

# TOPAZ DARE

A woman with dark hair in a high ponytail, wearing a black corset with lace-up details and a black skirt with a chain belt. She has extensive black tribal-style tattoos on her face, neck, and arms. The background is a deep red with a smoky texture and several human skulls are visible at the bottom left.

D.A.R.E. PROJECT BOOK 2

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Topaz has been enjoying the small freedoms that each assignment for retrieval has given her. When confronted by deadly insects that have already killed her targets, she has to choose running for her life or finishing her job. She is assisted by another dragon who offers her an option for her time off. He will take her to visit her sister if she will spend some time getting to know him, and part of her is only too delighted to happily to take Kirai up on his offer. Dragons, kidnapping, giant bugs, poisons and meeting a sister she thought dead make for quite the short layover for an active D.A.R.E. agent.

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Topaz D.A.R.E.

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Topaz D.A.R.E.  
D.A.R.E. Project: Book 2

By

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*In case you missed Ruby DARE...*

In Ruby DARE, we met the dragons living on a world not their own, living a life that is only a bare existence in an underground facility.

The people of earth have set the destruction of their planet in motion, creating a device that has enabled them to use a dimensional gateway to walk between worlds. What they didn't know, couldn't know, was that each person transported punched a hole in the stability of their world, each transport weakening the dimensional fibers that allowed their world to remain intact.

Thirty years ago a woman who was not human walked through a rift and warned them of the problem that would emerge with their technology. She was arrested, incarcerated and when it was found that she was pregnant, her children were removed and experimented on. This split the four embryos into twenty and the young girls were raised underground with no knowledge of who or what they were.

These girls grew into women who became part of the DARE project. Dimensional, Arrest, Retrieval and Extraction, these women travel from world to world to bring back the travellers, prisoners and escapees from earth to hopefully heal the wounds that the humans have made.

The DARE project women had no knowledge of their origins aside from what their mother gave them, that is. Eiwyn kept her bond with her daughters while her body was in suspended animation in a lower level of the facility.

Eiwyn is a seer and left her husband to bring her daughters to adulthood without the interference of her kind. Her husband would have used her daughters for political alliances, but she foresaw a different destiny and came to earth so that they could have it.

When Ruby met her male on assignment, Eiwyn breathed a metaphorical sigh of relief. Despite her confidence in her abilities, having a foreseen outcome come to pass was reassuring. Now, with one daughter safely away, there were only nineteen more dragons to go and she could leave this boring, backward world to its destiny, for better or worse.

## Chapter One

Topaz stifled a scream as someone grabbed her and pulled her down behind the sandy ridge she was peeking over.

“Hold still. The Marruk are motion sensitive.” The voice was deep, masculine, and as she turned her head to look at him, he seemed just as surprised as she was.

She tried to speak, but he pressed his hand over her mouth with a jerk of his head to the locals milling around on all six limbs, their jaws clacking in the still air. They resembled large ants, very large ants.

Topaz looked at the man who held her and noted the marks on his face matched her own. *Can you hear me?*

He blinked in surprise. *Yes. Who are you?*

*Topaz. Who are you?*

*Kirai. How do you come to be here, lady?*

*I am a member of the Dimensional Arrest, Retrieval and Extraction team. We are pulling the humans back to their world. They tore holes in the dimensional barriers with their technology.*

*Why are you working with them?*

*Because they raised me in their lab. I haven't known anything else beyond duty. It's my life's work.*

The gaze that he gave her with his inky black eyes analyzed her. She felt a searching touch in her mind and, in a rush of fluttering sensation, he took her memories.

In self-defense, she reached along their link and took his memories in return. Her mind spun as she absorbed his thoughts and she took in exactly what he was. Kirai was a dragon, just like her. Images of flying filled her thoughts, giving her a piece of freedom she had never imagined.

*You can fly.* It wasn't a question. She could see the memories in his mind.

*Yes. The Marruk have left for their afternoon foraging. If you want to collect those bodies, now is the time.*

Topaz nodded and he released her mouth. "The Marruk killed my targets."

"Their bones are in that pile over there. Finding the human ones should be easy." He lifted himself off her and helped her to her feet.

She could feel her features puckering in a frown. "Why are you helping me?"



“Because I wish to begin a courtship and this will be a good beginning.” He smiled, his facial markings twisting in a pleasing way.

He towered over her, the top of her head barely to his shoulder. His skin was a fascinating bronze, his arms bared by a leather vest that matched his trousers. The marks on his arms had jagged edges and her new knowledge filled in the gaps. His mother’s markings were on his face, his father’s on his arms. Echralia was his mother, Kairu his father. It was all there in the thoughts that she had taken.

“Fine. I have three days left here, so court if you can.” She took strides toward the bone pile and kept her guard up for any of the returning ants. Topaz knelt next to the pile and flipped out a tarp from her pack. Each human bone was accounted for as she placed them carefully on the fabric.

“They were a scouting party?”

“I think so. Their actual assignment was not divulged to me.” She shrugged and kept working.

He joined her in carefully separating the human from animal bones, including the locator tags. A glance at her scanner showed that all five of the people she was looking for were in this pile. It was a sad end to her

fourth assignment.

“Do you enjoy your work?” He was trying to engage her in conversation, that much was obvious.

“It has its moments, but it is more of an obligation than work. We aren’t given much of a choice and you know it.”

“I apologize for my method of getting to know you. It was an act of impulse.”

She looked at him in surprise. “Thank you for your apology. I don’t think I have ever been the recipient of one before.”

He cocked his head while he continued to sort bones. “The humans lack manners. They always have.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and sorted through his memories of humans. Dozens of worlds flicked through his mind, including earth. He had known humans when they dressed in long robes with wide sashes and swung swords.

Kirai was much, much older than he appeared.

Topaz fished for the last few pieces of human—a handful of toe bones—and gathered the corners of the tarp together. “Well, since this world is not safe for bipedals, I think I had better be going.”

“May I accompany you?”

She laughed, imagining the look on the techs faces if she brought him back with her. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

She started down the embankment she had climbed to get to the nesting site. Her mind was screaming at her to grab the first male of her kind that she had ever met and not let go, but logic told her that in three more days her leash would make itself known with a pain in her thigh she could not ignore.

“I do not live on this world. If you would like to come to my home, you have only to ask.” He walked casually at her side.

“If you don’t live here, why have you come to this planet?”

“There is a rumor out there that twenty dragon females are travelling dimensions. A general dispersal of males scattered the moment we heard about it.”

She laughed in surprise. “Where did you hear about us?”

“Your sister has found her mate, and Oton is not shy about bragging about his good fortune. They have had an endless stream of visitors in the last week as males turned up to confirm her parentage.”

“The marks? So that is what they mean. I knew

yours denoted your parents, but wasn't sure what mine were."

He gestured to her head, "The marks on your face are your mother's. They are a combination of her parents' marks. The same with the marks on your arms and ribs, they indicate your father's parents, and thus, your father."

She nodded. "I have not met either of them."

"But your mother speaks to you. Eiwyn was the strongest of our females, and an accurate seer. When she left Draven decades ago, we knew it was for a reason, and her complete disappearance gave him hope."

"Because if she was dead, he would have found her."

"As would any true mate." Kirai helped her past the stinging shrubs. "Why are you going so far from the nesting site?"

"I don't want to disturb anything more than I have to."

"Will you come to my home?"

She thought about it. "Will you promise to bring me back here in under three days? I only have seventy-two hours before my leash causes me a great deal of discomfort."

He smiled. "I promise, as long as you promise to

allow yourself to enjoy yourself while you are with me.”

“Will you tell me about our people?”

He grinned, his triumph clear in his gaze. “I will even let you examine me if that will make your understanding more complete.”

It took her a moment to figure out that he was using innuendo. She had heard it a time or two from her handler or the techs. “One thing at a time.”

“If I carry you, it will be easier, but you might want to leave the bones here if you are repairing a hole in space.”

She shook her head. “Will there be a safe place to put them where we are going? They are mine now and I will not abandon them.”

He gave her a strange look, but nodded. “Fine, tie the pack tightly, we don’t want to lose any of them.”

Smiling at his capitulation, she strapped the edges of the tarp into a tight bundle and lifted it easily in her arms. Kirai lifted her and she settled against him while he opened a portal. In a few short steps, they were in another world and this one was a study in pine trees and pounding surf.

The novelty of being held against him distracted her for a moment, but when she came to her senses, she felt

for the feel of the new world. She memorized the vibrations so that she could find it again.

He strode along as if she weighed nothing which made her feel rather feminine. Her leathers did a good job of outlining her body, but she had never felt like a woman in the arms of a man before. Her role was usually cast in the persona of the dragon swan fighting the guards to keep from getting jabbed in medical. Even her handler didn't bother trying to get her into the doctor's office, he called the guards immediately when an appointment was ordered.

Now, she was being held gently but securely as a dragon carried her to his lair. It was quite the change from normal events.

His home stood on top of a cliff, a house of smooth wooden panels and paper walls. "It's lovely."

"Thank you. I built it myself." His pride spilled out of him.

He put her down on the threshold and led her inside. "You can put the remains here. There are no other sentients on this world."

"Thank you." She placed the tarp carefully on the ground and then turned to look at her companion, his silky black hair waved down to his waist, dark eyes

sparkling.

“The first thing you must see is a transformation. It is important that you get used to men shifting shape and knowing which dragon forms belong to which men. Getting on the back of a man who is not your spouse is not acceptable.”

She smiled at his playful attitude as he led her back outside. “I have no spouse so I need not worry.”

He gave her a small scowl and waved for her to wait on the deck that surrounded his home. The air shimmered around him and an instant later, forty feet of undulating muscle and scales with a leonine face turned to greet her.

Brilliant gold scales caught the light as he shifted and preened, his five-fingered claws adorned his hands and feet, a soft mane of silky black hair caressed his jaw line and created a ridge down his spine.

“You are really big.”

*Thank you, but you will get used to it.* She sensed that there was another joke she wasn’t getting, but that thought disappeared when he asked, *Would you care to go flying?*

Her answer was to rush toward him, stepping on his raised hand and letting him lift her to the back of his

neck. “How will you fly, you don’t have wi—”

Her shriek rent the air as he began to undulate and lifted off the ground, shifting forward with speed that increased as she clutched the mane tightly.

Wind rushed past her face and her eyes flicked rapidly until the transparent inner lid that confused the earth doctors shifted to protect her vision, allowing her advanced sight and a more comfortable ride.

The undulations of his body warmed hers in strange and pleasant ways. If she didn’t know better, she would have almost mistaken it for arousal. She was just getting into the rhythm of his flight when he turned and landed next to his home once again.

She dismounted from his back with difficulty, her heavy boots clunked against his smooth sides as she slid to the ground.

The moment she was free, he shifted back to his humanoid form and smiled at her. “Did you enjoy it?”

“I really did. You are very lucky to be able to do that whenever you wish.”

A calculating gleam came to his eyes, “Like many things, it is most enjoyable with someone else to appreciate your efforts.”

She blinked and frowned. That sounded almost dirty.



She twisted her lips in confusion and glared at him. “I don’t understand your jokes.”

“Then I will have to try harder to amuse you. Please, come inside. I will prepare some dinner and we can talk about the history of our people.”

Still frowning, she returned to the comfortable dimness of his home. Her eyes flicked back to normal and she sat a few feet away from the kitchen as he began to remove food from a variety of cupboards and drawers.

When he opened a panel in the floor and withdrew a frozen fish, she laughed out loud. “You have a freezing unit?”

“There are many technologies in this universe that the humans have never dreamed of. This is a stone from the far reaches of the Jegraoth Heights. It removes heat and cannot be handled by anyone who can’t regenerate their skin as we can.”

“Fascinating. How long has my father been in power?”

He was solemn as he minced the vegetables and heated a skillet with a flick of his fingers. “Over one thousand years. He came to power after his father went mad and Draven was forced to lock his parent away for

the good of the public. Erigoth has been dead for two centuries now, but some of us still remember the madness that killed many of our kind.”

“Draven?”

“He is a bold leader who saw Eiwyn in his court five hundred years ago and immediately saw the benefit of having a powerful seer as his mate. Their childless union caused many murmurs, but few if any spoke of it to their face.”

“Mother once said that she always knew we would come to her, the how was the only fuzzy part. I think now that her mind simply could not believe what her senses showed her.” Topaz watched his hands as he moved with slick dexterity.

“It is likely. But Draven doted on his mate. He is still not stable and she has been gone for three decades. It will be good for him to know that she is safe.”

*He can't be told. Not yet.*

*Mother?* The tone in her head was feminine and she had not been expecting it.

*Lady Eiwyn? Lord Draven needs to know that you live.* He stopped preparing food to speak to Topaz's mother.

*And he will, Kirai, but not until I am ready. There is*

*much to do to settle our daughters and time is running short. If my girls do not heal the breach in the rift, the worlds will tear themselves apart, unraveling from earth outward.*

Kirai's eyes opened wide. *This is why you left him?*

*I didn't leave, I did what had to be done. I will return once my visions have come to pass, now be quiet and kiss my daughter. If she slaps you, you are not her mate and must let her go.*

*That is not a standard test.*

*Topaz is not your standard dragon. Kiss her, Kirai, or I will tell her about the time you came to court and you forgot your clothing and ended up in the women's quarters. A strange set of events.*

Topaz was listening intently and the dark flush of embarrassment on his cheekbones made her smile. *Are you sure about this, Mother?*

*I am sure. There is no harm in a kiss.*

No harm in a kiss. As Kirai approached her, she fought her smile. When he pressed his lips to hers, she leaned forward until she tipped off the chair and landed on the floor.

“Ow. And here she said there was no harm in a kiss.”

## Chapter Two

Kirai chuckled and the sound made Topaz shiver with...some unidentifiable emotion. She brought her fingers to her lips to hold the slight tingle against them longer. *What does it mean, this tingle?*

*It means, my dear daughter, that this man is quite capable of becoming your mate. There are few you would be compatible with, but what are the odds that the one who found you first would be so lucky?*

*You knew, didn't you?* Topaz turned her gaze to the tall dragon in front of her. He offered her his hand, no doubt to pick her up off the floor.

“Come, Topaz, let me help you to your feet.”

Topaz looked at his hand for a long moment. It appeared strong and tan. It also appeared gentle, if that was possible. She frowned at it, picked herself up off the floor and dusted her rear. What was it about this man that made her feel so strange inside? An odd feeling settled in the pit of her stomach when he touched and

kissed her. Did that also mean he was her mate?

*It could mean that, Topaz. Only you can decide that. If I may make a suggestion, I would get to know him. He said there are no other sentient beings here. How does he manage to keep his sanity living alone as he does? Find out.*

Her mother backed out of her mind after her last gentle nudge and Topaz looked a Kirai for a long moment. “Can we,” she paused to clear her throat. “Can we try that again, please?”

The look of male satisfaction he gave her was almost enough to make her change her mind. What was it about males of any species that made them think they were the sexiest thing on whatever planet they inhabited, even if they had potbellies and warts?

“I would be most honored to satisfy your need to experience a kiss, lady.”

She almost rolled her eyes at that remark. Of course he would be honored. He would also, most likely be aroused as well. She may be naïve, but... How did the humans put it? She hadn’t just fallen off the turnip truck.

Topaz gazed deep into his almond-shaped eyes as his face grew ever closer to hers. What was it about this man that made her want to allow him liberties with her

person that no other male had ever had? She shivered with anticipation as his head grew closer and closer to hers. She watched as his intriguing mouth grew closer and wondered what he would taste like if she opened her mouth to him.

“Wait a minute.” She held up her hand. “Is this right? Should we be doing this when we don’t even know each other?”

“You know me,” he said as he straightened and moved away. He put a small distance between them, probably to make her feel better.

He leaned against the wall, his hands behind his back. He didn’t look as vulnerable as she would have liked. The action pushed his chest out, drawing her attention to the size of his pectoral muscles and biceps the vest did little to cover. She narrowed her eyes, certain he did that on purpose.

“You probably know me better than anyone else alive.” He smiled. “You’ve taken my memories.” He crossed his legs. “Did you know that usually only a mate can do such a thing to a male?”

She bit her lip as she looked at him. As males go, he wasn’t hard to look at. He was arrogant though she could most likely attribute that to his parentage. Topaz

cupped her chin and tapped her lips. "I had no idea." She raised a brow. "Still, it is my choice, is it not?"

She wasn't sure what his answer would be, but something told her she was right. She could refuse him and if she did, he would have to accept her refusal.

"Yes, lady." He sighed and ran his fingers through his beautiful ebony hair. "It is your choice. It will always be your choice. I cannot force you to do something you do not wish to do."

That was an interesting answer. What could a male force her to do? She remembered when they were younger and a tech tried something with her sister, June. June had been surprised at the tech's advances, but soon became angry and took that anger out on the technician, showing everyone in the facility why the dragon swans were the ones to extract the targets. There was nothing like a few broken bones to convince even the most stimulated of men to leave you alone. Since then, none of the techs bothered any of the sisters that way. Still, he had been a human male. Could a male dragon force her compliance? Topaz wasn't certain she wanted to find out.

"Come," he said, holding out his arm. "Allow me to show you around."

He didn't force her, he didn't even attempt to coerce her into going with him. He merely stood still, his arm held out and bent at the elbow.

Topaz raised her hand and paused. Did he expect her to place her hand on top of his, on his arm? What was it he wanted from her?

"Allow me, lady." Kirai reached out, took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. "Is that comfortable for you, lady?"

Topaz could barely speak as a strange tingling raced up and down her arm. Her fingers burned where they rested against his skin and all of a sudden, she felt strange, decadent...wild. Something inside her burst and she knew she wanted to be with this man. At least for now.

"Yes." She nodded even as she stared at her hand resting against his darker skin. "Yes. I'm comfortable with this. "Would you care to show me around now?" She couldn't help staring at his mouth. She still wanted to feel his lips against hers again, but she didn't want to seem...what was the word? Wanton. Instead of acting out the fantasy in her head, she smiled and let him lead her around his home.

It was beautiful. The wood and paper walls and



doors seemed so weak, yet they stood up to the wind and rain she could hear outside. When had the storm rolled in? Was she so enamored with having found a male of their species that she didn't even watch the sky when she had the chance?

"Something wrong, lady?" Kirai turned to look at her, his expression one of concern. "It is but a gentle rain today. Nothing to fear."

She shook her head. "I don't fear it." How could she explain that she had spent her entire life inside a building, little more than a lab rat? She wanted to see the rain, be out in it, touch it. "I have never seen rain before. Can I..." she paused to lick her lips. "Can I feel it?"

"You wish to go outside?" He was surprised. She could tell by the way he looked at her.

"Oh, yes." She knew it was a strange request. Everyone wanted in out of the rain on earth and here she was, begging to go out in it.

"If that is your wish."

Kirai led her to the nearest outer door. As they neared it, Topaz scented the rain. It smelled of water and little like dirt, though it was a clean smell. One she related with the cleansing of earth. It was something she never realized she had done before. She had never been

out in the rain, but she had been out just after and this was the scent. Now she knew where that lovely smell came from.

Topaz ran down the steps and onto the cobblestone path that led to a small inner courtyard. She followed the path. The strange trees lining the edge bore beautiful flowers even though they were closed. She ran to the center of the garden with Kirai on her heels. She stopped in the center of the circular garden. Tilting her head back, she let the rain hit her face. It felt wonderful. Cool and gentle, the drops hit her face and ran down to the collar of her leathers. Like a soothing shower, the rainwater was cool just the way she liked it. Nothing helped her relax, cooled her emotions like a refreshing shower. Holding her arms out to her sides, Topaz spun in a circle, laughing with the pure joy of the freedom to stand in the rain.

Stopping, she took the time to look around her. Raindrops fell from the sky, glistening like tiny diamonds on the wide leaves of the palm trees. More oddly shaped trees surrounded her, their leaves shining as their gnarled branches struck sideways, searching for a life-giving sun that couldn't appear through the clouds.

"It's so beautiful," she whispered the words with

awe.

“Beautiful,” Kirai agreed.

Topaz turned to him and noticed he was looking at her, not at the garden or the rain. She felt the blood rush to her face and a strange tingling that started in the pit of her stomach and made its way out to every part of her body. What was it about him that made her so aware of everything about herself?

She looked up as he moved closer. He seemed to tower over her. The markings on his face seemed to grow larger as he leaned toward her.

“May I kiss you again?”

“Why do you ask?” she licked her lips, nervous all over again.

“Because it would be rude to assume you want it.” His gaze lowered to her lips, then moved back up to her eyes. “I have never forced myself on a woman and I do not intend to start now.”

“My sister June would love to hear a male say that.”

Kirai cocked a glossy black brow. “Why would this please her?”

“Because she was accosted by one of the techs charged with caring for us once.” Topaz grinned. “I guess they didn’t think that a girl could defend herself

quite so well as she.”

“More like they underestimated the temper and fighting abilities of a dragon swan.” He chuckled. “You haven’t answered me.”

She gave him a wide-eyed look. “You were serious? You really want to kiss me again? Why?”

“Because I found it most enjoyable.”

What could she say to that? Besides, if she were to be honest, she would have to admit that she found it very enjoyable as well.

“Okay.” Topaz tilted her head back, closed her eyes and slightly puckered her lips. She waited and when, after a moment, nothing happened, she opened one eye to see what his holdup was. She didn’t expect him to be standing before her, his arms crossed over his very muscular chest, grinning at her as though he was privy to some private joke. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, taking her by the shoulders. “I just had a different kind of kiss in mind. Close your eyes and wait.”

Topaz closed her eyes again. She waited for a moment, then another. Just when she opened her mouth to say something, he pressed his lips against hers. She wrapped her arms about his neck when he deepened the

kiss. She loved the feel of his body pressed against hers. The warmth of his flesh seeping through her leathers was quite erotic. No one had ever been this close to her before.

She pressed her body more intimately against his, feeling the difference between their muscles. Topaz knew she had hard, defined muscles for a female, but Kirai's seemed almost as hard as the cement walls of her room back on earth.

The cords of his neck stood out, his large biceps bulged beneath her hands when she skimmed them down the length of his arms. How did a man get so big? She pulled back when he straightened and opened her eyes. Drawing in large gulps of air, she placed her hand over her heart. "That was..." *Wonderful, exciting...* The most intense experience she had ever had and she'd killed people. That was saying something.

"Sickening."

Topaz turned at the sound of a strange voice and gasped. If she thought Kirai was large, she hadn't seen anything until she got a glimpse of the man before her. Instinctually, she stepped back toward Kirai, almost unconsciously seeking his protection. She scowled when she realized what she had done. She was a dragon swan.

Nothing, and she meant nothing, scared her...except the man standing before her. Why hadn't they heard him approach? She looked around, hoping to find how he had entered the garden so silently.

"What are you doing here, Galen?" Kirai wasn't happy. His eyes nearly glowed with anger and his brows drew down into a fierce scowl.

Galen grinned. "I am just here to let you know that I heard there were unescorted swans running about the dimensions." He nodded toward Topaz. "I see I am right. Her markings are of Draven and Eiwyn. The rumor has it that there are twenty of them. When Draven finds out, he will tear every dimension apart, searching not only for his mate, but for his unprotected daughters who could assure him great alliances."

"Alliances?" Topaz stepped forward. "What do you mean?"

Turning to stare straight at her with a piercing emerald-green gaze, Galen said, "Your father is a very powerful man. He is king of all dragons as his name would suggest. He would marry his daughters to men who would promise their allegiance to him."

Topaz felt her heart slam in her chest. Would she and her sisters only go from one prison to another? Growing

up, they didn't know better. They thought everyone grew up in similar ways, but having been to other dimensions, having seen what it was like for children to grow up with their parents in a family, she had hoped, dreamed even, that her family would be like them. She never dreamed that once her father found out she and her sisters existed he would barter them off for an alliance!

She raised her chin. "I will never marry a man just to solidify a political relationship. If my father thinks so, he will soon discover otherwise." She gave each of them a glare. "If either of you thinks I will marry for anything other than love, you are mistaken as well."

What was she saying? Marry for love? She didn't even know what love was. She thought she loved her mother and sisters, but she wasn't sure if that was what she could call the feeling in her chest, in her mind. Regardless of whether she knew what that feeling was or not, she refused to marry any male to secure a political alliance for anyone.

"We aren't asking you to mate with anyone for an alliance, lady," Galen said, his gaze meeting that of Kirai over her head. "Though I would like an introduction to the beautiful lady, Kirai. Has meeting an unmated female made your manners go missing?" He

crossed his arms over his chest.

Topaz tried not to look at how big the man was. If Kirai was large, this man was huge! He stood a good six and a half feet tall. His thighs were almost as thick as her waist and his arms... She swallowed thickly. His arms were nearly twice the size of Kirai's. If she looked to Kirai to protect her from this man, he may get hurt.

*He will not harm me, Topaz.*

"Come," Galen held out his hand, palm up, and wiggled his fingers. "Perhaps you should kiss me to see if you like me better."

*Though I may harm him.* Kirai growled. "Do not test my patience, Galen. He pulled Topaz beneath his arm. "This is Topaz. Her sister is Ruby, mate to Oton."

"I do not think that is necessary," Topaz said, her face burning. She bit her lip when she saw the murderous look in Kirai's eyes. "Perhaps we shouldn't even think on that idea anymore."

Topaz moved from the protection of Kirai's embrace. "You know of Ruby? Do you know where she is? Can I see her?"

"I know where she is, lady," Kirai said, glowering at Galen as though he'd just stolen his last friend. "I would be happy to take you to her."



Galen bowed with a grin. “We would both be happy to take you to her.”

“Then we are in agreement.”

Looking up at the dark blue sky, Galen spread his arms wide. “I concur.”

After a bright flash, Galen was gone. In his place was a dark green dragon. His scales gleamed with a bright silver iridescence. His eyes were still that same, startling green glowing from the blacks of his eyes.

She stared at him with awe. Before today, she had never seen a male dragon and now she had seen two! The air shifted behind her, then suddenly Kirai caught her from behind. His huge claw cradled her gently as his body undulated into the air. Nothing felt like this. Nothing made her feel free like flying through the air in Kirai’s claws.

Topaz laughed as they flew through the air, the wind rushing past, brushing her cheeks and mussing her hair. The ground grew farther and farther away as they continued to head up toward the clouds until a large hole opened in the sky before her. It was a dimensional gateway in the sky! How did they do that? They seemed to create the portals effortlessly while flying through the air. How extraordinary!

## Chapter Three

Vast open fields rippled under them as Kirai undulated and Galen flew through the skies. They approached a small city with frightening speed, and as a deep blue figure came toward them, Topaz sensed she was going to meet her sister's mate.

*Galen, Kirai, what are you doing here?* He was a fearsome sight, his spikes bristling with hostility.

*We are here to bring Topaz to check on her sister's new home. It will be a short visit.* The amusement in Galen's voice was unmistakable, even with the mental speech removing audible cues.

Kirai spoke, *I think it would be good for Topaz to see that freedom can be achieved.*

*I am right here you know, I can hear you.*

There was a snort from Oton and he circled them once, looking her in the eye as he passed. *Yes, she is Ruby's sister all right. Come this way. Don't disturb the*

*populace we are in the middle of first harvest.*

The men with her didn't say another word, merely followed the large blue dragon to a stone house and he shifted to a bipedal form as he dropped to the surface. Galen did the same and, as Kirai undulated in, he placed her on the stone before shifting back into the form she was more comfortable with.

She felt short for the first time in her life, dwarfed by these males who were looking at her with interested assessment in their eyes. "What? Did my hair fall out or something?"

Oton smiled and shook his head. "I am sorry, you just look very much like my new mate, except for the eyes."

She smiled at him and showed her teeth. "I kick and I bite."

He chuckled, "And yet so different."

The other two chuckled as well as Oton led them to a door. It flew open with a thud and a woman dressed in a long loose gown with a bodice that fitted it to her torso darted toward them.

Topaz was caught in a hug that lifted her from her feet as Ruby swung her around. They shared a warmth of minds and nothing else transferred between them.

“I think mother has blocked our direct communication.” Topaz smiled into the face that was a mirror to her own with the difference of red eyes instead of her soft gold.

They ignored the men as they began to speak of their assignments and Ruby’s new freedom.

“Aside from still having the leash in my thigh, I do not have any qualms about leaving. Are you on a retrieval now, Topaz?”

“I am. I have already obtained the bones with the trackers, but Kirai distracted me with the offer to show me a touch of freedom.” They were walking through a hallway, the occasional three-eyed servant scuttled out of their way with surprised smiles.

“You will return home?”

“I will, or the pain will rip through me. You know the drill.” Topaz looked at Ruby’s clothing. “You look lovely.”

Ruby smiled and caressed the leather bodice. “I killed it myself while hunting with Otan. It is a memory of a good day.”

That small revelation stunned Topaz. “You killed something?”

“Hunted and killed. I know it goes against what we

were taught, but it felt completely natural. If you think about it, our skills at retrieval are simply hunting skills reworked.” She chuckled. “Don’t worry. I didn’t bring it down with my teeth.”

They laughed at the memory of them being five or so and still allowed to sleep in the same room. One of the techs had been cruel to Opalite and the girls had surrounded him, growling. He had backed away and the next day they were lectured by their caretakers about exposing fangs and threatening to eat the techs.

“He really was scared, wasn’t he?”

“He pissed himself.” Ruby chuckled. “Now for a serious matter. You are still on assignment. What are you going to do about your leash?”

A masculine voice rumbled through the air behind them. “I may be of assistance in that regard. Oton has explained a little about your implants. What can you tell me?”

The dragons looked at Galen and blinked. “That is very disconcerting, ladies.”

They laughed. Topaz smiled. “We each have an implant in our thigh that is wired into our nervous system. It creates a pain impulse that radiates out.”

Kirai and Oton were standing behind him. “May I

examine one of you?”

Topaz cocked her head. “Do you need bare flesh?”

Galen swallowed as his friend’s hand landed on his shoulder. “It would be best. Do you mind if Kirai stays in the room?”

“Not as long as Ruby can as well.”

Kirai stepped forward. “Deal. Oton, where is there a place where we can have some privacy?”

Their host led them into the depths of his home and a guest room was opened for their use. Instead of asking her to strip, he pulled a chaise away from the wall and gestured for her to lie down.

Ruby got a throw from the foot of the bed and took Topaz into the lav. “Strip off in here. They don’t seem to grasp that the leathers aren’t designed to come off in pieces.”

Topaz shrugged and unbuckled her belt, placing it carefully on a small chair in the corner. Her fingers worked and soon she was sliding out of the uniform of the D.A.R.E. project. “It seems less cold than the medical officers back home, and if Galen can do something about these tags, then our siblings may have a means to find their own way to freedom.”

Ruby laughed. “You really mean to send a steady

flow of our siblings to his door if this works? He'll be delighted."

Topaz smiled as she got out of her boots and the bottom half of her leathers. She wrapped the throw around her and smiled at her sister. "Let's see if we can get a path of dragon swans to his door."

When they exited the lav, the men were standing in a cluster that jerked apart as they approached. "Topaz, please lie back on this couch and expose the thigh with the implant." Galen was trying to be official, but his gaze kept straying to the top of the wrap and flicking to the bottom.

Kirai came forward and took her hand, helping her to arrange herself to expose the implant site. Galen cleared his throat. "I won't be able to tell if I can remove it unless I touch her, Kirai."

With a low growl, Kirai moved to the opposite side of the couch and watched Galen's every move.

Galen gently traced the incision site and closed his eyes. Topaz felt a tingling in her thigh and tried to move it. "Hold still."

Kirai's hands clamped her leg down and held it there as the investigation went from a tingle to a sharp pain deep in her flesh.

“What the hell?”

She tried to sit up, but Oton pressed her back onto the chaise and Ruby was kept away by the triad of males holding her down. The pain was becoming unbearable, as if a dagger was being torn through her flesh. She groaned, she sighed, moaned and gritted her teeth as the pain crawled up toward her skin, inch by inch.

Topaz felt her skin part and the searing pain stopped, leaving a dull throbbing where it had been. Galen pressed his palm to the flesh he had opened and she sighed as liquid warmth replaced the agony.

Her leg felt proper, pain free and whole for the first time in months. “Thank you, Galen. That feels much better.”

“At your service, Topaz. Here is your leash.” He pressed a small bloody object into her hand.

She looked at it. One inch long and half an inch wide, it was wired with a number of circuits and symbols she could not recognize. She longed to destroy it, but to throw it back in the faces of those who planted it would let them know that there was a way to remove them and that might cause some of her sisters distress back on earth.

“Galen, please keep it, and when you have collected



all twenty from my sisters and myself, bring them back to me so that I may dispose of them properly.” She pressed it back in his hand and he grinned.

“I get to see all of your sisters? Then I will definitely keep it. It’s incentive to finding my own female who looks at me like you do Kirai.”

She blushed. “What is that look exactly?”

“Like your brain has been removed and replaced with lust.” He grinned and the men in the room chuckled.

“Ruby, are you going to get yours removed?” Topaz smoothed the wrap down, covering her thighs.

Galen smiled. “I am up for it if you are.”

Ruby took her sister’s place on the chaise and pulled her gown up on one side. This time Kirai stood at her head, Oton across from Galen and all males had their hands on Ruby at the same time.

Galen concentrated and Ruby’s breath came in short pants. Topaz retrieved her clothing from the lav and put it on while they were working on Ruby, admiring the absence of a scar before she tugged up her leggings and slid into her uniform completely. Her boots were in place before Ruby’s leash had been pulled and she patted her sister’s hand when Galen left his post with the

implant in his hand.

Oton tugged Ruby's skirt back into place, then gave her a hug. "One more tie is cut with your previous life."

Ruby hugged him back and Topaz sighed softly. The tender moment was something she had never thought to see, one of her sisters happy at last.

Kirai whispered in her ear. "We should leave them."

Topaz nodded and left the room, heading back to the flat roof so she could look out over the vistas and imagine a life of her own.

## Chapter Four

A streak of red ripping through the sky was her only warning. Topaz shrieked as claws gripped her and lifted her from the roof. A roar of outrage behind her told her that Kirai had followed her to the open air, but she was too busy dangling from the claws of the dragon above her to pinpoint his location.

The position she was held in frustrated her, but when her captor swung down to skid across the surface of the nearby body of water, she acted. Drawing her knife she plunged it into the base of the claw holding her. The dragon howled and released her, sending her splashing into the saltwater as his blood covered her hands.

She kept a grip on her knife by fluke when she struck the water. It took all of her concentration to claw her way back to the surface and look for her attacker.

Kirai was undulating toward the red, blasting fire and roaring madly. A blue dragon appeared and Oton

helped her companion send the red through a dimensional hole.

Her gold dragon spotted her and flew down until he was nearly touching the surface. He dropped into the water and gestured for her to climb onto his back. Topaz swam over and straddled him, expecting him to swim to the beach for takeoff. His body took flight underneath her, lifting straight up before moving back to Oton's home.

*Why did he do that?* She was shaking with adrenaline.

*He was probably after your sister. There is no way that he could have known you were here and alone on the roof.*

*Oton won't like that.*

*He is not pleased, but until your father will be able to give his blessing to the unions, the attempted abductions are part of the dragon culture.*

Mother's voice came into play. *It is why I wanted you to choose. Draven will agree. I will make him agree, but in the meantime, you girls have to be careful.*

Kirai shook his great head and snorted as they approached Oton's home again. *She is right. The males that take you on cannot be weak or off their guard. If it*

*is up to me, I would keep you near me, always.*

His words started a shiver in her thoughts. She wanted to stay away from earth, but she wanted to send the humans back. Was there a way she could do both?

Kirai stopped on the edge of the roof and whispered to her mind. *Say farewell to your sister. We will discuss this back at my home. It is a secure dimension and few know its location.*

Ruby was standing next to Galen in the doorway to the steps, safe from aerial snatching. Her red eyes were relieved as Topaz came toward her.

“Kirai and I need to discuss a few things. I will return when I can.”

“Do what you need to do, Topaz. I will be here with Oton, waiting.” Ruby smiled and hugged her, getting her dress wet in the process. She laughed, “Who taught you to swim?”

“I have no idea. It just seemed a better alternative than going with that red.” Topaz grinned. “The knife really surprised him.”

Ruby nodded. “I will start going around armed. Is this going to happen often, do you think?”

“Ask Oton. We are just learning our species traditions, he has lived with them all his life.”

She grinned, her red eyes crinkling. “Good point. I will see you soon.”

They hugged again and when they parted, Galen opened his arms. “Do I get a hug?”

Topaz laughed. “Yes. Thank you for removing our leashes. It was really uncomfortable to us to know they were there, even when they weren’t causing pain.” She reached out and hugged him, squeezing tight. Her body reacted slightly, but nothing like it did when Kirai brushed her arm casually.

This was not the right dragon for her, that much her instincts told her without asking.

She leaned back when a growling cough came from Kirai’s throat. She leaned up on her toes and gave Galen a quick peck on his cheek. “One of my sisters is for you, I can feel it.”

A wary hope flickered in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“You could almost be for me if I had never met Kirai, but I seem to have imprinted on him and so you will be on your own.” She chuckled and patted his cheek, then turned and raced back to the golden dragon who stood glaring at his friend.

She climbed back up and settled, weaving her fingers into the silky soft fur of his mane. He rose from the

stone and they raced the wind, right into a portal.

His home sat quietly in the green expanse and when she was standing on the wooden steps, he shifted back to his bipedal form, stalking up the steps until he was standing face to face with her. She blinked in surprise as he kissed her with a savagery that took her breath away until she pressed herself against him and hummed happily at the heat flickering through her.

He pulled his head away. “Don’t ever put yourself in such a vulnerable position again. I nearly lost a century of life in that moment when Dinar grabbed you.”

She brushed his hair away from the darkness of his eyes. “I wasn’t too happy about it myself. He caught me by surprise. Now, is there somewhere I can take a bath? I hate being covered with salt.”

He licked her cheek, a move that made her shiver. “I sort of like it, but I understand the discomfort. Come with me.”

Kirai led her into his home and a huge bathing room which included a tub built into the floor that could easily hold eight people. A light touch of the taps and it filled rapidly from four different sources.

“Remove your clothing and rinse off and then we will have a discussion while you soak out the tensions of

the day.” He was undressing as he spoke to her.

“This is a communal thing?”

“Among my folk, yes it is.” He grinned and stepped into the shower while she was busy watching the play of muscles in his back, buttocks and thighs.

His casual behavior and lack of visible interest in her calmed and disappointed her at the same time.

She disrobed and scowled at her white-encrusted clothing. As he finished rinsing off, she took his place in the shower and embraced the warmth that flowed over her. She rinsed her hair thoroughly and when she was positive she was clean, she joined him in the now steaming soaking tub, sitting a decorous three feet away.

“Now, to discuss your future.” Kirai leaned back and the water steamed gently around them.

Topaz suspected that he was doing something to the water to keep it warm, but it felt too good to question.

“What about my future? I will throw the bones back through the portal and live a life of freedom. I haven’t thought much about it beyond that.”

He opened his dark eyes and looked into hers. “Will you stay here? With me?”

She smiled softly. “I want to, I really do. But there is one thing that pounds in my mind. The earth is going to



be ripped apart by the holes they tore in the dimensional fabric and we are the only ones who can stop it.”

“Any dragon could work to stop it.” Kirai’s words held a solemn truth.

“The D.A.R.E. project dragons are the only dragons who actually care. If the earth shakes to pieces, it will start a slow collapse that might not remain confined to its dimension.” Topaz was fuzzy on the particulars, but the small repairs that she and her sisters had already engaged in were making a difference, slowing the decay of the planet. They could feel it every time they returned to the world of their birth.

“So, if you remain away from your home world, you will continue your work?” His hand was on her arm and she let him turn her so he could rub her shoulders.

“I can, if I can figure out how to survive out here without someone preparing my meals for me.” She relaxed into his hands as he worked down her back, tracing some of the lines that marked her torso.

When his fingers grazed a spot more sensitive than the rest on her ribcage, she yelped and moved away.

“What is it, Topaz?” His brow furrowed in concern.

She stood up and looked down at her naked skin and noticed the bruising bands that crossed her body.

“Bruises from the claws. He was going so fast when he snatched me, he must have damaged me.”

Kirai cursed low and slow. “I am so sorry. The hot water must have aggravated rather than soothed the damage. Come along, we will get your ribs wrapped and have dinner. I can and will prepare a meal for you.”

He got out of the tub and helped her to her feet. A circling column of warm air dried her in less than a minute and he led her to a cabinet on one side of the bathing room. “These are guest robes. We will get something more appropriate when we can.”

He slid the robe over her shoulders and helped her tie it shut. Once it was in place, he reached for a long sash. “This is for more formal wear, but it will do to support your ribs until you can heal.”

He started wrapping her tightly and when she was confined from breast to hip, he stepped back to admire his handy work.

The physical interest he had not displayed earlier began to rise and he grinned, gave her a kiss on the nose and put a robe on with a more masculine pattern. She was clothed in rose petals drifting softly to the floor as they crossed her robe, a truly lovely pattern. Tears welled in her eyes as she realized that she had never

worn anything so pretty.

After he was dressed, he knelt to slide some sandals onto her feet and after a few steps, she was comfortable with what she was wearing, even if the wide sleeves would probably hamper her maneuvering.

He led her back to the kitchen where they shared their first kiss and he threw out the earlier food prep, scrubbed the counters and started over.

“How did you learn how to do that?” She watched him closely.

“I learned from my parents. I know that you did not have that luxury, but it was a good experience. I learned all about housekeeping, the value of romance and the eternal hope that I would find a female who made me as happy as my mother did my father.”

His hands were a blur of motion as he sliced, diced and sautéed their meal. When it was complete, he handed her a steaming plate with rice and the fish stew he had compiled, as well as two eating sticks.

Without words, he showed her how to hold the sticks and pick up food with them.

She giggled as the first piece went flying and smiled with triumph when she was able to get a mouthful. He applauded her success and they ate in cheerful silence.

When he had cleared his plate, he gave her an unfathomable look. “Would you accept me as a partner in your efforts to clear the humans from the outer dimensions?”

That caught her by surprise. “Are you serious?”

“I am. I want you to be with me and am uncomfortable with the thought of you out of my sight. That, and you can move more quickly if you are flying dragon-back.” He grinned with triumph at his solution.

“What about contact?” She cleared her throat and looked down at her plate.

“I don’t understand.”

“Personal contact.”

“Oh, personal...” He reached out and held her free hand. “If and when you wish it, we can and will engage in personal contact. Often and frequently if the occasion calls for it.”

## Chapter Five

His grin started deep pulses of warmth that ran through her core and spread to her fingertips. She wasn't sure when she would want physical contact, but she had no doubt she would want it at some point. Now though, she just wanted to get to know him better.

“How old are you?”

He stared at her with those black eyes until she began to fidget in her seat. “I am very old...much older than you think. Are you certain you wish to know?”

Swallowing, Topaz nodded. She wanted to know all right. If she was even going to think of jumping into a relationship with this...man, she wanted to know as much about him as possible. “I know you are very old. I have seen your memories, remember?” She took a sip of her drink, taking the time to touch her tongue to her top lip to get the last drop of fluid.

Kirai growled low in his throat. “Do not do that

again, lady. I beg you.”

Heat flooded her face at his request. She wasn't certain why that bothered him, but she noticed that there were many things she had done over the last several hours that seemed to set him on edge. “I will try to remember that offends you and not do it again.” She looked back down at her plate.

Reaching over the table, Kirai lifted her chin to stare deep into her eyes. “It does not offend me, lady. Quite the contrary, I like it.” He cleared his throat before dropping his hand to the table. “Perhaps too much.”

Another thing she didn't understand. Would she ever gain some sort of common ground with this male? “Oh, I see,” she replied when she really didn't.

“I can see that you do not,” he said with a chuckle, his black eyes twinkling brightly, “but one day you shall. It will be my greatest pleasure and my greatest honor to teach you.” Leaning over, he picked up her hand and kissed the back of it.

Strange tingling sensations traveled from where his lips touched the back of her fingers and up her arm. Topaz took a deep breath and gave him a shaky smile. He was a kind man. That much she could see.

*He is a kind man, daughter, his dragon even much*

*more so when it comes to you. However, he will die to protect you. Do not put him in such a dangerous situation where he must rescue you from another. Listen to him on matters of safety. He knows our people best in this matter.*

Topaz agreed with her mother. He did know their people better than she. After being raised so sheltered in a lab, she had no concept of life outside the cold cement walls where she dwelled on Earth.

The meal forgotten, Topaz pulled her scanner from her hip and glanced down at it. It was time to make a decision. "I need to return the bones today."

"You will not be returning with them."

He made it a statement, but Topaz knew he was asking if she planned to stay with him. She stared into his ebony eyes for a moment, then smiled softly. "You seem like a very nice man." He snorted at that, but she continued with a smile. "At least you are to me. I could see how others would fear you." She lifted her chin, staring him straight in the eyes. "But I don't.

"I have decided to stay with you, at least until we have had the time to get to know each other better." She pushed her plate to the center of the table and stood. "If you don't mind, I think it is time for me to send the

bones back to Earth.” She shuddered when she thought of the huge ant-like creatures on the other planet and what the humans must have gone through during their deaths.

Kirai led her back to the room where they left the humans’ remains and Topaz gathered the bone-filled tarp. “Will you take me there?”

He gave her a short nod. “I will.” Exiting the room through a set of wood and paper double doors, Topaz followed him out onto a large balcony where Kirai wasted no time in changing himself into his large, golden dragon. *Climb up onto my back, lady, and I shall return you to the dangerous world. I only ask that you remain close to me. Even a dragon swan is no match for a swarm of the marruk.*

Topaz felt more than saw the strange undulations he made as they lifted off the ground and flew into the air toward a shimmer in the distance. The shimmer soon turned into an open portal and they flew through to the other world. A swarm of the *marruk* glanced up from their foraging, then back to whatever unfortunate life-forms they managed to capture, intent on stripping their remains clean.

Kirai set her down on the sand before landing and



striding to stand at her side. “We must hurry. The *marruk* have seen us. They will investigate as soon as they finish their meal. They are insatiable creatures and will soon want more to eat.” He placed a hand at the small of her back. It felt strange, yet nice as the warmth seeped into her body. No one had ever treated her with such defense before.

“Shall I open the portal for you?” he asked as she took a deep breath and set the pack on the ground to wipe her hands on her legs. She no longer wore the leathers. She wore a beautiful red and gold pant suit that Kirai had given her. The top was knee length and embroidered with a large golden dragon that seemed to hug her in all the right places. It also had a beautifully embroidered trim, with strange flowers he called lotuses. She was certain she had heard of the flowers before, but wasn’t sure where.

“I think I should.” She frowned. “What if they have equipment that can tell the difference if another dragon opens the portal?” She shook her head. “The last thing we want is for them to realize I am not alone and capture the both of us.”

Kirai chuckled. “That is one thing they could never do. The moment I sensed them attempting to open a

portal, I would take you from this place and leave them to the *marruk*.” The look on his face was not one of amusement. He bared his teeth in a smile that looked more like a snarl. “Do not worry, Topaz,” he continued as she began to open a portal between them and Earth, “they will never enslave you again.”

Topaz wasn’t certain that enslave was the correct word. The Earth scientists used them, that much was certain. She just wasn’t sure she could say that they had been enslaved all these years.

Kirai bent and grabbed the pack at her feet. “Take my word for it, lady. They enslaved you all. For that they shall encounter the wrath of your father.” He smiled again. It was another that didn’t reach his eyes. “I shall be honored to follow your father into that battle.”

Topaz shook her head and grasped his arm as he would have tossed the pack through her portal.

“It is my responsibility to return these to Earth, not yours.” She took the pack when he offered it to her. Her face heated at her childishness. She could have easily let him do it. Yet, she felt some strange responsibility to do this herself.

Before she could change her mind, she cut her hand and smeared blood on the pack. With that done, she

tossed the pack through. Topaz had just closed the portal when she heard a strange scream and clacking noise to her right.

Turning, she gasped when one of the *marruks* lunged toward her.

“Run!” Kirai pushed her from harm’s way as the creature lunged. She stumbled, then gaining her balance, Topaz ran as fast as she could, dodging and rolling as other *marruk* made themselves known.

She brought up her stunner and shot one that appeared over the next rise and slid down the other side of the sand dune as the click-clacking continued behind her. Never in her life had she ever been afraid of ants, but these giant creatures made any bug on earth seem harmless.

Just as the creatures surrounded her and she thought herself lost, Kirai swooped in from above, grasped her around her middle with his giant claws and lifted her to safety. He wasted no time in opening another portal and taking them to his planet where they had nothing to fear but their own feelings for each other.

“You frightened me beyond belief,” he said as he inventoried her body parts, whether it was to be sure none of them were missing or injured, she couldn’t

know. “Did I harm you when I lifted you?” His attention was on her midsection.

Topaz shook her head. “I’m fine.” She shrugged. “I have a few scratches, but it’s nothing I can’t live with.”

“Even a few scratches is more than I can bear knowing about if I gave them to you.”

She shook her head. “No. It wasn’t you. The *marruk* got in a few good lashes with their antennae.” She shook her head. “I never would have guessed that they could use them as weapons.”

“No one ever does. It is what gives the *marruk* the advantage in a fight.” Kirai reached out and removed the top she wore. “Why did you put your blood on the pack?”

“To make the base think I had been injured near death when they check the blood on the pack.” She shrugged and watched as her clothing fell. Vaguely grappling with the concept of modesty, Topaz stood still as he inspected her ribs with medical proficiency. He paid little attention to her exposed breasts and much to the scratches beneath them.

“You will need to bathe, to clean any poison from your wounds.”

She’d already known that. Topaz sighed. This wasn’t

much different from the examinations when she returned from assignment.

“It is very different.” Kirai pressed a kiss to her naval with a grin. “I am certain those examinations were not pleasant. Believe me when I tell you that soon, you will come to enjoy them. Very much.”

“You’re using innuendo again.” She knew he was, but still didn’t know what he meant by most of his teasing.

Kirai pulled her top back over her head and waited while she slipped her arms into the sleeves. “You will know soon enough, Topaz. Do not fear what you don’t understand. Anticipate it as you would a delicious dessert.”

That was easy for him to say. He wasn’t the one always left one step behind. “We don’t get to eat dessert if it isn’t our birthday. Excuse me, I should really soak these scratches.”

She pushed past him and entered his home, leaving him standing bemused behind her.

The pain from the welts was starting to radiate and she took a shower quickly, focusing the spray on her ribs. They were seeing a lot of action on this assignment.

Blisters coated the edge of the scratches and she took

a deep breath before ruthlessly ripping them away. The toxin seeped from her skin and she rinsed it again before entering the tub. Topaz's vision spun as she settled and when Kirai's arms caught her, she clung to him while she fought to stay conscious.

She managed to whisper, "I don't feel good."

Without another word, she pitched into the waiting darkness.

## Chapter Six

“Galen, what are you doing here?”

The dragon smiled and brushed hair from her forehead. “I am taking care of the bacteria that released when I removed your tag.”

“I thought it was venom.” She sat up in a pristine bed, holding the sheet to her chest.

“So did Kirai. If Ruby hadn’t come down with the same thing, I would never have gotten here so fast. I healed her and then came right over. It’s a good thing you were here. If you had gone back to your world, you would have been dead by now.”

She looked beneath the sheet and checked her healed ribs and the imperceptible mark on her thigh. “Bacteria?”

“There was a pellet under the leash that I didn’t account for. When Ruby started to convulse, we knew it had to be something exotic. Few toxins can actually

endanger us. Usually nothing more than swelling and blisters, like the ones you received.”

“So, you just came here?”

“Yes, Kirai wanted to come get me, but he couldn’t leave you so he was going to pull you through dimensions. Good thing I beat him here, it would have killed you.”

Topaz leaned back and closed her eyes. They had booby trapped her and her sisters. Even if the trackers were removed, they had left a pellet inside to kill them. Damned humans.

When she opened her eyes, Kirai was there, taking a seat at the edge of the bed. “You frightened me.”

“I know. I am sorry.”

He leaned in and kissed her, it was hard, passionate and wild. When he pulled back, his lips were swollen and his eyes were flickering with heat behind the black coal. “Do not leave me.”

She blinked in surprise. “I wasn’t planning on it. I said I will stay and I meant it.” She caressed his face and stroked the silky strands of his hair that fell over one eye.

Galen cleared his throat. “I will leave you two alone then.”



Topaz didn't hear more than a rumble in the distance. Her entire focus was on Kirai's face.

"Tell me what I am supposed to do. I don't know," Topaz's whisper floated between them.

"Don't think, just feel. And if you like something, let me know." His smile was tender as he leaned into her for a seducing kiss.

Topaz analyzed the kisses she had received from him, exploring, encouraging, claiming, possessing and now seducing. She reveled in the memories and then pushed them aside to enjoy the moment.

He touched her with care and attention that started flares of heat beneath her skin. When she stroked his skin in return, he murmured in appreciation. The sheet between them disappeared and she watched his body cover hers with a focus that shattered into sparks of light when he joined them.

It wasn't over. She didn't know how, but he increased the storm of sensation inside her as he moved. When Topaz moved with him, tilting her hips to his, lightning bolts of sensation struck her until she was moaning and clawing at his skin.

The tension in her body broke apart and she screamed in surprise, her body wrapping tightly around

his to hold him inside her as he groaned and arched against her, his own peak reached.

Panting and recovering from the shock, she welcomed Kirai into her arms, holding him flush against her. “Now I know why the techs were so obsessed. That was...”

He lifted his head and gave her a soft kiss. “It was indeed.”

“I had no idea. If I had known, I would have tried it the moment I first saw you.” She giggled at his shocked expression.

He scowled. “Oh, those wasted days.”

She laughed, feeling the pressure of his body against her and loving it. “Are you interested in wasting more time?”

A high pitched yelp came from her throat as he rolled her over and she ended up sitting astride him. “This time you do all the work.”

It took some trial and error, but she managed to replicate the sensations that she had experienced earlier, and Kirai didn’t join her, but he held her while she caught her breath.

She slumped across his chest and traced the swirls and sweeping arcs of his parental marks. “Where do you

think we should look for humans first?”

He sighed. “Despite the distraction, you are a very determined woman.”

“I am. The faster the humans are dropped back onto their world, the sooner the dimensional rifts will stabilize and my sisters will be free.”

“What of the poison in your bodies?” Kirai was alternately tangling and straightening her hair.

“Galen says he can remove it and I am sure my mother will warn them. I will ask her to pass on what we have learned.”

He ran his hand down her spine, smiling as she arched into his hand. “Do you think she will?”

“Yes, survival is what this is all about, for us and the humans. Mother won’t let any of her daughters die if there is anything she can do to prevent it.” Topaz sighed happily as she enjoyed his touch for one more moment. Grinning, she sat up and escaped his grasp. “Come on. Let’s go boot some humans back home and then we will be able to try this again.”

His look was dark, but when she rummaged through his wardrobe and withdrew a shirt and a set of fabric trousers that had a tie around their waist, he became interested. “You will need some proper clothing.”

“Yes I will, but I have no idea how to go about that. At the base everything was provided for me. I would also like to learn how to cook.” The loose fabrics felt slightly odd, but they allowed for a breeze to reach her skin that she had never anticipated.

He looked her up and down from head to toe and shook his head. “That won’t do. There is nothing for it, I suppose. I am going to have to take you to meet my mother.”

“What about the humans?” She was more nervous than she had been while facing the large insects. Her own mother was a nebulous presence in her life, a real physical parent was a frightening concept.

“They will keep. If they aren’t dead in the dimensions they are in, they will be fine.” He smiled and pulled some leathers on over his own lower body.

She admired the view of his backside and then started to look for her own boots.

“They are gone. All of your clothing is gone, but I kept your equipment.”

She frowned, puckering her lips. He pressed a quick kiss on her and then led her out of the house and into the front courtyard where he opened a portal and simply kept walking with Topaz in tow.

She had a hard time keeping her mouth shut as they entered a lush green oasis topped by a golden palace with a plethora of people coming and going. They were almost human in shape, but pointed ears behind the dark hair gave her the confirmation that she was seeing something else. “What are those?”

“Elvar. They come in a large variety of skin tones, but are similar to the humans with one exception, they aren’t.” Kirai nodded to several folk as they passed and smiles greeted them both.

Topaz leaned forward and whispered, “Why are they smiling at me?”

“The elvar live around dragons and subsist off the extra energy we give off. To see another dragon elevates their spirits.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. They have been gathering around us for eons. If you wish, we can ask a couple of them to join us in my home. They enjoy the work and are fairly good cooks.”

Her feet were unused to sprinting on the bare stone, but she managed to keep up without stumbling. “They will just come with you?”

“Well, now that you are here, my mother will

probably assign a couple to us.”

It smacked of the base all over again. “She will just assign them?”

“Most of her elvar have been working around her for over a thousand years. They live almost as long as we do, but they can’t move between worlds on their own.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and Topaz knew that it was to keep her from bolting.

“The elvar will just uproot at your mother’s order?”

“They will jump at the chance to drain the residue from us as we go about our daily lives.” His chuckle distracted her as two huge doors swung open to reveal a woman with dark hair and Kirai’s high cheekbones.

She was wrapped from shoulders to ankle in a gold robe with a wide sash of dark blue. Her marks were a brilliant blue and she raised one eyebrow as she took in her visitors. “Kirai, what the hell is she wearing?”

## Chapter Seven

“Mother, this is Topaz. Topaz, this is Karili the wise, judge of the dragons, and my mother.” He bowed low to his parent and she greeted him with a hug.

“Kirai, I don’t see you nearly as much as I would like. Topaz, welcome to my home.” She smiled and her pointed teeth were exposed by the gesture.

“Thank you for the greeting, Karili.” She nodded and smiled shyly. It was her first time meeting a female dragon and her mind was spinning with questions.

The woman looked at her markings and blinked in shock. “Eiwyn’s? This is Eiwyn’s daughter?”

Kirai nodded. “One of twenty. I do not have appropriate clothing for her very active lifestyle and her clothing was shredded by large insects. Will you help?”

“Of course. Eiwyn is a good friend. I have missed our chats.” Karili opened her arms and shepherded Topaz out a side door. The halls were lined with oak and

gold.

*Tell her that I have missed them as well.*

“Mother says that she has missed them as well.” Topaz parroted her parent without thinking.

“She speaks to you?” Karili steered her around a corner and whispered to one of the ubiquitous elvar.

“Since we were children. She is our greatest confidante.” Topaz looked behind her, but Kirai was not following.

“What are you dragging my son into?” The tone was friendly, but the look in her eyes was pure steel.

“The humans have torn holes in the universe. Their presence off world is causing their dimension to shake apart. My sisters and I have been trained to locate and return them to their home in an effort to stop the degradation.”

“What does Kirai have to do with this?”

“He wants me, and I want this. So, has agreed to partner me as I search out and deport the humans.” A troop of elvar women with arms laden with fabric came around a corner and together they entered a large chamber that looked like a study.

“That is for you. Well, since you are hauling my son with you, you need to be able to move, so trousers,



boots, tunics, breastbands and underwear.” They entered the room after the elvar and Topaz handed herself over to those who actually knew what the hell was going on.

She was pinned, prodded, turned and twisted until she was ready to scream. Even getting fitted for her fitted jumpsuit hadn’t been this involved. The miracle was that the elvar women had an outfit to put on her after about an hour of her shivering in a robe, making small talk with Karili.

“I do have to say, we were shocked to hear of Eiwyn’s leaving Draven. It caused a ripple through out the universe. They are truly meant to be together.”

“She believes it as well, but she has something to do and her daughters have to help her do it.” Topaz knew it in her soul. Her parents would be reunited and if she was lucky, she would get to meet them.

*Your father is all bluster, but he will accept you as his own even if his mind can’t believe it. I will embrace you as my own one day. Do not think otherwise, child of mine.*

“Kirai mentioned that you have nineteen other sisters?”

“Yes. My mother carried four seeds of new life. The humans removed them and split each into sections. For

some reason, five was the number of survivors in each cluster.” She shivered, but sighed in relief as the first of the elvar held up a pair of trousers and grinned at her.

Another woman returned with a pair of boots and soon, Topaz was dressed from head to toe, including underwear.

The shirt had wide open sleeves that could easily be folded back and it wrapped over her belly, held in place by a wide sash. Her trousers were tucked into boots that hugged her to the calf. Topaz stretched, jumped and twisted and then smiled happily at the elvar. “Thank you so much. Thank you as well, Karili.”

“You are welcome, daughter. Since your mother is not here, it is up to me to continue where my friend is unable to.”

*That is so sweet, much nicer then when she was trying to seduce Draven out from under me.*

Topaz laughed in surprise.

Karili looked at her with narrowed eyes. “What did Eiwyn say?”

“She said it was sweet of you to help me. Much better than when you tried to...” She wasn’t sure if she could tell Karili the rest without giving offense.

The elder cackled. “Truly, you are one of hers if she

told you that. Yes, I tried to lure her husband off, but it was only an experiment. I have no idea what I would have done if he said yes.”

*She always was honest. Even as younglings, she never could keep a secret for long.*

Topaz was going to say something but Karili waved it off. “She was speaking to you, I can tell by the glow that forms behind your eyes.”

“You can see it?”

“If you know what to look for. Now, what are your intentions with my son?”

Karili steered her to a lounge on one side of the room while the elvar kept working on her clothing, the needles occasionally catching the light.

“What do you mean, intentions?”

“Why are you with my son and will you remain with him once you have accomplished your goals?”

Topaz blinked. “I am with your son and will remain with him forever if I can. He helped me on an assignment and then took me home and to see my sister. I don’t plan to leave him. I just want the humans returned to their world so I can enjoy going forward in my life with a clear conscience.”

“Will you join with him in a formal union?”

*Not until I can be there, you won't.*

“Um. Not until Eiwyn is there to witness it.” Topaz rubbed her forehead. “She is really serious about that.”

“How long does she think that will take?”

The answer swung into her head. “Under three years. All of my siblings should be safe by then.”

“Safe, what do you mean?”

Topaz sighed and scrubbed her face. “We have been raised to do what we are currently doing. Healing the breaches. We will not be safe until the humans or their remains are back on their world and away from the other dimensions.”

“Are they that dangerous?” the older dragon raised an eyebrow.

“They used machines to do what we do naturally. The holes that they created are draining energy from their world and it is dying. If it collapses, the connecting ruptures will begin to suck in the worlds around them that they have visited. Stopping it then will be impossible.”

Karili nodded. “Sound course of action, and I suppose I could wait for a few years to see my son properly bonded. Welcome to our family, daughter. I look forward to seeing you frequently in my home.”

Topaz smiled. “I am sure that Kirai wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Karili got to her feet and took Topaz by the hand, leading her out to the gardens where the male in question was helping an older elvar move some stones in a sand garden. “You don’t know him well yet, but you will. I can see that much in you.”

“These clothes are very comfortable.”

“The elvar will make more for you and I will deliver them to your home when they are complete. Do you cook?”

She grinned at the older woman. “No, but your son does so that works in my favor. All I know how to do is light hand to hand combat, with survival and tracking training.”

“You are young, you will learn. Collecting skills is a great bonus of our species, due to our ridiculous life spans. You might learn more than you can imagine if you let yourself embrace the new.”

Topaz watched the sun gleam on Kirai’s marks and she cocked her head. “Where is his father?”

“Roku is at the court as Draven’s bodyguard and companion. When Draven lost his wife, I lost my husband.”

“He will return. I am sure of it. Eiwyn will send him home.”

Karili wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I see him when I travel to the court. We still love and laugh like we used to, but Draven’s sadness reminds us to treasure each other and gives us an intensity that we never had before.”

“That is nice, kind of sad, but nice.”

Kirai finished moving the rock to the old elvar’s satisfaction and grinned as he approached them.

“Kirai, would you and your lovely companion care to join me for lunch?”

“Of course, Mother. Topaz, would you enjoy a snack?”

She smiled. “Yes, Kirai, I would enjoy something to eat. It seems like forever since I ate something.”

He winced. She stifled a snicker as she reminded him of his lapse in the hospitality department.

Karili gave them an indulgent look and signaled an elvar female behind them. A table was set in the garden and they all knelt comfortably to enjoy a family meal.

The elvar that were serving were wearing a colorful rainbow of clothing that swirled and flowed as they moved.

Karili looked to one of the servers. “Leesha, are you aware of any couples who might like to spend some time alone in Kirai’s dimension?”

The elvar spoke with a tone that hummed with the notes of a song. “Mor and Calla are willing. Calla is aching to try experimental recipes and she can’t really do that here.”

Kirai looked to Topaz and she nodded. It sounded like fun to have people working for her rather than order her around. “You can tell Mor and Calla that they are welcome whenever they are ready.”

Leesha smiled. “I believe they are ready now. They started packing the moment that Kirai and his woman arrived.”

The pointy eared woman with midnight hair and eyes with slit pupils gracefully rose to her feet and went off to spread the news.

“They really are looking forward to moving, aren’t they?” She was curious by the behavior that she would have considered counter intuitive. After all, the elvar were safe at home surrounded by family and friends. Why would they want to leave?

“New experiences change us. Mor and Calla want change.”

Karili sipped at her tea with a delicate grip and Topaz mimicked it.

It was harder to manage than it looked, but once she had the cup settled, it was easy to tip the cup so liquid flowed in a precise amount.

“Your new clothing looks very nice on you. The style suits you.” Kirai’s compliment sent a surge of heat to her cheeks. An image flickered in her mind of being over him with no clothing on either of them.

She blinked and shook her head. That image wasn’t hers. It had been his angle looking at the marks on her body while she rocked on him. It was his mind to hers with a lascivious wink.

“Kirai. Stop that. Your mate isn’t used to such mental play.” His mother’s voice shut the image down in a second.

“Sorry, Topaz. Apologies, Mother.” He inclined his head gracefully, but there was an unrepentant gleam in his eyes.

Their meal concluded with a range of fresh fruit and Topaz continued to gain skills with the eating sticks.

When Kirai helped her to her feet and kissed his mother on the cheek she was stuffed, but satisfied with the first visit to his mother’s home.



A male and female elvar greeted them when they entered the dim expanse of the home once again. “Greetings, Kirai, Topaz. I am Mor and this is my wife, Calla. We have volunteered to join you at your home and will attend to your house and garden while you are there or away.”

“Thank you, Mor, Calla. We are happy to have you in our home.” He shook the elvar’s hand and clapped him on the shoulder.

Topaz was watching closely and when Kirai’s hand touched the elvar, the other man’s eyes sparked with energy. She suspected that the ability of the elvar to live off the energy of the dragons was not a lie. They both looked energized just being near Kirai.

Calla held out both hands, so Topaz covered them with her own. “Thank you for your invitation into your home. Mor and I appreciate being on our own for a while.”

Topaz smiled and gripped the woman’s hands before releasing them. “We appreciate you coming along. I don’t know how to do any of the standard things that women should know.”

Calla smiled. “I am an excellent teacher. Anything you want to know, I will show you.”

Kirai spoke. “Why don’t we get going? Topaz can take us home. Thank you for your hospitality, Mother.”

“It is always a pleasure to see you, my son. Bring Topaz back frequently or I will seek you out.”

“Yes, Mother. Thank you again.”

Topaz was caught in a hug and reciprocated quickly with some confusion. “You are welcome to visit as well, daughter. Consider this an annex to your home.”

“I will. Thank you, Karili.”

Before she could get tangled into the realm of more hugging and formalities, Topaz opened a portal to take them home.

She led Calla through while Kirai’s hand helped Mor reach the other side where the house was perched in majestic silence on the gorgeous expanse of green lawn.

“The house is wonderful.” Calla smiled and her genuine enjoyment of the house warmed Topaz for some reason.

It was weird, but she thought of that building of pale wood as home already, but home it was.

## Epilogue

After Kirai showed Mor and Calla their rooms, he returned to her with a gleam in his eyes. “What would you like to do now?”

Topaz swayed toward him, lifted her left arm to caress his chest, and jerked her sleeve back to expose her scanner. “I would like to find a human and dump them back to earth. How about you?”

He put his hands on her hips and kissed her nose. “If that is what will make you happy, we can visit five likely worlds that would support their kind. Only five, and if we don’t find any in those five, we will return home and try again tomorrow.”

“That is fair. Let’s go.”

He put a white shirt and loose vest on, then escorted her to the front of the house.

“Why don’t we open them from inside the house?”

“It is considered rude. Now, I will shift and you will

ride me. If you find a human on your scanner, just sing out in your mind and I will find them.”

“Good. Now get scaly so I can climb astride you and we can keep working on my riding skills.”

He kissed her with a passionate intensity that left her breathless and shifted into his huge golden form.

With a grin, Topaz clambered up his side and settled on his neck, waving at Mor and Calla as a rift opened up and took her to a world that might contain a human to send home.

Earth was going to get a whole new bunch of unscheduled retrievals. Once in the D.A.R.E. project, always in the D.A.R.E. project.

Extraction at any cost and hey, Topaz needed a hobby.

## About the Authors

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a *happily ever after* of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she

still resides today. She really likes it there.

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

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

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

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