected his indulgence, a grin. He glared. "Are you asking me these questions to fight with me? Because you're trying to distract me from sex?"

Was she?

"Uh...no. Of course not." She shifted under his grip, aware that his fingers were still twined in her hair, his arm anchored around her waist. He swiveled his hips, a warm touch with just enough to make her heartbeat quicken and a sweet burst of pleasure arching between her legs.

"I didn't read anything about the mate phenomena in the ancient texts. But I read something about sex. What it is and how it happens," she said. "At least in a superficial way."

"Then maybe I should show you more. Take the mystery away."

"I thought what you did that one day...when you made me feel such pleasure...I thought that was most of it."

He shook his head. "Only some."

He scooped her into his arms, taking her mouth in a languorous kiss, tongue plunging deep. Ketera felt his cock pressing her, naked and bold. So much for clothing. His nakedness contrasted against her tunic and filmy pants, a rasp of raw fabric against his strong, hair-roughened skin. His body seemed to grow harder, more purposeful. Dane's fingers cupped the back of her neck, his other hand reaching beneath to grasp her butt cheek. Overwhelmed by his touch, she didn't struggle. He rolled over on his back and pulled her on top of him. He squeezed her butt, a low groan slipping from his throat. His mouth still devoured hers, but she tore her lips from his.

"What are you doing?" she gasped the question.

"Trying to make love to you."

"Trying?"

He pressed kisses to her cheek, to her chin. "You keep talking."

His touch drifted upward until he slid beneath her pants and inserted his fingers between her legs from behind. She gasped again as he smoothed her wetness around the entrance to her womb. His touch was delicate, tantalizing, gentler than she expected. Though he'd made her shudder in pleasure before, this was different. She knew that if she didn't push him away now, he'd have her. That scared her more than anything.

"Wait." She gazed into those blazing eyes.

He didn't stop touching her, but his fingers ceased exploration. "What is it?"

"What will you do when I go back to Magonia permanently?"

His jaw clenched. "I dare not think of it. Feel what you do to me." His hips surged upward and bumped that pleasure spot he'd caressed before. "That is me wanting you more than I've ever wanted anything or anyone." The glow in his eyes softened. "Do you understand what happened inside me when I thought you'd left and put yourself in danger?"

Her palms flattened on his broad chest, fingers tingling as they brushed against the hair over his pectorals. "No."

Smooth, satin touches caressed between her legs, and sensation tingled and burned.

"I was angry." His brows drew together, the hurt in his eyes astonishing. "But when I realized you'd been kidnapped, I would have done anything, gone anywhere to get you back."

And he had. That's what frightened her. The length to which he'd go, the violence he could wreak upon another person without blinking.

"You surprised me." She had to admit it. "I didn't think at first that you'd come for me. Then I thought you would."

He slipped one finger into her core, and she gasped. "Oh." She cleared her throat. "Um...I thought you'd want to scold me. Which you did."

Puzzlement crossed his strong features. "Is that what you think this is all about? That my sole purpose is to dominate and hurt you? Damn the hells, it isn't." He growled a little. "Do not tell me you don't feel it. That my finger deep in your pussy isn't driving you wild."

It was. She closed her eyes and allowed the sensation to trail upward and pinpoint on her most sensitive spot. The spot he'd rubbed and caressed until she'd come apart in a blast of super-fired heat.

She whimpered as his finger slid in and out, and then did the most shocking thing of all. Gently, but with purpose, he drew her liquid upward until he teased her back hole. She twitched in surprise, jerking in his arms. "What are you —"

His mouth took hers again. As his tongue plundered and stroked, making intoxicating love to her, his finger teased her back entrance. With slow deliberation he slipped a small way into her forbidden entrance, and this time her gasp was filled with equal amounts of shock and astonished pleasure. He took her reaction into his mouth, thrusting his tongue in a cadence that mimicked the gentle motion of his finger. He kept that finger buried then flipped her on her back. His other fingers found her center, and this time her pleasure came out in a groan. He released her mouth but not her pussy. As his fingers worked her, she writhed under his touch, the feelings more intense than the last time he'd teased her with his touch. Ketera lost all inhibition, the power of his assertive movements making her heart trip over itself. He leaned in and took one nipple into his mouth and pleasure spiked. He licked, sucked, swirled his tongue over her nipple with voracious appetite. Powerful tremors started inside her. She ached with it, burned with furious need. She grabbed the covers beneath her, cried out and almost begged for the crazy pleasure to stop.

He whispered against her ear, "That's it. Let it go. Let it go."

He pushed his fingers deep and thrust faster. She couldn't reach the peak and couldn't stand the rising sensations that refused to release her. He eased his fingers from her, and she groaned in protest.

Seconds later he opened her thighs and knelt between them. He lay on his stomach across the bed, her private areas completely exposed to his gaze and touch. Her face flamed.

Dane licked over her wet folds, a delicate touch that made her gasp. Without hesitating, he slipped his finger into her backside and softly moved while tracing his tongue around her softness. She arched, closed her eyes and decided to take the ride, wherever it might lead. This wasn't what she'd expected, her heartbeat banging against her chest with a thumping heat that demanded an end to the madness. As he plied her with sweet kisses, his tongue flicked over that button that seemed to lead to her greatest pleasure. She moaned softly, unable to stop her body from responding. Warm touches grew into faster, more urgent caresses as his tongue flicked back and forth over the button and refused to give up. She shivered, shook and resorted to begging for a finish.

"Please, Dane. I need..."

When she opened her eyes, he looked down at her and the feral expression in his eyes told her all she needed to know. He wanted this for her, and he wanted it for him.

"Give yourself to me. I can take the pain away. I can make you feel things you've never imagined."

She gasped as his fingers moved again, lingering over that sweet pleasure spot. "Please."

"Please take you?"

She shook her head. "Make it stop."

"The pleasure?"

"No. Give me what you gave me before."

His tongue swirled around her pussy lips, the tingling, tickling, unwavering pleasure growing. His finger urged her higher. Higher yet. She gasped, moaned. Quivered on the edge as his tongue fluttered over her button.

Pleasure started deep in her womb, growing in size and scope until it spread down her core and burst with heat. Fire erupted, the blaze as eclipsing as Braxos, the star that heated Croan. Her body shuddered as she groaned, writhed under his touch and the bliss took her skyward. It seemed a lifetime before she came down from the explosion.

As she lay panting, he removed his fingers and left the bed. He was in the bathing room for a time, and when he returned, she couldn't help looking at him. At the magnificent body he owned. Everything about Dane screamed man—from the thick auburn hair tumbling around his shoulders to the strength of his nose and jaw. Arms rippled, stomach muscles bunched, reflecting his power. If he'd wanted to he could have hurt her a long time ago. Killed her, she supposed. Instead, in this moment, he treated her with a gentleness she'd never imagined resided in a man. Certainly not in any Magonian man she'd ever met.

"Let me give you more protection. Once I've made love to you in the deepest sense, your life will be extended by another ten years. My essence will keep you alive longer

than you could imagination." Before she could protest, he climbed on the bed. "Put me out of my misery, sprite."

"Misery? You?"

"Yes. I'm aching so badly my cock hurts."

She looked down at his thick intruder and saw that it looked swollen. Inches of thick cock demanded her attention. "All right."

A huge smile lit his features as he climbed back on the bed. "Thank Draconus."

He tried to take her into his arms, but she put one hand to his chest. "You don't understand."

He plunged his fingers into her hair, cradling the back of her neck. "Enlighten me. Hurry before I die."

"I don't mean that I want us to have full sex. There's one part of the texts that describes a sexual act that sounds...well, interesting. A woman..." She blushed but forced the words from her mouth. "A woman sucks a man's...you know...into her mouth and makes his semen exit again."

At her awkward explanation, he laughed and released her. "You want to suck my cock?"

"No...I mean that I will do it for you, but not because it's pleasant. I cannot imagine why any woman would want to."

He laughed again, and this time the wicked sound sent a sweet, aching thrill all up and down her body. "Perhaps you should try it and decide for yourself."

"This isn't amusing."

Dane shifted away from her, his eyes serious once more. "I'm sorry. I've never met a woman like you before, Ketera. You surprise me at every turn. I don't want you to suck my cock because you're paying me back for something."

His cock strained upward, and she considered it seriously. "Will it make your...cock happy?"

He grinned again, a small snort of laughter trying to escape. "Oh yeah. Perhaps faster than I'd like."

Without another word, she reached out and touched the tip of his manhood.

He sucked in a breath. "Ah, Draconus."

She hesitated, taking in his reaction. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, sprite. Do it again." He lay back on the bed. "Do whatever you want, save biting me."

With a returning smile, she leaned toward him. "Perhaps I should bite it. Then it won't be in this condition so often."

His eyes sparked with danger. "Don't even think about it."

She threw him a wicked smile and circled his thick length with her palm. He groaned, the sound pleasure-filled. Though her cheeks heated with embarrassment,

something stirred low in her belly, an answering throb of alertness. She worked him, sliding up and down, but kept her touch light. His hips lifted, encouraging her to move faster, to give him the satisfaction he craved. Emboldened, she shifted closer and held his cock while she licked the tip. Around and around she circled the thick head, and again she tried to imagine drawing this stalk into her body, of feeling pleasure from his body the way he did from hers. She couldn't imagine it, and she'd always thought of herself as too fanciful.

Another groan left him, his hips rising ever so slightly to her beat. Up and down she smoothed her hand in over him to a pace that came from deep inside. He arched, his hands clenching the bedclothes. Primitive sounds left his throat. Grunts, groans. The way he felt safe doing this in front of her added to her arousal, made her want this act more and more.

He whispered, "By the god, please. Faster."

She wanted to hear more, to see more, to feel more. Seconds later tried the one thing she didn't think she'd ever want to do. She moved downward until his long length reached far into her mouth.

"Oh sprite." The words barely made it past his lips before his breath hitched violently. "If you don't want my cum down your throat—"

She ignored him, ready for the finale. She quickened her pace. His breath came faster and faster. Ketera flowed with her instincts, using her tongue, flicking, caressing.

His fingers tangled in her hair. "I'm going to...if you don't want to..."

Frantic to give him satisfaction, she pumped him harder, and with a loud growl of pure male animal, he let loose. A hot stream of liquid hit her mouth and she gulped him down, took his essence into her with a sense of satisfaction and pleasure. His ecstasy-filled groan made her smile as she looked up at him.

"Oh god," he said between gasps for breath. "Draconus, that was good."

His smile said it all. She'd pleased him well. Between her legs a new need throbbed, an ache even higher than what she'd experienced with him before. She crawled upward toward him and powerful arms came around her fiercely. He kissed her, tasting her deeply, perhaps even finding the flavor of himself on her lips. Wild urgings encouraged her to continue with this quest, to learn mysteries she'd read about but never believed she'd experience.

"If you want me, Dane, have me."

There, she'd said it.

What he did then surprised her tenfold. "No."

"What?" Shock held her immobile.

He released her, shifted her off his body to sit against the headboard. "No. I see now you're not ready. You need more time. As much as I want you, I want your happiness more. Sprite, it's a drive inside me that will continue to build and there isn't a way around that. But I won't push you."

Dumbstruck, she eased back to the bed and propped up and her left elbow. "Do you speak the truth?"

"I always speak the truth."

She pondered that, and it occurred to her she'd never known him to lie. At least not that she could tell. She valued that about him more than she could dare allow him to know. "You will still help me rescue my father?"

Doubt clouded his face. "If you lost the texts, how will you bargain for his life? Won't you need them to get him back?"

Frustration and sadness battled inside her. "At this point I don't care how I get him out of jail. If I have to break him out, I will."

He grunted. "And you want me to break him out?"

"Who better than a Daryk One?" She poured on the flattery, half in truth and half in amusement. "After all, you can kill dragons, save women from perils of the jungle, kill slave traders with a single blow and have sex all night long."

His eyes burned, but this time the glow inside them was redder, more sensually hot and unforgiving. The look he gave her burned her up inside. "That wasn't sex all night long. But don't worry, if you ask me I will give you all the sex you want."

Her face heated with the thought, her belly clenching in reaction, her pussy aching with the thought. "Tell me once and for all, will you still help me, or do I find someone else."

"You will not find anyone else." His voice caressed her, but there was also a hard edge to it.

"Do not be so certain. Perhaps your former friend Rayder Tyrus would help me."

As the red light burned high in his eyes, she realized she pushed him toward a dangerous edge. "He won't if he values his balls."

"Well, since he isn't my mate, I wouldn't have to worry about him demanding sex all the time." He smiled, and she saw the glitter within his eyes that said the joke was on her. "What are you smiling about, Dane?"

"You've already had sex with me."

"What?" Shocked didn't describe her. Despite her knowledge of sex, she suddenly felt as stupid as the day was long. "We didn't. That was just...preliminaries."

"Keep telling yourself that, sprite. As far as I'm concerned, you've had sex with me."

She shivered, the word sex on his lips causing sweet tremors low in her belly where she still felt unfulfilled in some primary way she couldn't define. "That's ridiculous."

"Think what you like. A man and woman engaging in cunnilingus and fellatio are considered having sex, Keteria. So if you planned on avoiding sex with me, you failed." Before she could object, he continued with, "Let us bathe again and prepare for the day. After we take our morning meal, we must head back to Grimnald Castle."

Chapter Nine

As Dane walked through the forest with Ketera, he wished for two things. A bertog to ride, and that he'd never agreed to keep his hands off Ketera. He could be forgiven for changing his mind, for vowing that he'd leave her alone rather than try to seduce her. A man could change his mind as often as a woman. He wasn't used to confusion or altering his plans for a female. In his world, things tended to one way or the other, without that much variance. Violence or peace. Frequent sex or none at all.

As he touched Ketera's slim back, he acknowledged confusion. He hadn't lied to her when he said they'd had sex. Technically they had. Yet he wanted more. By Draconus he wanted far more from her.

Never you mind. She'll come around some day.

He'd gone from denying she was his mate to being unable to say that she wasn't in a very short time, and this highly unstable state didn't appeal. After all, Daryk Ones had a reputation to uphold. They were daryk. Strong. Brutal when need be. He didn't want to forget that.

After she fallen into the hands of that bloody slave trader, he didn't want to leave her, his fear too strong. He couldn't lose her. Logic played no part in his feelings. Doubling his trepidation was the fear she might go to Rayder, and he didn't trust the bastard well enough to put her into Rayder's hands. Rayder had experienced excitement during the fight too. If she'd been willing, Rayder would have had sex from her to relieve his lust.

Though he'd never experienced sharing a woman, he'd heard that Rayder had enjoyed two women at once. By Draconus, Rayder would be dead if he touched Ketera, and he didn't relish fighting with his old friend, even if the man had become a slave trader.

He pushed away violent thoughts and apprehension and vowed to keep his eyes open. Last evening he and Rayder had passed through a particularly dangerous stretch of jungle. A few miles remained before the jungle would part and welcome them back into the relative safety of Grimnald Castle.

"How much longer to go?" she asked.

"A couple of miles. Not far now."

"I always thought I was well-conditioned until I started this adventure."

"Is that what you thought it was? An adventure?"

She shrugged, her held high. There was some pride in this woman for certain. "No, not really. All that is on my mind is finding a way to get back to my father." Worry lines or perhaps anger lingered on her face. "I haven't done right by him."

"You're trying."

"I need to find a ship that will take me back to Magonia, and instead I'm traipsing about the country."

Impatience rolled up inside him. "Do you always complain this much?"

"Complain?" She stopped dead and glared at him, her gaze as icy as a glacier in Imekland. "What are you talking about?"

He caught her upper arm and continued walking. "You can't do anything about the situation right now and yet you're complaining."

"Damn it, Dane, I won't be told how to vent my anger. You're allowed to be this big brute with anger issues but I'm not?"

"Anger issues?"

"Yes. Someone who always blusters and boldly goes wherever he wants because he's so strong and indelible? I thought women here are allowed full expression."

He barked out a laugh, half offended and thoroughly amused. An inkling of shame worked its way into the recipe too. "You're right."

She halted so fast she jerked him to a stop. "What?"

"I said, you're right."

Her mouth opened then closed then opened again when she found her voice. "I can't believe you said that."

"I'm a reasonable man. At least as reasonable as any Daryk One can be, given our abilities and notions. We're beastly men, Ketera, I acknowledge that. It takes a lot for us to admit we're wrong."

"I see." Her voice held an ironic tone. "How are the Daryk Ones governed if they cannot agree who is right and who is wrong?"

"We're extraordinary. We work as a team whenever we're in each other's presence. At least that's the way it used to be until Drakus broke away and gathered rogues to his cause."

She nodded, and Dane started them moving again as he released her arm. "You saw how Rayder and I worked to save you, even though we are within an inch of killing each other."

"Because of his betrayal?"

"Right. No Daryk One should ever consider being a slave trader. It goes against every oath we take to protect the innocent and those unable to help themselves."

He glanced over to see her mouth twist slightly, and her gaze catching his was full of doubt. "Have there ever been Daryk Ones who were of mixed blood? Magonian and Dragonian."

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Her mouth softened, as if she wanted to speak but thought the better of it. "Curiosity. Now back to the original subject. How do I find a ship to take me back to Magonia? There must be a way."

"Minilos knows a man who can help you. Someone we can trust."

"Another Daryk One?"

"Finius Dow. You must never utter his name to anyone you cannot trust."

"Why?"

"Because he's a pirate of sorts. Not the kind who rapes or murders. But he does steal. Minilos wouldn't deal with a scourge who hurt other people."

Ketera laughed softly. "A kindly pirate then."

"Of a sorts. He's dedicated to robbing the Magonian ships of their goods. Your tyrant stone, which Dragonians use in their mating vows, for example."

"Mating vows?"

"Marriage, as you'd know it."

"Do Daryk One's perform mating vows?"

"Yes. Didn't your precious texts tell you that?"

"Yes, but not specifically Daryk Ones. The texts didn't mention Daryk Ones at all."

Another glance at her made his heart thud slow and thick. Heat poured into his body at the thought of having her permanently linked to him. Then it dawned on him what she'd said. "How old did you say the texts are?"

"Not quite two thousand years old. Perhaps less."

"Did the texts explain how our two continents came to be such bitter enemies?"

"They mentioned a great war between two ideals but little about what those ideals were. Our scribes tell us that both our people lived on Magonian at one time, but that after the war, the Dragonians moved to this land mass. The texts seem more interested in describing the differences between our peoples and the commonalities. It's those commonalities and truths about Dragonians the scribes don't want us to know."

"Do the texts explain why our languages are the same? Why they haven't evolved apart?"

"They have...a little. Your names for things are often different than ours."

"There is much more you have to learn about Dragonia, Ketera—"

A loud roaring came from nearby, and Dane came to a complete stop. "Damn it."

"What is it?" She glanced around frantically.

"Another dragon. Only this one sounds like it's in distress. There might be hunters nearby."

"Dragons are hunted?" Genuine surprise colored her voice. "By Daryk Ones?"

"Never. We only kill to defend. Poachers kill them for sport and their hides. Even though dragons are mostly dangerous, our laws forbid us to hunt them."

As if he'd cursed them by mentioning the dubious safety of the area, a strange rumbling echoed in the forest.

Startled, Ketera looked around. "What on Croan was that?"

Dane's focus shifted, his eyes scanning the area with intensity. Another low rumble came from the jungle and in the distance the very tops of huge trees swayed.

Ah, shit. No denying that sound.

We're here in the jungle with nowhere to hide. No castle. No walls. The dragon is coming near.

Fear started its slow creep up Dane's spine. Every Daryk One, if he knew his worth, feared a dragon encounter. Even with his extensive training, his lightning-fast reflexes, dragons were nothing to play with.

"This is the time, Ketera. If I say run, run. If I say stop, stop."

Vibration started under their feet and a low, throbbing pounding echoed in the ears. A dragon's unimaginable weight trembled the ground beneath their feet.

"Is the dragon close?" she asked.

"It's running. So should we."

Before she could gasp out another question, the pounding became harder, more intense. He grabbed her arm and they were off. Dane's zig and zag took them through the thick fronds, hanging vines and tangling shoots. Then something happened he didn't expect. One of the shoots jumped up and grabbed Ketera's left ankle. She cried out in pain. Blood rushed through his veins, his instant need to protect surging to life. A ridigulate plant, at least six feet across at the base, had lashed out for a meal.

Fuck.

He should have steered clear of the plant.

Behind him the pounding was louder, and now the shouts of poachers driving the dragon came in the far distance.

Ketera gasped but nothing came from her throat. No time to warn her not to try to get the vine off.

Instinct gave him extra speed as he grabbed his sword, swung and cut the vein from the main plant. With a rasp the plant drew back the rest of its vine and remained still. Fuckin' ridigulates were cowards.

Ketera's pale face reflected intense pain, and he knew it had to come from the poison already invading her body. She reached out for him, and panic clenched his throat. He fell to the ground and grabbed at the dead vine. He drew it away with swift moves, unwinding it and tossing it aside.

A second later he caught her in his arms as she fell. Large welts spiraled around her ankle and halfway up her calf. Her face flushed, her breath coming quickly. "Dane, what's happening?"

"Damn the hells! You're poisoned." He drew her into his arms, his mouth coming down on hers in a swift, hot kiss.

As his tongue plunged deep, he hoped his immunity would do the trick. He'd been correct earlier saying his kiss would protect her from any threat by beast or bug. She met his tongue in desperation, twining around his in a sexual thrust and parry that made his groin harden instantly. He ignored arousal in favor of making sure she received a full measure of his immunity. He couldn't turn this into a sexual session. The dragon and poachers were getting closer.

He groaned and grabbed her hand. "Come on. We've got to run!"

He heard her gasp of pain as she followed, but he couldn't indulge her injury. Time demanded otherwise. They ran, careening through the jungle, still heading for the castle but at a slight angle to the northeast. He kept his fingers tightly entwined with hers. He couldn't afford to lose her in this thick mess. He kept his eyes peeled for any more vines, creepers and snakes. Draconus knew the place teamed with anything and everything that could kill.

Two men jumped from the clearing in front of him. He released her hand, his sword in hand with one swift move. "Ketera, stay back!"

The tall men were obviously followers of Drakus, but they weren't Daryk Ones gone bad. Both men wore tunics, black long breeches, and had braided their dirty, dark hair in two plaits. Nope. Definitely not Daryk Ones. Not as big or as strong either, but not to be ignored. Especially not with Ketera in need of his protection.

"Dane, there's two behind us!"

He turned quickly to get the lay of the land, snatched his dagger from his waist and handed it to her. These brutes were dressed similarly to the two men on his side. "If anyone comes near you, cut him and ask questions later."

Perspiration dampened her face and her breath came in great gulps. "Dane..." Her voice held a shaky uncertainty. She didn't look good. By the god, if he hadn't gotten all the poison –

The men charged. She screamed, but in a defiant cry that meant business. He turned in time to block one man's sword thrust then the other's, and soon his movements flowed as he'd been taught since he was young, a flow of thrust and move and swipe and cut. He'd known all his life how to fight and knew he was faster than these men. Ketera's life depended on him. He slashed one man across the throat, almost enough to sever his head. The man dropped.

Ketera cried out in female rage, her fighting fierce. All he could hope was that she did some damage. He couldn't let fear for her cause him to make a mistake.

But it did.

One flinch the wrong way and the attacker feigned to the left and slashed him across the ribs. Pain didn't come, but Dane felt the hot blood. It only made him angrier. He growled, the sound coming from deep in his chest as he spun, slashed, and with a clean stab to the chest, the other poacher fell dead.

Dane turned in time to see one of the other poachers on the ground, the dagger in his chest. The last attacker circled her, ready to play.

She'd picked up a huge rock, her breath puffing out as if she'd run a hundred miles with a dragon on her heels. "Stay away from me, you filth!"

Before Dane could come to her aid, she tossed the large rock. He expected it to miss its mark. Instead, it clonked the bandit between the eyes and he flew backward and lay still with his eyes wide open. She'd killed two men. Surprise made him stagger. Then he remembered his wound and his hand went to his side. Blood stained his fingers. Damn the hells.

"Ketera." He went to her, dragged her into his arms and held her close.

She buried her face in his neck, her breathing hard, almost sounding like sobs. "Dane. Thank the god." She lifted her face to his, the horror mirrored in her eyes something he'd never seen on her before. "Dane, I killed those men. I killed them."

"You had no choice. I'm proud of you."

She jerked back out of his arms. "Proud? Proud? It's the most awful feeling I can imagine."

Anger replaced his concern. "You know the worst feeling I can imagine? That you'd kept your damn morals intact and those men killed you. That's the worst feeling imaginable to me."

Looking stunned and ready to retort, she glanced down and noticed the blood on his tunic. Worry stamped her face. "You're hurt."

He shook his head. "I'm fine. Damn breast plate shifted and the poacher cut me. We need to hide. We can't get to the castle in time, and there are more poachers out there. They're going to look for their friends. When they find them dead, all hells will break loose." Her face was still unusually pale and she trembled violently. He closed the distance between them and cupped her face in both hands. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I can't stop shaking."

Worry slammed him. "Could be the fight, or the poison is still working on you." He released her. "There's a cave not far from here. We need to go there." His vision wavered in and out, and pain started to surface. For him and for her, he pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Let's go."

He took her hand and they ran into the jungle once more.

They ran until they couldn't and the cave entrance came into view. It was high enough on a hill that it commanded a decent view of the area below. Still, it was covered in vines. At least none of them were carnivorous.

"We're going up there?" she asked, breath still coming fast.

"Yes. Follow me."

Without hesitation he plunged forward, his side aching and stinging. It wasn't the worst injury he'd encountered, but it still hurt like the blazes. He kept a hold on her

hand, and she staggered up the hill easier than he expected. He felt like dragon dung, and that wasn't a good sign. Maybe the poachers had used Magonian poison on their swords? Why hadn't he thought of that before? If they had, one thing needed to be accomplished.

He stopped halfway up the hill. "Do you know what a feralax weed is?"

"No."

"I'll point it out." He saw some. The stringy weeds were plentiful on this hill, thank the god. "There." He snagged one of the innocuous-looking plants from the ground in the hillside. "We need this for both of us." He took her hand again and continued up the hill.

"We don't have supplies," she said. "No water or food."

"We can live without the food for a day or two. The cave has a fresh water source."

Pain flashed like a white-hot poker to his injured side. He couldn't stifle a groan as he automatically reached for the offended flesh. His hand came away crimson.

"Dane." Her voice was ragged, eyes filled with concern.

"Never mind. I'll be all right."

As they encroached on the cave mouth, he noted that nothing about it had changed. Not only was the mouth wide, the ceiling soared a good fifteen to twenty feet above their heads.

She swung around and scanned the jungle trees. "Can't they see us up here?"

"If we stand here too long, maybe. Let's go in."

They hurried through the opening. "Don't tell me that strange creatures inhabit this place."

"All right. I won't tell you."

She made a slight snorting noise and kept her tight grip on his hand. "Sir, you are no gentleman."

"Never said I was. I'm a Daryk One. Not a fine and dandy man like a Magonian."

She laughed softly, and the gentle female quality somehow eased his pain.

The continued toward the back until the left side of the cave curved and flattened into a wall.

She nodded toward the gloom beyond in the narrower tunnel. "Where does that go?"

"No one ventures back there. Too easy to get lost."

Her eyes narrowed. "No ugly creatures ready to devour us when we're defenseless?"

"None that I know of."

"That you know of?" She tossed him a half smile. "Wonderful."

He returned her grin with a weary grunt of derision. "Like I told you back at the castle, our world is dangerous and wild. Most things here would sooner kill you as look at you."

She covered her eyes for a moment with both her hands. "On Magonia you're more likely to be killed by the murdering heat than any man or beast."

"A gentle place to live then."

"Ha! Hardly." She didn't explain, but asked instead, "Will the poachers look for us here?"

Before he could manage a reply, a searing heat filled his side and stole his breath. He gasped for breath, reached out for her and the world went black.

Chapter Ten

Dane hit the cave floor like a ton of rocks, lying silent and still on his back, legs sprawled open, arms at his sides. His mouth was slightly open, his lips pale, his face a waxy white. Though he was fairly light skinned anyway, this paleness spoke of true illness, and it scared her to death. He'd said the wound wasn't that bad.

Ketera thought her heart would stop. Simply curl up and die right in her chest. Paralyzed, she stared at his inert body. For a moment the weight of all Croan came down upon her, and a million thoughts raced through her. Horror that the big Daryk One lay before her, seemingly helpless. Feral terror that she could be left alone in this unspeakably dangerous place. Dread threatened to overtake her senses, and the cave ceiling felt as if it were lowering inch by inch, ready to crush her.

Then her mind jolted her into action. *Dane needs your help.*

Fear galvanized her reaction, her concern for him so powerful she instinctively knew what to do. The weed he'd picked on the hill. He'd meant they needed it for poison. She didn't feel poisoned, but even if poison from the vicious vine still lingered in her body, it couldn't be as potent as the wound in Dane's side.

He's immune to poison, isn't he? That's what he'd said, but something told her to use the weed anyway. Just because he was immune to poisons didn't mean he couldn't contract an infection. She didn't have anything to clean the wound, so she'd have to make do. She struggled with his breastplate but managed to work the side of it open enough to reach the wound. He weighed far too much for her to lift him, so he'd have to lie where he'd fallen. She tore the tunic open then reached for the bottom of her own tunic and worked to tear off a strip at the bottom. A few furious yanks separated the fabric from the bottom of her tunic. She balled it up, took the weed and ran to an indent in the rock near the cave opening. She soaked the weed and rag in cold water. Ketera hadn't a clue if this would hurt or help, but what choice did she have? By the god, she wished she'd taken that medical course her father had suggested. Her hand shook as she lifted his tunic enough to see the wound more clearly. The wound wasn't bleeding.

"How can this be?"

It made no sense, but the bleeding had stopped. The gash, about eight inches long, looked considerably deeper than she expected. That's when she noticed something that took her off guard. The wound had already started to close, to heal.

"Magon," she whispered in astonishment.

Jerking herself out of the stupor, she placed the weed over the wound and then applied the cloth as a way to hold the slippery plant.

She closed her eyes and sent up a prayer to Magon. "Please, Magon, preserve him. Heal him."

Dane jerked, startling her. She opened her eyes and found his eyes open as well.

"You think a prayer to Magon will work on me? Shouldn't your god hate me? Consider me an infidel?"

Tears sprouted in her eyes, but she forced them away. "Dane."

He placed his hand over hers where it rested on the wound. "Thank you, Ketera. Without this, I might not have made it."

"You're healing so fast."

"That's normal. It's the damn poison on the poacher's sword."

His raspy, weak voice worried her. "Why? I thought you were immune to poison."

"Poison's from Magonia, not Dragonia."

She couldn't speak, immobile with worry. "Dane, what if..."

"If I die," he swallowed hard around his words, "if I die, I will see you in the next life. You will still be my mate then, as you have in every life before, as you will in every life from now on."

With that his hand went limp, and he fell into unconsciousness once again.

Fear hadn't left her, and as he lay silent, it refused to relent. She couldn't let anything happen to him. She refused. Poison from Magonia? It made sense. The people here wouldn't have built up immunity. She held the weed to his side, hoping that it would cure him, prevent him from leaving this life. The only one he had, if the scribes and the god Magon were right. She closed her eyes and willed strength into her body. She had to do whatever it took to save him.

Something angry snapped inside her. She kept the weed against his wound but shook his shoulder with her other hand. "Wake up, Dane. Wake up. Isn't there anything else I can do to save you? Anything?"

His eyes barely opened, but his lips parted and the words came so softly she had to lean close to his mouth to hear. "Kiss me."

Once more his eyes closed, and she couldn't awaken him no matter how often she called his name. She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. Tears poured into her eyes and she indulged them, allowing them to run down her face.

Exhaustion claimed her and she fell into a deep sleep. How long it lasted, she couldn't say, but when she awakened, she saw she'd kept her hand with the moistened weed against his side. How had she done that? Sheer will perhaps. She felt his brow and found it cool, and when she looked at his wound, it had completely closed. A miracle. It was as if he'd never been stabbed. She allowed the cloth and weed to fall to the ground, and that's when she saw it. The weed had withered and dried to a dead brown. The white tunic material was red and blackened. Still weary, she looked around the cave and realized they needed warmth. Sunlight had dropped away in the high jungle canopy, and not even the clearing before this cave allowed much sun to intrude.

Before long, sunlight would disappear. They'd be left in this jungle with no protection from elements or beast. She'd slept far too long.

She slipped his sword from the scabbard and held it aloft. Heavy. She almost dropped it. Instead she walked to the edge of the cave and scanned the deepening shadows. Time to find firewood. But where? Where could she go without losing her way? She inhaled deeply to calm her nerves. She'd do it. What choice did she have?

Purposefully she eased down the slope, intent on any wood she could locate. Inside the jungle numerous animals called, their deadly intent singing in their voices. Fronds swayed, leaves whispered, the trees seemed to call to her with a drunken, almost sibilant whisper. Asking her to come to them. To be an evening meal.

She pulled her stare from the haunting forest and continued to stack wood around the base of the hill. It didn't take her long, but carrying the sword and gathering wood wouldn't work. She returned to the cave and placed his sword at Dane's side. Returning to the wood at the base of the hill, she made three trips until she'd piled a stack far enough inside the cave it wouldn't get wet.

Once she'd gathered the wood, she set about building the fire. Thank Magon some of the wood was dry. It took quite some time, but the flames started to flicker, catch, build. She sighed with relief, hoping for heat and protection. As darkness started to descend, a thousand thoughts raced through her head. Worry stayed chief among those concerns. When would Dane wake up? She couldn't succumb to fear or exhaustion with Dane unconscious. Only he understood this jungle. She could escape the jungle on sheer will, but how much more fraught with peril would it be if Dane wasn't with her? Fear crept higher. She sucked in a deep breath as she tried to reduce her heart's crazy pounding.

That's when she heard the noise. The strange chortling, howling laugh sounded like a demented human. The fire. Damn. Had she made it easy for the poachers to find them?

A bark, a weird and feral noise, came from the front of the cave beyond the fire's reach. At first she froze. What now? She held her breath, her throat tight. What if the creature wasn't afraid of fire? She jumped to her feet, bent down to grab a large stick, and hurried toward the fire. If she tried to light the stick to use as a weapon or torch, it would burn down too quickly. She stared into the pattern of light created by the large fire and shivered as she peered into the gloom beyond. Listening intently, she tried to see who, or more likely what, lurked in the darkness. Her heartbeat quickened. Her breath came short. Nothing in her experience on Magonia prepared her for this fear, for uncertainty as biting and sharp as what she felt in her skin, her bones, her heart right this moment. She swallowed hard.

Get me through this and I promise not to complain about my situation for the next hundred years.

She listened intently.

Was that a twig breaking? The sound of a stealthy creature moving closer, stalking with intent to kill? Sweat broke out on her body, chilling her despite the humidity. Once more the crackling of brush, a twitter of sound, both human and beast.

She wanted to scream out, to demand the creature show itself so she could fight. A little voice murmured in her mind. *Or die trying.*

Then she saw it, less than twenty feet away, peering around a bush.

Brilliant red eyes, as bloodthirsty as any creature she'd witnessed in a nightmare.

Her mouth went as dry as the inhospitable deserts near her home on Magonia. She longed for the safety of her underground home where temperatures both hot and cold were kept at bay and strange beings didn't approach without a warning system sending up an alarm. She swallowed hard again, her heartbeat feeling as erratic as an injured bird's wings. She went so still she thought she could hear everything, feel everything, an urge to run screaming through her body.

The creature blinked and moved forward. Slowly it revealed itself.

An abomination of awful proportions.

With a long, skinny head, the animal looked gray, almost reptilian. The snout reminded her of insect-eating animals that roamed the deserts on Magonia. She didn't see any ears, and the mouth was so small she couldn't be sure it had one. Four legs and a torso came into view. If given to describe it, she'd make a poor witness. It was hard to describe something so hideous and twisted without wanting to vomit. The appendage hanging between its legs said it might be a male. The front legs were longer than the back and ended in hooves. The mottled skin along the shoulders featured green, red and brown splotches. Aha. A mouth indeed. Her skin crawled.

It moved so fast she didn't get a chance to scream.

Glad she held the sword in her right hand, she drew it back and made a slicing motion as she yelled in rage and terror.

The sword flew from her hand and found its mark, lodging in the creature's chest. Growling, the creature kept coming.

She backed up, tripped and fell. The creature stumbled, roared and landed within ten feet of her. Panting in terror, she scrambled backward on all fours.

Something touched her from behind. She screamed.

"It's all right." Dane's voice came as he clutched her shoulders. He squatted next to her, heat a welcome feeling.

"Dane?" Her voice shook. "Is it dead?"

"Dead. It can't hurt us."

He drew Keteria to her feet and she turned into his arms. For one sweet moment she buried her face against him, her arms around his neck.

Clinging, she gasped out her next words, "You're all right?" She drew back slightly and saw his smile, his face no longer pale. "The plant really did its work?"

"Very well thanks to you."

She sighed in relief and looked at the creature. "What is that...that thing?"

"A branax. Half lizard, half cat, half who knows what. An aberration against even nature. Very deadly. You, on the other hand, are obviously much more lethal." His face reflected sincere surprise and pride. "You're a warrior, sprite."

Her body was racked with shivers. "I do not feel warriorlike. I can't believe I killed it."

"You're sorry?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No."

Awe entered his eyes and he cupped her face. "You're a wonderful marvel to me."

"Why?"

"All Dragonian women are strong, but so are Magonian women apparently."

She grunted softly. "Only some of us."

His laugh was soft, amused and teasing. "You're a beautiful, intelligent, warm woman. But you have the heart of a cellidon."

She laughed softly and eyeballed the branax with wary attention. "Cellidon? I hope you're not comparing me to another ghastly creature."

His laugh was softer still, a husky sound that soothed as well as aroused. "A cellidon is a feathered animal that sails our skies. A rare beauty with a gentle heart. It will defend all human life, even at the cost of its own. Some people even own them for pets because of their loyalty and bravery."

Tears suddenly filled her eyes as she looked up at him. "Are you trying to own me too?"

He frowned as he brushed the tears from her cheeks. He kissed her nose and his arms tightened. "Never. I would never own you. But you are mine to protect." He slipped one hand into her hair. "Then again, perhaps it is me who is owned. You've saved my life today. Twice, I think. For that you have my undying loyalty forever."

Her heart constricted with affection and desire, her emotions boiling up in a tangle of sweet feelings and lingering fear. Oh yes, he would protect her if he could. He'd move the heavens and hells to make certain they made it back to Grimnald Castle. Tender feelings swamped her, and she did the one thing she never imagined she'd do before now. She cupped the back of his neck and kissed him. It was a tiny, silly kiss with no fire, and he didn't have time to respond.

Surprise burned in his eyes, and so did that mysterious and almost frightening red gleam. "Hold that thought. Let me drag away this bag of guts so we don't have to look at it."

He released her and marched toward the beast. She held her breath, half afraid the creature would revive and attack. "Dane, be careful."

He looked back and smiled. "Always."

He grabbed the sword and yanked it from the beast's chest, and then with a strength she didn't know he possessed, he took hold of the beast's front leg and dragged the carcass down the hill out of sight. By the god, he was strong. A thrill stirred powerful feelings in her chest then straight down to her lower belly. She couldn't define her emotions or the physical feelings they created. Love? But how would she know? She'd never felt that kind of emotion for a man. She loved her father, and when she thought of him rotting in that prison, it caused a pain so severe she wondered if she could stand it. No, this was different. It felt restless and wrong and settling and glorious all at the same time. It made her belly stir with want. She wanted him to touch her, hold her, kiss her and know her in ways a man had never known her before.

She couldn't deny it any longer that Dane Charger had stolen her ability to remain detached. When she left Dragonia, there would be a place missing in her heart she knew could never be filled by another man.

In the meantime though, she could have one memory of him that would sear its way into her forever, a brand of love or lust or foolishness. Whatever the texts called it, she wanted to know it at least once.

Dane returned quickly, which was good because her body was still shaking with fear and reaction from their close call. Close call? Hah! Try calls. She couldn't leave this Magon-forsaken place quickly enough.

Dane returned to the cave and bent down to wash his hands in a large puddle. He splashed his face and the hair around his face became damp. He stood, his big body looking healthy and hardy once more.

He approached her, his eyes warm with that red glow, but this time the color was muted and he looked calm and gentle. "Are you all right?"

"A little hungry. Are you feeling better?"

"Much. Like I said, you saved me. How did you know to soak the weed in water?"

She shrugged. "A happy guess apparently."

He grinned, and the sexy smile made her loins clench. Warmth filled the soft folds between her thighs and she grew moist. The sight of him so capable and alive made her blood run fast.

He wandered toward her with an ease of motion that took her off guard. "If you're hungry, we could cook the beast you killed. I hear the meat is tough but edible."

She shivered. "No, thank you. I'll wait." They met in the middle of the cave, barely six inches apart. "You're alive and well, and that's all I can think about right now."

That sexy grin turned cocky and he planted his hands on his hips. "You were worried about me?"

Pride denied it. Her heart demanded a different answer. "Yes."

Her admission threw him—she saw it in his parted lips and something that could have passed for wonder. Wonder and not his usual arrogance.

"No one, save my parents, has ever cared for me," he said.

He didn't sound pitiful or as if he asked for sympathy. It was simple truth. "No other woman."

He shrugged. "None who ever said so."

"Perhaps they loved you from afar."

He shook his head. "Doubtful. Now that I've found you, I can only hope that you and I have what my parents had."

"And what was that?"

"A bond that couldn't be broken." He sighed. "My father died for my mother. He gave his life for her and she gave her life for him."

She covered her mouth for a second, trying to hold back dismay. "What happened?"

"She was outside Grimnald Castle six weeks ago when Drakus Fina and his rogues set upon the place. My father was at the top of a rampart, working. He tried to save her with his bow and arrow. He killed one of the men holding her. The other ran off with her." Dane swallowed hard. "Father gave chase. It was a trap."

"Trap?"

"Drakus waited in the jungle and used my mother as a lure. Drakus said that if my father would sacrifice himself to the dragons, my mother would be safe. Drakus despised the fact his mother...my mother, had run off with my father."

She rubbed one hand over her face. "Drakus was born of your mother, a Magonian. Drakus' father was a Daryk One who was Dragonian?"

"Yes."

"And your father was Dragonian?"

"Yes."

Dread curled up inside her, her throat tight with suppressed emotion. "Your father sacrificed himself to the dragons?"

Dane sighed. "Drakus wanted my mother for a sacrifice as well. Drakus had heard long ago that I'd been born and he was jealous. He'd hoped to capture me as well and throw us all to the dragons."

"He would kill his own mother?"

"That's the kind of man he is."

"What happened next?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"My father couldn't bear for my mother to be harmed. He offered himself to a dragon willingly." Dane's voice turned low, a vibration so deep and yet sorrowful. His eyes had darkened. "My mother was forced to watch. Before she—"

He cut himself off, sorrow etched in his face.

She took the first step and the next, not certain what would happen but fairly certain it would change her life forever. She reached for him, touched his face. "She what?"

"Before anyone could stop her, she ran into the dragon's path and was killed. You see, my father was her true mate and not Drakus' father, and her son had just committed a heinous crime. My mother's remorse and sorrow forced her into the jaws of the dragon as well."

She leaned into him as his arms came around her. "Oh Dane. That's awful. I'm so sorry. Your own brother caused their deaths."

He closed his eyes, and she absorbed the sensation of his muscled body as she pressed against him. "I understand now why you didn't wish to tell me. But you...how awful for you to lose your parents that way." She smoothed her hand over his bristly cheek. "Do you hate Drakus for it?"

Dane's mouth opened but nothing came out at first. "It depends on what day you ask me. Sometimes I hate my father and mother for leaving me. For leaving me and not trying to save themselves. Other days my hatred is all for Drakus and his evil heart." Dane pulled her tighter against him. "Right now all I want to do is forget. Here. Now."

Her heart thundered in her ears as she leaned into every inch of his hard, hot body. Muscles rippled, and she closed her eyes a moment to savor the feeling. Before he could speak, she cupped the back of his head and stood on tiptoes to reach his mouth. She slid her lips over his. A groan left Dane, a hungry sound that growled low in his throat. Immediately he took control, his mouth urgent, tongue plunging deep to caress. They fell into a rapture she couldn't believe, a lightning-fast explosion. Her mouth seemed meant for his as their hands found sensitive places to caress. His palms made perfect acquaintance with her butt, squeezing. He slid his hands under the waist of her pants and cupped naked flesh. Light and hard, caressing and hard, he painted his touch upon her. Her hands raked through his hair, felt the silky, thick texture with genuine enjoyment. A moment later he shoved her shirt up her body, and his tongue and lips latched on to her nipple. As she gasped, his tongue circled flesh and the sensation tingled. Sucking strongly, he pulled at her nipple, tasted it while he tugged the other tip between finger and thumb. Each swirl of his tongue, each gentle pull of his fingers caused a startled moan to leave her throat. It was all too much, too sudden, yet not quick enough. She wanted more. Had to have more.

He backed her against one wall, and the coldness shocked her. With one swift movement he lifted her. "Wrap your legs around me."

When he lifted her, she did as he asked.

Ketera moaned against his mouth, desiring nothing more than to discover the greatest mystery with him. Their breaths mingled as one, and she fell into the moment with enthusiasm. He pushed his cock against her center in a gentle back and forth motion. Pleasure heated her body. She twisted to get closer. Moving her own hips, she started a cadence. She recalled a scene like this illustrated in the forbidden texts, and wondered if they were about to enact it in full.

Caught up in a never-ending delight, she fell into it, followed his passion and needs with perfect understanding. His cock continued its gentle assault. Her head fell back as

she moaned, reaching for that illusive pleasure that had touched her before. She wanted it. Wanted to give him the same delight.

Before she could voice her desire, he whispered in her ear, "Come for me, Ketera."

He'd asked her, demanded of her that she come before, and this time the added pleasure his words gave pushed her closer to the edge. She writhed, aching deep inside and wishing there was more. More of this. More of everything. She whimpered, gasped for air as he moved his hips. Her hands moved over him frantically, searching his muscle and power. She thrived on his masculinity and wanted him with a surge of desire she didn't know she'd possessed. Her hands scraped over his shoulders in an attempt to hold on to her rocking world.

He returned to tormenting her breasts. On and on he sucked her nipple, causing an arousal that threatened to undo her one thread at a time. With gentle sweeps of his fingers, he tested her other nipple between his fingers. She grabbed his head, stuffed her fingers into his hair and hung on for dear life.

"Dane, oh—" She gasped.

He moved to the other breast while tormenting the one he'd just loved with swift brushes and tugs of his fingers. She wriggled, eager to find the answer and put an end to the torment building inside her. He hefted her higher in his arms.

"You're so strong." She barely gasped out the words, amazed and yet delighted.

"Mmm." The vibration from his throat added pleasure to the sweep of his tongue over her aroused flesh. "You make me strong and hard."

Power ran through her as she'd never experienced before. She loved that she could make him like this, and in her own small way had command over him.

Dane's voice went throaty, a low demand. "I want you."

Ketera managed her next words, but they came out with difficulty. She'd never thrown herself at a man and had never wanted to until she met him. "Then take me."

He lowered her to the floor and drew back. His chest heaved up and down, and his cock pushed at his breeches. "I can't."

Shock kept her silent for a moment. "Why? You just said you want me."

"You aren't ready for this." He used his right fist to tap his naked chest. "I've never had a virgin before, and I don't want to hurt you." He smiled then cupped her face with one big, gentle hand. "Your first time with me shouldn't be like this."

To say he'd startled her was an understatement. She didn't expect this. She rubbed her arms, a chill going through her. He drew her to his chest and cuddled her close, and she soaked in his warmth. "You've pursued me so relentlessly I thought for certain you'd want me when I offered myself." She looked up at him, frowning as she thought of something. "Is that the real reason you aren't taking me? Because I offered myself?"

He smiled. "No. My motives are true."

She nodded, trepidation keeping her silent for a few moments.

Her body ached for more. He released her and started to pace the cave. Clearly not having her was taking a toll. Long moments went by, the only sounds his heavy breathing and the scuff and thump of his boots against the ground.

Finally she asked, "Does Drakus realize you're his half brother?"

Dane sighed. "Yes, Drakus has always known. Though he's a Daryk One, he's always lived in the jungle with his father and grew to despise me because of the lies his father told about my mother."

"His own mother a Magonian but he wants to hurt us."

Dane shook his head. "Sprite, I know that the only way Dragonians can survive is if we breed with Magonians. We need each other, but the complications are thick."

Curiosity overran her mouth. "Do you think that's why you're attracted to me? Because you're half Magonian?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I was attracted to you from the moment I saw you on the beach, from the moment I held you in my arms. I remembered my father explaining many years ago that Magonians and Dragonians are not so different, and when it comes to mating, we're the same in body if not in tradition."

"But Magonians are not so wild. Not so free."

"That's only because of what Magonians are taught from birth to restrain their true natures and limit what they really feel. Given freedom, a Magonian is as wild as any Dragonia. You know that."

She did. If living a short time on Dragonia hadn't proved it to her, nothing would. "I killed two men. I killed a beast." Tears rose in her eyes again. "I cannot believe I did that."

Pain flickered through his eyes, and she wondered how she ever could have believed him her enemy. "You had no choice. You did it to survive. You are brave and more beautiful than any woman I've known."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and he returned to gather her close. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Good. Then you won't kill me when I tell you a secret."

Chapter Eleven

Dane stared at Keteria, holding her shoulders and caressing her gently. Her fingers slipped over his chest, and she wanted to touch him more than anything on Croan. She kept her arms at her side, her eyes moist with more tears. By the god, she ached for him.

She sighed. "Tell me this secret quickly then I might take pity on you."

He chuckled then kissed her forehead again in pure affection. "If you wish. Come close to the fire." He maneuvered them so he sat with his back to a rock outcropping. "Sit between my thighs." She delighted in the way his eyes smoldered. She loved how he brought out her passion, and when she sat with her back to him, he said, "Nestle your ass against my cock." A shocked little gasp left her throat, and he was amused again. "By the god, I can't wait to introduce you to sex in a way you've never imagined in your wildest dreams."

"Dane." She felt breathless, her face heating uncontrollably at his words. She segued. "Tell me, Dane. What is your secret?"

He sucked in a breath and groaned. He slipped his arms tight around her, just under her breasts and buried his face in her hair. "You smell wonderful."

She sniffed. "You flatter well, sir, but I know I smell of our exertion."

"No. You smell of pretty cunny dripping with need."

"Dane—" She shivered delicately in his arms as one hand cupped her left breast. "You are so..."

"What, my sweet?" He lifted her tunic and cupped her bare breast. He gently tweaked the nipple. "What?"

"Never mind. Tell me what your secret is."

"Well, it's like this. I am half Magonian, and that proves that everything Dragonians believe about Magonians is partially wrong."

"That's your secret?"

"Yes and no."

"Explain."

As his palms caressed both breasts, her breath became faster. He kept one hand on her breast, while the other slipped into the band of her pants. He barely touched her mons and she couldn't help the excited intake of breath. He sank his fingers between her legs and found warm cream. Her hand slapped down over his, but when she didn't stop the movement, Dane caressed her soft folds. A moan left her throat as pleasure poured through her. Perhaps they could make love. Perhaps. He caressed her nipple and toyed with the wetness between her legs.

"Very well then. You know that Magonians don't believe in sex for pleasure," he said.

Her breath hitched again, but she didn't know if it was from her astonishment or the fact his middle finger toyed with her pleasure button. "Yes."

"I am part Magonian and yet that didn't cool my blood, did it?"

"No."

"We Dragonians like to pretend we're superior to Magonians, but in the end we're no better or no different. Did the texts or your scribes explain the real reason why Magonians wanted us out off the supercontinent?"

"Other than what I've told you already, no?"

His hands stilled on her, but he kept them in place, a tantalizing lead-in to what could happen next if she allowed it. "We required blood of others to survive two thousand years ago. We weren't just banished from Magonia because of our wild passions and inquisitive nature but for our desire for blood. I didn't tell you earlier because I didn't think it mattered."

"Magon." She stiffened in his arms.

"Fear not. It isn't within us anymore. We learned how to get blood from animals on Dragonia. We had to in order to survive. Then the desire for human blood disappeared after two thousand years." When she didn't relax, her body stiff against his, he sighed. "You know how my eyes glow red whenever my passion or anger is aroused?"

"Yes."

"That is all that is left of our old ways and needs."

He feathered his fingers over her nipple and caressed her folds, and she wriggled in his arms. "It is against nature what we've done. If we'd stayed and lived in peace with the Magonians two thousand years ago, we would all flourish as one lovely continent. Dragonia would continue to be forbidden, a place of hideous creatures."

Dane buried his face in the nape of her neck, his tongue sweeping over sensitive flesh. Oh, that felt so good.

His cock, which had stayed hard, grew thicker against her buttocks. When she didn't speak, he ventured to ask, "Are you afraid of me? Of what I told you?"

At first Ketera thought she should be afraid. Then she realized how much sense it made. All of it. "No. I admire you and your people. You turned away from blood seeking in order not to harm others. You've built a world here on this continent that amazes me."

When he kissed the side of her neck, her blood rushed hot. She could hear his breathing quicken.

"There is a way we can make love now that we know each other's secrets," he said.

"Oh? But I thought you said we couldn't breed here?"

"Blame my lack of foresight."

She smiled even though she faced away from him. "Show me."

"I'm going to lift you and bring you down on my cock. But we'll do it very slowly. If it hurts, you tell me. Lift up and get rid of those pants."

The rough demand in his voice excited her on a whole new level. He released her and she stood long enough to toss her pants aside. As she did so, he quickly removed all his clothes and piled them together in a heap. She wanted to savor him, to look at his exciting body with leisurely appreciation, but knew he couldn't wait any longer. She couldn't wait any longer. Truth was upon her and she both feared and longed for it. This mystery of life would finally be solved.

Ketera returned to him. She couldn't wait another moment. His cock touched between her legs then slid down, down. She gasped.

"All right?" he asked.

"Yes. You're so big."

He laughed softly, the husky sound vibrating over her skin, sending her senses into pure arousal. "No more than any Daryk One."

She sighed. "It feels so good."

"Mmmm. It should. It should always feel wonderful."

He slid into her with a slow glide, spreading her open. That thickness caressed, made her body more aware, more excited than she could have imagined. Like a hot brand he moved through her moist channel.

Still holding her above him, he groaned out his next words. "Oh by the god. You feel so good."

Her body trembled, her senses soaring as she wanted to move, to stroke him within her body and know another incredible orgasm. "Please."

"Don't. Don't move."

She wriggled, and with a roar, his hips came up and he lowered her at the same time. She felt a stretching, an incredible fullness as his thickness spread her open and drove to her womb. In wonder, she realized lovemaking was a mystery no more. This was sex. This was the most primal of human expressions, and she couldn't deny that she wanted more. Her core clenched around him, and an ache built in her center. Primitive desires that he'd awakened earlier roared into full life. She reached back to touch his face, to show some expression of her desire.

He groaned softly, his hands lifting her slightly then brought her down. "Ketera, honey."

"You're so...this is..." She wanted to move, to writhe against the insistent craving that demanded fulfillment. She gasped, unable to take it all in.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked as his arms went around her, his voice rough but concerned. "If I hurt you—" He started to lift her.

"No. I'm...please don't stop now. It feels so good, so good."

And he brought her down again, his breath rasping, his chest rising and falling. She could hear his arousal in each of his breaths and knew that he ached for her as much as she ached for him.

"I don't know what to do," she said softly.

"Nothing to do." He kissed her ear. "This first time is for you. Rest back against me and relax. Just let me touch you."

He cupped one breast, holding it tenderly, caressing the nipple in tantalizing brushes, sweet tweaks between thumb and finger. She groaned as he brushed her pleasure center above where his cock penetrated her. She clenched again, the ache inside her starting to tingle from her womb and down her channel. Desire drove her higher. She wanted to caress him from the inside out, give him more pleasure and happiness any way she could. His fingers took all other thoughts from her mind but glorious enjoyment. As his touch brushed over her, she jumped again.

"Easy, my sweet." His voice rumbled against her ear. "Relax. Relax. Let it happen."

As his touch glided over her sensitive flesh, she moved in his hold. Seated on his cock, she clenched again and again. His moans started to rise with hers. His middle finger swirled over her button, again and again and again. Excitement escalated, her heartbeat banging in her chest, her breathing fast and anxious. His hardness barely moved inside her, his hips tilting upward. The rhythm was gentle, undemanding and started a firestorm in her body. His cock pumped against a sweet spot high inside her, touching it, brushing over it again and again until the tension inside her threatened to grow unbearable. It was happening fast. So fast.

Her hands gripped his powerful forearms as pleasure shivered through her. She needed an anchor in this insane world. "Dane, Dane!"

He wouldn't let her back away from it, his fingers stimulating her, his thrusts steady and slow. The incredible stimulation drove her higher until she couldn't stand it any longer. Her body convulsed, a high treble of staggering pleasure radiating from her womb, down her channel and into her clit. She whimpered, her head thrown back.

Dane tensed, his grip around her waist tightening as he released a guttural cry of satisfaction and thrust one last time. Ketera felt his power, the essence of his life force spilling deep within her, a flood of warmth.

Moments later, his breathing still hard, he whispered to her, "All right?"

"All right?" She laughed, still breathless. "I'm wonderful. That was..."

"Mmm." He kissed her neck. "There's more."

He lifted her off his cock, and her tissues ached with lingering pleasure. "More."

"Stand up and I'll show you."

The cold night didn't matter because her entire body felt as if it might combust with leftover excitement. Though the orgasm had driven her into a sweet madness, her body demanded more love.

As she turned around, her tunic covering her top half but her bottom naked, she laughed. She looked down at herself. "Dane, I'm a half-naked woman in boots."

As he rose to his feet she saw that his cock was still erect. Still erect? By the god, were all men like this? She'd heard that after one time men were done for quite a spell. "Are all Daryk Ones like you?" She nodded toward his cock. "I mean, your maleness is still..."

He laughed. "Most Daryk Ones are potent. We require more sex than the average man. But never so much that it would hurt our mate."

Utterly naked, a god come to life, he moved toward her, his steps deliberate, his virility evident in every rippling muscle. He stood watching her, his eyes not feral red but warm with appreciation for her nakedness. She flushed, her body reacting as she took in his nakedness with ravenous curiosity. Yes, she'd seen him naked before, but without the full and startling view she had now. He was so big and imposing, a tiny part of her felt caution around all that power. His broad shoulders and corded arms showed tremendous strength, the rippled muscles in his stomach and narrow hips gave her a thrill she couldn't explain except in biological terms. Of course, when a woman witnessed such virility, she would respond as purely female needs took hold.

Her body moistened, wanting him with a tremendous force. Those needs flowed through Ketera, thumping in her chest, burning under her skin, making her stomach swirl with an aching arousal only Dane could quench. Her fingers itched to trace over all his muscles, to touch the hair sprinkled over his pectorals and trailing down over his stomach.

And his cock.

Well, his cock stood erect, hard and thick, and she ached to know it inside her again. Slick warmth heated between her legs. Her heart jumped in her chest as she caressed his cock with her gaze. She'd never imagined a man's cock could be so large, yet it had fitted deeply inside her with no trouble. Her womb felt as if it contracted and she gasped. Tearing her gaze from his manhood, she took in his powerful thighs and calves and arrived at his big feet.

His smile held cocky self-assurance, a man at ease in his body, at ease in any environment. "Like what you see?"

"Of course. You're..."

"Yes?"

"Amazing. There. Does that embolden your ego?"

"It does." He moved closer, like a prowling animal.

Ketera licked her lips in anticipation.

As he gathered her into his arms, she pressed against him and gloried in his naked flesh and beauty. He drew her tunic over her head and left her equally naked. Her breasts pressed against his hair-roughened chest, the nipples rising and hardening. He caressed, testing her skin with gentle strokes that promised more pleasure in the

coming moments. His tongue tasted her neck, finding her pulse points and licking over them with delicate touches that made her long for more touches and another deep penetration. Heat spilled inside her, encompassing her, driving her to caress him with an eagerness to match. She edged away just far enough to reach between them and circle his cock with her fist.

He drew back with a gasp and captured her hand. "Please, sprite. If you do that I'll come too soon. I want to be inside you."

With his palms he glided over her flesh, testing the firm roundness of her buttocks, tracing the crack between her ass cheeks. She gasped and gazed into his eyes, now a soft red glow.

He kissed her forehead. "There are many sex acts Dragonians love."

"Will we do them all tonight?"

"No." He smiled as he teased her back entrance with one finger. His cock trapped between their bellies a reminder of his continued arousal. "But soon I'll take you here."

She shivered at the thought. "There? But I couldn't. I mean, I read something about Dragonians liking anal sex but it's just not done on Magonia."

"How do you know? My guess is that a lot of Magonians indulge in so-called forbidden acts behind closed doors where the Truth and Order Police can't see them." His fingers continued to tease her. "Like anal sex. Oral sex. Sex in caves."

She laughed, the joyful sound muffled as his lips took hers. She moaned as his tongue took possession for one hot stroke. He drew back just as quickly. "There's one sex act I want to try now. Are you sore?"

"No. I don't think so."

He released her and took her hand. He led her toward a cave wall. "Turn away from me and place your hands on the wall. Lean forward a bit and spread your legs."

She did as he asked, excitement rising. He came up behind her, cupped her hips and his cock touched her pussy lips. She sucked in a breath.

He drew back. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, no. It feels so good. I want you."

He circled her waist with his arms, kissing her back as he drew her into a small hug before taking a hold on her hips. He inserted his cock just inside her pussy lips, and the heat made her ache to know more, to feel more. With excruciating slowness he thrust. His cock pushed into her softness, gliding in...in...until he spread her wide and came up against her womb. She wriggled, her heartbeat banging against her chest as she shivered around his cock.

"So soft. So wet." His voice lowered, more guttural and demanding.

This time it was his turn to suck in a breath. His cock moved in slow, tentative thrusts and learned her core with a gentleness she didn't expect. She knew he'd never hurt her intentionally, yet his sheer animal presence and power touched the feminine inside her. She didn't think after the number of orgasms she'd had that she could feel

such overwhelming pleasure again. She was wrong. His length stroked her, and what he did next fired her senses higher.

His fingers tightened on her hips, his voice powerful in its demand. "Open to me. Push back."

She caught his rhythm, learning what he wanted, how fast he wanted her to move. Their hips moved, coming together again and again as he took her with a growing fierceness. Her breath caught in her throat as her excitement rose higher. With a powerful lunge, he speared her deeply and her body unraveled in a wild, shivering spasm of pleasure. She whimpered, shuddering as the ecstasy tore her apart.

Dane gritted his teeth as her flesh pulsed and throbbed around his cock. His balls drew up tight, signaling an imminent explosion. Under his hands, she quaked, her body gripping and releasing his flesh. She shook with it. The orgasm lasting so long it seemed an earthquake. Primal desire drove him to pump faster. He fucked her harder, wanting to spill within her and create life. She'd come so hard and was so wet he moved easily within her channel, and the way she caressed him felt more amazing than anything he could have imagined. The pleasure of her silken, wet skin enclosing him, caressing him about drove him straight from his mind. He gasped and moaned, the intensity of his need overwhelming. His eyes closed, his teeth clenching tight as he tried to hold on. He wanted her to come again, but his body had other ideas. He fucked faster, and within seconds her sweet pussy clenched and tightened over him as she quivered and moaned in ecstasy.

His mind screamed in male satisfaction as he recognized another orgasm shaking her to the core. By the god, yes.

He gripped her hips and rammed inside her. Hot semen escaped, spilling from him with pulse after pulse of unbelievable bliss. He shook as he stayed tucked inside her body. For a time that seemed immemorial he maintained his grip on her hips and allowed her to cushion him. His breath rasped in his throat, his heartbeat slowing from thunderous to a steady beat. What seemed forever passed and then she spoke.

"Dane."

Realizing that he still leaned against her, he left her body and brought her around to face him. Her skin was warm, but he knew the damp, cool cave would soon chill them both.

He cupped her face, kissed her lips. "You all right?"

Ketera's smile was mischievous, filled with a variety of emotions including amazement. Her hands slid up his chest and the excitement of having her hands on him made his breath catch.

He caught her fingers in his and brought them to his lips. "Let's get dressed. It's too cold to do this for long."

They redressed in a hurry, and as they did so, he saw her shivering.

"I can't believe we just did...*that* in a cave," she said. "And just a short while ago you were..." She sat on the ground to pull on her boots.

"Dying." He gave her the right word, sensing she didn't want to speak the truth. "Daryk Ones are not immune to Magonian poison and many of the poachers know that."

"But couldn't they also poison themselves using it?" She stood slowly.

"They take the risk and apply it to their swords shortly before a fight." Emotions swamped him and he gritted his teeth. As much as he cared for Ketera, he couldn't allow his affection to distract him from what they must do now. "We need to get back to the castle. Minilos is probably worried and he wanted to get us in touch with Finius Dow."

She scrubbed one hand over the back of her neck. "That's the man who promised to take me back to Magonia."

"Yes. But now I think it's my job to take you to Magonia."

Her mouth opened in surprise. "You would."

"Absolutely. But we'd have to do this in a clandestine fashion. It's obvious I'd have to play the part of a dominant Magonian husband once we reached Magonia."

"Don't think that just because we've had sex that I'm going to become submissive."

He laughed in earnest. "You think so?"

She glared at him, perhaps only half amused. "Yes."

He nodded. "Nothing can stop me from wanting to keep you safe."

She reached for him and snuggled into his arms. His heart melted as her soft weight nestled near. A rush of emotions exploded inside Dane. He'd never felt this way about any woman, not even the few bed partners over the years who he always respected.

Dane decided overthinking the situation at the moment wouldn't help their quest to return to Grimnald Castle safely. He could do something else for her, however, that might solve his concern for her and still help her discover what was happening to her father.

"If it will ease your mind, I'll ask Armen if I may send a Daryk One to check on your father. A lone Daryk One could make it to Magonia far easier and quicker than you could and report back what he finds."

After a short surprised silence, she said, "Thank you. But a Daryk One wouldn't be able to save my father, would he?"

Dane nodded. "Yes. Remember how strong we are. The things we can do that no ordinary man can do?"

More silence enveloped them until he continued. "Do you know how long it will take for your father's trial to be completed?"

She shook her head. "It is hard to say. In his case though, it probably isn't much longer."

He nodded. "Then I'll send someone as soon as we get back to the castle. Perhaps you won't think me so evil hearted now?"

"No. Do you think I could have...made love with you if I thought that?"

He reached out and cupped her face then allowed his fingers to caress her neck. "I think you feel the same pull I do. What we think of each other is not as strong as our desire to mate."

He saw disappointment fill her face though he didn't know why she would feel dissatisfaction about what he'd said.

"Perhaps not," she said. "I'm grateful you're sending someone."

"We need sleep. Dawn comes soon enough, and we'll need all our strength."

She looked up at him, her eyes once more strong and certain. "Thank you for saving my life. For taking care of me."

He made a soft, self-deprecating laugh that sounded more like a snort. "By the hells, Ketera. Don't you know? It's you who has saved me."

Chapter Twelve

Ketera awakened to a horrifying scream. A beast or human in the most horrible pain. She jolted upright and found Dane gone. They'd slept against the cold wall all night, his arms cradling her. How had he left her without her knowing? Frantically she glanced around, but saw no sign of him. The fire still burned brightly, keeping the cave from being quite as cold as it would have been. Dawn lightened the cave and sounds of animals coming awake chirped, growled and called. Her heartbeat slammed against her chest as apprehension took hold.

She stood and headed for the cave opening just as Dane appeared at the cave lip. Relief swamped her. "What was that horrible sound? Where were you?"

A smile touched his mouth as he held up a lizard. About three feet in length and two feet thick around, the mottled green creature had an elongated ugly snout filled with razor teeth. Its tail was almost as long as the body.

He strode into the cave. "Breakfast. Sorry it woke you. Makes a terrible sound when killed by a sword."

"Oh." What else could she say? "We're eating that?"

He started to work, staying at the edge of the cave as he drew his dagger and slit the creature from end to end. "Tastes like...well, there are those feathered creatures you saw at the castle that run amok making a clucking sound. We call them chilikins. You know what I'm talking about."

"We have something similar on Magonia. They're called chaikins there."

He shrugged. "Same difference. Anyway. This lizard tastes a lot like a chilikin."

She wrinkled her nose and rubbed her arms. "Honestly?"

"Yes. You'll like it."

Doubt lingered but she assisted with dressing the animal and setting up a sturdy spit over the fire. In no time, pieces of the white meat roasted as they took turns rotating the lizard. Outside the cave, beasts continued to call, their various sounds both fascinating and frightening her.

"How much farther to the castle?" she asked.

"About an hour's walk."

"We couldn't have walked there last night?"

"Even a Daryk One knows when not to travel in this jungle. Pitch-black night is one of those times. Especially not with an innocent."

That rankled. "I'm not innocent."

He unhooked the lizard from the spit and placed it on leaves he'd gathered. "In some things you must be. You just came to our country. Even your texts don't tell you everything to expect here. Did they tell you about all the harmful animals and plants and insects?"

She couldn't avoid admitting the truth. "Some. Please just do not call me innocent. I've had to play innocent in Magonia for so long I thought it would kill me."

He didn't look up as he used a stick to spear some meat. "Eat up. We need our strength."

"Not until you vow not to call me innocent."

He returned her gaze. "As you wish. I'm not certain why it matters so much. Why don't you explain?"

She took a stick and used it to stab the steaming-hot cooked meat. "Like I said before. I was very good at talking and working with people from all walks of life. Even the very rich and poor ones. Everyone seemed to like me, but I soon didn't know who I was. Everyone saw Ketera Aldrancos as I wanted them to and to some that meant innocent. I couldn't tell anyone about the texts. No one. As it is, you and my father are the only ones who know about the texts."

"And you lost them in the shipwreck."

Shame and anger rose inside her. "Yes."

"Then you must go on without them and save your father."

His practical statement, his sheer hard-nosed response had two effects on her. She agreed and yet she also wanted to slap him. Slapping him sounded more biddable right now. "Agree not to call me innocent."

Dane's serious expression was even more unsentimental. "All right. If you wish."

His voice had that placating tone she'd heard husbands use on wives before, though more often she'd heard wives use it with husbands. It worried her. Though she'd encountered plenty of conflict on Dragonia, she wanted to find some peace soon. Her father back at home with her, her life as it was before. At the same time, she understood the chances of that happening were slim. Now that she'd met Dane, it appeared everything had changed. From the time he'd first kissed her, touched her body in ways she never thought a man would, to their night of wonderful lovemaking, Dane had shown her a new way of seeing life.

Lovemaking had been more than she'd imagined, and she could imagine a considerable amount. Life had turned on its head and brought her adventure, danger, and yes the one thing she thought to never find. Romance. She never would have understood romance if it hadn't been for the texts. If she hadn't seen hints that true love existed outside of the rigorous religious views in Magonian society, she wouldn't have believed it. Surely some things in the texts couldn't be true. Dane's lovemaking proved to her that every inch could be true, down to the last detail. A truly odd thing in cultural and anthropological terms. People who wrote great books always embellished

the truth, made their mythology far more grandiose. The scribes altered the facts to suit their own needs, which usually translated to power over a people.

Confusion went along with her happiness. She'd given herself to this man and didn't know what it meant. They had no future when she returned to Magonia, and the knowledge burned inside her like a brand. Resolved not to think about it for the present, she ate her meal and tried to forget what that meal had looked like before Dane killed it.

Soon after, they left the cave. Ketera's blood ran skittish, her mind spun in a whirl as she tried to keep calm. It took some doing, but she reminded herself what she'd accomplished so far. She'd killed two men to save herself and saved Dane's life. None of it felt real, but it gave her some satisfaction to know she could still take care of herself. She dared not dwell on Dane's near death.

After about an hour of walking, Ketera saw the castle donjon at Castle Grimnald come into view as light rose high in the sky from the star above. Almost obscured by the huge gray curtain walls, it promised protection. Her nerves jumped, reminding her they weren't quite there yet. She was glad they'd left for the castle once they determined poachers hadn't followed and lay in wait outside the cave. Dane had explained the poachers were more interested in the dragon in the long run.

"I hope the dragon escaped," Ketera had said.

Just as they were coming into the clearing, the huge drawbridge came down. They'd planned on entering around the side at a smaller entrance, but this worked well enough. Several Daryk Ones ran toward them.

"Dane," one of them called when ten Daryk Ones arrived in front of them.

All ten men stood at least six feet tall or slightly over, but they weren't as tall as Dane. They had a couple of days' worth of beard, and their shoulder-length, thick hair came in shades of blond, red and black or brown. They each wore a huge pack on their backs, as if they expected to be traveling for a significant time.

The one who had called Dane's name had inky hair and was rough-looking, but that didn't surprise her. She hadn't seen one yet who didn't look tough and capable of serious harm. Involuntarily she took a step back.

Dane's hand came down on her shoulder. "Ketera Aldrancos, this is Eryk Gauth. Eryk and I have known each other since we were children."

She held her hand out to Eryk, and he bent over it to kiss the back. "A pleasure to meet you." He smiled as he released her hand and stood straight. "I see that Charger has found his mate."

Dane's grip on her shoulder released and he smiled at his old friend. "I haven't seen you in a month. Where have you been? You've brought others with you?"

Eryk's handsome face shadowed. "We have two missions."

"Poachers? We ran into them yesterday. They were hunting a dragon."

"Minilos told us you went after your lady. We were worried when we heard you'd disappeared. A few people came in from the jungle but said they hadn't seen you, and we were going out to search and then leave the area."

Dane and Eryk gripped arms up to the elbow in a strange handshake she hadn't seen him use before. "Thank you, my friend. I ran into Rayder and he helped me."

Eryk's eyes, a brown that glimmered with danger, turned darker. "That traitor?"

Dane nodded. "Seems he still has enough integrity to help me find my mate." Dane looked at the other men in the crowd and acknowledged each one by name. He returned his attention to Eryk. "What else brings you here?"

"There is a restlessness afoot in Imekland and Ithycan. The people at Bardannia Castle and Leadios Castle are in conflict with each other. Leadios' leader believes that perhaps Drakus Fina is right. We should take Magonian women and breed with them."

Ketera stiffened under Dane's hand, and he pressed her shoulder gently. Dane cleared his throat. "What does Bardannia believe?"

"That we should stay the course as we always have." Eryk shifted on his feet and crossed his arms. His eyes glittered. "That kidnapping and taking Magonian women against their will is a great crime."

Dane's hand slipped around her waist and brought her against him. "And what do you and these men believe?"

"We will never follow a man like Drakus Fina. We would rather die fighting him," a blond man said, pure masculine determination etched on his face.

She glanced at Dane and saw resolve cross his face as well as relief. "I'm glad to hear it, friend."

"In the meantime, we must hurry," one of the other men said. "Time is a wasting."

"We've heard that Drakus plans to raid Grimnald Castle again within the day," Eryk said, glancing at the jungle as if he expected someone to jump out at any minute. "At least that's the rumor. More of his forces plan to raid Bardannia. We must return there as soon as possible."

"Raid?" Ketera asked automatically, fear escalating.

Dane's arm tightened around her. "It's at least two days' travel to the edge of Imekland and Bardannia. What makes you think you can make it there before the place is raided?"

"I must return." Eryk's gaze traveled over Ketera with keen curiosity she didn't understand. "My woman is in danger."

Dane's eyebrows shot up. "A mate?"

Eryk shrugged. "I'm almost certain."

"Almost certain?" Dane snorted. "How can you be almost certain? Mates are or they aren't."

Eryk's eyes took on a coldness. "It is complicated, and none of your business, Charger."

Dane laughed. "Of course, I'm sorry. Good luck to you. In the meantime, will you stay here and fight with us?"

Eryk's face held conflicting emotions, with regret chief among them. "I wish we could. You have plenty of Daryk Ones to defend this castle. Thirty at least, not including yourself."

Ketera didn't want to think they had so few Daryk Ones to take care of this castle. "Is that all?"

Eryk smiled, and it changed his dark eyes to warm and appreciative. "Thirty Dark Ones can kill many men at a single fight."

"Still..." She tried not to shiver.

Dane released her and shook his friend's hand again. "I'll bid you goodbye. I'm grieved we cannot spend more time together."

Eryk released his hand and nodded. "As am I." He gestured to the men with him. "Much drinking and joviality would be appreciated at another time, my friend. I'll hold you to it."

"Be safe." Dane waved as the men head off into the jungle at a run.

Another shiver ran over her and she rubbed her arms. Though there were other people milling about on the outside of the castle, most of them were heading for the drawbridge.

She shivered again. "Dane, let's go in."

He nodded and they started for the drawbridge. Before long they'd entered the bustle and hustle. People didn't stop to look at them or greet them—they seemed far too hurried to make the effort.

"Everyone is preparing for battle." Her voice quavered and she hated that. She cleared her throat and coughed.

"Possibly. Fear makes everyone walk a little faster."

"Is that why we're walking so fast?"

He grunted, face serious and unyielding. "We'll go to my quarters. There we'll prepare for anything that might come."

"Why would Drakus attack this castle again?"

Dane's grim stare as they marched toward his quarters told her only half the truth. "Those poachers were Drakus' men. They weren't Daryk Ones or you wouldn't have been able to kill them."

That stung a little. She'd taken pride she could defend herself. "And? He'll want revenge?"

"Not because he cares about the men. Because his pride's been hurt." A small smile touched his mouth then vanished. "The dragon probably did get away."

She laughed, but there was no real mirth in the sound. "He'd attack this entire castle just for that?"

"More likely he's angry because Bantu died at my hands. At Rayder's hands."

"How would he know that?"

"Word will filter through that Bantu had a woman and someone got her back. He may guess it was us based on the way we fight."

"He would know how each Daryk One fights?"

"Long years of being a Daryk One himself. Don't underestimate Drakus. He is very clever. Evil just happens to be a part of his intelligence."

They reached the stairs that went up to his quarters and started upward. He stopped on the stairs when she didn't follow him. "What?"

She continued past him and headed to his door, eager to get there. "We need to get in touch with Minilos, and I need to leave Dragonia before the siege. Time is running out for my father."

She expected him to argue, but instead he drew her inside their quarters and locked the door behind them. "I don't know if there's time for that."

"What do you mean?"

He cupped her face in one hand then drew her into his arms. "I doubt there's time for us to get out of here and make it to the beach before Drakus lays siege to the castle."

She sighed. "No."

"Yes. Look, as soon as the siege is over, I'll get you out of here. There are a few things we absolutely have to do first."

She drew out of his arms, her frustration returning. "You're not just saying this to keep me here."

"Of course not." He looked unhappy that she'd questioned him. "You don't trust me?"

"I know you want to keep me here."

"Of course I do. You are my mate."

Red glowed in his eyes and reminded her of the primal urges that ran through him. Through her, if she would admit it.

"I must save my father."

"Not at the cost of your life. I will send the Daryk One to reconnoiter in Magonia."

Returning frustration made her turn away from him. He clasped her forearm and gently spun her around. "No matter what you think, I want to help you. Before that, we need to prepare for Drakus. I have some things to show you." He showed her a false bottom wall in one cabinet. "There's enough food and water stored back here to last weeks."

She glanced around, astonished by the food stores he'd managed to put away. "This is incredible."

He showed her how to open a false bottom in the closet. "You'll need to know about this." He pulled out a bag filled with money. More money than she'd ever seen.

"By Magon," she whispered.

He put the bag back inside the depression in the floor. "There is twenty thousand triand in there."

He stood and helped her into standing position. He kept her hand in his. He dipped down to kiss her, his mouth ravenous. He let her go almost as quickly. "If something happens to me. If the battle starts and I don't come back for you today, you need to take this money and go through the tunnel." He took her to another door, this one hidden in another wall. He pushed it open and blackness yawned beyond the door. A short distance down the tunnel, vines in the wall glowed with blue and white. "This tunnel is continuously lit by fire plants. It leads straight to the tavern and Minilos. He'll keep you safe and get you to a ship back to Magonia. The money might help you secure your father's release."

Her throat tightened, her mind racing in a hundred directions. "I can't take your money, and you're coming back."

"I plan on coming back, but anything is possible in war. You know that. I must talk to Armen Helnak. Take the time to bathe. You might not get a chance once the battle begins. I'll bathe when I return. Lock this door when I leave."

He planted another short, hard kiss on her lips. She responded, throwing her arms around his neck and taking the lead by caressing his lips with her tongue. He groaned, hauling her into his arms and pressing his growing erection against her. He took over, plunging his tongue inside her until she felt an intense response blossoming in her lower stomach. His hands clamped on her butt and squeezed as he kissed her voraciously.

When he broke free, his eyes were flame red, his breath puffing between his lips. "I want you, but I have to restrain myself now." He left her go and drew his dagger out. He handed it to her. "Take this. It served you well in the jungle. Use it if you must, however you must. You're a good fighter."

With a parting smile, he left. The door closed, but he didn't lock it from the outside. Wonderment and fear mixed inside her. Dane trusted her. She was here, free to go anytime, and he'd shown her a huge stash of money. She could leave anytime.

No. She couldn't.

She couldn't abandon Dane, even if he didn't come back today. She couldn't take his money and leave him high and dry.

Her bond with him grew tighter, closer every minute. His trust in her amazed and yet gratified her. The man had given her a gift she couldn't remember receiving from anyone but her father. Total trust.

She tried to relax, but as silence gathered around her, her mind turned to nightmarish visions of what might come.

Chapter Thirteen

Dane walked into the donjon situated near the center of the castle and immediately two Daryk Ones moved from their posts by the main door and blocked Dane's way.

"Who goes there?" one asked.

Dane wanted to yell that there wasn't time for the formalities, the ceremonial aspects. These men knew him well. Instead, Dane gritted his teeth in impatience. "It is I, Dane of the Daryk Ones and supreme ally to our lord Armen Helnak."

"Enter," the other Daryk One said.

Dane passed the men and opened the door to the donjon. As he walked in, he didn't expect to see the feudal lord standing at a window, staring out at nothing. The entryway was bare with no decoration on the walls or other personal items to make it appear more as a home. Usually Armen spent most of his time in the second and third floors of the structure, running his affairs from there. About fifty-five, the man didn't have family left. He'd married twice, but both wives had died without producing an heir. Not likely that he would have had children. Walls surrounded the area, and the window only allowed fresh air into the donjon.

"My lord." Dane stood at attention, his spine straight, his eyes planted on the wall above the other man in a sign of deference.

"Have you considered what will happen if I die before an heir is produced?"

Dane frowned. Funny this man spoke of the very thing Dane had been thinking. Still, it was a strange question. "No sir. I am concerned with battle at this time. I heard from Eryk Gauth that Drakus Fina's minions are attacking up and down the frontier. He races to Bardannia Castle to save his woman."

The lord turned and faced Dane. Women found the man handsome, but Dane couldn't see it. Didn't expect to understand. Tall, and almost big and strong enough to be a Daryk One himself, Armen Helnak presented a formidable picture. Dressed in much the same garb as a warrior, the overlord walked toward Dane.

"And what of your mate. I heard you have one."

Dane nodded. "Yes, my lord."

Though Armen was of a much higher class than his soldier, Armen bowed in politeness. "Much good fortune and children to your union."

Dane bowed at the waist in deference. "Thank you. My lord —"

"You did not answer my question, Charger. What will happen to this castle when I die?"

Why did he want to talk about this now? "I had not thought of it."

"I've made plans, Charger. You are to be my successor should I die. I wrote it into my will."

Dane couldn't believe what he'd just heard. He'd come in here expecting to discuss orders for the coming fight. "What?"

"If I should die in this battle or any other, you must promise to take over the running of this castle with the same spirit and hand that I have."

He took a step forward. "No. Sir, I cannot."

"You cannot, or you will not?"

The man before him had the power of life and death over Dane. Yet Dane had never known him to discipline unfairly or to exercise that death right. The Daryk Ones and the people of this castle respected Armen Helrak for his kindness and the firm hand that kept things running smoothly.

"I will not."

"Is your mate worth dying for?"

"Of course. She is my mate."

"Is this castle worth dying for?"

"Yes."

"Then you must promise to protect it if anything should happen to me. I would not ask you if I thought anyone else could do it. You are one of the strongest and most accomplished Daryk Ones I have ever known. I would not leave this castle or these people's welfare to anyone but you."

Dane didn't know what to say, his gut twisted in knots at the very thought of it. "What brought this on, sir? You are ill?"

"No. I am as hardy as ever. I'm only asking this of you because I see great leadership within you. You killed the dragon this week single-handedly. Few men can do that, even if they are Daryk Ones. As a Daryk One, you are used to autonomy yet work as a team if you must. You...you have a keen intelligence for what the enemy will do next, and a vast understanding of what makes people follow a leader."

Armen had always praised Dane's skills, but this went over the top. "Thank you, my lord." Dane swallowed hard. This order had come out of nowhere, but he knew he had to follow it. "You will marry and have children one day. There's no reason for this."

"Perhaps. And if that happens, then you will relinquish your title as my successor as feudal lord of Grimnald Castle. Before that, you will vow to take this order."

"If I refuse?"

"You know I'd never have you executed, Dane, even though I could. I ask this as your friend."

Taken like that, it made it even harder to refuse, but refuse it he did. "No. I cannot."

Armen shook his head. "It is too late. You are successor. It's in my will and testament."

Anger rose sharply inside him. "You did this against my will."

Armen's smile spread across his face. "Yes. For I knew you'd refuse and then I would feel too guilty to put your name down in my will. Now let us speak of the attack that is coming."

Dane marshaled the effort to stay on an even keel. One way or the other he'd convince Armen to change his will again. He wouldn't take on the responsibility of this entire castle. But first things first. The castle and all its occupants must stay safe.

A loud knock came on the door. A voice said, "My lord!"

On alert, Dane pulled his sword and held it at the ready, his stance in front of Armen protective.

Dane heard Armen pull his sword as well. "Enter!"

One of the Daryk Ones who guarded the donjon burst inside. "Several villagers have come in from the south and said they've seen rogue Daryk Ones towing a trebuchet!"

"Damn the hells!" Armen cursed more vehemently. "Fuck them! We have boiling oil, rocks and all matters of destruction. Let them come!"

Dane took a deep breath, as ready for battle as he could be. This time, however, he didn't feel as confident. His woman was in danger and that put an entirely different complexion on the entire situation.

With that in mind, he turned to Armen. "If they are towing a trebuchet, it will take them some time to get it through the rest of the jungle. We have a little time at least. I suggest we plan better strategy."

Armen nodded. "You're right, Dane." He smiled. "And this is why you must be my successor."

Dane's heart thudded in his chest, his apprehension higher than it had ever been in his life. "We'll talk about that later, my lord. I have another request." He told Armen about rescuing Ketera from the beach and her father's predicament.

Armen's eyes narrowed. "Your woman is Magonian?"

"Yes."

"You would do anything for her? Protect her with your life? Shield her from any harm?"

"I would."

"You are an honorable man." Armen's face transformed into a rare smile. "So be it. Perhaps this war had to come at some time. But not the way Drakus wants it, damn it."

Dane nodded. "Time is urgent. May I send the Daryk One immediately for her father?"

"Of course. When you come back we must talk about how to win this battle."

* * * * *

When the doorknob rattled and someone knocked, she almost flew off the bed. She stood there for a second before grabbing the dagger.

"Ketera, it's me."

She recognized Dane's rough, husky voice immediately. She hurried from the door and unlocked it, pocketing the key. "Thank Magon."

Relief sideswiped Ketera as Dane reached for her. He drew her into his arms, and she sank into security, for the moment forgetting the battle that may start soon.

"What's happening out there?" she asked as he drew back.

"Battle will come soon, but perhaps not until night. That's the way Drakus operates. It makes sense. He wants to keep people off guard. In any case, we must be prepared for what comes. Come talk to me while I bathe."

He walked to the bathing room.

She hesitated, at first embarrassed by the idea of watching him step into the bathing area. "Are you certain? I mean, about watching you bathe?"

He turned just as he reached the door of the bathing room. "Of course. Come."

And she knew what happened next wouldn't be a simple bath.

Ketera followed Dane, her face flaming. Why was she acting this way? She'd already had the most intimate experiences with him. Should bathing be any different?

Still, she walked into the room a mess, unable to stop the heat from overtaking her at the thought of watching him bathe. Such an intimate thing stirred passion in her, a fire that refused to be extinguished. Despite fear about the battle, she needed more connection with him and to forget the danger they faced.

"I've sent a man to Magonia. We should know shortly about your father. But it will take him at least a day to get across the ocean."

"I know." Impatience pushed her into making a sound of frustration. Before she could say anything, he continued with, "And it would take you at least that long to get there as well."

Ketera echoed his sentiments. "Yes, but I want to be there now."

"Of course you do." His voice was soft with understanding, and it sent a sweet pang of need racing around in her body.

"This place is relentless," she said.

"Relentless?"

"On Magonia all I had to worry about was the heat. Our houses are underground."

"I heard that. And that it grows to one hundred and forty degrees during the day."

"That's in the summer. At night it goes down to one hundred. In winter it's only one hundred during the day, and ninety-five at night. We can go outside during the winter for short periods."

"Do you prefer that environment to Dragonia?"

She shrugged. "I can't say. I haven't seen anything but the jungle, have I?"

He nodded and scrubbed one hand over his jaw. "True. Perhaps someday I will show you the glaciers and deserts. Though perhaps you are weary of seeing deserts."

"Very much so."

She tried not to stare as he started to take off his breastplate, but slowly he stripped. First the breastplate and then the stained and torn tunic fell to the floor. Though his hair was matted and his body sweaty, the carved lines of his chest and arms stood out in sharp relief. She'd never seen a more magnificent man and it set her on fire.

He didn't seem to notice her perusal as he dumped his boots in a corner and hurried to strip off his trousers. Every tight, amazing inch of his body caught her attention until her imagination turned to touching that body again. Tasting every inch.

He turned away and picked up his shaving tools. His back, a study in hard, undeniably masculine lines trailed down to his firm buttocks. She'd never become used to seeing this man naked.

"You've had a bit of beard since I met you," she said, her mouth dry as she watched him slide the blade over his chin.

"I don't like it too long. Should I cut my hair as well?"

"No!" she said almost violently.

He turned away from the water basin to look at her, a smile quirking one corner of his lips. "You don't like that idea?"

"Your hair is...a glory."

He smiled, grunted and turned back to shaving his face. "Glory. Sounds like a woman."

Her turn to grunt. "Dane, you are so masculine. So rough and..." What else could she say but what she felt. "Amazing."

He rinsed his face and dried it on a piece of linen. His smile when he looked at her lit his face from within. "Thank you. No woman has ever said such a thing to me."

Imagining another woman sharing this ritual with him caused a streak of jealousy to pour through her. "Have you invited many women into your bathing room?"

He glanced at her, that cocky smile still in place as he turned on the spray and water flowed down over his body. "Not many. I take it you don't like the idea I might have been with other women?"

Be honest. That's all you can do. "No."

He laughed. "That is a good sign."

"Of what?" Doubt layered over perturbation in her voice.

"That you care about me."

Not to be outdone, she put her hands on her hips and said, "And you care about me."

He threw back his head and let the water soak his hair. He shook his head and the water sprayed. Heat blazed in his eyes, and the warmth she saw there made her heart pound. "I would die for you."

That did it. Her heart expanded, opening to his in a way she couldn't have imagined in a million years. She'd never believed a man would ever vow to lay down his life for hers, not in her entire existence had she imagined a devotion this powerful. Until she met Dane.

Tears gathered in her eyes and she spoke the truth. "And I would die for you."

His eyes went animal, feral with heat. "Let us celebrate it."

As he lathered soap over his body, she found her mouth hanging open. She wanted to be the water. The soap. His hands traveling over each sculpted, rock-hard muscle.

When he saw her staring at him, he said, "Come help me bathe."

"I just washed."

His eyes turned warm, the red flame beginning to flicker. "Help me." Husky with seduction, his voice sent warmth traveling all over her body. "Please."

How could she refuse when her very breath seemed to rely on completing this request?

Refusal hovered on her lips, a modesty she couldn't deny working to the forefront. Craving exploded inside her and refused to wait silently. She wanted him and wanted to know more about this wonderful thing called sex.

She drew her clothes off slowly and watched him watching her. Desire turned his eyes a golden red, like the mysterious carn animal that wandered the deserts of Magonia and killed only at night. With a whiskered face and sharp claws the huge carn took no prisoners. Neither did this man. She couldn't deny the desire in his eyes, and as she undressed, she took in how he appreciated her. His nostrils flared, his pupils dilated. His lips parted. She worked with that desire, feeling her female power rushing through her body like a rogue wave crashing upon the shore. Like the wave that had taken down her ship. She wanted him helpless under her touch and craving her more than any other woman. In his eyes, she also saw a sadness she didn't understand and she feared it. It also made her want him with a heat she couldn't suppress.

As proof of her potency, his cock hardened, full and thick and long. No doubt about it. Dane wanted her in the worst possible way. She savored the wave of self-confidence it gave her. Along with this knowledge came her own desire, an ache of need deep between her legs.

Naked at last, she strode into the spray of water and allowed him to encompass her in his arms. As water cascaded over her, she clutched at his shoulders and held on for dear life. Before she could speak, he kissed her. Just like that, he wiped all else from her mind. Dane's kiss held desperation—as if he wanted her to forget everything but what they had in this moment. His skin was hot, soft skin over metal hardness, a delight to female senses. A man with substance in both body and soul. She hadn't known him long, yet she'd known him forever. Her heartbeat quickened as his hands traveled her

body, sliding soap over her skin from buttocks to shoulders. She'd never imagined making love to a man in a bathing room before, but it seemed as if her imagination had been very limited. She, who thought she'd understood the sexual descriptions in the texts, now knew she hadn't known as much as she believed. From that moment forward, she closed her eyes and just felt.

His hands traveled her body, paths untouched and those he'd explored previously. No hesitation remained inside her—she knew they'd tour ground she'd never considered before. It scared and thrilled her all at once. His mouth found hers, tongue seducing tenderly. Suddenly, urgency found them, and she couldn't stop shaping him with her palms, touching him in ways that demanded more. Now. It must be now. He cupped her buttocks then his middle finger touched between the crease. She started and tore her mouth from his.

In his eyes she saw the question and immediately knew the answer. Before she could speak, he teased her back entrance with a tickling touch. She laughed softly and wriggled.

"Dane?"

"Only if you want it."

She knew he did, the desire hot upon him, filling his eyes with a glow that hypnotized her. "Yes."

"We will go slow. If at any time I hurt you —"

"You never could."

Ketera knew it the way she knew her own name. She closed her eyes and threw her head back while he continued to explore. With gentle testing he inserted his finger deep, and the pleasure she remembered tingled inside her lower belly. He pushed that finger in farther then drew it out, beginning a steady rhythm that mimicked sex.

His mouth trailed over her cheek and found her neck. Tingles raced up and down Ketera. She moaned, her breath coming shorter and shorter as arousal kidnapped her. In and out. In and out. His finger slid back and forth easily. Finally he drew it out, and for a moment she feared he'd leave her frustrated. No. He edged another finger inside and thrust. Two fingers spread her open, and she gasped as he worked them gently, tutoring her flesh. He removed his fingers slowly and then proceeded to rinse soap from their bodies. He backed her against the wall as the water continued to cascade down upon them.

He cupped her ass in both hands. "Put your legs around my waist."

As he lifted her, she circled his waist and his cock slid into her pussy in one smooth thrust. She gasped as his broad length spread her walls, the ache deep within her rising high with one stroke then another.

She grabbed his shoulders as her eyes locked with his. The intimacy surprised her, shocked her down to the very core.

"Dane." Her voice sounded soft to her own ears, breathy with passion.

"Take me deep." His eyes flared the hottest she'd seen them as his hands tightened on her buttocks. "Come on my cock."

His rough, blatantly sexual request shocked her. He hammered once. Twice. The third time he hit extra deep and touched a spot inside her that ignited to life. All the fire banked inside her broke loose as she came with a startled cry of pure bliss. Her pussy pulsed along the thick cock buried inside her, and she shook within as the tingling ecstasy spread through her cunny and her entire body.

She buried her face against his shoulder, expecting him to continue. He stopped and lowered her feet to the floor.

He cupped her face, and although the fire remained in his eyes, his smile was tender. "That was beautiful, sprite."

He reached and turned off the water, startling her. She whispered in disappointment, "I thought we were going to..." How did she say it?

"We are. On the bed, where it's easier."

"Oh." Her face burned a little, her innocence an embarrassment in that moment.

Dane's smile didn't mock her. He took her hand. "Don't dry off. It's better wet."

The heat in his eyes as he said "wet" incinerated her the way the star above heated the planet. She followed him as he led into the bedroom. Even though the air was cool, she didn't care. Within a moment or two, she'd discovered a new fire.

"On your hands and knees on the bed, sprite."

His husky voice gave instructions without sounding demanding, and she wanted to hug him for it. This was all so new. So amazing. Had any of her married friends back on Magonia discovered this? She doubted it. Sex, they'd said in hushed tones, was unremarkable.

She climbed onto the bed, and when he moved behind her, she stiffened a little. "Dane?"

"Yes, my sweet?"

"Will it hurt?"

"No. Never with you. Never with my mate."

He leaned over her, cupped her breasts. He tweaked her nipples gently then kissed her spine. One kiss followed another, a chain of splendor as he heightened her need. By the time he reached the top of her buttocks, she felt like melted pudding.

Then his cock touched between her buttocks. She wanted to open to him, to let him know this dark place inside her. She leaned forward until her face was on the bed and used her hands to open herself to him.

"By the god," was his tight, husky whisper. "By Draconus you are pretty, my sprite."

He used some of the feminine cream flowing from her body to moisten her entrance. He spent what seemed a lifetime teasing her opening, brushing over it, kissing her butt cheeks until she moaned with excitement.

A moment later he pushed his cock head against her opening. Gently he tested her and eased his hardness inside until her body opened to admit him. She gasped as his cock head entered and rested inside her. It was the strangest, most amazing sensation she'd encountered. The fullness brought her a new level of arousal. She ached for something more, some primal urge to mate hard building inside her like a firestorm. She moaned again and pushed up on her palms.

"Ketera? Am I hurting you?"

"No. More."

Again he edged into her, back and forth. Back and forth. Just his cock head pierced her, working the flesh over and over. In and out he fucked her gently until her body gave more permission. Deeper now. Deeper. She panted, surprised at how the feeling pulsed into her vagina and tingled in her pleasure button. She reached up, found that spot and swept her fingers over it.

Wild pleasure pulsed inside her. "Yes." Her word was choked with honest pleasure. "Please."

"Please what?" His hips worked, still not giving her more than the tip of his cock.

In. Out. In. Out.

"More."

He moved a little harder and faster. His cock went deeper yet. Deeper. Each thrust brought him farther into her body, and his thickness felt like a hot rod. She moaned, not caring if anyone heard her.

"More." Her insistent demand was answered as he pushed a little harder and slipped in farther.

Before she knew it, his rhythm quickened, and so did the pace of her fingers teasing her bud.

"That's it." His voice had gone guttural. "Pleasure yourself."

She lost all her last inhibitions, the pleasure so astonishing she couldn't imagine not having it over and over.

"Can you take all of me?" he asked, breath panting, his voice guttural with unrestrained sex.

"Yes."

Another stroke and he went deep, the base of his cock up against her ass cheeks. By the god, he was inside her all the way. The idea fired every last need into full motion. She moved with him, fingers busy on her pleasure center, hips swaying. He leaned over her, his hips churning in a slow thrust and drag that worked his cock deep in her ass. Her pleasure button stung with rising excitement, her breath puffing from between her lips as she moaned nonstop. She couldn't stand it. She couldn't. Desperate, she thrust

two fingers inside her pussy and caressed her channel. The pleasure was astonishing. He clasped her hips and moved faster, his cock moving in her dark channel. A second later she exploded, her button firing to life as her pussy rippled.

Pumping steadily, his groans rising, Dane gave her one last hard thrust and came with a shuttering groan. Heat filled her ass as he poured inside her. Dane remained slumped over her, his cock buried deep until he gently inched from inside her. She sighed, replete with a content she'd never expected after the erotic, forbidden act they'd just performed. He helped her from the bed and they returned to the bathing room long enough to cleanse themselves.

"If I keep this up, I shall be as wrinkled as a hag," she said, heat suffusing her body at the memory of what they'd done.

He laughed. "Possibly. We need to dress. As much as I'd like to keep you naked in my arms, I fear there is no time to waste. We need to keep watch."

So they dried off, clothed themselves and cuddled on the bed to wait for battle to come.

Chapter Fourteen

Outside Dane's quarters, Ketera heard the sound of a fight. Shouts. Angry cursing.

Dane shoved his feet into his boots. "War has come."

Fear rose so high she thought she'd choke on it. Instead, she took a deep breath and forced it down deep where it couldn't escape. "I'll come with you."

She dragged on her boots and readied to depart, her hand going for his dagger on the bedside table.

He stayed her hand. "No. I told you. Stay here. As worthy a fighter as you are, your life depends on you staying here. If the fighting becomes too fierce, if I don't come for you by nightfall, you must leave. Remember, take the cave to the tavern and find Minilos. I stopped by the tavern earlier to let him know you might be joining him—"

"No." She hated the thought and stood in a rush of defiant motion. "I can't. I won't leave here without you."

He stood with her and cupped her shoulders, his fingers digging in a little as his face turned hard with admonition. "Damn the hells, Ketera! You must do this one thing for me above all else. If I think you're going to join me I won't be able to fight. I will make a mistake trying to protect you. I won't be able to perform my duty as a Daryk One. There are things I might do in battle that I don't want you to see. And I would die if I thought those things would make you think any less of me. Beyond that, I have to know you're safe. Take pity on me."

His plea was so sincere, his pleading blazing true in his eyes that she couldn't refuse him.

"Dane—"

"Promise me, damn it. Promise me."

She cupped his face, traced her fingers over the stubble already forming on his handsome jaw.

Treacherous tears burned her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall. "I promise."

"As the god Draconus is my witness, it will keep me alive knowing that you are safe somewhere. Even if it is on Magonia." He swallowed hard. "Even without me."

He pressed a hard, desperate kiss against her lips then released her. He grabbed his belt with his sword and donned it then quickly put on his breastplate.

"Gather food and money and put it in the pack on the table," he said, the order firm.

She complied, hurrying. She had it put together quickly, and that's when he took her arm and swung her toward him. His eyes held a haunted expression she knew she'd never forget as long as she lived. Dane took her in his arms and placed the most tender kiss on her mouth. Before she could respond, he released her and headed for the door.

Her heart spasmed and fear assaulted her. "Wait."

His hand on the doorknob, he stopped and waited.

"Please." She'd never liked begging before. Then again, she'd never felt what she did for this man before. "Come back to me."

"No matter where you are, sprite, there is always a part of you in here." Dane balled his fist and pressed it to his chest. "When this is over, no matter where you are, I will find you."

With that, he grabbed a dull silver helmet off the table and placed it over his head. It was the strangest thing she'd ever seen. With a high ridge along the top that made him look like a ridgeback lizard, a nose plate and with eyes and jaw unprotected, he looked every inch the warrior.

With a nod and a bow, he said, "My lady Keteria." He turned and left.

She rushed to the door and locked it, took the key. She balled her hands into fists and pressed them to the wooden door, knowing that war would find its way through this soon enough. She pressed so hard her hands hurt and the key bit into her palm. Drawing back with a cry of frustration and grief, she stowed the key into the pocket. On legs that trembled, she settled into one chair at the table and waited.

* * * * *

When Dane walked into the sunlight, he found the world already in chaos.

Men and children ran about, much as they had when the dragon threatened the castle. Dane's battle rage rose to the surface, as it did with any Daryk One. His blood stirred fiercely, a desire to protect the castle with all his might.

"Trebuchet! Trebuchet!" A Daryk One yelled from the top of a tower. "They've arrived!"

Dane sprinted down the stairs outside his quarters and across the courtyard, dodging the crowd as he went. He arrived at the tower and ran inside to take the circular stone stairs as quickly as he could. By the time he made it to the top, he was just in time to see men below working on setting up a massive trebuchet. From the way it was set up, he realized it would be some time before they managed to put it all together.

Another Daryk One, a man named Kilar, leaned over the edge in an attempt to see below. "They're marshalling close to the moat as well."

Before Dane could move, a shout from beyond the trebuchet caught his attention. Two archers drew back and fired.

Dane gestured at Kilar. "Get down!"

The man ducked. "By the hells!"

Dane started toward the stairs. "I'll check the other towers."

It didn't take long to assess the situation. At each tower men crowded the ramparts, ready to fight. Archers gathered in the lower floors of the towers.

It didn't take long to discover that even though the castle stood ready, the force outside would prove tough to quell. Dane took a deep breath. He wanted to go back to bed and fill himself with Kitera's love. A woman had never looked at him the way she did, had never torn him up inside with desires and needs the way she did. Now that he'd realized she was his mate, he couldn't return to pretending otherwise. Deep inside him fear ate away at his confidence for the first time in his life. He feared for her life, wished he could be with her as she made her way back to Magonia. But not right now. Not now.

A mere moment later he heard one sound he didn't expect.

A dragon's roar.

What in Draconus' arse—?

It didn't make any sense. He supposed a dragon would see a large crowd of fighting men outside as a healthy meal and be attracted to the fight. Not likely.

Concerned, he returned to the tower above and found Kilar crouched next to a wall and peering over. Kilar turned immediately, dagger drawn until he saw Dane.

"You are not going to believe this," the other Daryk One said. "They've got a fuckin' dragon on a leash." He snorted. "A halter, anyway."

Dane crawled along until he could crouch along the wall as well. He stopped near Kilar and looked over. "By all that is holy."

Sure enough, a sithmyan dragon from the harsh deserts of the Ithaycan. "They must have bought it off a trader in Austos Castle."

"They keep tame dragons there?"

"Tame as they can be. It's said that too many of the Daryk Ones at Austos have become rogues. That would explain the easy access to a domesticated dragon."

Kilar's face expressed utter amazement, but they didn't have time for this. "Kilar, we'll need something far more powerful to defeat a sithmyan dragon."

Kilar frowned. "We will? But we can kill any dragon out there."

"Not with the Daryk Ones and the trebuchet at their disposal."

"What then?"

"We are strong. Far stronger than the average man. We can't let Drakus and his men defeat us or everything we believe in will be destroyed. We must stay strong and protect all the innocents here. Do anything you have to. I know those are Daryk Ones we're fighting against, but we can't falter."

This time Kilar's eyes went wide, his mouth dropping open. "By the god, I wish we were still blood seekers."

"Be we aren't. That's long gone and in our past. All we can do is fight hard."

Kilar nodded. "So be it. Be safe, Dane."

Dane followed him down the stairs and at the bottom they went their separate ways.

He turned his mind toward the upcoming battle. With the addition of an apparently tame dragon, they had a big problem on their hands. Within a few moments he heard more screams and ran into the courtyard. Arrows spilled over the parapets in dozens. The courtyard had cleared, save for one old woman. He'd seen her about before, and she could barely walk as it was. She stood in frozen fascination as arrows rained down upon her. He knew he could survive some hits, but she could not.

He ran toward her without another thought. "Get down!"

She didn't move. He plowed into her, taking her down beneath him. Seconds later arrows rained down on him.

* * * * *

Shouting started, men's yells coming from down below and Kitera wanted to be with Dane, fighting with him and for this castle. She left her chair and hurried to the window and parted the curtains over a small window. From this vantage point she could see quite a bit. Had the rogue Daryk Ones gotten into castle? If so, how? Surely the castle was guarded enough this couldn't happen. Then again, Dane wouldn't have cautioned her about staying inside if he thought there wasn't danger.

She didn't see any women running around outside, but she did see dozens of men, including Daryk Ones. Part of her wished to run and join them instead of sitting in Dane's rooms, waiting for anything to happen. Fear knotted her gut. Fear for Dane and what might happen today. She paced the floor. She returned to the window one more time, and before she could pull back the window curtain, a shadow darkened the area outside. She gasped in surprise.

Glass shattered inward, and she cried out and threw her arms in front of her face to avoid the glass. Fear jolted through her midsection as she rushed to the pack on the table. Time to get out. Desperation ran through her mind. She didn't want to leave Dane, but her father needed her.

She ran for the door to the tunnel, slipped inside and slammed the door behind her. The glowing vines provided enough light, thank the god. Still, she didn't care much for the semidark tunnel pressing in on her from either side. She hitched her backpack higher on her shoulders as she trotted down the tunnel, eager to get the hells away from Dane's quarters. She knew the tavern wasn't far, but wondered if the other side would be unlocked. Luckily, when she rounded another corner, she saw light emanating from under a door.

"Thank the god." Apprehension settled in her gut as she reached for the doorknob. Ketera hesitated, opened it slowly.

The door swung open, well-oiled hinges did not make a squeak. She peered into a small room. She could see well enough because there was a door across from it that was cracked open. Rags were piled on the floor, linens and towels stacked on shelves, and several brooms lined the walls. She sighed in relief. Some sort of closet.

Still, she couldn't afford to be complacent. She edged into the closet and left the tunnel door open while she assessed the situation. Peeking through the small crack in the partially open door, she saw Minilos preparing a knapsack similar to the one strapped on her back. Something made her hesitate to let him know she was there. Good thing too.

The outer door to the room burst open and in walked one of the most ugly men she'd ever seen. Close to seven feet tall, with shoulders as broad as any she'd seen, the man's bald head evolved from a nightmare. One eye was lower than the other and one side of his mouth matched by drooping at the corner. His body was perfectly proportioned for his size, however, a fighting machine that could surely kill Minilos with ease. Ketera sucked in a breath, expecting a fight as Minilos jumped up with a roar, dagger flashing as he drew it from his waist.

"Minilos, you old cunt!" the monster said with a lopsided smile as he placed his meaty hands on his hips.

Minilos stuffed his dagger back in the holder at his waist and burst into laughter. "Finius! Screw you, you pussy!"

Finius Dow? This was the man who would take her to Magonia? Apprehension trickled down her spine. She didn't trust the man.

The men shook hands, their grins both hideous and filled with mirth.

"Finius, I have a job for your hairy butt."

"From what I recall, you've never seen my ass, so you can't say for certain if it's bald, lightly furred or as hairy as a gimfard. What's so important I had to slip in between those rogue Daryk Ones outside? They're thick as thieves and panting for trouble. I fear if they get inside, the damn castle is doomed. They'll pick off the women for quick pussy."

Finius made a sign with his middle finger that she'd never seen anyone use before, but she figured it had something to do with sex. She blinked. Their filthy talk didn't offend, but it surprised her. Such joviality when the world around them fell apart bit by bit?

"You must deliver a friend to Magonia." Minilos said this with a straight face, but Finius' grin faded.

"What? You did not say anything about delivery of a package."

"She's not a package. She's Dane Charger's mate."

"What?"

"Stop saying that, damn it. She's precious cargo to Charger, and she needs to return to Magonia."

She waited, practically holding her breath as Ugly stayed silent. Finally the man sat with a thud in a small chair, and she heard the wood groan. She expected the tiny seat to break, but it didn't.

"Charger's mate, eh? What is her name?"

"Ketera Aldrancos. Pretty little thing. Anyway, she'll be here soon."

Ugly looked around. "Through this fight outside?"

"She'll be here."

Finius scratched his chin. "Magonia? Why does she have to go back to that shithole of a country?"

She winced.

Minilos shook his head. "It's none of your business. Just deliver her after we get out of this battle, and you will be richly rewarded."

As the two men continued to banter, with Finius sprinkling profane language like salt on food, Ketera contemplated her choices. She could run from this situation and rush to Dane's quarters and hope that no one would break into his room any more than they already had. Or she could take her chances with Ugly and hope she survived to see her father again.

Then the choices were taken from her.

"What was that noise?" Finius said, his strange face curling into a dark mask of suspicion. He walked toward the closet.

She held her breath.

Minilos turned and drew his dagger again.

With her heart in her throat, she called from inside the closet, "Minilos, it's Ketera."

Minilos smiled and moved toward the closet. As she swung it open, he put his hand in to take hers and help her. "My lady, how good it is to see you. How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to hear your colorful language," she said, only half joking.

Finius the Ugly came toward her, graceful on his big feet. "You are Dane Charger's mate?"

Ketera guessed that a positive answer was important. "Yes."

He nodded and smiled, even though she didn't like the gleam in his eyes. "You're welcome to my assistance then. I'm a great admirer of your Daryk One."

She knew the answer to her question but asked it anyway. "Are you a Daryk One?"

The big man's chuckle rumbled loudly. "Never. I'm a pirate." He tilted his lopsided head. "Didn't your man tell you?"

Attempting a smile didn't feel natural, but she did anyway. From this point forward, she knew speaking with deceit in mind could save her life. "He did."

"And you have no moral disgust for my profession?"

"Are these questions necessary?" Minilos asked.

She contemplated her answer, unused to skullduggery in the quantities these men were used to. "It's all right, Minilos. The man wants to know what he's getting into, I imagine."

Finius' face wrinkled up in surprise. Good. Keep him wondering.

"That's right, my lady," the big man said. "You have no bad feelings about my profession?"

She shrugged. "Does it matter? My mate told me I could trust Minilos and you, Mr...Dow. Can I?"

She'd almost called him Ugly.

Finius chuckled, and the sound was as disconcerting as his face. "Of course." He tapped his chest. "I am the most trustworthy pirate you've ever met."

"I've only met one." She didn't plan on telling him who, that she'd met Rayder Tyrus. Somehow it didn't seem like a good idea. "He did not seem trustworthy."

"You don't have to worry about that." For a minute she thought she saw good-heartedness showing from those brilliant green, rather normal-looking eyes. "I'll deliver you to Magonia, no questions asked, for the right price."

"Half when I get on the ship. The other half upon my delivery to Magonia."

"It won't be an easy ride." Minilos spoke up. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Screams echoed outside, nearby. She jerked her head that direction. "I do. And soon."

The big man held out his hand. "Shall I carry your pack?"

She smiled. "It fits me quite well, sir. I don't plan to take it off."

"She is a smart woman, Finius. Do not think you can mess with her." Minilos' warning sounded sharp.

Finius' eyebrows, dark slashes on his face, shot up. "Me? I would never."

Minilos grunted. "Right." He turned to her, his eyes serious. "May I have a word with you in private?" More shouts came from outside the room. "There's not much time to lose."

She nodded. He took her into the next room and closed the door. She glanced around at the small place with a bed and dresser, chairs and the normal accoutrements of a bedroom.

Before she could speak, he said, "Have a care with this one."

"Are you saying I can't trust him?"

"You can trust him better than most. But no pirate is worthy of one hundred percent trust."

"What about Rayder Tyrus? Could he take me instead? He helped Dane rescue me from one of Drakus' minions. I would trust him more."

One side of Minilos' mouth turned up. "We don't know where he is, and Rayder is even less trustworthy than the big lug," he pointed his thumb back toward the closed door, "in the next room."

Indecision had never been a part of her personality until she shipwrecked on Dragonia. She longed for the more placid, predictable life on Magonia for all of one moment. "All right. What choice do I have?"

"You could stay here and take your chances, but I wouldn't recommend it." His mouth twisted somewhere between sarcasm and more humor. "Or you can go out there and take your chances."

She decided colorful language was in order. "Either way...how do you say it? I'm fucked?"

Minilos' eyes widened then he burst out laughing. "I think I shall miss you. Come back to Dragonia when you've saved your father and it's safe."

"Why?"

He pressed her shoulder, his touch fatherly rather than familiar. "Because Dane will be inconsolable if you don't, and I shall have to listen to his pissing and moaning for a decade."

"Only a decade?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps very much longer. The rest of his life. He needs you, Keteria."

Tears stung her eyes, but she took a deep breath and buried them so they couldn't interfere with the next minute, the next hour or the next day. She gestured to the door. "I will take that under advisement."

They left the room and she headed straight for Finius. "Sir, we should proceed. I think the battle is getting closer."

Chapter Fifteen

Ketera and Finius slipped out a back door of the tavern, and she followed him into the jungle's gathering gloom. Thank the god none of the fighting concentrated around the town outside the castle. Other concerns assaulted her. What would she do if one of those vines tried to attack her once more? Or any other animal, for that matter? She didn't have Dane's protective kiss available.

She didn't take the time to ask Finius what she'd do. She followed his bulk closely, not wanting to lose him in the gloom.

In the distance, she heard the unmistakable roar of an animal. "A dragon?"

"Sounds like it. I heard a rumor the rogue Daryk Ones were bringing a desert dragon."

She'd read about them. The deadliest dragon was also the most likely to be tamed if trained from birth. "Magon! You mean a sithmyan from the Ithycan desert?"

"I do." She saw him glance back but couldn't detect his expression in the gloom. "The very same."

Her mind whirled with fear. "Will it come this way?"

"Hardly. They'll have it restrained."

"I won't ask what they plan to do with it."

"Help them take down the drawbridge and destroy everything it can inside the castle."

"Burn it?"

"No. They do not shoot fire from their mouths as so many other dragons."

He sounded unconcerned and cold.

She shivered, even though the night temperature stayed warm. She didn't say anything more on the subject, her intuition telling her to keep quiet.

"How are we going to see in this?" she asked.

"I can see in it. Just as your Daryk One can."

"You're not a Daryk One."

"Only because I failed the test when I was younger. You see I have all the markers of it. I'm extra strong. I can kill dragons and see in the dark. But they told me I wasn't intelligent enough."

She heard bitterness in his voice and couldn't exactly blame him. "Do you resent Daryk Ones because of it?"

"Sometimes. Their high status among the people irks me. It's as if the only good man is a Daryk One. The Daryk Ones are so highly revered that they take all the women. Like you."

She laughed. "Really? That is hard to believe."

"It shouldn't be. Women are drawn to their virility. It is said they can fuck for hours without stopping."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Where is it said?"

"You should know. You are bound to a Daryk One."

Dane had made love to her with a virility and strength she believed remarkable, but since she'd never made love with any other man, she couldn't be certain about the rumors. "It is not appropriate to talk like this. Let us stick to the facts at hand."

He took her to heart, not saying another word on it.

As the jungle wrapped them, she worked hard to keep fear from rising inside her. "How long will it take to reach the ship?"

"A few hours. Not to worry. Your Daryk One carried you through the jungle to reach the castle."

Why was he so intent about talking about Dane? "All right then. I cannot wait to get there and on my way."

"Best you be quiet then. We must be on the lookout for poachers, thieves or rogue Daryk Ones before we get there."

Time seemed to pass forever, especially because they didn't talk. She needed all her concentration to navigate. The jungle at night proved even more frightening than it had during the day, and she wished to the god she could dream her way out of this situation. Her life had been a nightmare of danger since she arrived in Dragonia with its awful beasts and equally awful men.

No. Dane wasn't like that. He was the best of men.

Her heart ached thinking of her last kiss with him, the last glance of heat from his eyes as he left her. Though he hadn't declared love for her in so many words, he'd said and done enough to prove it to her.

I would die for you.

His declaration rang in her mind, as well as his vow to find her no matter where she went. A man just didn't make those vows unless he loved a woman, yes?

She also worried about his safety, a sense of doom nagging her. She ignored it, concentrating again on placing one foot in front of the other. All she had to do was survive another step. One more hour.

At the end of two hours, she gasped, her lungs burning and heart pounding from the relentless pace. "Sir, we must stop."

He relented, and she almost ran into the back end of his enormous body. "I suppose we should. You'll need water and food."

Breathing hard, she nodded and managed, "Yes. Please."

"Sit here. This is a safe rock."

She blinked, feeling dazed. "What? There are dangerous rocks?"

"If you sit just anywhere on a rock out here, you could sit on the lair of a ludius."

"Dare I ask what that is?"

"A spider. Very large. About a foot across."

Once more she shivered, but she sat on the rock slowly. Tentatively. "If you say so."

Finius sat on another rock beside her and removed food and water from his pack. He handed a package of mystery meat to her and water. "Let us eat. Here. Save your food. If anything happens to me, you'll need your food and water to get by."

She refused to think of anything happening to this large man. "Hardly seems likely you could be taken down."

"Nothing is impossible, my lady."

Though he didn't seem to want to talk, her curiosity got the better of her. "Finius...may I call you that, or do you prefer Dow?"

"Most of my friends call me Finius, and since you are a friend of Minilos, so you may also call me Finius."

She smiled, catching a glimpse of his strange face. "Good. Finius, may I ask how your face was..." She drifted off, realizing she hadn't worded her question well at all.

He chuckled. "I wondered if you would mention that."

She waved one hand. "I'm sorry. I should never have asked."

"Never you mind. I am well used to people asking. They think it was some horrible accident. But any accident that would have made me look like this would have killed me." He took a swig of water. "I was born this way."

"I see."

"Do you? What do people in Magonia think of deformed children?"

"Deformity is happening more often." She munched on some bread, her stomach growling as if she hadn't eaten in hours. "People are generally kind to those with deformity, thank goodness. The scribes and our religious leaders say we have deformity because we sin too much. If we worshiped Magon as we should, it wouldn't happen."

Finius snorted. "Do you believe that bollocks?"

"No, of course not. Based on what I've seen of Dragonia, I think the problem is twofold. People in Magonia are not well mixed. We need...Dragonian blood. Dragonians are becoming sterile and need Magonian blood."

Finius grunted. "On Draconus' cock. Is that so?"

She shrugged, afraid she'd said way too much. "I do not know for certain. It's only a theory."

He went silent for a while then finally said, his gruff voice soft, "You may be right, my lady. I think perhaps Charger has found himself a fine, intelligent mate."

Heat rose in her face. "Thank you."

"Why do you need to return to Magonia?"

She hesitated. "It is imperative I keep my journey a secret."

In the darkness she saw him nod. "Very well. If it wasn't a secret, Minilos wouldn't have asked me, and you wouldn't travel at night."

When he didn't ask another thing about it, she breathed a sigh of relief.

After they ate, he insisted they continue. She felt stronger and her eagerness to leave the jungle meant she quickened her pace. Time seemed to lengthen, to take an eon with each step. She tried to concentrate on her goal, to reach her father and not think about what lurked in the jungle around her.

When they reached the beach without incident, accomplishment and heavy euphoria started to pour through her. They'd almost made it, and soon she'd sail away on a ship back to Magonia and to her father. Waves rolled against the sands, and the cool wind blowing across her face held the scent of water. Happiness made her more buoyant than she could remember—only Dane's lovemaking had brought her higher. Six moons came out from behind the cloud cover, turning the blackness into a silvery day that made it so much easier to see.

Finius suddenly turned and she almost ran into him.

"Stop," he whispered. "Quiet."

She glanced around, heart in throat. What—?

Figures walked out of the darkness. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.

"Finius, who are these people?"

He didn't speak as he put his big body in front of her and drew his sword. She knew then it was trouble. She'd kept Dane's dagger in the long folds of her tunic and pants, and she didn't hesitate to reach in her pocket and grab it. She peeked around Finius' massive arm. The men coming toward them didn't slacken their pace.

"Get them!" An unfamiliar voice echoed in the night, guttural and harsh.

"Stay behind me." Finius brandished his sword while standing in a half crouch.

Before she could do as he requested, she saw something come over him she'd never seen happen before.

It was utterly frightening.

Though she'd seen Dane's eyes turn red with passion and anger, this was different. Finius threw his head back, a roar leaving his throat that sounded more as if it belonged to a ravenous, deadly animal. She stumbled back a step as Finius' muscles bulged with power, and the untamed ferocity within him seemed to burst out in a wave.

The twenty men yelled at once, their combined voices sending up a charge that chilled her to the bone. Rushing forward, the men continued their warbling war cry as their eyes glowed as red as animals.

Her heart slammed in her chest as fear crashed into her. Dane had taken down men and she'd taken down two. There was no way she could escape twenty men, even with Finius' help. Who were they? Frustration made her angry. Damn it all, she'd had enough of this. She was tired of being roughed up, chased, poisoned by vines, stalked by dragons –

Six men came after her, skirting past Finius as the remaining men charged him. They bashed at him and he countered with strike after strike of his sword, his cry ragged and filled with rage. He tried to disarm them, but one grabbed his sword and managed to wrest it away. One man fell upon Finius and threw him to the ground.

Finius roared and threw the man off him.

She slashed with her knife, aiming for arms, groins, necks, anything she could manage. She half expected to feel the sharp edge of a sword cutting her flesh. Stumbling, she fell on her butt, and the men fell upon her.

Ketera's fighting instinct didn't matter in this case. She was down for the count and knew it. These men weren't like the poachers who'd attacked her and Dane. They were fast. So fast. She slashed at one man and the next, growling as she rammed all her strength into her attack. One man groaned as her knife sliced deep into his biceps.

Someone grabbed her from behind. She kicked back, connecting with the man's thigh. She couldn't let them get her. She couldn't. She thrashed, struggled, used her elbows. The man's forearm pressed her throat. Choking, she tried to pull his arm away.

"Enough!" Finius dropped his sword and held his hands up. "Let her go. Don't hurt her!"

The man behind her loosened his grip but didn't release her. He grunted. "I'm not going to kill her."

Finius' face, what she could see of it in the dark, held pure rage. "If you hurt her, the weight of the Daryk Ones will come down upon you. And you don't want that to happen."

"Come on. You're going with us," another man said.

"Where are you taking us?" She tore herself out of the man's arms, but he grabbed her forearm and held fast.

"Where are you going, bitch?" the man asked.

The biggest Daryk One spoke. "Finius here is sloppy. He talked too much and too loud, and we heard about your venture. Blame him for your failure. We're going to Drakus Fina's lair."

Her stomach curled with anxiety and anger. "No!"

Finius looked gut-punched. "I didn't say anything to anyone. I swear."

As they shoved Finius and her along, she wondered if this was the beginning of the end.

* * * * *

Arrows hailed down upon Dane and the old woman as the enemy unleashed the hells. Searing pain sliced the back of Dane's right calf as he huddled over the old woman he'd thrown to the ground. He'd run hard and fast to reach her, afraid he wouldn't make it. His body jerked as another arrow found his right biceps, slicing deep as it went.

Damn all the fuckin' hells that hurt.

At least none of the arrows made a direct hit.

As if to prove him wrong, three more arrows stuck, banging off his breastplate. Good thing the damn armor covered his back as well. He half expected an arrow to slice off his ear or penetrate his hands and hit his skull. The *whish* of arrows raining down on them stopped. He waited, making sure.

The old lady had screamed when he'd knocked her down, and now her flailing limbs proved she wasn't down for the count. "Get off me! Get off!"

He rolled off her, ignoring his wounds.

Gray-haired, trembling and pale, the wrinkled little woman stared at him. "Thank you, Dane Charger. Thank you for saving my life." She leapt to her feet with surprising agility, but then started to limp as she ran.

He went after her, but that's when all the hells really did break loose. A fireball sailed over the curtain wall, looking as big as a wagon. "Get down!"

The old woman dived behind a wall, and Dane ran her direction, hoping he'd make the same shelter. He veered off at the last minute, diving into an alcove that was closer. The fireball missed them both, but flames crowded up the curtain wall between them. Dane saw the old woman dash away. Damn it all, flame or arrow would hit her if she didn't find shelter. He couldn't worry about that now when his fellow warriors needed his help. A rush of anger and raw primal warrior rose up inside him, and as he felt the strange sensation arise, he realized he understood what it was.

A guttural roar left his throat, and a red haze filled his vision. Power rushed to his limbs, his body surging with power. This was his body filled with a battle rage, and part of him relished the desire to kill, to protect those who needed him. His muscles felt larger, fuller, more capable than ever before. Energy sluiced through his body with a rush that almost knocked him off his feet.

Anyone who came in here without permission would face his wrath. Would face a Daryk One's power.

As he ran toward another tower closer to the south and the drawbridge, he heard a battering ram making weak thumps against the drawbridge. Did they expect to break down the door that way?

A loud roar from the dragon pierced the air.

A moment later twenty Daryk Ones raced into the courtyard from all directions. Their eyes were red, their bodies looking larger and more fierce. More dangerous. Again the dragon roared, the sound coming closer. The ground vibrated under Dane's feet. The dragon headed his way. Archers from the ramparts started shooting and they must have hit the mark on the enemy. Men cried out in pain and the dragon's irritated shrieks filled Dane's ears. Stomping and growling, the dragon battered the drawbridge. Dane didn't move. He knew it didn't matter what the men by the drawbridge did. The dragon would –

The drawbridge gave way and loud cracks echoed across the jungle.

"By the god!" Dane cursed, but he wished his words had the power to change the terror he couldn't stop.

Three small ballistae machines were set up at the farthest wall away from the dragon and drawbridge. They wouldn't do near the damage a trebuchet would, but they'd have to do. A few regular men stood in the middle of the courtyard, blades drawn and faces etched with pure terror.

Dane gestured to the men. "The ballistae. Light them!"

The men broke from their trance and raced to the large weapons. Dane knew it would take a while before the men could get the weapons ready, and by that time the dragon and rogue Daryk Ones would be upon them.

Dane rushed toward the drawbridge, his heart banging like a drum. He might die for this, but at least he'd have the honor of knowing he'd tried his best. The dragon's head came through the damaged opening as the creature stomped on the wooden drawbridge until it snapped like kindling. Dane winced at the ear-splitting noise. Another angry roar came from the dragon. Thank the god this dragon didn't have the ability to breathe fire. It didn't matter. Furious, huge and relentless, this was one of the most dangerous animals on Dragonia. And somehow that bastard Drakus Fina had tamed it.

Seething with anger, Dane challenged the beast. He waved his arms, screamed obscenities. "Come on, you bug-infested lizard! Come on!"

The dragon turned its head to look at him. Its eyes were the strangest he'd seen – he'd never been unfortunate enough, until now, to see the eyes of this type of dragon. A kaleidoscope of colors made the pissed-off male creature's eyes sparkle like jewels.

Dane stepped back but not far. If the dragon had a chance to get too close to the ballistae, the weapons wouldn't be effective.

He heard the men behind him pulling back on the levers required to send flaming masses toward the dragon. He half expected the dragon to go after him. Suddenly, a familiar figure charged in behind the dragon. Dane's heart hammered, his stomach dropping. Drakus Fina. Enemy of the people. The enemy of everyone who valued honor, love and life.

In those fleeting seconds, Dane took in his brother's presence. Dane saw their family resemblance in the hair and the structure of his face and body. Brandishing a sword, the tall, powerful man moved forward.

A sneer cut across Drakus' face as he directed the dragon. "Simian, take the tower!"

Dane's heart practically stopped. Drakus was targeting Armen. He dashed toward the tower ahead of the dragon, his breath rasping in his throat. The men guarding the tower stayed while Dane rushed up the stairs. He reached the first floor where Armen stood at the window, looking out at the approaching terror. Armen's face was impassive.

Dane grabbed his arm and pulled. "My lord, we must run!"

"No time, my friend. I dreamed about this over and over again every night. It is my destiny to die this way. Promise me you'll protect this castle."

Dane's anger boiled over at his leader. "It may be too damn late. Come on!"

But the roar outside the window told the truth. Before Dane could move, the dragon roared and its heavy weight slammed against the rock walls. Cracks formed by the window. The dragon screamed again and threw its weight against the ropes holding it.

Dane was tired of this shite. He grabbed Armen's arm and shoved him toward the staircase. The tower vibrated under the dragon's assault. Momentum carried the men forward. Dane heard the foundation shudder, vibrations rumbling through the donjon. Before Dane could do more than fly down the stairs with Armen in front of him, all the hells broke loose.

Armen cried out as he lost his footing. Dane reached for him, but the planet seemed to tilt forward. Dane couldn't keep his balance, and he cried out in fury. As the building started to crumble around him, something hard hit him in the back and head. Pain rushed over him in a hot wave, and he fell into the darkness.

Chapter Sixteen

The road became long and arduous, and Ketera considered rushing into the jungle and making a run for it. More than one problem with that though. Four rogue Daryk Ones surrounded her and made it less likely she could escape. They'd taken her backpack with all her supplies. Trying to escape without supplies meant she'd die of thirst or starvation if she couldn't find her way out soon enough. Though she had some idea how to navigate because her father had taught her, and she could use the moons to work out direction, so many dangers lay under the jungle canopy she knew nothing about. She wished it were daylight. At least then she had a better chance of surviving this mess. On the other hand, if she stayed with these wretched men, she may not survive much longer.

A thousand thoughts ran through her mind. Was Dane all right? Had the battle ended? Had Finius actually betrayed her? Doubt-riddled, she decided to stay with the men.

Finius stumbled along in front of her as they periodically struck him with a club in the back. The big man didn't fall, even when the blows became heavy. How did he endure it? Time crawled as they moved through the night, and even when she could barely take another step, they prodded her to continue. To her surprise, a clearing came into view where the jungle had been hacked away to make room for a dozen large tents. The night was forced back by torches surrounding the camp, and a few men and women milled about. Women? Were they prisoners too, or willing conspirators?

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Drakus Fina's camp," one of the men in front of her said.

Deep inside she trembled at the thought of meeting Drakus for the first time.

As if he'd read her mind, the man said, "He's not here."

"Out to take Grimnald Castle," said another man near her.

"Grimnald Castle?" She repeated the statement and felt raw.

She'd known that Drakus' men planned an attack, but not Drakus specifically. Worry for Dane assaulted her. Dane fought to save the castle, and he'd do everything he could. His life could be in danger, and she couldn't do a thing about it.

"Let's move it," one of the men said, urging a faster pace as they dropped down a slight incline to reach the encampment. The camp buzzed even at this extremely late hour, and she wondered why.

One of the rogues said, "Take Finius to the far south tent. Tie him up there until Drakus returns."

As two men led Finius away, Finius said, "Don't worry, my lady. You will be fine."

Fine? Did he honestly believe that? She seethed with an anger she couldn't define. Fury that once again she'd lost an opportunity to return to Magonia and save her father. Despair that every minute of her life these days seemed fraught with danger. She never honestly had a moment to rest, to gather her thoughts. To find a way out of this mess.

A thought whispered to her. Not exactly true.

Not everything in this trip had proved horrible. One bright spot still brought a blush to her cheeks at the thought of it.

She'd had long minutes to find love with Dane. For if she spoke honestly to herself she did love him. How she could in such a short time, she didn't know. Perhaps it was because she knew his heart. Knew that he'd given everything for her, had shown his true goodness in so many things he'd done for her already. All she could hope was that he found a good life, if and when she returned to Magonia. He could find a new woman, someone he would realize could mate with him just as well as she could.

But she realized it wasn't likely she would survive this adventure. Not if Drakus Fina decided he wanted her for a mating partner or made the decision he'd rather eliminate her. Her stomach curled with nausea at the thought. For a few seconds she couldn't think, her breath ceasing with anxiety.

A man pushed her along. "This way. You're going to Drakus' tent to wait his arrival."

"When is that?" she asked, tension creeping up her spine.

"Don't know."

Right then she made a decision. She would survive this. For she had to return to her father no matter the cost. One way or another, she'd beg, borrow or bargain her way out of this camp.

* * * * *

Pain throbbed through Dane's body, a *thud, thud, thud* that didn't seem to have a source, a beginning or end. He remembered weight pressing down on him, the overwhelming pressure, the defeat, the loudest roar he'd ever heard in his life.

A dragon? Or the donjon falling on him?

He thought he heard rain splattering on a roofline and the crack of thunder overhead.

I'm alive.

He couldn't form more of a full thought than that for what seemed an eon. He sensed movement around him and the relentless sound of people moving about, talking, hands touching him with care and concern. Still, he wanted to move and squirm and ask for them to leave him alone.

"Rest easy, old friend. We've got you." The voice rumbled nearby, reassuring and promising safety.

Two things propelled him into action. Thoughts of saving Armen and needing to live for Ketera. More than anything he must live for her. He longed to see her with an ache the superseded the pain spiking over his body like lightning strikes. He groaned from frustration and pain and tried to move. Pain sliced through his ribs and he clutched at his side. Using his training, he attempted to assess his injuries.

Broken ribs? Or just cracked?

Bleeding out?

How long had he lain here?

Yes, his body would repair itself, but perhaps not quickly enough to save the castle and the people in it. Or, if the damage was too much, too massive, he might not survive.

Time seemed to drift on, an eternity of people coming and going, his life easing in and out of clarity. He didn't have a coherent thought for a long time, a time he couldn't define. No pain, no fear, no...nothing.

"Dane?"

The voice whispered close, and Dane jerked. "By the hells!"

His gasp came through a throat that felt sour, as raw as if he'd been screaming or had screamed for hours. He managed to open his eyes slowly. Minilos stared down at him, eyes momentarily reflecting sheer concern and perhaps a weariness that had no end.

"What the fuck is happening?" Dane asked through his parched throat.

"You bloody well almost died. Didn't think it was possible for you, you bastard." Minilos sank back into a chair next to the bed. "But I can see by the cleanliness of your language you're well and truly on the mend."

Minilos' dark humor wasn't lost on Dane, but he managed only a half smile. "How is it I survived such a royal mess?"

"Damn good luck, I'd say."

Ketera. "Where is Ketera? Did she come to you during the battle? Is she safe? Did Finius take her—?"

"Easy there, friend." Minilos clasped Dane's biceps. "Finius has already taken her to the ship."

Part relief and part disbelief ran through Dane's mind. "How do you know they've reached the ship? Have you received word or evidence?"

"No, of course not. It hasn't been near long enough for that. Finius is a good man. He'll get her there."

Dane was skeptical. "He'd better. Anything happens to her, anything or anyone lays a hand on her—" Dane groaned as pain sliced his rib cage.

"You need rest. You'll be like new in no time, but right now you need time to mend. You can't waste time thinking about her."

Dane almost came up off the bed but weakness kept him from getting more than a couple inches off the bed. "Waste time? She's my mate!"

Minilos held out one hand. "Easy, my friend. I know that."

Dane decided he needed to believe this almost more than he needed to breathe. To do that, he'd have to take Minilos' advice to try to mend. He couldn't help Keteria this way.

Dane glanced around an unfamiliar room. "I'm not in the donjon."

Minilos sighed. "You were dug out of there twelve hours ago. It's night."

Shocked, Dane took in the room and saw curtains pulled over a large window. Candlelight flickered from several candles around the expansive room. "I didn't recognize your quarters at first."

"I didn't either. Damn maid did too fine a job of cleaning it the other day."

They chuckled softly, and Dane gasped from the pain. "How the hells did I get here?"

"Daryk Ones who survived the siege brought you here through the tunnel from your room."

Dane tried a deep breath, but the pain in his ribs dictated otherwise. "Wait. Where is Armen?"

Minilos' expression sobered considerably. "He didn't make it."

Dane groaned, his anger mixing with undeniable pain. Armen had been a good man and a wonderful leader. "Draconus! That means..."

Minilos threw up his hands for a second, his voice a growl. "It means you're our leader for now. Armen's will was changed some time ago and it said you would be the successor. From this point forward, you're our leader. The savior of Grimnald Castle."

Dane sucked in a pained breath. "He told me. I didn't believe him, and I damn sure didn't want it."

Minilos nodded. "It is a horrible and great responsibility. You must think of it as an honor and not a burden."

"Fuck that." Dane didn't want to hear it. "It is a burden."

Minilos looked grave, his frown telling. "Perhaps it is better your mate returned to Magonia. She could have been harmed or killed if she'd stayed."

Irritation replaced Dane's affection for his friend. "She still might be harmed or killed when she goes back to Magonia. She doesn't have my protection."

"Easy." Minilos held up one hand. "You need rest."

Dane quieted his voice. "Tell me what else happened."

Minilos hesitated. "When the dragon entered the castle and attacked the donjon, the structure fell apart. Never saw the likes of it in a thousand years."

Dane grunted. "You haven't lived a thousand years."

Minilos managed a halfhearted smile. "I'd like to. But it seems these fucking rogues have another plan. Drakus is still out there. He won't stop until we're all under his rule. Until he's raped all our women and killed the men."

Dane's tongue felt thick and clumsy with fatigue. "Did he take women with him?"

"Yes, some of the youngest and most fertile. About fifty women in all."

Dane couldn't think of a proper, virulent-enough curse to express what he felt, and fell back on asking more questions. "What of the castle? Is it decimated? Destroyed?"

"Hard to believe, but no. All of the Daryk Ones loyal to our creed survived, as did other citizens. The castle is severely damaged but not destroyed."

"What of the dragon?"

"Killed by the Daryk Ones."

"Thank the god for that at least," Dane managed through his parched lips. "I must get up. I have duties—"

"Enough of that." Minilos reached for a goblet of water. "Here. Drink." He helped Dane sit up, but the pain caused Dane's vision to waver. "Easy now. Drink slowly. You lost some blood and it's taken quite a bit to keep you alive. Vander root. Jalimen plant. It's a good damn thing I had a heavy supply stored for just such an emergency. You're a few hours away from total mending. After that you'll be able to return to the castle and do a proper assessment of what lies ahead."

Dane swallowed hard around the truth. No, he couldn't fight now. He couldn't do anything to save the castle or his woman in this shape. He could give orders, however.

"We must rebuild the walls immediately. Any man who can be spared must do this. Any woman who can manage it must take herself and any children into the dungeons. As gruesome as the idea might seem, it must be done. Drakus won't come back right away, but he will be back."

Minilos took his orders and left the room, promising to return shortly with more concoctions to revive Dane completely. Dane sank into his pillows as weariness turned his world weak and quiet once more.

In his nightmares he chased a dragon, and that dragon threatened something more dear and precious to him than his own life.

Ketera.

* * * * *

Ketera awakened to a new day peeking under the tent flap, surprised she'd been able to sleep at all after she'd been tossed into Drakus' tent. Battered and exhausted, she'd fallen onto the lone pallet, a bed bigger than any she'd seen before. While she hadn't planned to close her eyes, exhaustion had pulled her down until she couldn't resist.

Now, when her eyes opened, she couldn't believe the light that trickled under the tent flap. How could she have slept so well knowing the danger lurking nearby? Drakus could have come into the room and...

What? She shook her head and sat up. She glanced around the tent and took in what she'd missed in the semi-gloom last evening.

The tent possessed far more luxuries than she expected. Not only was the bed wide and long, with six fluffy pillows that didn't fit the image of a dastardly and cruel man, the linens on the bed were exotic. Gold threads wove through a purple base, and red stripes gave the cover on the bed an expensive appearance. All around her the evidence showed that Drakus had wealth. Though he traveled light, what he did possess was precious materials and metals she knew only Magonia offered.

Perhaps every rumor about Drakus was true. The man plundered Magonian ships, stole their woman and planned to breed with them all. Her presence here offered him one thing. Either he wanted revenge on his half brother, or he wanted to breed with her and produce an heir. Extreme dread burned a hollow in her stomach.

Before she could take in any additional surroundings, the flap rose and a man walked inside. He was tall, well over six feet. No one had introduced him, yet she couldn't mistake the swagger and the arrogance that demanded full cooperation.

Drakus Fina.

Like all the Daryk Ones she'd seen, he wore a sleeveless tunic with a breastplate. Although his breastplate featured a large green dragon on the front, white teeth bared in a roar, there was a regal aspect to his bearing and stride that spoke of a highborn man. This surprised her—she'd expected a roughness and crudeness. No, this man had more than brute force at his disposal. He owned power and persuasion. His muscled arms were lined with sinew and power. Black leather breeches curved over narrow hips and long legs. She shouldn't have been surprised that a man many considered evil was also so handsome. Long, blond hair with red streaks in it flowed in thick locks over his shoulders and reached to mid chest. Despite his beautiful hair, his face had a craggy handsomeness that kept him from being too perfect. His eyes were blue, and within them raged a passion she didn't expect. Nothing about him appeared as she thought it should. This man was Dane's half brother? She looked closer and realized the curve of his mouth and nose somewhat resembled Dane. Though he was at least ten years older than Dane, Drakus still presented a sensual magnetism that surprised her. Perhaps many women had succumbed to his primal bearing.

Perhaps she'd be the first one who wouldn't.

She'd met more murderers, thieves and no-account scum in a short amount of time on Dragonia than she would in a lifetime on her own continent. She wasn't used to consorting willingly or unwillingly with men of few morals.

"It seems I've made you speechless." His voice was deep and mellow. "I am Drakus Fina."

"I know who you are."

His eyebrows went up. "How is it that you know?"

"Who else would walk into this tent as if they owned it?" She swept the room with one hand. "No one else in this camp could possibly have such luxury."

A smile lifted his lips that shocked her with its warmth and sincerity. Though his eyes held defiance, cockiness and self-assurance, she reacted down to her toes to his charisma. She hated that because she knew it was all surface. Under his veneer of sophisticated charm lay a brutal killer who drove his mother to suicide.

"You are right. And you are Ketera Aldrancos."

Surprised, she shifted off the bed and stood. He towered over her, his size as intimidating as Dane's had been. "How do you know my name?"

"We have a person inside the castle who feeds us all the information we need. She helps us in every way she can."

"Why would she do such a thing and betray her people?"

He sniffed, the sound one of contempt. "You're assuming she is from Grinnald Castle."

"Who is she?"

"Never you mind. She is of no importance. She told me that Dane Charger planned an escape for you. I knew that if you were taken, Dane would have to come for you. The man normally couldn't be stopped if he wants something bad enough."

"You don't know him. Not really."

He chuckled, and the genuine amusement in the sound sickened her. She wanted to throw something at him. "He is a great fighter. But not the fighter I am."

The contempt in his voice made her stomach flip-flop. Brother or not, this man held no love for Dane, no sense of family honor.

"Of course, there's the problem of the castle being destroyed. I'm afraid it was necessary in order to bring about the needed results," he said.

"Results? To destroy people's lives? To murder people?"

He shook his head. "Battle is not murder, my dear. I think you're listening to your Magonian sensibilities. We aren't the same as you. We require life on the edge of a monumental abyss in order to feel alive. Magonians are staid, prudent, too innocent."

"That is not true of all of us."

He clapped his hands together and startled her. "Forgive me. It isn't true of you. But you are a rare Magonian. Most of you I could care less if I knew."

"Yet you want to breed with us."

He smiled. "We need you for the propagation of our people. That is all." The big man crossed his arms. "And I'm afraid I have even more bad news for you. Our dragon destroyed the donjon with Armen and your lover along with it."

Her breath caught in disbelief. A chill froze her to the spot. "No."

He nodded. "Well, I am not one hundred percent certain about Dane, but the chance of him being alive is very slim." His eyes traced her with disconcerting interest, as if he might enjoy the spoils of war. "Pity. I planned for the dragon to kill Armen, but not Charger. Charger is far too worthy an opponent to be killed in such a manner."

Anger crawled up her spine and fear sucked the energy from her. She remained standing but just barely. "Then why did you attack Dane?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't control where Charger went. He ran into the donjon on his own. Probably to save the illustrious leader of Grimnald Castle."

Cold filled her veins, her heart thumping painfully as grief strangled her. While the thought of her father rotting in a Magonia jail filled her with sadness, nothing compared to what she felt now.

For the first time in Ketera's life, she thought she understood hatred. Throat clogging with tears, she couldn't form her next sentence. "You...you..."

"Did my men treat you with respect when they brought you here? I know they had to get a bit rough. We found the dead poachers. Did you help kill them? Perhaps you're more vicious than you realize."

She blinked, taken aback, throat still aching with the horrible knowledge of Charger's demise. "What do you care? You kill people. You set a dragon on innocents. You killed Dane Charger."

"I took you to provoke Charger, but now you have a new purpose. One I think will serve me very well."

Ketera saw the tent flap behind him rustle the slightest bit, and it caught her attention for a moment. She returned her gaze to the man in front of her.

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "What are you planning?"

"I'm planning to make you my concubine." He came closer, and she flinched inside.

"Never." She said between gritted teeth. "You will never touch me."

He stopped walking toward her, but his smile filled with easy self-assurance. "You say that now, but eventually you'll become a willing lover who will bear me the children needed to replenish Dragonia."

Her mouth dried up, her heart quickened, her body clenched. "No. I won't."

He shook his head and started for the tent exit. "You don't understand now, but someday you will." He gestured once more, a smile flickering over his lips. "I will send Samhala in with food. Eat and enjoy our wine. It comes, after all, from the finest Magonian ships."

"You plundered the ship I was on. The *Hydrasoseles*."

He stopped, looked at her intently. "What was left of it after the wave destroyed it, yes. The treasures that floated ashore were many indeed. Unfortunate you weren't there when we came by. I could have taken you with me then."

She shivered.

He left the room quickly, and Ketera sank to the bed. Her body trembled from head to toe as sadness gripped her along with an overwhelming desire to break free. Shaking with a desire for revenge, she rose to her feet again and stalked toward the tent flap. She stopped at the entrance, picked up a candlestick and exploded through the flap door at full speed. She dashed past the startled guards in time to see Drakus walking ahead at a leisurely pace. Utter rage exploded inside her, obliterating every other desire within her. She cared about nothing but wreaking havoc on Drakus Fina.

In her heart, she screamed for her love.

Dane!

With all the pent-up anger, sorrow and screaming revenge in her heart, she threw the candlestick at his head.

Chapter Seventeen

Filled with murky hues and distorted sound, Dane's vision refused to clear. He tried to push away the fuzzy glaze over his eyes but couldn't.

A few moments later it dissipated and he saw the strange camp laid out over the jungle floor. Most tents were dark save the largest one near one side of the camp. Dane walked toward it without fear, even though two rogue Daryk Ones guarded the entrance. They didn't appear to see him. He continued onward and walked right between the men into the tent.

Ketera!

She lay on the bed, her body relaxed and prone, her eyes open. She looked sad. Fearful. He tried to speak but nothing would leave his mouth. He reached to touch her and his hand went straight through her arm. As fear bombarded him, he strangled on the possibility that he was a shade. Was he dead?

"Ketera! Ketera can you hear me?"

She sat up as if she might have heard something, but then sat there with a pensive, defiant look he'd seen on her face more times than he could count.

She wasn't in Magonia, he knew that. She was still here in the Tarrian jungle. Anger destroyed his fear as he searched in his mind for an answer. Was this Drakus Fina's camp? If so, he must save her. He must do something.

Dane broke from the dream with a gasp, heart hammering in his chest. He lay stunned by what he'd seen, uncertain if it was a nightmare or premonition.

"Bloody hell." At least he wasn't dead.

Morning sun spilled into Minilos' quarters. He threw off the cover and shifted upright in bed then remembered where he was and what else had happened. His head still throbbed, but his body had knitted back together. For the first time in his life, he loved being a Daryk One with restorative powers. He'd awakened with no more bones broken, his vision clear. Yet his anger stayed on full rampage. Several hours of drinking some Draconus-awful concoctions Minilos poured down his throat had repaired Dane. While his body would have mended eventually, potions presented by one of Minilos' lady friends had spurred his return to health.

He closed his eyes a moment and tried to visualize Ketera happily greeting her father. Then he shook his head.

The dream.

He couldn't ignore it. He knew what he had to do. Even if Finius had taken her straight to Magonia, something felt wrong. Off. Dane chafed with the feeling and couldn't tolerate it any longer. He groaned as he stood. He went to the bathing room and washed off the battle. He'd probably ache the rest of the day. After significant

injury, a Daryk One could repair quickly, but a lingering soreness could go on for days in the bones and muscles. He hated that, but the alternative was far worse. He could still be lying in Minilos' bed, broken and half conscious. Within a few days he'd almost forget being crushed under the rubble of the donjon.

Armen. Dane groaned again and dried off. Hatred for Drakus, for the half brother he'd never truly known as a brother, rushed through him. He shoved aside the potent emotion long enough to allow another emotion inside. His fierce need and concern for Keteria. That slightly strange feeling made its way through Dane again. He walked naked back into the room and waited for the sensation to leave. He'd felt it several times over the last few hours, an aching awareness of how much he missed his mate. She needed him. He knew it with everything in his body. Despite his call to duty, to run the castle as its leader, he couldn't ignore the bizarre feeling. After dressing in fresh clothing and donning his breastplate, he left the room. Minilos was nowhere to be found, but Dane did find tavern workers cleaning up damage. Though the tavern hadn't been ransacked by the enemy, it looked as if the place otherwise needed some help.

"Where is Minilos?" Dane asked one young woman.

She dropped into a curtsy, her young face filled with deference and fear. "Sir, I didn't see you there." She kept her eyes cast downward. "What must I do, my lord?"

My lord?

Dane remembered this was the title given Armen as leader of this castle, but it sounded odd to Dane's ears. He would have to get used to it.

"Rise." He gestured. "What is your name?"

"Denatra."

"Denatra, where is Minilos?"

"Carrying out your duties as you requested, my lord."

The girl was frail, her skin so delicate-looking it wouldn't take much to mar it. And it hadn't. A bruise marked her chin. Her ragged clothing and the haunted look in her blue eyes told him a lot. Her hair, piled on her head in a messy bun, was a dirty shade of blonde and brown. He hadn't seen her around the tavern before, but then he hadn't spent that much time there in recent weeks.

"Samhala? Where is she?" he asked.

"I'm her replacement." She shook her head. "She disappeared around the time of the attack, my lord. Perhaps she was captured?"

"Perhaps." He handed retrieved some coin from his pocket and handed it to her. "For your service to Minilos and myself."

Her eyes widened as she stared at the coins. It was probably more money than she'd seen in her entire life. "Thank you, my lord." She curtsied again. "Thank you."

She scurried away to do her work.

Dane exited Minilos' rooms through the tunnel and returned to his own quarters. The room was damaged and obviously plundered. No surprise there. He discovered most of his food supply had also been taken. He hurried outside, intent on observing the damage and if the Daryk Ones who lived had managed to shore up the walls. He ran across the courtyard.

Men already worked under the hot day, their backs gleaming with sweat as they hurried to reconstruct two sizable holes in the curtain wall, and to rebuild the destroyed donjon.

Minilos directed the work, his tall form, booming voice and extravagant gestures betraying his position near the donjon. He saw Dane and gestured for him to come over. Dane complied, lengthening his stride.

"Is that bits of dragon I see scattered around?" Dane asked, teasing.

Minilos grimaced. "I wish. Garbage and rotting food thrown about. We need to clean that up. I think some of it disappeared in the night because of castle dogs and perhaps some beggars looking for meat."

Minilos commandeered two workers to perform cleanup. Dane found himself gazing around the area in a daze and his mind trying to catch up with what he knew had to happen. "Thank you for working on all of this. It gave me time to mend."

Minilos wiped his brow. "You don't look mended. There are still bruises about your body and perhaps your mind as well."

"Superficial. I need to ask you yet another favor, old friend."

Minilos grunted. "I know that voice. Is this the part where you tell me you're leaving the castle to find your mate?"

Dane looked around him again, his natural instinct to command warring with his needs as a man. "You're very perceptive."

"You called her name when you were unconscious. She's on your mind. You're really going to Magonia to find her?"

"Something is wrong. I had a dream that she was taken to a camp and it's still in Dragonia. My father always told me that some mates have a strong mental connection, and perhaps this wasn't a dream at all, but a cry for help." Minilos didn't say a word, and for that Dane felt grateful. Dane never talked about what had happened to his mother, but it burned a hole in him every time he thought of it. "Father was right. There is a strong connection that goes beyond the physical."

Minilos kicked aside a piece of rubble. "You are saying you...love her?"

"You make it sound dirty."

With a shrug Minilos leaned down and picked up a large piece of rubble. He tossed it in a growing pile that would be salvaged to rebuild the donjon. "It is in my world. But I never said my world is yours. You aren't going to lose her like you did your mother, Dane."

Dane shook his head and planted his hands on his hips. "I keep telling myself that, but another part of me doesn't believe it. Especially not after the dream."

"Lovesick men are easy to read though." Minilos grinned and dropped to one knee. He bowed his head. "Yes, my lord. As you wish, your will be done."

Dane heard the teasing in his friend's voice, but when Minilos left his head bowed, Dane grunted in disapproval. "Get up, you lout. Everyone is looking. There's no reason for you to bow to me. I don't take this whole lord-and-master thing to heart."

Minilos did as asked, but he frowned. "You should. It is your duty."

Dane didn't like hearing it. "I know. But I won't rest until I know my woman is safe. Ketera is a stranger to this place. She's survived much since she came here, but if anything happens to her because I ignored what I feel I would never be able to forgive myself."

"She knew the danger when she left here. We can trust Finius."

"I understand that. But Drakus managed to damage this castle far more than we expected. The Daryk Ones have been dealt a blow. We must pay attention to him whether we want to or not."

"Then you had better go to her." Minilos' voice held firmness. Truth.

Dane nodded. "I'd ask you to help me find her, but you are needed here. I will declare you the leader of this castle until we return."

Minilos' eyes clouded, uncertainty filling his gaze. "If you go this alone, the dangers will be vast."

"Aren't they always?"

"I could go with you."

Dane shook his head, his eyes scanning the rubble and the men cleaning up and rebuilding. "Normally you know I'd ask. But not this time. I cannot put anyone else in danger."

"You could take Daryk Ones with you."

"They're needed here at the castle to help rebuild."

Minilos stared at him for quite a long time before he started back to work, directing the other men to do this and that. "I understand. Don't worry, my friend. I'll take care of this castle as if it were mine."

"For a few days it is." With that Dane walked away to make preparations for his journey. "Just don't get any ideas after that."

"Wait!" Minilos waved. "You'll need supplies. Take what you need from the tavern. And don't bother leaving money for them. You know I won't take it."

Dane snorted softly. "I know." He returned to the spot where they worked on the donjon. "Before I depart, I'll leave a list of things I think should happen at the castle while I'm gone. Will you do as I bid?"

"Of course." Minilos smirked. "Even if you weren't the high-and-mighty lord of the castle, I'd do as you bid because you're a damn fine man and friend. You'd do the same for me."

Dane chuckled and turned away.

Dane took the tunnel back to Minilos' tavern to get food, supplies and additional weapons. After he'd borrowed a pack and food and water, he started to leave money for his friend, but knew from Minilos' admonishment it wouldn't be welcome. With an evil grin, he left money anyway.

As Dane exited the vacant tavern, he noted it hadn't been ransacked the way he'd expected. Perhaps even the rogue Daryk Ones decided to be loyal to Minilos? Brushing off his wayward thoughts, he decided to pay attention to his instincts from this point forward. As the Tarrian jungle surrounded him, he rushed into the area knowing that his mate needed him. Whatever came, he would do anything to have her safe and back in his arms.

* * * * *

Drakus turned, hand flashing out as he grabbed the candlestick in midair. Ketera stepped back, heart thumping wildly. She shouldn't be surprised he moved that fast. Rogue or not, he was still a Daryk One with the reflexes to match. If she died in this moment perhaps she could see Dane in the afterlife promised by Magon.

The two Daryk Ones guarding the tent opening grabbed her by the arms. Pain stabbed through her shoulders and she gasped. Drakus stepped toward her slowly, his eyes burning red.

"Let her go," Drakus said.

They released her and she rubbed one shoulder in reaction.

Drakus stopped a foot in front of her, still holding the candlestick. By now several men had exited their tents and stood watching.

"Your grief and anger are understandable. Because of that, I'll forgive your impetuous action." Drakus waved a hand at the other men and they backed away.

Drakus took her arm and paraded her back into the tent. When the tent flap closed, she gave rein to her furious emotions.

"Get your hands off me." She yanked her arm out of his grip despite the shooting pain in her shoulder. "You bastard."

He chuckled. "My father took vows with Dane's mother. It is Dane who is the bastard. You may be angry with me for Dane's death, but perhaps you wouldn't think so highly of him if you knew the truth."

"What are you talking about?"

He gestured to the bed. "Sit down."

On shaky legs, she did as he asked. His searing red eyes frightened her in a way she hadn't experienced with Dane.

When Drakus settled beside her on the bed, his body touching hers, she rebelled. She scooted away, putting a good two feet between them.

"You seem to think I have no regret at Dane's death. Did I give you that impression?"

She scoffed, unable to repress her contempt. "You know you did. If you felt remorse you wouldn't have taken me in the first place."

"I took you because you're Magonian. At least that's what the spy told me. If I can get you with child, then we'll know it's true."

Her stomach curled. "I won't have sex with you."

"Believe me, when the time comes, you will be more than ready to have sex with me." He shrugged. "Of course there is an alternative that might serve Dragonia just as well."

She seized on it. "What is that?"

"You could become a dragon sacrifice."

"What?" Disbelief warred with a strong suspicion that he spoke the truth.

"Did Dane tell you about how my mother sacrificed herself for the good of Draconus?"

She held back a wince as her shoulder pained her again. "Your mother sacrificed herself for Dane's father, just as Dane's father sacrificed himself for her. It had nothing to do with your god."

Drakus' mouth parted in a wide smile as he laughed. He threw his head back and almost roared with it. When he looked back at her, the red in his eyes had completely disappeared. "You are far more intelligent and intriguing than I'd hoped. I like you."

"Do not waste your time liking me."

"Defiant." He reached out, and she shrank back. He allowed his hand to drop. "But you will bend to the will of Draconus before long."

"And don't use your religion as a smoke screen for your brutality."

She half imagined he'd deck her at any minute, just reach out and put an end to her with his enormous strength. She didn't care. What did she have to lose? At this rate, she didn't know if she'd ever escape the continent and return to Magonia to save her father.

He tilted his head to the side, watching her as if she could be a delectable piece of meat he wanted to taste. "Did I give you the impression I believe all that cock and dragon dung? Religion is quite the convenience, my lady. A man in my position must pretend he believes in the predominant system. My father named me Drakus because he believed I would have the power of the god. He knew I could bring the so-called god Magon to its knees, and therefore Magonia to its knees. A real zealot, my dear father."

"A sick man."

"Indeed. He wanted Magonia under his thumb because he believed Dragonia knew the only right way. I've never believed it."

Astonishment filled her. "Then why did you follow his path?"

"I used it. The people of Dragonia will follow any dogma if given incentive. Making babies is one. Preserving our way of life, the sanctity of our social structure, the morals. All of it could be destroyed in a moment if we allowed Magonians and Dragonians to mix."

Taken aback, she didn't know what to say. Finally she found her voice. "But I've heard your people already accept other religions."

He snorted. "Some do. Most don't."

"But you want to breed with Magonians. Isn't that mixing?"

"I want to mix precisely because I don't believe the dogma, my lady. I know that Magonia and Dragonia must merge. Of course, Dragonian society will have to make war on Magonia to make Magonia see the right way of doing things." He shrugged, face totally unconcerned. "I'll allow the people to imagine I care about their ideals. All I want is the power. The land. The breeding to grow more of my warriors. My Daryk Ones. Draconus and his rules are nothing more than means to the power, my lady. Nothing more."

Flabbergasted, she didn't know whether to laugh in complete disbelief or to admire his evil ingenuity. "You are using the people. Making them think you believe what they believe when your motivations are entirely self-serving."

"As I said, you are a very intelligent woman." His eyes sparked with more amusement. "No wonder Dane wanted you."

If he thought she'd be flattered, he didn't know her well. He didn't seem concerned by her defiance or even vexed and angry anymore.

Ketera, on the other hand, hadn't forgotten one moment of her pain. "Since Dane is dead, and I don't want you, what is the point in keeping me? Let me go back to Magonia and free my father."

"Free him?"

"He's a prisoner. A religious and political one."

Drakus tilted his head to the side again, as if trying to detect a lie. "Indeed. That is a shame. I hear Magonian prisons are hell."

While she didn't know the conditions prisoners lived in, she knew she wouldn't last much longer under this man's regime. "Just let me go."

"I think not. The people demand a sacrifice or a breeding. It is their will. Besides, Dane's mother and father gave themselves to the prosperity and lifeblood of Dragonia by becoming a dragon sacrifice. You could too."

"No. I'll never kill myself."

"Oh, you don't have to be willing, my lady. Not in the end. We can always arrange for you to be tied to a stake for the dragon's meal. While there is little honor in that route, it still produces the same result."

"Which is?"

"Our land is prosperous and the god Draconus will make certain the people are fertile. Or at least they'll think that."

She wanted to stand up, to run, to scream. "It isn't true."

"It is in our texts and as far as rogue Daryk Ones are certain, there is little you can do about it."

She hadn't read anything about dragon sacrifice in the texts and wondered why, but didn't plan to let him know that. "What evidence is there for such..."

She couldn't put a name on it.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes now mellowing until the red disappeared. "One of the Daryk Ones in camp took a Magonian as spoils when we ransacked a small vessel a few months back. She is pregnant and soon will bear a child. She became pregnant the very first days of them meeting." He reached out, but she shrank back. He laughed softly. "You have nothing to fear from me."

She glared. "How can you say that? Dragon sacrifice?" She shook her head. "There is nothing you can do to persuade me to participate."

"Are you certain?" He moved and it was so fast it happened before she could blink.

She gasped. Drakus sat next to her again, his body pressed to hers, his red eyes holding her. "You cannot escape this. The will of Draconus will be done."

Despite her fear, she found a reservoir of courage. Dane wouldn't want her to give up. Her eyes threatened to tear up again as she thought of Dane. "I won't breed with you."

Coldness came into his eyes. "Then before two nights are done, you shall be a dragon sacrifice."

Chapter Eighteen

Just before dawn, Dane reached the beach where Finius' ship should have docked, but there was no sign of it. Not that he would have expected the ship to be here, unless something had happened to stall them leaving.

He closed his eyes and tried to feel Keteria. The dream repeated in his head, the details that showed him a camp. Though he had no proof his dream was true, he needed to follow it. Using his tracking skills, he looked for signs that Finius and Keteria had been here. It didn't take long for him to find what he needed. In the sand lay a piece of Keteria's tunic sleeve. He snatched it, held it up. Then he saw dried blood in the sand, his stomach tumbled. Someone had taken her and perhaps hurt her. Sand all around the area was disturbed. A fight. Before long he saw other signs of struggle and then an area where footsteps led back into the thick foliage. His gut clenched with anger, all his muscles tightening in a desire to beat some rogues into the ground. His breathing came fast as his rage built.

"By the god!" He hissed his words, the taste bitter on his tongue.

He'd allowed her to take this dangerous journey and maybe now she wouldn't survive. Perhaps even yet she'd been —

"No."

He couldn't think this way. She must be alive out there. Captured and perhaps even hurt, but she was alive. He would know if she'd been killed. There would be time enough for violence, but right now he had to focus on the task at hand. Find Keteria fast.

Eager to find his woman, he started running in the direction the footprints took him. Then he realized he couldn't continue at that pace. The day had already turned hot, and he could not afford for the rogues to hear him coming. Despite his burning need to rescue Keteria, he knew whatever he did would take stealth. Incredible odds stacked against him. He had to remember that if this rogue camp was truly there, it was one against many. He'd need to outthink other Daryk Ones. How many he couldn't say for certain.

As he tracked through the jungle, he didn't take long to stop as the day poured onward. He'd trekked the jungle, following a path through the area that showed him that several people had passed through, for what seemed hours. His body protested such rigorous action. Though he'd hoped to feel back to complete form, a body that had been as severely injured as his demanded some time to finish healing, and he'd punished himself. He didn't care. Nothing mattered more in his life now but getting to his woman.

"Fuck me," he said under his breath.

He never thought in a lifetime he'd ever think that way about a woman, but there it was, undeniable and fierce.

He found a copse of low-lying trees under the canopy that afforded him a good view on all sides. After taking time for water and a hardtack that tasted like absolutely nothing, he returned his canteen and food to his pack. That's when he noticed the clouds gathering overhead. Daylight shrank as the clouds stole what little light managed to make it through the canopy above. He had to move fast or he'd be forced to make camp. He made progress through the jungle, dodging thickening vegetation and at least one dragon. He'd journeyed through this jungle so many times he thought he should know it intimately, but the jungle played a fickle game by morphing each day. Precipitation grew taller creepers, thick vines and trees that towered so he couldn't see the top. None of it would stop him from finding Keteria, yet he foraged through the growing darkness with urgency. Rain started to cascade in sheets, but he pushed onward. His aching body protested, but he pushed harder.

Hurry.

Hurry.

Ketera needs you.

* * * * *

Ketera paced the tent floor. She couldn't relax. Not when her whole world balanced on a thread. The tiniest misstep and she'd be dead.

Oh, what does it matter? Soon you'll be a dragon's meal.

She couldn't even summon fear when she contemplated what could happen to her in the next couple of days. She tried to recall if she'd ever encountered a dread and despair like the one she faced. Only when she'd been on the ship, seen the wave coming and knew that she'd never make it back to Magonia to save her father. Then she'd awakened in Dane's arms and understood that she had another chance to live. Another chance to save her father. Until this mess happened. Despair came as much from feeling as if she'd failed her father in every way possible. She'd tried to get to him and her efforts had crumbled. How could she live with that truth? Perhaps she hadn't tried hard enough.

Pain seized her at the thought. She picked up a water goblet to slake her thirst. She drank greedily. Her throat hurt as emotions bubbled and threatened to explode. Exhaustion reached for her. She lay across the bed and closed her eyes and tried not to think about what might lie ahead for her. No matter which direction she took in her mind, it all led to a bad ending. Then her father's voice came to her in her thoughts.

Ketera, you're a strong woman just like your mother was. No matter what happens in your life there is always a way out. Use your instincts. Feel and you will understand the best way to proceed. Don't allow disappointment or other people to derail your dreams. Reach for what you want. Live the life you've wanted no matter what happens. Survive, Keteria. No matter what, you have to survive to get the truth out. The people of Magonia have to know the truth.

Then it came to her.

Father had said these words to her when he'd sent her a message by courier before she'd sailed on the ship. He'd known that he wouldn't make it out of prison. Tears filled her eyes. She drew in a shaky breath and buried her face in her hands. Sobs racked her as grief tore her to pieces.

Her father would die, if he wasn't dead already. Dane had already —

Her sobs came harder now, her body shaking as she allowed the feelings to pour forth. Being strong had been her goal, but she couldn't hold back. Before long she'd discover her fate.

Survive, Ketera. No matter what, you have to survive to get the truth out. The people of Magonia have to know the truth.

Right now she didn't care if Magonia never learned the truth.

Footsteps at the tent entrance caused her to bolt into a sitting position. A woman entered the tent holding a platter of food. With long, straight, dark hair, creamy-white skin and a gentle expression in her blue eyes, the small woman had an ethereal air. Wearing a tunic and pants that looked far too large for her, the woman moved toward Ketera with a smile. Ketera instantly recognized the serving girl from Minilos' tavern.

"Samhala?" Ketera asked in surprise.

Samhala placed the platter on a stand near the bed. "You must eat and keep up your strength."

"I'm not hungry." Because she didn't trust anyone in the camp, Ketera sat up and swung her feet off the bed.

The woman sat on the bed next to her. "You must eat."

Ketera swallowed hard around the lump in her throat and tried to shove aside overwhelming emotion to no avail. "Were you taken prisoner during the raid on the castle?"

Samhala didn't answer the question. "Eating will give you strength for whatever comes next."

Perplexed and frustrated, Ketera bit out her next words. "Why should I? My father will die because I can't rescue him, and the man I love is dead. What more is there to live for?"

Even as the words came out of her mouth, she didn't believe them. Didn't believe that her father could die or that Dane was already dead. A tiny part of her couldn't stand it, couldn't process it in any way shape or form, and the grief was so excruciating she didn't know if it would ever extinguish.

When Ketera looked up, the other woman's eyes had gone from welcoming to sad. Very sad.

"I'm so very sorry to hear it. I—" Another emotion flickered over her face. "I wish I could take it all back."

Confused, Ketera peered at her. "Take what back?"

"I'm the reason your lover is dead."

Ketera's confusion increased. "How?"

Samhala left the bed and walked slowly around the room. She rubbed the small of her back, as if it might hurt. "I betrayed everything that I am a short time back, and yet I would do it all again." Samhala turned her gaze back to Ketera. "I overheard Minilos talking to Finius about your plan to return to Magonia. I told Drakus. I've been spying for him for a long time. I worked in Minilos' tavern up until the siege."

Hatred would be too strong a word for what Ketera felt, but not far off. She stood and took two steps toward the smaller, thinner woman. "You were a spy?"

"Yes. I justified it for a long time." Samhala's eyes had gone vacant, and unless it was Ketera's imagination, the woman seemed as steeped in grief as she was. "You see, my Daryk One was taken prisoner by Drakus six months ago when Drakus tried to convince him to spy at the castle."

Ketera listened, her heart sympathetic to the woman's turmoil. "Kidnapped. Where is he now?"

"Held at another camp. My love tried to get away and they... They injured his legs so he couldn't move. Whenever he tries to escape, they break his legs. When he recovers, they break them again."

"Oh god Magon."

Samhala's gaze snapped to hers. "You are Magonian?"

What was the point in hiding it? "Yes."

She nodded. "I have nothing against Magonians. And as you know, neither does Drakus."

Ketera snorted. "Of course he does. He wants to steal Magonian women and rape them."

Samhala shook her head. "Yes, but if Drakus were the ruler of all Dragonia, Magonians would be welcome to immigrate here, and Dragonians could immigrate to Magonia. How is that a bad thing?"

Ketera's moved toward the woman, her irritation rising. "Regardless of his desire to bring the two sides together, he is going about it the wrong way. And he kidnapped your mate and forced you to spy." She blinked. "Wait. Did you spy willingly? Before your mate was kidnapped?"

Samhala shook her head. "No. They contacted me after they kidnapped my mate. They told me what they'd do to him if I didn't spy for them. I had no choice."

"Break his legs?"

"They might do other things to him, kill him with poison from Magonia or perhaps cut his head off."

Ketera winced. "I knew about the poison. I never...I guess I didn't think about how a Daryk One could be killed. Not once I knew how they healed."

Samhala nodded. "I've done a lot of things in the last six months for my mate. Things I wish I could take back. Because I don't think they're going to let him go. Ever. They're using him, keeping me on a string. The thread grows thinner ever day."

Ketera could see the pain in the other woman's eyes, felt it right to the core, mixing with her own agony. "Why are you telling me this?"

Samhala turned sad eyes her way. Tears shimmered on Samhala's lashes. "So if I have to betray you again, you'll understand."

That stopped Ketera from speaking for quite a few moments. Finally she found her voice. "You haven't tried to escape?"

"I wouldn't. Not without my Daryk One."

Ketera understood that love, and with all her heart wished Dane were there. She'd tell him how much she loved him. "What's his name?"

"Yavna."

"A very strong name."

"Very." Samhala turned and headed to the tent flap. "If you want to stay alive, you'll have to do whatever Drakus wants, you know."

Ketera opened her mouth to deny it, but Samhala left without waiting for a response. Ketera wondered why she didn't hate the woman for her betrayal to Grimnald Castle and for helping this terrible situation to form in the first place. No matter what she did, she couldn't summon the fierce dislike. Instead she felt nothing at all. Fatigue settled in and soon after she drifted into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares. Odd creatures she'd never seen before floated through her dreams, their cries calling to her, screaming, fleeing toward her from the wild tangle of foliage. She couldn't move, paralyzed by her overwhelming fear and grief. The dreams tangled together in a noxious soup until she didn't know either a beginning or an end.

Ketera awakened some time later and heard rain drumming on the tent. How long had she been asleep? She couldn't say, but she could tell it had turned to evening and darkness settled on the land. A cool breeze fluttered the tent flap and the welcome wind brushed over her flushed skin. She wanted to bathe, but no one had offered her the opportunity. Perhaps they wouldn't. The day had stretched on, and she hadn't seen another soul. She heard people outside, the calls of men at work and wondered if they would pull up stakes and move the camp.

Not long afterward, she heard the tent flaps move again. She ignored them. A shadow fell over her and she sat bolt upright with a gasp.

Samhala stood above her, a knife in her hand.

* * * * *

Dane didn't know which frightened him more. The fact his legs were shaky after running for what seemed hours through the jungle, or the fact the camp was heavily guarded. He sank down next to a cluster of trees that afforded him coverage. No one

could see him on this slight incline, but he could survey the entire area from this point. The clearing was circled here and there by rogue Daryk Ones. The camp had been carved out of one of the few places in this jungle that could be used for such a thing. Dozens of tents, most of them big enough to accommodate five Daryk Ones, lined up along a nearby river. One large tent, the largest he'd seen, dominated the south side.

Drakus' tent no doubt. Bastard would expect such commodious provisions for himself while the rest of his men lived in far less.

Dragon dung. How the hells was he going to penetrate this perimeter? Even the night couldn't cloak a man walking into such a well-protected camp. He sighed and contemplated an idea that had turned around in his head for the entire night. Without a planned attack with several dozen men to take the camp, Dane couldn't expect to get far. Certainly he could attack and take out a few men on his own. Perhaps more than a few. In the end, he'd still be captured and if the mood struck the rogues he fought against, they might decide to execute him on the spot. That would leave his mate defenseless.

No. Ketera would never be defenseless, but at the very least he wanted to be with her one more time. Touch her. Taste her lips. Know that she was unharmed. If he had to, he would beg Drakus to keep her safe. To never harm her. He sighed. By the god Draconus, he never wanted to do this. The desire to fight raged high inside him, but there were too many rogues against him.

With that realization, he stepped out of the bush and headed directly for the enemy camp. He made certain to keep his weapons stowed, his hands at his sides and fists open. He didn't want anyone to think he planned to attack. Less than fifty yards later three Daryk Ones came out of the bush. He'd never seen these men before—they weren't familiar to him.

"Stop!" one called out to him.

All three rogues kept some distance between them, and he knew they planned to block him from the camp. He stopped.

They approached, swords at the ready. All he could hope was that they didn't plan to cut his head off right there and then. If they had orders to kill, he'd fight to stay alive, but the odds were damn high against him. His muscles twitched with the desire to save his own life, to attack first. The other men paused, their eyes boiling red. In the dark, with his eyes glowing as red as theirs, it was easy to see their hard expressions mixed with curiosity.

"You risk much, Daryk One," the rogue to his left said.

"Are you the one they call Charger?" the one to his right said, and took a step forward.

Dane nodded. "I am."

"What are your intentions?" the rogue in the middle asked.

Dane held his hands palms up in surrender. "I am here to speak to Drakus Fina."

All three men looked surprised and didn't try to hide it. Finally the middle rogue nodded. "Come with us."

Dane expected them to fight him, and when they gave in to his idea with ease, he wondered if perhaps this had been the right thing to do. As they walked into camp, the few men standing about watched him, flanked at the sides and in back by their compatriots. A few men sharpened their swords while others ate or shined their breast plates. He watched them with caution. Some allowed their eyes to burn red, others didn't bother. Their complacency, their acceptance of him, did more than surprise him, it flabbergasted him.

The large tent loomed in front of Dane and he wondered what the next few minutes would bring. In those moments his life felt on a precipice, the balance shaken, his desire to fight all but drained. For the first time in his life he wanted peace. After so many years—all his life—he needed quiet. He was tired of fighting. So damn tired.

But for Ketera he would fight.

He would fight until his body was raw. Broken. Destroyed. She was worth every sacrifice.

In front of the tent three rogues took up position. Dane's heart hammered, and he took a deep breath.

From the darkness, around the side of the tent, Drakus stepped out.

Chapter Nineteen

Drakus looked much as he ever had, their family resemblance evident. Dane wished they didn't share a mother's blood, but they did. They seemed two sides of a coin and that couldn't be changed.

Dane nodded in acknowledgement. "Drakus."

"Dane. Welcome to my camp." Drakus gestured to the three guards who watched Dane's every move. "Begone. Six of you are too many."

"Are you sure?" Dane asked with sarcasm. "I could maim and maybe kill all three of your other guards."

"You could." Drakus smiled. "But you won't. I have something you want."

Dane couldn't deny the truth. "Where is Ketera?"

"She is well."

Dane's anxiety and anger turned to a full boil. "I swear to Draconus, if you've harmed her—"

"Enough." Drakus gestured, the hand signal abrupt. "I would never harm her. At least not until I'm finished with her."

Dane snorted in disgust. "Finished with her? You mean to take her against her will, make her your slave and concubine. Then you'll feed her to one of your dragons. I know how you think."

His half brother laughed. "You know me too well, brother. But, if she gives herself to me willingly and bears me a child, there is no reason to make a sacrifice of her. She could prove useful to me as a breeder for the people. To replenish our diminishing land. If she chooses to defy me, then I shall feed her to the dragon. The people will demand it."

"That is full of shite, Drakus, and you know it." Dane pointed at his brother, using his index finger to stab point after point. "It's your will and twisted need for power that demands it."

Throughout Dane's angry sentences, Drakus had remained calm-looking. He folded his arms. "The people of this land are imbeciles, my brother. Without people like me, they will crumble to their own violent impulses and eventually destroy the land." He lowered his arms and took two steps forward. "They need you and me to show them how it should be."

Dane grunted. "Plain shite, Drakus, and you know it."

Drakus smiled and nodded. "You, my brother. I would give you this chance to join with me. If you vow to renounce Grimnald Castle and become a part of my group, we can rule this land together."

Dane hadn't expected this. His mind spun in a thousand directions with disbelief his first emotion. "You're asking me to rule jointly with you?"

"Yes. Consider it my first gesture of brotherly love. With our two minds ruling this country, there is nothing we couldn't do."

More anger built inside Dane, but he kept a maintained composure. "You think I would renounce my integrity to join you merely because you are my half brother?"

"I considered it as a possibility. I thought I would offer it to you. Of course if you refuse the consequences will be severe."

"How severe?"

"You will die and your beautiful mate will be sacrificed to the dragon. Or, perhaps if I am feeling the need for entertainment, I will feed her to the dragon and make you watch."

Dane's mind raced as his stomach roiled at the ugly image. Dane's fists clenched. The one subtle movement caused the three guards near the tent entrance to move forward almost as one.

Drakus held his hand up. "Halt. Dane is understandably angry."

Dane's breathing quickened. "And if I join you on this ridiculous quest, you'll still take my mate?"

Silence stayed supreme, and Drakus' face said he pondered the answer. "She is your true mate. That I can see. I would let you have her as long as you remained loyal to our cause."

Dane's lips curled. "You believing in true mates? Difficult to imagine."

"Not difficult. Just not important. You would be allowed to get her with child. Fuck her as much and as often as you willed it. If you did not get her with child within a month, I would fuck her. My seed is apparently more fertile than yours."

Dane's mouth dried up at the thought of this man laying one hand on her. Instead his mind turned to one certainty. One objective he would certainly accomplish. He would fuck her repeatedly, giving her more pleasure than she'd ever imagined until they had a child. Dane's primal needs roared into existence, filling him body and soul. "She is mine. You will not touch her. Ever."

Drakus' eyebrows lifted. "Why is she so special? You have copulated with dozens of women over the years. Not a one has borne a child. It is unlikely that a few times bedding you would make the difference necessary to bring about a child."

"Watch me." Dane wanted to curse until his throat was raw. "As far as other women, I have always taken precautions. There are ways."

Drakus smiled, his eyes brightened from within by cold amusement. "Coitus interruptus? A skin over your cock?"

"What difference does it make?"

Drakus shook his head. "It doesn't."

Silence fell down upon them, and Dane felt what seemed like a hundred eyes staring at them and listening to the discussion. Jungle sounds crept in—creatures called, insects buzzed, the wind rustled. The jungle's thick smell filled his nose.

Dane couldn't help but ask, "Why are you this way, Drakus? Have you ever considered the answer? Was your life so unworthy as a child that you felt you needed to change the path of everyone on this planet?"

Drakus' eyes stayed cool. "Not everyone, Dane. There will always be a few holdouts. Like you."

"Why would you give me Ketera?"

"As a gift to my only brother. But it is a temporary gift."

"She is not property."

"To you, perhaps not." He shrugged. "To me... You have one night to accept or refuse my challenge. Accept that you must help me in my quest and you get to keep Ketera. She must be pregnant within a month. If not, I will take her. After having taken her, you will never have her again. If I choose, she will be sacrificed to the dragon."

Dane's mind rebelled, his heart following easily behind. The ultimatum was horrible, but so was the alternative.

Drakus stepped away from the tent flap and swept his hand toward it. "Your quarters for the night, my brother. You are required to stay here for now. Inside is a welcome surprise."

* * * * *

Dane is alive.

Ketera heard every word as her mate and Drakus discussed her future, Dane's future, outside the tent flap. Her heart pounded furiously, her mind whirling like a wheel. By Magon, she couldn't believe this. They bargained for her like chattel? At the same time, her heart soared at the sound of Dane's deep, beloved voice. He was alive, and Ketera knew she'd never been happier in her life.

She stood by the side of the bed, riveted. Dane swept aside the tent opening and stepped inside.

His eyes widened with undeniable surprise, his lips parting as he drew in a sharp breath. His composure as a warrior slipped from view and left behind a joyous expression. Her eyes teared, and all her inhibitions exploded as she ran toward him. He went to her, scooped her in his arms, buried his face in her hair.

"Dane, what—"

His mouth covered hers. His kiss wasn't tender—he thrust his tongue and possessed, each stroke between her lips a hot invader that conquered and demanded

and set her on fire. Liquid heat swept into her womb. Her body knew his, yet the long length of his body refused to acknowledge her softly. His chest pressed into her breasts, and her nipples went hard, achy for his touch and tingling. Wild longing sent a liquid rush to the sensitive tissues between her legs. She felt open to him. Waiting. Wanting as if she'd not seen him for a millennium. His hands plunged into her hair, searched her shoulders and then ventured to her breasts. As her hands went around his shoulders, he cupped her breasts through her tunic. She shivered and moaned, hips moving to search out his erection. Solid as stone, his length pressed into her stomach. She writhed, and his fingers brushed over her nipples. She gasped into his mouth, and he took full advantage. His hands went under her buttocks and lifted her. Her legs went around his hips and he broke their kiss.

As their ragged breathing filled the tent, she managed a few words. "You came for me."

"Always." He pressed kisses to her nose and forehead. "Did you hear my conversation with Drakus?"

She nodded. "I did. You mustn't do it. You mustn't sacrifice anything for me."

He lowered his voice to a whisper, and when he smiled it was sad. "You are my mate. I could do nothing less."

Tears she'd fought to hold back surged forward and fell on her cheeks. "I thought you were dead. He said you were killed during the castle siege." She explained how she was taken captive along with Finius and how the bargain Drakus wanted to make with her. "He does not believe in making Dragonia a better place. It's his gratification, Dane. He is prideful and willing to lie to the people. And they might believe him."

Dane brushed hair away from her face, cupping it and pressing kisses to her forehead and lips. "Many would believe him."

Dane quickly explained what happened at the castle during the battle, as well as Armen's requirement that Dane safeguard the castle as Armen's successor. "I don't want it, but it is my destiny. You and I will return there."

She drew in a shaky breath and kept her voice low. "Do you have an escape plan?"

"Yes. One that will have its pleasant benefits." He smiled gently. His arms drew her tight against him and his erection stayed hot and hard, pressing into her stomach. His eyes flashed red, and she thought his body vibrated with an intense energy.

Ketera didn't want to assume anything. "You can't mean—"

"Yes." He lowered his voice and whispered in her ear. "We will be together in every way possible. We will take and give to each other, and as we do we'll discover a way to survive this. If we fight we will lose. We have to rely on our wits. Or strength."

When the red in his eyes blazed hotter than she'd ever seen it, the answering flash low in her belly burned so high she gasped.

He kissed her mouth again, soft and sweet and slow. "I want to know that anything you give me is from your willing heart."

She melted, her body responding with everything female inside. He released her long enough to discard his breastplate. It fell to the carpet. Lifting her into his arms, he took her to the bed and fell down on it. He cushioned her fall, making sure she fell on top of him. Instant need centered in her core. Their circumstances meant nothing under the gathering storm inside her. She'd never felt so hungry for him, and she wouldn't waste time thinking about what might happen to them later.

She arched against his hardness and lifted up to sit on the thick column that pressed against his trousers. She slipped off the bed long enough to strip off her boots, pants and tunic. They fell to the ground. Gone was her modesty. Only animal, primal hunger remained, a reaffirmation of life. She didn't give him a chance to pull her down on top of him. Nothing mattered but becoming complete and filling her body with his. She ached between his legs and knew she was more than ready. She pulled at his pants until they were out of the way far enough. His erection released and she held it by the root. She straddled him and did what felt right. Despite her tightness, she'd become so wet and aching for him that when his cock head touched her pussy lips, she gasped at the luscious feeling. Slow love could come later, if there was a later. Now might be their only opportunity.

"Ketera." Her name sounded so rich on his lips and aching with need. His eyes told a story of hunger and a man's need to find release within the haven of her body. "Ketera."

She sat on Dane and pushed his thickness into her inch by inch until he pressed to the root. She moaned, hungry to feel his cock surging, thrusting, bringing the pleasure she knew he could deliver. Forcing worries from her mind, she felt the man she loved filling her.

"Ride me," he said, clasping her hips.

She did. Instinctively, moving up and down with quick, driving force. With no shame and ravenous desire, she slammed down on him, lifted and came down hard. She watched his face at first and marveled at his closed eyes, his parted lips. Ecstasy and pleasure was written on his features.

She held back her groans of pleasure, concentrating as she closed her eyes and absorbed every emotion and feeling.

His guttural voice whispered, "Come for me, sprite. Come." Pleasure filled his eyes. "Feel me."

She couldn't, straining and wanting but never quite able to reach the top. Dane sat up and turned her onto her back, his cock buried deep. Heat blazed in his eyes, and when he moved his hips, she gasped at the slick, hot sensation of thick manhood taking her with stroke after stroke. His hips picked up speed, pushing his hot column of flesh deeper. Her pussy tingled, the heat more than she could stand. As his cock ground against her clit, she cried out. Excitement spiraled in her stomach. She clasped his shoulders tightly and held on for dear life as pleasure bombarded her.

"Look at me, sprite."

His rough words opened her eyes, and for those few moments his eyes were no longer red. His gaze burned with emotions so deep, she melted under their force.

"I love you," he said, and stroked deep within her.

His words and the fullness inside her brought her sweet fulfillment. Trembling on the brink, she fell over. Her entire body trembled uncontrollably as she cried out. Quivering, shaking, she rode the hot pleasure as it burst in tremendous waves. Floating on a beautiful dream, she didn't want to let the feeling go.

He held himself inside her, not moving, pressing deep. Then he grabbed her ass cheeks and pounded deep inside her pussy, thrusting so hard another orgasm drove her to the top and she shivered and groaned beneath him. His thrusts jerked, pounded as his breathing accelerated and his moans broke into growls. With a shout, he poured inside her. His body shook with release. Her pussy clenched rhythmically over his cock, pleasure prolonged by his excitement. He rolled to the side, keeping his cock buried within her as he held her buttocks. Silence enveloped them and she didn't move. Emotions overwhelmed her. Euphoria. Sadness.

"You love me," she said in wonder. "Or perhaps I only dreamed such beautiful words."

"You didn't dream it. I love you." His voice went ragged. "I wanted you to know in case..."

She knew what he meant. In the event they didn't make it out of the situation alive.

"What are the chances that we'll live through this?"

He released her, his still-hard cock slipping from her body. He brushed his hand over her hair. "Your life means everything to me. If I must sacrifice myself for—"

She covered his mouth. "Do not say it. I can't lose you now. Not when I know you love me and that I love you so much it hurts."

He smiled gently. "Hurts? I hope not."

She couldn't produce a smile. "Perhaps I should do as he suggested. If I follow Drakus' command, he might let you go."

A scowl crossed his handsome face. "I will not leave you."

He released her and sat up, swinging his legs over the side and reaching for his discarded clothes. Disappointment filled her. Not that he'd left her embrace, but that their time became more limited.

Desperation made her reach for anything she could think of. "And I won't leave you, so do not even consider it."

"You heard his ultimatum. Well, I have another one for him."

"What?"

"I will fight him for you."

Fear rushed upward. "No."

"The alternative is not acceptable. I can't join his quest for domination of the continent. If I fight him it's over. His men will follow me. We'll be done with this civil war."

"Or we could play this safely. You know I heard him say it." She thought the word but had never dared say it until now. She left the bed and slipped her arms around his neck.

She pressed her body close to his. "Take me. Keep taking me until I am positive to have your child."

Dane's gaze darkened, his expression troubled. He held her close and pressed kisses to her nose, mouth and cheeks. "That's what I want too. But not because he orders it. We have to find a way out of here before a fortnight."

She nodded and released him. She nodded. "Under the bed is a knife. Samhala gave it to me."

"Samhala? She's here?"

Ketera explained everything she'd learned about the woman, including the fact Samhala had betrayed the castle.

Dane's gaze held hers, and the depth of emotion she saw gave her strength. Ketera wanted to run away from their problems, yet she knew they wouldn't leave anytime soon.

"She betrayed us, made certain the castle fell." Dane's eyes flashed red again. "Made sure men found you and Finius. And you've made friends with her?"

His disapproval stung, and she left the bed to gather her clothes. She dressed quickly, vulnerability stealing over her. Now that their quick, hard lovemaking had finished, she felt awkward with him. When she'd first met him, his disapproval had fired her into action.

"You heard what I said about her. She confessed everything to me. She didn't have to do that," Ketera said.

Though Dane didn't speak, she worried his frostiness would continue.

"We cannot trust her, Ketera."

Exasperated, she sighed. "Fine. But we'll take the knife. They stripped you of your weapons."

He nodded. "All right."

She tucked the knife into her pants pocket and kept her voice low. "What do we do next?"

"Drakus knows that we want to live." He slipped his arms around her. "I'll tell him he can't have you. As I said, I will fight him for you."

She grabbed his hand. "No. You can't."

"Yes, I can."

Fear shot up inside her. "Listen, we don't have to do this. We'll find some other way. Make him think that..." She swallowed hard. "That we will spend the next few weeks making love. It'll give us time to think of a way to get out of here."

Dane shook his head. "He'll continue to take women from Magonia if he can. He might even raid Magonia." Sadness clouded his eyes. "And we won't be able to get to your father. As much as I'd like to stay with you and make love to you every day, this won't work to save our lives. Drakus wants domination."

Before he could speak, the tent flap opened. In walked Drakus with four guards. Drakus smiled as if he'd just met old friends. Dane moved in front of Keteria, his automatic desire to protect emerging. While she appreciated his desire to keep her safe, she wouldn't allow him to take all the fire. She moved up next to him, her hand in her pocket with the knife.

Drakus held up his hand. "Before you tell me what you've decided, I have some bad news."

She held her breath.

Drakus took a deep inhalation, as if he didn't like conveying the news. "We captured your emissary to Magonia. The Daryk One. He was on his way back from Magonia with grave news. He told us what we wanted to know." Drakus turned toward her. "My dear, there's no need to return to Magonia. Your father has already been executed for his crime."

Chapter Twenty

Grief slammed Keteria like a fist to the midsection. She tried to suck in a breath but couldn't. Dane's arm came around her waist and she sagged against him as her mind went blank. Drakus stepped forward and for a few moments everything slowed. She couldn't form a single coherent thought.

"My sincere condolences, my lady," Drakus said.

"Sprite." Dane's voice was soft with caring, softer than she'd ever heard him speak.

Keteria looked up at him, but the words wouldn't come. Nothing seemed to work as she absorbed the staggering sorrow. She'd known her father's death was a possibility and had wanted to do everything she could to help him.

She'd failed. Miserably.

And Drakus had as much to do with that as anything else. She stepped from under Dane's arm and slapped Drakus' face with a resounding crack.

No one moved.

Drakus' eyes blazed red for a few moments. "I am grieved that you believe that was necessary."

Tears surged into her eyes. Even with Dane's help, she should have realized she couldn't help her father without the sacred texts. Even with them, the scribes and Truth and Order Police would have declared them blasphemous. Her father was condemned no matter what. She just didn't want to believe it.

Shaking, she wondered if she'd just sealed her death warrant slapping Drakus. To her amazement, Drakus' eyes returned to normal and softened. "Your situation is an unfortunate result of war, my lady."

"That is dragon dung and you know it."

"Keteria." Dane's voice held a warning.

"I won't stand by any longer and keep my thoughts to myself. You are a piece of filth, Drakus, no matter how wonderfully you dress it up. You're a madman."

Drakus laughed, throwing his head back. "My brother, you have a very brave woman. I admire that."

Trembling all over, she stifled her tears and grief and shoved them to the back of her mind with extreme effort. "My apologies, Drakus. I was carried away with grief."

She did not mean a word of it.

Dane reached for her and turned her into his chest, and for a few moments she took what comfort she could from his arms wrapped around her, her face pressed into his chest. She wanted to scream, cry and hit Drakus. She knew better. Shoring up her

defenses, she leaned into Dane's strength and strangled her tears. She wouldn't show more weakness to Drakus.

She eased from Dane's embrace and stood on her own, glaring at the rogue leader.

"Let's get on with it," Dane said. "I have a proposal for you, Drakus. One that will put this idiocy to an end. I will fight you for Ketera. If I lose, you have to promise you'll send her back to Magonia unharmed. If I win, you will cease your hostilities toward Grimmald Castle and all peace-loving people in Dragonia. You will also give up your war against Magonia."

Drakus smirked and put his hands on his hips. "A unique proposition. It doesn't follow with my plans."

"Take it and keep what honor you have left. If you kill me, you will be done with me. Ketera will be safe, and you'll show your compassion to the people. Forcing me to join you is impossible. I won't do it. Even if you kill me and keep Ketera, I know her well. She will make your life a hell. She doesn't give in easily."

Ketera found a wedge of humor in his statement, something she didn't think she could. "He's right. Take his challenge."

She didn't want Dane to fight Drakus to the death. She didn't want any of this to happen, but what choice did she have? A sense of fate and inevitability came over. Whatever happened, she'd experienced the most glorious love she could have wished for in a lifetime. That was all that mattered.

Drakus remained silent, apparently considering his options.

When his answer came, it surprised her. "Very well." Drakus eyes reddened, as if the challenge intrigued him more than anything he'd planned previously. "I accept the challenge with one stipulation."

"Get on with it then," Dane said, his voice filled with harsh edge.

"Ketera will be tied up at the altar, waiting for the dragon. If you try anything unusual, she will die by the dragon."

Dane's gaze turned to hers and they locked eyes. She saw inevitability lying inside his eyes, a deep love that burned for the ages. "Ketera..."

"Yes." That was all she needed to say.

She saw him swallow hard and return his attention to his half brother. Standing fairly near to each other, the men appeared more like each other than before. Their bearing showed strength and perhaps even Drakus possessed honor. Time would tell all.

"Very well." Dane's voice rang out. "It will be done."

Drakus' smile conveyed cleverness as if he knew something they did not. It made her stomach turn. "Guards, take her to the dragon altar."

"Wait!" She held her hand up. "Can I have five minutes with Dane?"

Drakus nodded. "So be it." He gestured for the guards to leave with him.

After they'd departed, Dane snatched Keteria into his arms and buried his hand in hair. They kissed savagely, and she felt it down to her very bones, in her blood and across her skin. She threw her arms around his neck as he dragged her close, banding her to him. She tingled, her womb actually contracting with the deepest need to take him within her. But there was no time. No time.

His tongue tasted hers until they broke from the kiss. They breathed raggedly, and tears filled her eyes. She whispered her words. "You must come back to me."

He kissed her again, softly this time, a smile on his mouth. His eyes shimmered with moisture. "Always."

"I love you, Dane."

His voice was a horse whisper. "I love you."

The tent flap opened and the guards returned. As Dane released her, the men escorted her from the tent, and she thought her heart might shatter into tiny pieces.

* * * * *

Dane's heart slammed in his chest like a massive drum as he stood in the center of the small arena in camp. Arena didn't accurately describe the dirt ground cleared of jungle flora. Over fifty Daryk Ones who'd been willing to betray their country stood around the ring and watched him. He'd been marched in after being offered food and drink. The hospitality surprised him, and he'd taken some food and water to store up his reserves. When the Daryk Ones had urged him to enter the ring, their voices were strong and insistent but showed no particular disrespect. All of this amazed him, but he reminded himself the dozens of men surrounding him didn't intend for him to escape this situation in one piece.

The day was unusually cool for the jungle and clouds already gathered on the horizon, another strange situation for morning. Still, anything could happen in the Tarrian region. Dane's mind stayed firmly on Keteria, his fear for her far outweighing any concern he harbored about fighting his brother.

A rumbling and roaring vibrated through the thick foliage, and he recognized the sound of an approaching dragon. The beast would be here soon, from the sound of it. Its thunderous footsteps echoed, throbbing in the ground. What were they doing bringing it here now?

A black dragon appeared, this one smaller than the one Drakus had used to attack the castle but one of the nasty fire-breathing types that made it more dangerous to handle. The animal's furious growls were throaty and rumbling. Dane wanted to engage the dragon because he knew why Drakus brought it into view.

The bastard wanted to use Keteria as leverage.

It worked.

Swallowing convulsively, Dane reached for his sword and drew it from his scabbard. The blade gleamed like the moons that rose full every night, their gray hue

shining and clear. Unexpected emotions rushed like a river inside him, fear foremost among them. Ketera depended on him, and he couldn't fail her.

Before he could dwell on it, two Daryk Ones brought Ketera to the edge of the jungle. His gaze snagged on her and stayed.

Run. Run. Run.

If she did, they'd catch her and bring her back, or at the least the dragon would. Though he knew Ketera wasn't defenseless, she could only fight so much against a creature that large.

Draconus help her. Give her power and strength.

He'd never prayed to the god before in earnest, but now he did, hoping if there were a deity, that he would listen. Dane drew in a deep breath as he waited to see what happened next. The Daryk Ones surrounding Ketera took her arms and brought her to a wooden stake. They pushed her up against it, their movements not violent but nonsensical. They drew her arms up and tied them to ropes that drew her arms up over her head. She hung there, her feet holding her up. Dane almost stepped forward, his anger as hot as the lightning that suddenly streaked across the sky.

A huge roar came from the sky. Thunderheads broke over the jungle, rising faster than he'd ever seen a storm develop. It was as if the storms came by the will of Draconus, the god's anger consuming and ready to drown them all. Dane knew that was shite, but the clouds turned purple and black, and the wind picked up. Black? He'd never seen black clouds form over the jungle. The ocean perhaps.

As Ketera hung from the trees and waited for her fate, she didn't scream, but Dane wanted to. Oh yes. He wanted to yell, to cry for her to be released. It wouldn't do him any good and he knew it. The Daryk Ones kept the dragon quite a distance from Ketera, and Dane was thankful. The threat was there, however, and he couldn't ignore it. The men around him didn't laugh or jeer or talk. He'd expected the rogues to act out their hostility, but he realized something important. The men didn't see their revolution and a possible civil war as a reason to pillage and rape. They saw it as serious business with consequences. Only their leader didn't buy into the philosophy, and that made his ideals and his pretensions all the more dangerous.

From the bank of tents, Drakus emerged. Dane gripped his sword hilt, ready for a fight, uncertain how or when danger would strike. Drakus walked into the makeshift arena, a sword gripped in his left hand. A fight against a left-handed man would be different, but Dane knew what to do. Training kicked in, and as Drakus walked toward him, Dane braced for whatever might come. Drakus stopped several feet away from Dane. Dane took in his half brother's attire. The man wore an undecorated, plain black breastplate, a sleeveless tunic that ended at the knees. Unlike Dane, who wore trousers, Drakus' legs were bare past the knee except for boots that covered up to his ankles. He didn't wear a helmet as Daryk Ones often did, nor did he offer Dane head protection. The proof would come if the fight turned deadly. Dane didn't know if it would—he couldn't allow Drakus to live and save Ketera's life.

Drakus held up his left fist, sword pointed to the stormy sky, stretching his hand high over his head. "Dane is an honored guest in this camp and his lovely mate," he gestured to Keteria, "awaits her fate."

The men cheered, and Dane's blood ran as icy as a glacier in Imekland. He waited as Drakus made a cutting motion across his own throat, and the men stopped screaming and hooting, their arms high in the sky.

Drakus turned around, sword still in hand, addressing all the men. "The dragon is here to taste her blood if I so chose. If Dane should win our fight, he will not be harmed and Keteria shall not be sacrificed to the dragon." Drakus' eyes started to turn red as he moved around the ring, addressing the men it seemed almost one by one. "If I should win I could still sacrifice her. If not, I will take her to my bed and impregnate her as my concubine. She will bring us many children and prove once and for all that our few pregnant Magonian women are not a fluke." He smiled in triumph. "We may be rogues, but we will prove that we're right. Magonia will be ours, their land ours and their women ours."

He shoved his arm upward, pointing his sword to the sky once more. The crowd cheered. Flasks filled with spirits started around the crowd. Good. If the rogue Daryk Ones became inebriated, that could prove good in one way. Or bad in another. They could become violent. Or they could become reckless and make mistakes. He hoped it was the later.

Dane's breathing quickened, energy from the crowd adding fire to his blood. He no longer cared about maintaining civilization in the face of death. Nothing would stop him from winning this fight. He would save his woman. He would.

When the crowd stopped crowing and celebrating, Drakus turned to face Dane. "Shall we begin?"

Dane nodded and braced his body.

Drakus attacked.

* * * * *

Keteria's body shuddered with fear as she watched Drakus hurl toward Dane. From her vantage point on an incline above the fracas, she saw the men come together in a furious tangle. Jungle pressed in on all sides around the small plateau. Her heart drummed in her ears as dragon breath puffed and a throaty roar issued with ear-splitting intensity. Thunder rumbled as inky clouds continued to pile high above the canopy. Small droplets of rain pattered on her head. She twisted in the ropes securing her wrists to opposite poles. Her feet supported her but just barely. Physical discomfort paled when she couldn't take her gaze away from the fight below. Even the dragon's loud huffing didn't distract her as several Daryk Ones restrained the creature.

Dane met Drakus' surge as their swords clanged. Sweat gleamed on their arms and legs as they moved with deftness and skill. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears as she tried to suck in one breath and then the other. Fear for Dane settled low in her stomach

as if she'd swallowed a rock. Hard terror touched her at the thought of the dragon so close. God, it stank. She trembled.

Bravery. She must be brave.

Swords clashed with a loud ring as Dane and Drakus brought metal together time after time. Rain started to spatter on her body with large drops, wetting her hair and face and slapping her body. An unusually cold wind followed, flattening her tunic and pants to her skin. She shivered.

The rogue leader circled Dane, his movements practiced and as skillful as a beast on the hunt. She held her breath as Dane kept his gaze on his opponent. With a rush the men came together. The crowd roared at the same time lightning sent a jagged bolt across the sky. The men brought their swords together in a furious play of movements that moved so quickly she couldn't keep up. The crowd's appreciation drowned any sounds of exertion. The opponents backed away for a moment then plunged forward with brutal movements that expended all they had. Rain poured down their bodies as the storm lashed the jungle with unrelenting fury. It was almost as if the storm knew the fight's importance. A war could be settled before it started. From here she could hear their labored breaths, see their expressions. Dane was determined, and with everything inside her she willed him to stay safe and fight hard.

Oh god Magon. Keep him alive. Keep him safe. I love him.

Dane lunged with a move so quick and furious she almost missed it. A growl issued from his throat as his blade slashed Drakus' rib cage. Drakus cried out, the sound engorged with pain. Drakus fell to his knees and clutched his side.

Dane could take his head now with one blow.

She held her breath.

Suddenly, out of the bush, dozens of voices rang from all sides, their cries angry and ready for war. Dane hesitated and the Daryk Ones surrounding the fight turned, looked and readied their stance for attack. Their leader down, they had no order.

Then she saw a familiar figure hurling from the jungle in front of the attackers.

Her breath caught. "Minilos."

The older man threw himself into the fray.

To her right the dragon roared and turned toward her.

Her heart seemed to stop. Time stopped.

"Dane, I love you."

Chapter Twenty-One

Dane's mind whirled as three things happened at once. Drakus fell to his knees. Daryk Ones surged from the jungle. The dragon roared and surged. The Daryk Ones holding it lost their grip and fell to the ground.

Dane allowed all his extraordinary strength and battle fever to fill his muscles.

Dane darted away from the fight toward Ketera. She struggled against the ropes as the dragon took a step toward her. The dragon's fury turned to its right as its wings spread and with three huge leaps, the creature was upon him.

The dragon didn't care about Ketera.

It wanted him.

Dane charged the beast.

A huge wing came down toward Dane as the dragon's mouth opened wide. Dane stared into the purple maw, half expecting jaws to clamp down. Dane twisted to miss the crushing wing and mouth.

"Dane!"

Ketera's scream echoed in his mind, and as he rolled out from under the dragon, he realized she must have thought the dragon had eaten him.

Empowered by his escape, Dane ignored the men fighting nearby, his opponent prone on the ground. He'd free Ketera, but the dragon had to go first.

As he came out from under the dragon's shadow, he pinpointed all his concentration on the beast. He drew back, and with tremendous momentum, heaved the sword toward the beast's belly. Above Dane lightning splintered the sky with dagger fingers. Water poured down from the heavens.

The sword hit.

The dragon came to a complete stop, its hateful green eyes rolling wildly. With a cry that echoed across the jungle through the pounding rain and fighting men, the dragon started to fall. At impact the ground actually trembled beneath Dane's feet. When the beast's heaving breath puffed out in a great expiration, Dane ran toward the creature, grabbed the hilt of his sword and yanked it free.

Dane's surprise at the easy kill couldn't overwhelm his amazement to see Samhala cutting Ketera loose from her restraints. Dane charged toward them, still not trusting Samhala. As the ropes fell away from Ketera, she rushed toward him.

He gathered her against him with his left arm, his bloody sword still in his right hand. She trembled against him, and he crushed her to him, his lips finding hers in one

desperate kiss. Her arms came around his neck. As he broke the kiss, the fighting nearby caught his attention.

"Where did Samhala go?" Keteria asked.

"Don't know. But we have to get out of here."

He grabbed her hand and broke into a run. No time to fight with Minilos or the other Daryk Ones who'd found their way here to help. No time to ask why. It was better to head for Grimmald Castle and learn the truth later. Dane half expected a rogue to come after them, but Minilos' band of men kept them occupied.

Minilos ran to them. "Get your mate to safety. We'll take care of this mess here."

Dane nodded. "Thank you. I owe you one."

Minilos laughed. "You owe me more than one."

As they plunged into the jungle, the rain continued to saturate them. Hair flopped in his face, and he shook his head to get it out of the way. The jungle came at them from all directions, sodden leaves and mud sucking at their feet. Rain lashed at them with tremendous force. Keteria stumbled and was torn from his arms. She slid partway down a hill.

"Keteria!" He shouted into the wind. When he reached her, he lifted her into his arms and ran with her.

She didn't protest, and he felt her shivering in his arms. So he just kept running.

And running.

* * * * *

Keteria awakened in a familiar place, her body wrapped in safety and warmth. During their headlong flight to escape, Dane had carried her a good portion of the way. She'd protested, but he wouldn't listen. Eventually he put her down and they kept running. Finally the cave they'd taken shelter in before came into view. They'd collapsed inside, Dane gathering her close as they sat together in quiet. As she took in their surroundings, she noticed dawn had come and the relentless rain had stopped.

She shifted in Dane's arms and took stock of his expression. His eyes opened, their beautiful intensity showing complete calm. His gaze shone with warmth and appreciation that started a tingle in her lower belly. Arousal rose swiftly. She reached up to touch his cheek and the bristly beard rasped over her palm.

"I thought I'd lost you," she said.

His smile was slow and sensual, his eyes beautiful without the Vedic red to obscure their true color. "You could never lose me. You're my mate."

She sighed, peace coming over her until she thought of her father. She had cried in Dane's arms when they reached the cave, but didn't know if the strain of their recent experience caused her to cry. She thought of her father, her guilt searing.

"You're thinking of your father," Dane said.

She peered at him. "How did you know?"

He brushed a tender touch over her hair. "The same way I knew you were in danger. The rumors about a strong mate bond are true."

"I'm so grateful you knew to come for me. I...I was trying to be strong but..."

He feathered kisses over her forehead. "You are the bravest woman I've ever known."

Tears flooded her eyes but she resisted them. "Thank you. I don't feel strong."

A weary smile touched his lips. "You've had so many things happen in a short time. Give yourself time to recover."

"Father needed me and I couldn't help him." Anger returned to swamp the pain.

"You did what you could." He hugged her close. "Right now we need to worry about us. Drakus is alive and he won't let this end here."

"He'll come after us?"

"Perhaps. I think civil war is coming."

She sighed, inevitability settling over her. "I think so too." Silence surrounded them for a short time. "I thought you were dead."

He peppered more kisses along her face. "You know it's not easy to kill me."

"Drakus told me you were killed at the castle. I shouldn't have believed him."

He explained how the donjon had fallen and severely injured him. "At that time I thought you were safely on your way to Magonia."

He kissed her, and she felt the desperation in their physical need. "Dane, I can't imagine doing this without you now."

"We've come a long way, sprite. You used to hate this wild land and me."

She winced. "Hate is strong, but I'll admit I feel far different than I did when I first met you."

"If there isn't anything left in Magonia for you, will you stay in Dragonia with me?"

"Of course. I love you."

"You'd give up Magonia for me?"

She knew it now without regret. "Yes. I'm not the same person you met."

He grinned, and it was full of mischief. He pulled her over onto his lap so that she straddled him. She could feel his solid erection pressing against her sensitive core. "You changed me."

"Me? How so?"

"You taught me restraint. I'm not the wild man of Dragonia anymore."

His smile held enough teasing, she knew he was only half serious. "I do not believe that."

He cupped her face. "Believe it. More than once you've shown me something I never believed was possible for me. I never thought a woman could love me." His gaze

caressed her face. "More than that, I never thought I wanted a woman to love me before I met you."

She reached for him, her heart full despite her grief over her father. Their lips met. Sexual heat engulfed her, but so did exhaustion. Lovemaking would have to wait.

They left the cave soon after, eager to return to the castle. What they found there surprised them. As they cleared the jungle, the massive fortress gleamed gray in the late morning sunlight. The ground was soggy as they tromped through mud and crushed foliage as they headed toward the structure. People poured across the drawbridge in significant numbers. While the castle sheltered many individuals, the amount entering the castle seemed excessive.

"What's going on?" she asked as they brought up the rear of the long line.

Dane glanced around. "People are scared. As soon as my fight with Drakus becomes known, there will be more fear. War is inevitable."

"Has that ever happened before? War on this continent?"

"Many hundreds of years ago. But not for a long time now. People won't know how to react."

"A warlike people who don't know how to fight a war?"

He clasped her upper arm in a proprietary fashion, his gaze scanning the crowd. "Fighting is something we do well, but on a small scale. War is going to be..." He shook his head, disgust pouring over his features. "War on this continent will be a special kind of hell."

Shuddering deep inside with apprehension, she shifted closer to Dane. "What will we do?"

"Take things one step at a time."

She turned her gaze to him as his arm curled around her shoulders to bring her tightly against him.

"Do you trust me?" he asked softly.

"Of course."

"Whatever happens next, we'll get through it."

Right that moment Minilos walked toward them from the jungle, as did a large contingent of Daryk Ones. Finius was with them.

"They're alive," she said in relief.

"Of course." Dane squeezed her gently. "If anyone could kick rogue ass it would be Minilos."

After greeting the Daryk Ones, who headed toward the drawbridge, Dane and Ketera greeted Minilos and Finius.

"How did you survive that mess at Drakus' camp, old man?" Dane shook hands with Minilos "And why did you come to help?"

"I decided if you were killed this castle would go all to hell." Minilos grinned. "And I couldn't stand the thought of leaving your ass out there, hanging in the wind. This fine lady was in danger too." Minilos swiped his right forearm over his forehead, a cocky twinkle in his eyes. "As it is, those rogues are not as manly as they think they are."

Her stomach churned. "Did you kill them all?"

"Hardly. Something interfered."

"Interfered?" Dane asked.

Minilos was cut and bruised and Finius appeared even more ragged. They both bore the marks of hard battle, yet both of them wore a smile.

"Drakus halted the fight before we could kill them." Finius seemed almost lighthearted.

Dane's face twisted into disbelief and he slid his arm around Keteria again. "He stopped the fight?"

"After you spared his life, he decided in order to honor you he would stop the fight. If you can believe that shite." Minilos grunted in total disgust.

Keteria couldn't believe it either. "How very odd. Do you think he has a conscience after all?"

Finius snorted, but then his gaze slid to Dane. "Perhaps he did it because you are his brother. Perhaps he has some respect."

Dane shook his head. "It's possible but not probable. More likely he wants to regroup and come back stronger than before."

"Drakus isn't finished," Finius said. "He will return to full form soon enough."

"Whatever his reason, we're here now," Minilos said.

Minilos reached for Keteria's hand and squeezed it, all humor disappearing from his eyes. "We also rescued the Daryk One who was sent to find word of your father. He told us about your father. My deepest sympathy."

A lump grew in her throat, but she managed to hold back the tears threatening to choke her. "Thank you, Minilos. And thank you for helping us escape Drakus and his men."

Minilos actually flushed when she squeezed his hand. "You would do the same for me, my lady."

She smiled. "Yes. I think I would."

His eyebrows winged up as he laughed. "You think?"

Dane groaned. "Are you going to stand here all day and flirt with my woman?"

"Me?" Minilos waggled his eyebrows. His eyes turned serious again. "We saw Samhala. She told me how she betrayed me and offered her head."

Keteria's stomach tossed. "What?"

"Not to worry," Minilos said. "Though her betrayal could have killed us all, I understand why she did it. We found her mate and rescued him as well. They're together now."

Ketera felt something ease inside her. "Good."

Weariness threatened Ketera's equilibrium. Dane drew her against his chest and kissed his forehead. "We need to take you inside where you can rest."

She decided she wouldn't argue with that. After promising to stay safe and to make contact later, Dane and Ketera proceeded into the castle and headed directly for his quarters. When they stripped of all their clothes and headed to the bathing room, they found energy in the shower of water that cleansed them.

Dane touched her gently, as if he were afraid she might break, and she did the same. Cuts and bruises dented both of them, and sore muscles assured that sex wouldn't happen though her body sang with need.

At least, that's what she believed.

Dane's eyes turned red, redder than she'd ever seen them. Except when he fought Drakus.

His nostrils flared the slightest bit, his hands moved over her quickly. "I can't make love to you now. I might hurt you. I want you too much."

"Make love to me." She wanted it more than anything. "I need to touch you. More. I need all of you. Not just the safe part. Not just the parts you want me to see. After all we've been through, I need everything you have to give me."

His eyes calmed momentarily, his soul in his gaze. Love simmered in those eyes. "I am yours."

Without another word, he stood beneath the water and began to kiss his way down her body one moment by one moment. Every inch of her skin surrendered under his lips, his fingers close after with touches so tender they resembled the brush of a feather. She shivered under his exquisite attention, craving the time when he allowed himself to let go and take her with abandon. For only then would she know Dane in his glory. She expected him lift her in his arms and pound his cock into her already-hot core. Instead he reached her pubic mound and parted her legs. He took a second to glance up and the red was back. She spread her legs wider and he found her clit. One sweep of hot tongue, slick and urgent, made her body shiver in a drowning desire that threatened to pull her under. His tongue drew her higher with each sweet flick and swirl. He speared his tongue between her pussy lips and his thumb swept over her clit. She gasped, grabbed his head and held him in place. He couldn't leave her now. The water cascaded down, flowing and easing her muscles. Making it easier to close her eyes and sink into the luscious moment. She quivered, gasped as the pleasure rose. The wet brush of his tongue circled her pussy lips and teased one gasp after another from her lips. Her clit heated and tingled under each brush of his thumb. It wasn't enough. Magon, it wasn't enough. Her fingers twisted in his hair as her head tipped back and water flowed down her face.

She gasped. "Dane."

He paused and for an agonizing moment she thought he'd quit. Instead he slowly pushed two thick fingers inside her and started to rub a special spot inside her. The pleasure shot to the top as she cried out, whimpering and twisting. He flicked his tongue over her clit and fucked her with his fingers, driving toward a pinnacle. Climax slammed into her so hard she couldn't hold back the frantic cry that tore from her throat. When she stopped gasping for breath and the pleasure had come down, he picked her up in his arms and laid her gently on the bed. His cock, hard and thick, slipped easily between her swollen pussy lips and she opened herself wide to his possession. Heat engulfed her as his cock pressed deep. He rested within her, and the solid bulk of his flesh surrounded her in pleasure. In that moment he was everything she needed and the burning desire in his eyes said no other woman would ever do for him again.

She cupped his face and smiled. "My mate."

"Forever."

His hips started a rhythm, a pumping that sent tremors of hot arousal flaring deep inside her pussy. He groaned against her throat, out of control and unable to show the sweet side. He was animal now. He eased out of her.

"No," she said.

"Turn over. I want you from behind."

Excited by the idea, she turned over and pressed her ass to him. He pushed aside her wet hair and kissed her neck. If she'd thought he planned to fuck her into oblivion, she was probably right.

He lunged into her, slamming deep as she groaned and pushed back against the ruthless attention he gave her body. His hands grasped her hips and dug in, moving her with each thrust and teaching her the motion.

"Please." She threw away any thought but reaching the top with him, of branding him on her soul.

Dane kept the pace, his body an instrument for her pleasure and everything about him designed to motivate her to surrender. Slick friction teased her to the heights until she moved with him in ways she'd never moved before, her tightness clenching over his cock. Shivering with indescribable pleasure, she soared to climax as it racked her body with tremors. It fired in her clit, in the depths of her womanhood. Orgasm took over her mind and washed it in pleasure. He wasn't done, his guttural utterances testimony to his primal reaction. He fucked her with new force, each gasp from his throat showing how she affected him. Each time he bottomed out, she cried out. Higher, higher they moved toward the plateau.

Incredibly a firestorm rose she couldn't deny. It entered her skin, cascaded over her body in tingles that told her this time was different. Dane's cries of need rose higher until the manly, feral sounds ripped from his throat. He thrust wildly and climax shook her again, the pleasure going on and on until she sagged to the bed. Dane slipped from

her immediately and fell onto the bedside her. Gathering her into his arms, he cuddled her close.

“Stay with me forever,” he said, breath rasping in his throat.

“Yes. Wherever we are. Forever.”

Epilogue

"War isn't coming. It's already here," Dane said to the contingent of Daryk Ones loyal to him and the castle as they stood in the great hall. "But we will prevail on all fronts. Drakus and his men are strong, just as we are. But we have more on our side. The might of love behind us."

Dane saluted the men and sat down at the long table on a dais where Minilos sat on his left and Ketera on his right. The men let out a cheer as they took a tall drink of their ale.

Minilos started talking to a Daryk One who'd come up to the table, and Dane turned toward his mate. Though she smiled, he saw the fatigue that had worn her to a nub. She looked more relaxed and less strained than she had after returning safely to the castle only yesterday. He knew though, that hard times lay ahead.

Minilos cleared his throat and addressed Ketera. "You said you have a friend who was lost when the ship sank, right?"

Ketera's eyes narrowed. "Yes. Two friends."

"I just heard a rumor from one of the Daryk Ones. While I'm not certain it's true, it pays to listen. Apparently Eryk Gauth saved a woman who was floating in the sea."

"Eryk Gauth?" Ketera's eyes widened, lit from within by hope. "We met him on our way back into the castle from the jungle." She turned to Dane. "He could have saved Mia."

"That would be good news." Dane reached for her hand and squeezed gently. "Eryk is ruthless but I doubt he'd hurt a woman." Worry returned to her beautiful eyes, and he was damn sorry he put the emotion there. But he'd do anything to soothe her. "And Rayder said he has Xandra. If there is one kernel of decency inside him, Xandra should be all right."

"Both of them have always had a soft spot for women," Minilos said.

Ketera's genuine smile warmed Dane's heart. "Then there is hope for my friends' safety yet."

Dane hoped that Rayder and Eryk wouldn't prove her wrong.

About the Author

Suspenseful, erotic, edgy, thrilling, romantic, adventurous. All these words are used to describe award-winning, bestselling novelist Denise A. Agnew's novels. *Romantic Times Magazine* called her romantic suspense novels *Dangerous Intentions* and *Treacherous Wishes* "top-notch romantic suspense". With paranormal, time travel, romantic comedy, contemporary, historical, erotica and romantic suspense novels under her belt, she proves her gift for writing about a diverse range of subjects. (Writing tales that scare the reader is her ultimate thrill.)

Denise's inspiration for her novels comes from innumerable sources, but the fact that she has lived in Colorado, Hawaii and the United Kingdom has given her a lifetime of ideas. Her experiences with archaeology have crept into her work, as well as numerous travels throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Denise currently lives in Arizona with her real life hero, her husband.

Denise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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