

# EMERALD DARE

D.A.R.E. PROJECT BOOK 3



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Raised for one purpose, Emerald is pulled between two facts. One, she doesn't want to live in a lab forever, and two, her sisters are disappearing into the dimensions they have worked in. When she meets two males of her kind, she has to make a choice and doesn't even hesitate. She picks the one who doesn't make her skin crawl.

Aegon is a silver dragon with the patience and creative intelligence of his kind. He is delighted that his random sweep yielded one of the dragonettes that he has heard so much about and he will do whatever she needs him to to keep her happy and with him at all times. He has to release her to win her, a conflict he has to wrestle with while she returns to the lab. A life together glows before him, but when will she call him so they can begin it?

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Emerald DARE

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ISBN: 978-1-55487-869-7

Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by Devine Destinies

An imprint of eXtasy Books

Look for us online at:

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Emerald D.A.R.E.

By

Tianna Xander and Viola Grace

*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 themselves. 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 sign 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.

*And in case you missed Topaz DARE...*

Topaz found her mate in the Eastern dragon, Kirai. When it was time to remove the technological leash that the lab had placed under her skin, a horrible twist was discovered that put all of the dragonette's lives in danger.

Topaz's attachment to her duty gets in the way of Kirai's courtship, but dragons are nothing if not clever and together, they find common ground in a new dimension.



## Chapter One

Emerald looked up at the three moons and took a deep breath. She wondered at the tidal changes that many moons would create and shrugged. Whatever they were, she wouldn't have time to find out. It was a waste of precious minutes to even wonder about it.

It had been almost twenty-four hours and the light hadn't changed a bit. It seemed as though this world, or at least this part of the world, was in a perpetual state of twilight.

She couldn't help but wonder if danger lurked around every corner. Who could blame her? Two of her sisters had gone missing. One on a simple mission just like this one and the other disappeared straight from the facility where they lived. It was easy to see things lurking in the shadows even if there was nothing there to see.

Tall, untouched grass reached her hips as she waded

through it toward her targets. Usually, when she jumped to a world, she got close to her quarry, but not this time. This time she landed nearly fifty kilometers from her objective. Her allocated time might not be long enough.

Emerald continued to trot toward the encampment on the horizon. At least it was in sight now. Before, she could do nothing else but follow the directional beacon on her scanner.

A strange shadow passed overhead and she looked up with a frown. Whatever it was, it looked huge. The wingspan looked at least forty feet wide. The strange whining noise that accompanied the shadow grew faint, then silent. The world around her was quiet once again. The only noise she heard was the faint rustle of the wind through the grass and trees.

Just as the strange whining returned, someone rushed from the nearby brush and tackled her. “Shh... Don’t move or it will see you.” The voice was female.

“What—”

“Hush!” The woman clamped a hand over Emerald’s mouth and whispered, “Not so loud. It will hear you. I’m told they have exceptional hearing.”

Emerald pulled the hand from her mouth and replied in a low voice, “What are you talking about?” She could

see how such a large bird could be a predator, but she was a dragon swan. She had little to fear from a beast such as a large bird.

Content to let the other woman hold her down in the tall grass as she awaited an explanation, Emerald looked up toward the sky. She strained to see what it was they hid from. Still, she saw nothing.

“The dragons.” The woman paused as though to give her time for the proper level of horror to sink in. “They never used to come more than once in a life cycle. Now there is a new one almost every day. No one knows why.” She got to her knees. “Follow me. There’s a shelter near where we can talk above a whisper.”

Emerald wasn’t sure if she should follow the woman or not. She had no reason to fear her own kind.

*Follow her, darling. You cannot be certain that the creature this woman calls a dragon is the same as we are. Look at the komodo dragon of Earth. It is nothing more than a large, meat-eating lizard. This, too, can be a large predator that you are not prepared to fight.*

Yes, Mother. Emerald agreed and followed the woman in a crawl.

“How far is this shelter,” she asked as they entered a copse of trees.

“It’s right here.” The woman opened a door covered in dead leaves and grass as camouflage.

“After you,” Emerald said, wary. After all, this could be some sort of trap. The other woman seemed happy to enter first. Once she scurried inside, she turned to usher Emerald in, closing the door behind her.

Once she had closed and secured the door, light filled the room from a fist-sized stone she removed from a black bag that she had pulled from her pocket.

“My name is Sabina.” She set the stone on a small table in the corner with a trembling hand. “This is one of many shelters carved from the hillside. We use these when the dragons and the others visit.”

“I’m Emerald.” She introduced herself, then got back on track. “What do you mean by *the others*?”

“You know, the magical creatures...those other than dragons.” She shrugged. “We don’t usually see so many. They have become restless for some reason.” Sabina stood and began to pace. “I should have been home two days ago, but I can’t find the courage to leave this shelter. The next one isn’t very close. It’s at least a two hour walk.”

“It sounds close enough to me.”

“Not with the dragons flying overhead.” Sabina

shook her head with a shudder. "We would never make it."

"What do you suppose the dragons want?"

Sabina's eyes widened. "To feed, of course."

*Eew! Mother, do dragons actually feed on humans?*

*Of course not.* Her mother paused. *We have been known to perpetuate the myth that we do on certain planets.*

*Well, that explains that fried humans are good with ketchup saying on Earth, doesn't it?* she asked her mother wryly.

*Well...* There was another, longer, pause. *That one was my fault. I couldn't let them think that I wanted them to catch me, could I?* Her mother replied with a chuckle.

Emerald sighed, then returned her attention back to her companion. She heard the other woman's stomach growl from over three feet away and she wasn't even trying. "How long has it been since you have eaten?"

"Two days." Sabina covered her stomach with her hands as though the action would quiet her hunger.

"Why hasn't someone come looking for you?" Emerald shrugged off her pack and began to rummage through it.

“I don’t think anyone will notice me missing for a while. I live alone. Even if they have sent a search party, they could be stuck in a shelter, too.”

Grabbing two protein bars from the bottom of her pack, she tossed one to Sabina. “Eat that.” She tore the wrapper off her own and took a bite. “You’re going to need the strength it gives you. We’re leaving here in ten minutes.”

She watched as Sabina wolfed down the power bar and took a few sips of water from her canteen. She would drag this woman back to the city if it killed her. Emerald wanted to think of her as spineless, but couldn’t. Sabina had risked herself to come to her aid. Emerald could hardly consider that an act of cowardice.

“W-we can’t go!”

“Well, we certainly can’t stay here.”

Sabina stood, shaking her head as she plastered herself against the wall. “But the dragon.”

“We’ll just have to take our chances with him. I’m not going to stay here and starve to death and I’m not leaving you behind.”

*Good girl, Emerald. Just don’t put yourself in needless danger.*

Reaching out, Emerald grabbed the stone that gave

them light, marveling at how cool it was in her palm. Light without heat was a huge thing on Earth. The scientists she knew would most likely give precious body parts for it.

“Put this away. We’re leaving now.” She tossed the stone to Sabina and strode to the door. Sabina followed, fumbling to put the stone in its pouch while she walked. “Ready?” she asked when the room was dark once again.

At the other woman’s murmured assent, Emerald opened the door and listened for the whining sound that Sabina was certain foretold the approach of a man-eating dragon. “There’s nothing out here right now. Move it.”

Sabina hustled through the door and Emerald followed. “Stick to the tree line and the bushes if you can. When you can’t, run like hell to the next stand of trees.”

So began a bizarre leapfrogging from tree to tree with the goal becoming tantalizingly closer with every passing moment.

“I don’t believe we did it! We made it back.” Sabina beamed at her six hours later. “Please come to my home. I can never repay your kindness, but I can offer you a hot meal and a place to sleep for the night.”

For the night. That was a strange concept here in the land of forever twilight. “Thank you, Sabina.” Emerald took the other woman’s hand. “I would love to if I could, but first I must locate some old friends who live near here.”

Sabina looked disappointed. “Won’t you reconsider? It’s only one more night and you have to be exhausted.”

Emerald pulled her scanner out, noted that all four of the signals were now less than a kilometer away from her and sighed. “Okay,” she agreed with a smile, “but I really must leave first thing in the morning.”

She didn’t have to leave first thing, she had more time, but she wanted to get this over with and get back home. Since the tremors on Earth got less severe with every extraction, the doctors had become rather generous with the deadlines. She had a few more days to complete her mission and return home before the leash in her leg brought her discomfort. However, it was difficult to track the time with there being no differential between day and night. The lab may not be much of a home, but it was the only one she had and she wanted to get back there before she disappeared like her sisters, Ruby and Topaz.

When Emerald awoke the next day, the sky was just



as dark as it had been. She'd so been looking forward to seeing the sunshine. Since she couldn't bask in the warmth of the sun, she took the time for a nice cool bath before once again donning her leathers. At least they smelled better. Thankfully, Sabina had found a way to clean them.

"Thank you for your hospitality and kindness, Sabina. I enjoyed my stay, but it is time for me to go. I must see to my friends and return to my home."

Sabina took her hand. "You are most welcome, my friend. Again, I thank you for bringing me back. I would have stayed in that shelter and starved as you said if you hadn't forced me to go."

Reaching out, Sabina hugged her for a moment, then released her. "Go now and find your friends."

Emerald pulled the scanner from her pack and frowned. The four signals were no longer together and only one remained in the spot less than a kilometer away. Stuffing the scanner back into her pack, Emerald began to trot to her first target. She had enough time to search them out. She would send them back one at a time if she had to.

## Chapter Two

Emerald stood just outside the structure that housed the lone signal. She'd just raised her hand to knock on the door when someone grabbed her arm.

“Are you looking for someone, lady?”

Looking down at the hand on her forearm, Emerald followed the long, flowing sleeve past the shoulder and up to the face of its owner. The markings on his face gave her pause. She almost wanted to rip the sleeve from his arm to see if he had markings there as well. Perhaps he would know what they meant.

Still, no matter how much the man startled her, there was something about his manner she didn't like. His very presence practically made her skin crawl. “Not that it's any of your business, sir.” She forcibly jerked her arm from his grasp. “But yes, I'm looking for some

friends of mine. If you'll excuse me." She made to turn her back on him, but he grabbed her again. *The man must have some sort of death wish.*

"I'm afraid I can't let you go, lady."

Nausea peaked and she gagged as her system rejected the contact.

*The man you face is a dragon, dearling, and if he makes you feel that way, he is not the one for you. If he will not release you, you may have to fight him. Draw your stunner, if you must, but only when you are certain he cannot take it from you.*

Emerald heard that strange whining sound again, just before a beautiful silver dragon landed before her. It took less than a blink for him to shift into a tall, dark and gorgeous man.

"I found her first, Aegon. Leave."

"You know it doesn't work like that, Leirt. She must choose. I saw her refuse you."

The new man was so beautiful it nearly hurt her eyes to look upon him, but look she did. Dark hair hung down to his shoulders. His eyes were swirling silver surrounded by black, the contrast was so great, it was startling. His clean-shaven face bore only one scar over his smooth black brow. It only enhanced his appeal.

Broad shoulders and a wide, smooth chest tapered down to a narrow, sculpted waist. The wide silver-adorned belt he wore to secure his dark slacks matched his vest and was held by a large, silver buckle.

After all the new races she had seen, nothing had come close to this impact on her senses. She didn't know what to think about finding such a perfect male. She could do nothing more than stand and stare at him with appreciation.

The silver dragon turned a brilliant smile on her. The markings on his face and arm seemed to swirl as he held her gaze. *I am pleased that you like what you see, lady.*

“How...” *How can he know what I think, Mother?*

There was a short silence before her mother answered, *If your connection is that strong already, daughter, it means he can be the one for you. However, only you can decide that.*

*The one for me?*

*Your mate, sweetling.*

*I don't want a mate.* Emerald frowned. *I want to live free. Free of the lab and free to do whatever I please whenever I please. A male will only attempt to rule me.* She rubbed her arm where the other grabbed her. It was a reminder of why she wanted no male in her life.

Besides, she'd seen what love could do to a person. Her handler, Becky, was constantly falling in and out of love. She'd seen her fall for men at least a dozen times over the years and every time the relationship ended, it took another little piece of her soul. She wanted no part of something as unhealthy as that.

*He will not do so if he is your true mate, sweetling. The one you pair yourself with will respect your need of freedom. He will not hamper it. Give Aegon a chance. He is a much better choice than the other and you've already heard him say it is your choice. The other is not so generous.*

Her mother had a point, dammit. She just didn't want to have to deal with males at all. Any males. And especially not the one who dared to lay a hand on her. She should stun him just for that.

*If you attempt to stun him with that, it will only make him angry. If I were you, I would listen to your mother. She gives you sound advice.*

Emerald glared at Aegon. If he was any kind of a gentleman, he would stop reading her mind, but what could she expect of a dragon male? They probably had no concept of gentlemanly behavior.

"I don't care how you two handle your situation, but

I have a job to do.” She stubbornly raised her chin. “The humans here need to return home. When the scientists sent them to this place, they used a machine that punched a hole in the dimensional fibers and they must return in order to repair that hole. Haven’t you noticed tremors in your worlds? The humans must return to repair the holes and keep the entire dimensional universe safe.” She turned to the door and prepared to knock. “Duke it out any way you want. Just leave me out of it.”

The door opened almost immediately when she knocked. A woman stood on the other side, her eyes full of tears. “Yes.”

“Amy Allen?”

The pretty woman nodded. “Yes. I’m Amy.”

“I’m Emerald from the Dimensional, Arrest, Retrieval and Extraction team. I have been sent to bring you home.”

“Thank God. I was just sitting here praying that I could leave.” She turned, ran back into the house and began to throw things into a backpack. “I don’t even want most of the things I brought here, but some of these things would be worth money if I take them home. Goodness knows I’m going to need it.” She grabbed every precious stone in the house and a light stone. “I’m

ready to go and the more time you can put between my leaving and that jerk Jolen, the better. I'd like the time to find a good divorce lawyer."

Emerald stood in the doorway stunned. This may be the easiest retrieval she had ever experienced.

"Okay, I'm ready. When do we go?"

"We don't go, you do and the time is now."

"Now?" The woman glanced around. "Where's the portal generator?"

"Right here," Emerald said as she waved a hand down her body. Waving her arms, she concentrated on Earth and opened a portal. "There you are, ma'am. I can't make any promises, but according to the distance I have to travel to catch up to him, it will be at least a few hours."

"Wait here and he'll come to you in ten hours. He always comes home for at least one meal a day. His mistress can't cook." She grinned. "He'll go hungry tonight. He's going to be plenty ticked off and I'll have some time to file for divorce if you'll wait." She gave Emerald a quick hug and almost skipped through the portal with a smile on her face.

Ms. Allen's experience with her husband was another reason for Emerald to stay off the emotional

rollercoaster with men. After closing the gate behind the hapless woman, whose husband apparently spent his time and energy elsewhere, Emerald turned to face the males who harassed her earlier. Only one of the two remained. The silver dragon. Not that she minded. The other man just plain gave her the creeps.

Aegon stood watching her. His expression was blank. It wasn't fair that he knew her thoughts, but she knew nothing of him.

"Ask me and you shall be rewarded with the answer."

"Will you stop reading my mind?"

"It's not something I'm trying to do, your thoughts just pop into my head." He held out his arm. "Will you walk with me, lady?"

Emerald hesitated. Should she? She glanced down at her scanner. Amy said her husband would be back in ten hours. She didn't ask about the other two. Drat those two dragon males and their posturing. They screwed up her game and she didn't like it.

Sighing, she took his arm. "Well the woman said I had ten hours to wait for her wandering husband to return. I guess I can afford to take a stroll."



## Chapter Three

The endless twilight was a strange constant, but it matched Emerald's mood. Aegon was prettier than she was and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. If Mother said that he might be her destiny, she would give it consideration, but she didn't have to like it.

The humming that had started in her bloodstream was another matter. She needed to get back as soon as she could and have the doctors check her out. She felt feverish.

A strange smile was hovering around the edges of Aegon's lips. It both intrigued and infuriated her.

"Why did *you* come to this planet?" She put as much casual query into it as possible.

He chuckled. "Since a rumor that a clutch of dragon swans was running about unclaimed and without

protection has spread, many of us have taken to the skies. Leirt and I are but two of hundreds out there looking for a female of our own kind.”

A peculiar hope started spreading through her system. “What kind of a rumor?”

“Oh, that two of our kind already have the joy of a mate who stumbled through a portal looking for humans to return to earth.”

Emerald dragged him to a halt. “Explain.”

His hypnotic face seemed surprised. “There are two dragons who have wooed and won your sisters’ affections.”

“They are alive? They are safe?” Her heart was pounding in her chest. *Mother, why didn’t you tell us?*

*I didn’t want you to act differently in front of the lab techs, darling. If they knew your sisters were alive and well, they would demand that they be returned to the lab and you would have to do it. That is not something I wanted you to face. Your grief had to be genuine.*

“They are alive and safe. Their men care for them and are teaching them the ways of our kind.” Aegon nodded.

“Our kind have ways?” The phrase made her smile even while her mind grappled with the enormity of what

she had learned. Her sisters were alive and her other sisters were being hunted. It was a lot to deal with.

“Oh, a long and proud history, tens of thousands of years of traditions and battles for the few females produced by our kind.” He bowed to her.

She shook her head and got back to business. “Since I am here, I need to find the humans and send them home. My leash will give me another few days here, but after that I will have to return to the lab.”

He frowned. “Your sisters are currently alive and happy, why would you have to return?”

“Because they must have found a way around the leash. I don’t have that option.”

“What is this leash?”

“It is an imbedded chip in my thigh that causes a numbing pain if I go past my scheduled time here. Speaking of which, I think I should set out to track my next targets.”

“Would you accept a ride? I can carry you to the dig site. Those biologists have been messing all the natural cycles up with their forced evacuation of the caves.”

“Isn’t that against the natural order of things, to have biologists that disturb the environment?” She shook her head.

“Whether is it proper or not, they are doing it.” He had a serious expression.

“Then we had better get them under control. You said you would give me a lift?”

“When I shift, climb up my arm and take a seat on my neck. There are ridges to settle between and you can be quite secure if you take the time to get comfortable.”

He stepped away from her and moments later, a glow followed by a huge dragon stood before her. Emerald took the invitation of his raised claw and let him boost her up his arm and onto the thick expanse of his neck.

His skin was not scaled, but a thick hide that pulsed with warmth under her thighs. When she was settled, she stilled and waited. He took a few steps and then launched skyward.

The air rushed out of her as she was flattened to his neck with the surge of his takeoff. His wings cupped and scooped air out and down from his body and when he had gained the altitude he wanted, his wings took on a motion that moved them forward. Emerald checked on her scanner and had to admit that they were approaching her targets with tremendous speed.

*This is a much more effective means of transport. Perhaps on your next mission, you could call me to you*

*and we could have a little more time together. In the meantime, I will investigate your sisters' ability to remain with their mates without suffering from the effects of the leash.*

*How could I call you?*

*Like this. Come through the portal and speak to me with your mind. I will be there within the hour.*

*You can find me that way?*

*If you wish me to. All dragons have a certain frequency for their thoughts and yours is embedded in my mind.*

Emerald had to admit that she was already certain that she would be able to spot the bright silver and black of his mind from a distance as well. Now that she knew what she was looking for, it would be easy to spot.

Having backup on a retrieval wouldn't be bad either.

She looked over the landscape lit by the moonlight and wished for a sun to illuminate the sky around her. The feeling of air rushing past her felt right, natural, but she wanted the visual that matched the feeling of movement.

*Is your home a bright place?*

*It is. Sunlight for eighteen hours a day, moonlight for eight and then it starts over again.*

Emerald smiled at the image in her mind. She imagined sunning herself on a rock and dozing in the warmth. Life underground had left all of her sisters with a longing to see the sun and she was no different. Her body was designed for action, not a sedentary life beneath the surface.

*It is designed for more than that, but one thing at a time.*

The chuckle in his mental tone was unmistakable, but she didn't have time to work on his meaning. They started to drop from the sky in a rush that caused a panicked noise from the humans below.

She slid from her perch the moment that they touched down and strode forward. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am here to return you to Earth."

A man came forward and puffed his chest out. "We are engaged in important biological investigations here. One day we will return to our planet, but not until they have created a method by which we can be transported with our knowledge."

"Mr. Allen, I presume? You have been recalled by the very project which sent you away from your world."

He gestured to her back and she assumed that he was pointing at Aegon. "You have the same markings as

them. How do you know what my project director wants?”

She released her stunner from her thigh and checked the charge. It was completely full, enough for nine humans, not simply three. “Your governments sent exploration teams out all over the place, and the holes that were punched in the dimensional curtains are tearing your planet apart. Your presence here will guarantee a hole will remain open. I cannot allow that to happen.”

She aimed her stunner at him. “I am Emerald of the Dimensional, Arrest, Retrieval and Extraction force, and you are coming with me.”

Her finger pulled the trigger three times and three humans dropped to the ground, asleep for hours.

Sighing, she holstered her stunner and started gathering their research. “What were they doing here?”

They were under a canopy, which seemed peculiar in the dim light. When animals screamed from caverns above them, a piece of information dawned. “Those huge fliers...they were trying to defend their territory.”

Aegon went to the mouth of the nearest cave and sniffed. “Explosives. They must have blown the predators out of the cave and their presence drove off

their food source.”

“Sabina mentioned dragons hunting.”

“Who was that?”

“A local woman that I met near where you found me.” She filled a duffel bag with small computers and as many notebooks as she could.

“Ah, the people with the night sight. I tried to pinpoint their details myself once, but nothing quite matched.” He smiled.

“They have a fear of what they call dragons.”

“The predators here resemble us superficially. It could be a natural confusion.” He shrugged.

“It could be, but I will keep it in mind.” She laughed. “This was the first batch of humans to point out that I was not one of them. I know that my sisters have run into that before, but this was the first time for me.”

He smiled. “There is always a first time for everything.”

She snorted. It sounded a little like innuendo, but she would need to do some research before she could make an assessment.

“It never fails to amaze me that they take me at my word.” As she spoke, she started to collect the humans, lifting the annoying Mr. Allen over her shoulders and



picking up the others under each arm.

She turned and draped in her targets she smiled at Aegon. "I will call you when I leave the lab again. Goodbye."

She blinked in surprise when he came toward her and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. As soon as he backed away, she licked her lips out of reflex and a hot spiral of silver ran through his eyes.

A visible shiver ran through him and he straightened. "Until the next meeting, Emerald. Be well."

With the riot of reaction to his taste, it took her a few seconds to gather her thoughts together to open a portal. It wavered in location until she focused on Earth and then she was walking through to the lab, her arrival pad buzzing with security and medical teams.

Her dispatch tech, Stitch, was waiting. "You had to knock them out?"

"Mr. Allen here was trying to tell me that I wasn't a rep from Earth. Since time feels different on worlds without daylight, I didn't want to try and open portals with my leg exploding...again." She dropped her burdens into the arms of the medical team one at a time.

Stitch nodded. His full name was Edgar Stitchwhile, but his willingness to answer to Stitch was endearing.

“I am lobbying to have the leashes removed. Several of the dispatchers are in agreement. It is bad enough that you have to face whatever comes your way without the clock ticking on you.”

“Thank you. My family appreciates any efforts on our behalf.” Emerald absently rubbed her thigh as she thought of her implant.

With her burden removed, she stretched and started to step off the platform.

Stitch stopped her. “Weapons please, Emerald.”

Sighing, she unstrapped her gear of tracker, scanner, stunner and knives. She stood still as a metal detector was waved over her and the tech pronounced her clean.

Her walk to medical took her past one of her sisters who was on the way out. They high fived each other as they passed. June was out on her way to a strange new world and Emerald was returning. It was nice to cross paths with her sisters now and then.

A new doctor was on duty. “Hello, Emerald. Glad to see your face again.”

She waved for Emerald to begin removing her clothing.

The female physician chuckled. “Of course, the first time I saw your face it was Ruby behind those eyes.”

“You are the doctor she brought back from her first assignment, aren’t you?” Emerald followed her gesture to disrobe and submitted to the examination.

Instead of the impersonal exam, she was usually subjected to, the doctor asked questions and did a cerebral scan. She stood and muttered at the results while Emerald got into her lab greys.

“I think this report is going to go missing.” The doc spilled coffee on the report before running it through the shredder and into the garbage.

As her new physician extracted and destroyed the memory chip from the scanner Emerald had to ask. “Why?”

“Two reasons. Either you have gone into heat or someone has been traipsing through your mind, but your chemistry is all over the place and your neurons are firing like mad. If I turn in this report as it stands, they will want to investigate you immediately, possibly invasively.” Her words were completely casual, but her actions were deliberate.

“Thank you. I don’t even know your name.”

The physician smiled, her bright human eyes carrying her grin within them. “My name is Dr. Archa Shivven. I look forward to seeing you again, Emerald.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Her exercise clothing was comfortable, but it lacked the flare of her leathers. Waiting for her in the hallway was her handler, Becky.

“Emerald, I wasn’t expecting you so soon. How was your assignment?” Becky fell into step beside her, looking up through dark brown eyes.

“It went well. I managed to retrieve all four and only three had to be stunned.” She carefully didn’t mention the dragons.

No one in the lab referred to them as dragons. They were called conduits, agents, or subjects. It made Emerald wonder if anyone on Earth actually knew what they were.

“Still had to use the stunner, huh? That sucks. What do you want, massage or food?” Becky was chirpy and that meant she was in love, her life and attitude was always morose when she wasn’t.

“Food first. I will fall asleep during the massage.” Rations were rations, but a hot meal was always her preferred starter to every return.

“Your debriefing is set for six hours from now. They have to wait until dawn before the committee arrives.”

Emerald nodded and followed Becky to the commissary. Emerald took her seat and her handler

darted across to the single food server who sprang into action.

The exhausted dragon swan propped her cheek on her fist and watched Becky bustle about through bleary eyes.

“Wake up, Em. You need to eat something.” Becky sat across from her, her own tray ready with desserts of half a dozen varieties.

“You are having sex with the commissary officer?” Emerald blinked down at the enormous meal she was supposed to consume.

“We are in love. It is not something to sneer at, Em.” Becky lifted her chin and gave her a stern look.

“I wasn’t sneering, merely asking a question. My kind are not allowed social interactions, if you will recall.”

Becky blushed. “Of course. Sorry, Em.”

It was funny to Emerald that only her handler called her by a truncated name. Even her sisters called her Emerald, their names the only thing that was theirs alone and therefore, worthy of respect.

As her handler caught her up on the gossip of the last few days, Emerald sighed at the nickname that was constant in her address. When it came to names and

respect, Becky had not gotten that memo.

## Chapter Four

After a massage that sent her to sleep and a restoring nap, Emerald was ready to face the debriefing.

Her hair was down her back in a straight dark braid as she sat calmly in the hot seat.

She went through all the details until she concluded her telling of picking up the unconscious bodies.

“Agent Emerald, Dr. Allen is upset by the manner in which you retrieved them.”

She nodded. “He would not agree to simply come quietly and with the endless twilight of that place, it was hard to determine how much time I actually had left. Instead of endless negotiations, I used the stunner, grabbed all of their research and brought them home.”

Doctor Evian Raughl, a recent retrieval, scowled. “He also makes mention of dragons.”

“He must have been referring to the creatures he was dynamiting out of their habitats.”

The group of administrators and researchers began to mutter among themselves. Dr. Delphin called them to order. “It does not matter. Agent Emerald, we find you have carried out your duties within the scope of the powers granted by your position. Thank you for attending this debriefing.”

She rose and inclined her head while Dr. Raughl pitched a fit. “Dragons, I tell you! They are real and you are breeding them here!”

Emerald kept the smile from her face. Breeding them, no, raising them, yes. It was a secret that would be out soon.

Dr. Delphin seemed to know what they were. Mother had spoken kindly of him, even though he was one of the humans keeping them from freedom.

It seemed that the attitudes were taking two very separate poles in the lab. Those who wanted to make the dragon swans full members of the teams and those who wanted to keep them as tools they could discard when the project was over. Whichever they decided, Emerald was determined that she and her sisters would all be long gone before they made up their minds.



After the debriefing, Becky escorted her to the common area she shared with her sisters. It didn't seem the same with Topaz and Ruby gone. She hugged Sapphire to her and whispered, "I miss them."

"I miss them, too, but wherever they are, they must have more freedoms than we do here."

Emerald pulled back, startled. She didn't realize that any of her other sisters dreamed of having their freedom as much as she did. Of course, they talked about living their lives on the surface. Who wouldn't? As dragons, they wanted nothing more than to be in the sun, to stretch out beneath its warmth and soak in the glorious heat.

Heck, she even enjoyed the rain as it fell on her. She didn't mind getting wet. The strange smell that filled her nostrils before it fell always reminded her how clean everything would seem once the water stopped falling from the sky.

She looked around at her sisters huddled in small groups, whispering. All of them had their theories on where their sisters went and only she knew for certain what had happened to them. She wanted to tell them, but her mother was right. Their grief must be genuine when and if Aegon was able to spirit her away, she would see

them again.

Emerald blinked to keep the tears from her eyes. Just the thought of leaving them here to go off with a male made her heart ache. She knew what she must do and she knew her mother was right, but it didn't make the process any easier.

Just looking at her sisters, knowing that soon Aegon would find a way to free her and she would leave them here to continually work for the people of Earth with no real compensation was enough to break her heart.

The scientists never told them of love or sex, they never wanted the sisters to know what it was, but their mother, while never present physically, had always seen to it that they felt her love. She had shown them what that delicate emotion was and she was the one who encouraged them to feel it for each other.

"I can't stay here tonight." Emerald looked around, her feelings almost overwhelming her. "I'm too exhausted to sit here and chat." She took Sapphire by her arms and stared deep into her eyes. "We can't know what's going on, but we must believe that wherever our sisters have gone, they are safe and well." What else could she say to prepare Sapphire for the inevitable loss of another sister?

She left her sisters in the common room, all of them whispering their suspicions to the others. Whatever they thought, Emerald was certain that none of them had the idea that their sisters were out there, living lives with their mates as Aegon suggested.

Entering her room, she closed the door behind her and leaned against it with a sigh. One thing was certain, she would rather have Aegon by her side than that overbearing Leirt. She would call him on her next assignment. The last thing she wanted was to have some overbearing dragon throw her over his shoulder and take her away regardless of what she felt.

Seven hours later, Becky knocked on her door before opening it and sticking her head through the small opening. "Are you ready? It's time to go." She brought up her arm and waved a pad. "I have your next assignment here."

Emerald smiled at her handler. She was just as chipper and cheery this morning as she had been the day before. "He seems good for you. I hope this one lasts."

"I do, too," Becky said with a sigh. "He's so handsome and he really cares about me. What other man would worry that I eat?" She looked down and grimaced

at her slightly plump form. “Most of them before thought I ate too much and I probably do, but they didn’t need to tell me that.”

Perhaps this cook really did care for Becky. It wasn’t like most human men to go after a plump woman and encourage her to eat. In her limited experience, the men always wanted their women as skinny as sticks, even if the men were as fat and dumpy as a cow. She barely stopped her lip from curling at the thought.

“No they did not need to tell you that.” She took the pad from her handler and read it over. Seven team members this time. They were on the other world doing medical research. Their research and any important samples must return to Earth with them, which made the assignment more difficult than usual. She would need cooperation from at least one of them. There was never a guarantee that any of the targets would offer their cooperation. The woman on her last assignment had been a pleasant surprise.

“I’m ready.” She followed Becky through the door and down the corridor. Even if she didn’t like manhandling people, she lived to wear her leathers. Not only were they comfortable, but they also made her feel...attractive. Not that it really mattered around here.

She didn't even know why she cared. Looking attractive was not a prerequisite for the job. Kicking ass was and she and her sisters did that well enough dressed in nothing more than a medical gown. Still, as one of her old handlers said, it just felt good to know she looked nice.

After donning her leathers and gathering her weapons from the armory, she stood on the platform ready to go. Dr. Delphin stood off to the side, a clipboard in his hand as he talked to another handler. She forgot which of her sisters the man babysat, but she knew she didn't like him. He was arrogant and stupid. Still, she kept her mouth closed as she stood awaiting Dr. Delphin's special instructions. He rarely made an appearance at the beginning of an assignment unless he had something important to add.

Once the doctor finished with the handler, he moved to the edge of the pad and looked up at her. "As you know, two of your sisters have gone missing. I would task you with keeping your head on this assignment."

Emerald gave him a short nod. "Yes, sir." She wasn't about to tell him that she'd heard her sisters were just fine.

The doctor looked at her through narrowed eyes for a

moment before continuing. “Your sisters disappeared with their implants intact. If they are out there and free, you may run across one. If you find them alive, the pain from their *leash* as you call it, may have made them mad.” He looked down at his now trembling hands. “You may have to...” He paused as his voice caught. “You may have to put them out of their misery.”

Emerald took a deep breath. She had always known this doctor was kind, but she never dared to think he cared about any of them, yet she would swear he was about to break down, right here in front of the techs and handlers.

Looking up, he pierced her with a steady gaze. “I don’t care what you have to do. I can’t stand the thought of them alone and suffering.” The last was said on a whisper so low, only she could hear.

“Yes, sir. I will try.” She stared at the doctor with newfound respect. She never once thought that the man cared anything about them beyond what they were to the project. Now she knew that he had feelings for them. Perhaps the others here weren’t quite what they seemed either. She wondered, when this was all over, if some of them wouldn’t like to leave Earth and live on a world with herself or one of her sisters.

*It is a possibility, darling, though we have no idea what your father will think. I know he is going to rage at the people of this planet for what they have done to me and to all of you. Not once did your father ever dream to have twenty daughters and for that, he will be grateful, but his benevolence will only go so far, for his rage will take him much farther than even we can imagine.*

Emerald didn't know her father, but she couldn't believe the man would thank the people of Earth for taking his mate and his daughters from him. *I know you are right, Mother. I cannot see any man refusing to make the people of this planet pay for what they have done to our family. Yet, those who have made our lives easier and those who have done their best to protect us, deserve our respect and return devotion.*

*You are correct, daughter. Perhaps together we can all convince him that those who were kind to you deserve to have a choice in what happens to them. Who knows? He may agree.*

*Don't you miss him?*

*I miss him more than I can express, darling. Her mother's words sounded wistful. You must go now or he will think something is wrong. I do not want him to suspect that we can talk to each other like this.*

Emerald turned to the doctor. “I am honored that you care.” She kept her words a whisper so the others wouldn’t hear. “If I see them, I will care for them as it requires.”

Dr. Delphin swallowed and nodded before backing away. “Now that you have your special instructions, you may be on your way.” He waved his hand, then turned and left the room.

Emerald stared after him, wondering if she would have the opportunity to see him again. The man had hidden depths. Perhaps there was more to some of the others as well.

She turned to the tech seeing to her leash and grimaced. She hated the testing, she hated the implant and she hated for the thing to go off on her during an assignment. She resisted the urge to rub her leg. It was a habit she noticed all of her sisters had since the implantation.

The things sat below their skin like some insidious thing, waiting for them to screw up just once and take too long to come home. Then it zapped them with a pain so debilitating that they could barely breathe, let alone think. She knew Dr. Delphin had declared the pain not be so intense, but a few of the techs didn’t care. They



liked pain themselves so when they set the device high, they not only tortured one of the sisters, they got some weird sexual gratification for themselves. Emerald didn't think she would ever understand people like that.

She only hoped that this tech wasn't one of those who liked pain because she planned to call Aegon and she had no intention of coming back here ever again—at least not while her sisters were still here. She intended to come back only once to see if any of the techs or handlers that she knew were kind wanted to come with them to another world. Even then, she would have to await her father's approval.

## Chapter Five

When the tech finally finished with her implant, he stepped off the platform and Emerald almost sighed with relief. Time to go. She closed her eyes and, concentrating, imagined the world where she would find her targets and opened the portal. Opening her eyes, Emerald stepped through and gasped. She had never seen anything so beautiful. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the brightness of the twin suns. Heat seeped into her pores, her very bones warmed as she stood staring a beach of white sand caressed by blue water.

She took a moment to stare at the beauty with awe before searching her mind for the path to Aegon's. She wanted, needed, to share this with someone and he seemed the obvious choice. After all, her sisters and mother couldn't be here and what she had heard about

her father, she wasn't certain she was ready to meet him.

It only took a few minutes for Aegon to appear. His smile was something to behold. She didn't think she had ever seen a male who was so well put together. His teeth gleamed at her as his silver irises swirled through the blacks of his eyes. The breeze coming off the water ruffled his hair, making him appear even more handsome than he had the day before.

"You called, lady?" He bowed low, his tone respectful even though his eyes twinkled merrily. "I hoped I would hear from you. I am at your service."

Emerald spun around in a circle, looking for some sign of life. "I need to find seven medical researchers and I must return them *and* their research with any samples they may have to Earth."

"I would be happy to help you any way I can, lady." He turned and took a few steps. "If you would like a ride, I can take you to those you seek."

"You know where they are?"

He shook his head. "No, but it wouldn't be difficult to find them from the air. They must have an encampment of some kind."

He was right. It didn't take long to find them from

the air. When he set her down about a kilometer from the camp, she thanked him with a short kiss on the cheek. “I must go alone from here. Dr. Allen told the others about you and I don’t need these people corroborating his story.”

“I will be here to help if you need. You merely have to reach out with your thoughts and I will be there.”

“Thank you, Aegon. I will call you if I have need.”

Turning, she walked toward the camp, mentally rehearsing what she would tell these researchers to make them want to go home with their finds.

“I don’t believe it!”

Emerald heard a woman squeal through the trees.

“I’ve found it. I’ve found what we’ve been looking for and it’s been right here all along.”

“You’ve found what, Tamash?” the deep male voice asked from further away. “Is it the cure?” The deep rumbling voice grew closer as other voices added to the mix.

“Yes, Teil. It’s the cure and all this time it was in this.”

“Eeew! That’s disgusting. What made you even try that?” another female voice asked.

“I don’t know. Desperation, perhaps. I can’t help but

feel that our time here is running out. No one was meant to live in paradise forever.”

The other woman snorted. “Paradise? Are you stoned? This is no more paradise than bedlam. Who wants to be stuck here with nothing, but plants and insects to keep you company?”

“Oh, Sirah, I would love to stay here. I *want* to be stuck here with all of this wonderful flora and these insects that kill several different types of cancer,” the one they called Tamash said.

Emerald stepped into their camp just in time to see the woman hold out a dish filled with dead insects. “It’s not like we have a choice anyway. The laboratory won’t be able to come looking for us for at least another year.”

She stood in full view as the researchers took her in. “That is where you are wrong, Tamash Ubul. You must all return with haste. The methods used to bring you here tore holes in the dimensional rift and they will remain open until you all return. You will be transported the moment you have collected your research.”

“A way back! We have a way back!” The other woman rushed to Emerald and hugged her. “Thank you!” She grabbed Emerald’s hand and shook it. “I’m Dr. Sirah Gonlen. You wouldn’t believe the types of

medicinal plants and insects we found here. With our research, we can synthesize cures for all kinds of diseases back on Earth.”

Tamash grinned. “Yeah and the thought of collecting the Nobel Peace Prize doesn’t hurt either.”

“We’ll never want for research grants again.” The male who had spoken earlier rubbed his hands together.

Emerald stood and listened to their animated chat. She knew a cure for cancer was a huge thing. The people of Earth had been plagued with that for centuries. “I would be happy to take you all back. You merely need to gather your things. We don’t have much time. I’m sure you’ve noticed the tremors of this planet.” She watched as they all nodded.

“We have.” The man stepped forward. “I’m Dr. Teil Streng.”

Emerald didn’t bother to tell them she knew who they were on sight. The files provided by the techs were always very thorough.

“We thought they were the equivalent to earthquakes or maybe an unseen volcano. Truthfully, we’d begun to worry as they continued to get worse.” Teil moved to sit at a small collapsible table and picked up a drink. “Would you care for some?”

Emerald shook her head. “No, thank you.” She wasn’t about to take any chances. Her sister Ruby told her how the people tricked her on her first assignment. This seemed too easy.

The man shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He took a long drink and smiled. “This is something else we need to take back.” He gestured toward their sleeping quarters and makeshift lab. We’ll need a day or two to pack up. Do we have the time?”

“We have some time. I have been instructed to make sure all of your research returns with you.”

“Good.” Teil nodded with a smile. “Good. We have found many marvels here. We have gathered and dried seeds of several different types of plants that we used to have on earth, but are now extinct. All of them have medicinal qualities.”

Emerald was glad. She hated the thought of the Earth people suffering. Some were nice and others, most of the others had no idea what went on in the underground laboratory where she lived. The majority should not be punished for the trespasses of the minority. However, somehow she knew her father would do just that. “That’s good. At least you won’t return empty handed.” She looked at them each in turn. “Where are the others?”

Sirah stepped up and snorted. “Geologists. They went in search of the volcano they just *knew* was causing the tremors. They could be anywhere.”

Emerald slung her pack from her shoulder and pulled the scanner out. “No worries. I can find them with this. It’s how I found you.” She smiled. “Will they want to return home as well?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Sirah said with a snort. “If anything, they’ll fight to stay and they should have research material, too. They went off about six months ago and we haven’t seen them since.”

“I hope they haven’t perished out there in the wilderness. You know how difficult it can be to find cospes of edible plants.” Tamash bit her lip, obvious worry painted on her face.

Emerald nodded. “I am on my way to find them. Prepare your samples for travel. We will leave as soon as I return.”

Sirah swallowed. “How will you return us? You don’t have the generator or the stationary gate.”

Emerald winked. “I will manage. This isn’t my first rodeo.”



## Chapter Six

Aegon was curled up on a rock in his other form, basking in the sunlight. *What do you need, Emerald?*

She struggled over a pile of rocks as she approached him. *I need to find a clutch of geologists. Their location seems to be interfering with my scanners.*

*I will get you as close as I can to the largest electromagnetic disturbance in the area.*

His huge clawed foot extended to her in invitation. Emerald smiled and climbed aboard the proffered limb.

She settled into place and gripped one of the ridges for stability. When he launched into the air, she watched the camp below and though they stopped to point at the dragon as it flew over them, the scientists seemed to be involved in crating up their discoveries.

The steady beat of his wings took the place of her

heartbeat. She felt the world falling beneath her as air was scooped and pushed away. The heavy pulse became her focus.

Her scanner crackled on her arm as they headed north. Four small pulses of light surged and then settled into steady beacons, flickering on the display.

*I can see them. Northeast.*

*Near that huge volcano?*

She looked up in surprise to see the smoking edifice of the natural disaster in the making. *Can we circle that? I have never seen one before.*

*Of course. Where have you lived that you look at the world like a child?*

*In a lab, underground. We saw pictures of this kind of thing in our educational classes.*

*You received an education?*

*Of a sort. Physical education, navigation, orienteering, reading, writing and general anatomy of a world in distress. Seeing it all in person is quite another thing.*

*Then look all you wish, there are places out there that I would love to show you, walls of crystal and fire. Oceans of bright jewels and new wonders are around every corner.*

It sounded wonderful.

The glow of lava simmering in a pool surrounded by a ridge of stone was hypnotic. The blast of heat felt amazing on her skin. *This is wonderful. It feels amazing.*

*We like the heat as a species. Those little humans won't be faring so well.*

*What humans...oh.*

Down below, a course of lava was making its way toward the small cluster of humans, pinned against a pillar of rock and trees, a tiny oasis in a growing sea of molten rock.

*Can you grab them?*

*Not all in one go. I may knock more of them into the lava if I am not careful.*

*Crud.* Emerald thought about it quickly. *Drop me amongst them and then come back to get me after they are clear.*

*Are you sure you can manage a landing? I will have to stay fairly high to slow down.*

Emerald was already shifting her legs and working her way down to his huge talons. He gripped her lightly by the arms while lowering their altitude.

The heat was uncomfortable for Emerald as they swooped down to the small oasis in the molten flowing

rock.

*Ready? Drop.* He let her go and she fell thirty feet, tumbling forward before rolling to a standing position.

Her ankle twinged a little as she walked toward the cowering humans. “I am here to get you home.”

One of the geologists looked at her through swollen eyes and he yelled, “I don’t care who you are, get us out of here.”

Emerald raised one eyebrow and opened a portal for them. They grabbed their gear and headed to the exit she offered as quickly as they could. She couldn’t do anything about their sighting of the dragon, but with their bodies and minds suffering from heat and panic, she could only hope they would be vague in their report.

*Okay, they are away. Come and get me.*

*Move toward the center. The lava is coming in rather quickly.*

She followed his instruction and stood as close to the center as she could manage. The heat was coming toward her in waves, blurring her vision. A silver glow was coming at her and either the moon had come down to crush her or Aegon was on his way.

*Hold still, Emerald, this isn’t going to be comfortable.*

The warning was given to her an instant before the cooler rush of air caressed her face.

A squeak of pain was forced from her the moment that he connected. Emerald felt the flutter of contrition as he carried her away from the lava field and the small piece of land she had been standing on. A few rapid blinks of her secondary lids and she got to witness the destruction of her previously safe haven.

*I guess we got there just in time.* Dangling from his grip, she tried to ignore the pain in her ribs.

*Your timing was impeccable. I would almost suspect the humans of having a psychic link.*

*Not really, I have retrieved bodies before. It isn't pleasant, but it is part of the job.*

*That's horrible. I can't imagine sending a woman as sensitive as you out to deal with the dead.*

Emerald laughed. *There were twenty of us on duty when we started. There are eighteen now. The humans have no one else.*

*Are you all out in the worlds at the same time?*

*No, they always hold a few of us back so that if something happens, they are not without their safety stock. Also, not all assignments take the same amount of time. We come and go all the time.*

He was silent as he flew the rest of the way back to the small base camp that housed the rest of the research team.

Limping and slapping out the few embers that were searing into her clothing, she hiked over the hill and approached the research team. Absently, she removed her canteen from her belt and slugged back some water. Her ribs were probably cracked if not broken. Her injuries were not life threatening, but she was not comfortable.

The pain made her a little grumpy when she stomped back into the research base.

She must have looked like the hammered hell she felt like because Teil shouted and brought her a chair. Emerald sat and pressed her head into her hands.

“What the hell happened to you?” Sirah was in front of her, a damp cloth in her hands that was applied to Emerald’s face.

“Oh, not much. The geologists are safe, but their camp is under lava right now. So they were only able to take away the information they had on their persons. You have about twelve hours before the lava flow reaches you. Less if the volcano blows.”

Sirah looked northward and widened her eyes. “I

didn't...that wasn't there yesterday."

Teil whistled. "Where did that come from?"

Tamash gasped, "How long do we have?"

Emerald removed the compress from her face. "I estimate less than twelve hours. That is just going by the curves and the twists in the valleys between here and there. It was as if this spot was designed to be in the middle of the pathway."

Sirah nodded and got to her feet. "Then we had better get a move on. Prep all active experiments and get ready to move."

Tamash and Teil jumped to it and left Emerald to replace her compress.

With her eyes closed, she reached out to the dragon just beyond the hillside. *Did you hear that?*

*I did. Are you returning with them?*

Emerald froze. She didn't want to. She wanted to see the crystal hills and oceans of jewels. *Will you take me to see my sisters?*

*Of course, as soon as we take you to a healer to get your leg and ribs fixed.*

*What?*

*I heard and felt them crack when I grabbed you, but I wanted you to finish this assignment before I took you*

*for medical care.*

*Pretty confident that I would go with you, aren't you? One would think you thought I liked you or something.*

*His chuckle in her mind made her smile slightly. What is not to like?*

*If I had a response for that, I would tell you, but you have rendered me speechless.*

*Save your little humans and I will take you off to meet not only your sisters, but more of our kind. There is an entire universe out there waiting for you, Emerald. Time for you to come to greet it.*



## Chapter Seven

Emerald could hear and see the smoke rendered by the approaching molten rock. “Are we ready?”

Her targets were standing by, their collection of boxes impressive by anyone’s standard.

Teil nodded. “How will this work?”

“I will open the portal, one of you will go through and warn the base crew and the two with me will start sliding boxes through to the other side. Once the boxes are through, you two will follow and I will bring up the rear.”

She added, “Now, I will do the throwing of the boxes because if you strike the side of the portal you will begin to pass through it and it is a one way door for humans if I am not touching you. You can go in, but you can’t come back. Is that understood?”

The group nodded.

“Now, who is going first?”

Sirah cleared her throat. “Tamash will go first. She is the youngest and the best research assistant I have ever had.”

Teil nodded. “I will pass you the boxes, but please be careful. We will not be able to return for more samples, will we?”

“No. I am afraid not. When the mechanical portals were created, they punched holes in space that ruptured the fabric of matter in the area around your world. This caused a weakness that is rippling across dimensional barriers. When you passed into those holes, you carried bits of the dimensional fabric with you. Until those bits are replaced by your return, the instability will spread. This is a complete recall of all those who left Earth by the way. Not just you.”

They had turned grey.

Sirah nodded. “We understand. Ready when you are.”

Emerald nodded, walked to the edge of the pile of containers and opened a portal back to Earth.

Tamash gave Teil a passionate kiss that Emerald watched with intense curiosity before placing her hand

on the woman's shoulder to escort her into the portal.

Tamash held a case in front of her and walked into the swirling vortex with a soft gasp.

"Now we wait for a minute so she clears the station."

Teil cleared his throat. "You said it was our world. Where is your world?"

She smiled at him as her internal clock counted down. "I don't know. My mother was captured years ago and my sisters and myself were cloned from her existing pregnancy. No one knows what we are, let alone where we came from."

Sirah frowned. "Why won't your mother tell you?"

"I don't know, I have never met her. We were raised in the lab and she is within the facility, but kept from us."

Sirah scowled, "Are you sure?"

"I am positive. Whatever I am, it isn't human." She ticked off the seconds. "Time is up. Let's get this load shifted."

Speech turned into soft grunts as Teil and Sirah passed her the heavy boxes and Emerald slid them through the portal.

Whatever sense it was that allowed her to create the rifts, told her when they were empty and she launched

through the next crate.

The smell of burned grass and smoldering trees was coming closer. Emerald paused as Aegon flew overhead to take up a safer perch.

Sirah was gasping, but she asked, “Have you seen one of those before?”

“A dragon? Once or twice.” Emerald kept working.

“They have been doing fly bys for the last few weeks. I have never seen anything like them outside of a storybook.”

“I have heard of those.”

“Dragons?”

“No. Storybooks. My handler told me about them.” She smiled and kept working. “Becky was always a lover of the handsome prince rescuing the princess.”

They had moved two thirds of the boxes when Aegon reared up and flew toward them.

*We are running out of time. I will help.*

“No one panic, we are about to get some help. His name is Aegon, and yes, I have met him before.”

As the giant silver beast came toward them, Sirah stopped helping and watched him land and shift into his other form. “How did he...”

Aegon didn't introduce himself, merely started

lobbing more and more of the crates into the portal.

“He looks like you, Emerald.”

“I think he’s taller, Sirah.”

Her dragon companion snorted and shoved the last of the boxes through.

She turned to the researchers. “Time to go. Just walk through and you will be with your research in no time.”

“Aren’t you coming?” Sirah paused after Teil entered the vortex.

“I will be there in a moment. I just have to speak with my companion first.” Emerald smiled.

Sirah rushed at her and hugged her. “Thank you.”

Emerald didn’t know what to do, so she hugged the woman back. Sirah wiped her eyes and smiled as she turned to walk through the portal.

Aegon came up behind Emerald and wrapped his arms around her. “Do you want them to know you are coming willingly?”

“Not particularly.” The feeling of his arms was completely different from those of Sirah.

“Then scream.”

She didn’t understand until Sirah took that first step into the portal and Aegon gave her ribs a gentle squeeze. She screamed.

\* \* \* \*

Sirah was already being drawn in, but the sound carried with her all the way to Earth as the dragon caught Emerald and made her scream. The pain in the tone stayed with her until she stumbled out onto the platform and the doorway closed behind her.

“Where is the agent who sent you here?” A serious technician was looking at the spot where the portal had been.

“I don’t know. There was a dragon and I heard her scream...”

Teil looked up from the crate he was checking. “What?”

“He came up behind her and then she screamed. After that, the portal closed.” Sirah wasn’t sure what had happened, but that scream had been genuine. Emerald was out there and she was in pain.

\* \* \* \*

Emerald caught her breath. “Did you have to do that?”

“Sirah had to return to her world with tales of your

scream. There was only one way to do it.” His hands soothed her sides.

“Wonderful. You mentioned a doctor?”

“No, a healer, but the same for your purposes. Come along, the lava is almost here.” He shifted into his winged form and she struggled to get onto his neck once again.

She settled in place with pain rippling through her every nerve. He lifted slowly, easing into the air and riding the currents of heat that the black and orange course of lava was giving off.

When they were hundreds of feet over the crackling remodeling of the landscape, a portal opened in front of him and he flew into it, taking her away from destruction and into a burst of light and possibilities.

## Chapter Eight

Dragons were everywhere. A cluster of dragons were circling a tower and when they moved so Aegon could land, she knew they were expected.

*Galen is a great healer. He will be able to help.*

*This is his home?*

*It is. Many come to seek his assistance, but he only helps those he deems worthy. He has healed both of your sisters by the way.*

*Good. Can we get on with this?* She was having trouble breathing.

He quickly shifted into his bipedal form and ducked his head back from between her thighs.

She was lifted into his arms in a moment and another dragon male came to greet them as they approached the door to the tower.



“You must be...hmm...green eyes...Emerald? Peridot maybe?” The male smiled at her in a brotherly way.

“Emerald.”

“Well, Emerald, I am Galen and I will be your healer today. Aegon, please take her to the sun room.”

Her companion nodded and walked swiftly down the tower steps to a room that glowed with light.

He placed her on the bed in the center of the room, under the skylight. “Galen is really the best, I swear it.”

The man in question arrived and sighed. “I am sorry, but I will have to have contact with your skin. If you could disrobe, it would be best.”

She tried to undo her belt, but her hands were not cooperating. “Can I get some help?”

In a moment of ridiculous surrealism, two dragon males stripped her to the skin. Blushing wasn’t doing her any good. She was not ashamed of her body or marks, but their looks of extreme appreciation were making her uncomfortable.

Galen hissed as his gaze took in her deeply bruised ribs and ankle. “What happened, Emerald?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just a regular day at work. Can you fix me?”

He grinned. "Of course. And I will even remove your leash."

She smiled weakly and let him work on her, the pain of the healing reminiscent of the original injury. Through the whole process, she kept a tight grip on Aegon's hand, his touch the one anchor in her world of pain.

Galen moved and a necklace swung free. Two leashes were hanging there.

"You really did heal my sisters, didn't you?"

He grinned. "I really did. It's a good thing Aegon brought you. You had internal bleeding."

"Oh."

"Now for the most painful part, the leash and the viral capsule." He pressed his hands over her thigh and she felt the tug deep inside as it came loose from her femur.

She wasn't able to ask questions as pain seared a burning path from her bone outward. When the leash broke the skin, she breathed deeply for a moment before it began again.

The tiny capsule between his bloody fingers confused her, but he healed the torn path and set the capsule and the leash aside while he washed his hands.

“They put a contaminant under your leash in case you tried to remove it yourself. Topaz almost died, as did Ruby. Fortunately, Topaz’s mate realized that the problem was more than a minor fever.”

“Thank you. Can I put my clothes back on now?” She tried to sit up and Aegon helped her.

“It’s a pity, but yes, I suppose you can.” His grin was unrepentant as he left her and her companion alone.

“What next?” she asked as she donned her leathers once again. They seemed a bit tighter than usual. She blamed the feeling on her newly healed ribs. Perhaps she was a bit swollen.

“What do you want to do next.” Aegon looked her up and down. “Would you like new clothing?”

Emerald shrugged. “Perhaps, but not now.” She grinned up at him. “I want to see those worlds you promised to dazzle me with.” Reaching out, she took his hand. “What?” she looked up at him, confused. “Why did you inhale so sharply? Are you injured?”

“No,” he replied, chuckling. “I am not injured.” He looked down at her, his gaze unreadable and squeezed her hand. “You surprised me. That’s all.” He pulled her out onto the balcony and they stood watching the arrival and departure of many dragons. They flew through the

air as though it was nothing. Perhaps it was for them, but for Emerald, it was an amazing sight.

The shimmered around her and she shivered. Before she knew it, a large dragon stood by her side on the stone balcony. Turning, she gave Aegon a smile as he bowed low. His head nearly touched the white marble floor.

*Would you care for a ride, lady?*

“Where would you take me, sir?” She arched her brow, following his playful mood. No one had ever teased her quite like he did. It amused her. It felt...right when he did it. She didn’t know why, it just did.

*I would take you to worlds so beautiful, you cannot possibly imagine.*

“Would you take me to your world?”

*If that is your wish.* He bowed again.

“Would you take me to see my sisters?” While this was a beautiful world and Galen was a nice enough man, Emerald longed to see her sisters, Ruby and Topaz. She wanted to know they were all right. Her mother had taught her to love them well and she missed them.

Aegon tilted his big head. *In time.*

Emerald narrowed her eyes. “Would you truly show me the wonders you have promised?”

*I would show you them and more.* Aegon bowed his head once again as he stretched his leg out. *Climb up onto my back and we shall be off.*

Quickly, Emerald climbed upon her dragon and settled herself between his shoulder blades. When she was secure beneath the ridges, Aegon pushed off.

Emerald squealed with delight as they shot into the air. The ascent felt strange, as though she had left her stomach somewhere on the balcony of Galen's beautiful home below. They climbed high into the air and Aegon glided through the thick clouds, the strange cooling mist dampening her clothes.

Aegon's ridges tightened on her legs just before he performed a spinning dive toward the ground below. His giant wings flapped powerfully as they spiraled downward. Just when she began to worry that they would crash into the ground, he pulled up, opened a portal and shot through it.

They emerged from the rift over crystal blue waters. Waves crashed over a nearby shored of a tiny unpopulated island, the mist mixed with the wind in her hair. The sugar-white sands beckoned her to take off her boots and sink her toes into its warmth.

What looked like mountains made of jewels

glistened in the distance. Aegon never lost his enjoyment of her wonder as they flew over the jade green grass beneath the strange lavender sky. She felt it in his mind.

Emerald lifted her arms and basked in the heat of the large sun. She tilted her head back and smelled the misty air. So, this is what freedom smelled like. She laughed. She'd never thought it would have a scent. She reveled in the differing sensations of the warm sun and the cool mist on her skin that Aegon created as he dragged his large feet through the swells beneath them. This was what freedom felt like. Closing her eyes, she licked the saltwater from her lips and tasted her newfound liberty.

She looked down and marveled at Aegon's other shape as he carried her over the water as they grew ever closer to that distant and glittering shore. She took a deep breath and sighed. "This is what it feels like to have a complete lack of restrictions. To be independent and have free will." She gazed around with awe. No wonder the people on Earth would die for it—had died for it, according to their history books.

*Yes, lady. You are finally free. Free to be yourself, to be what you want, what your true destiny meant for you to become.*

Emerald bit her lip and worried for a scant moment before she threw her head back and laughed. She never dared dream of such a thing. In fact, had anyone asked, she never thought to *want* such a thing.

While living in the compound, she never felt like a captive. Not until her sisters began to disappear and she met this amazing dragon who called her lady.

When she looked to the mountains once again, she gasped. They were like large jewels set in the ground, jutting up like diamonds and smoky crystal with shades of Red, green and blue.

“They are beautiful.”

*They are the jeweled mountains of Hern. Dragons come here from everywhere to see them.*

“I can see why.”

Aegon flapped his powerful wings, took them higher and opened another portal. *I think you will like this the best.*

When they emerged on the other side, a great castle stood before them. She saw very few people around and no village was nearby. “Where are we now?” She stared at the beautiful fortress before them, noting the tall towers and unmanned ramparts.

*This is my home. I have been adding to it through the*

*centuries as I awaited my mate. I have dreamed of bringing her here for a long, long time.* Aegon landed in an inner courtyard and waited for her to dismount before changing into his other self.

Emerald spun around in a circle, admiring the beautiful gardens that surrounded them. She saw a woman emerge from a side door and for a moment, she felt something strange in her middle. Like disappointment. Then another woman emerged and when she turned to look at them, she realized they were her sisters. One was dressed in a flowing red gown that hugged her figure to perfection, while the other wore a dark blue outfit that was very reminiscent of the leathers Emerald still wore, but of a much more elegant material.

“Ruby, Topaz!” She ran to them, taking them both in her arms. “I never thought to see you again.” She turned to Aegon. “Then Aegon found me and told me of the men who captured you.”

“No one captured us, Emerald,” Ruby said with a grin, her eyes glowing as red as the precious stones the earthlings named her after. “We went with them willingly.” She gestured to Aegon. “Did your man bring you here against your will?”

“No.” Emerald shook her head, still unable to release



her two sisters. She couldn't wait to have this reunion with all of their other sisters, especially Sapphire and Opalite. "He did not bring me here against my will." She grinned. "But he did capture me in a way."

Topaz scowled over at Aegon. "What did he do to you?" Her eyes narrowed and she took on a bloodthirsty expression that Emerald knew well. "I am certain we can all take him together. If not," she paused as she turned to watch two more men emerge from the set of double doors behind her. "I am certain our men can."

Ruby and Topaz both held their hands out to their mates. It was so good to see them, to know they fared well and were happy. She smiled at the two men and, in Earth fashion, held out her hand. "I'm Emerald and I am happy to meet you."

"As are we, lady," the two said in unison.

Ruby wrapped her arm around a man who towered over her. His black hair brushed wide shoulders and a wide silver belt drew attention to his narrow waist. "This is Draven, my mate." She turned to Topaz and the man she held by her side. His black hair gleamed blue in the bright sunlight. He smiled at her, his almond-shaped eyes crinkling at the corners. "That is Kirai with Topaz. He is her mate." Ruby frowned and turned to Draven.

“Our sister thinks you captured us. Can you remove her from Aegon’s possession if he has harmed her?”

Emerald laughed aloud. She felt more carefree than she ever had in her life. To think that her sisters would assume she allowed a male to capture her and drag her to his home without a fight. She took each of her sisters’ hands in hers. “Aegon has not brought me here against my will, sisters. He has done the same thing your men have done to you. Somehow, he has captured my heart.” She turned to Aegon who stood behind her with a pleased smile upon his handsome face. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

\* \* \* \*

From deep inside a cryo tank in the heart of the D.A.R.E. Project labs, Eiwyn sighed as her daughters caught up on their time apart.

Seventeen more children needed to find their mates before she would call her husband to bring her home. He wouldn’t be happy, but he would do as she asked and let the girls keep their men.

She may be a prisoner now, but she was still the mother of his children. If he ever wanted to touch her

again, he would do as she asked.

A grimness took her over as she touched the minds of her unmated daughters. Each was on assignment or returning from one and the time for them to retrieve the stray humans was running short. The dimensional fabric was being held together by her will and she was getting tired.

The thought of grandbabies in the future made her smile. Her vision was slowly coming to pass, even if it had taken over thirty years to bear fruit.

She loved it when a plan came to fruition, but she wanted to be warm again. Three decades in the freezer was quite enough.

Eiwyn chortled in her mind and rubbed her psychic hands together. Her freedom was right around the corner, she just needed to get all of her daughters safely wed.

## 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.