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Accidental Mates: Ladon

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Prologue

Something was out there. In the darkness. Normally, I could see well at night, the same as I could in the day, but when I scanned the rocky, dry landscape, there appeared to be nothing for miles. No trees, no water—nothing living.

Yet, it sliced through me from every angle. Sharp claws tore at my flesh. Before my natural ability to heal could kick in to help, the thing was on me again. I shifted to dragon form and blasted fire in every direction. Screeches rent the air, not of pain but annoyance. I was not hurting it at all. I pissed it off and trying to end its attack.

I leaped into the air spreading my wings, only to feel something cold and heavy fall in splotches all over them. Whatever it was weighed me down until I crashed hard onto the earth, my mouth scraping and filling with dirt.

"What the hell are you?" I screamed and blasted it again.

This time sounds from all around came at me like claws tearing at the impacted soil. I was not under attack by one creature, but many. Baring my razor-sharp teeth, I lunged at the air in random directions and prayed for a bite, something to give me an advantage. If they were impervious to my fire and my eyesight, maybe if I ripped a hole in their hides, I could get the upper hand.

I caught something in my bite, and I pressed down with two tons of force. Instead of some alien creature's bitter blood, cold ripped through my gums. Spreading like a disease, the cold raced though my head and consumed my body. I screamed in pain.

A Drelconian is all about fire. Being shape-shifting dragons, we literally breathe it. And when the thing released whatever substance it did into my mouth, I felt like it had dropped an industrial freezer in my belly, complete with weight and chill.

My hind legs crumpled beneath me. My front legs slid straight out. I was flat on the ground losing my grip on consciousness in seconds. Making scratchy calls into the night that sounded like triumph to my ears, they covered me, froze me.

"Please, somebody, help," I begged.

My eyelids drooped when I heard the flap of wings. Dragon wings. I wanted to turn toward it, but I was too weak. Now in human form, I lay exposed and naked. My pouch carrying my clothing was lost somewhere during the attack.

I tried sniffing out who might be coming to my rescue but couldn't identify him or her in my weakened condition. Liquid rained down over me and the ground around me. I couldn't tell if it was hot or cold, if it was water or something else. But whatever it was, it injured the creatures enough to release me. They

rolled from my body, maybe shape-shifted, and scurried away in the darkness, still unseen.

Dragon claws landed by my head. I didn't move. The wide, craggy snout came down and nudged me, sniffed a little too close for my comfort toward my breasts. I commanded my hand to lift and shove it away, but it wouldn't obey.

He shifted to his humanoid form. The now-infamous Ladon, previous Drelconian guard who hated both Drelconians and humans alike, stood before me. "Ladon?" I mumbled. I hadn't known he lived on this planet.

"My, my. Tiam. Last I heard you were living on Shale with the silver dragons. What are you doing on Orel-X Four?"

"Do you really give a shit?" I grumbled. "Please, can we get out of here before they come back?"

He shifted back to his dragon form, picked me up between his sharp teeth none too gently, and slung me onto his back. With the last bit of strength I had, I tucked my head behind his bone crown and held on. We flew with ease back toward the colony's settlement.

"Perhaps when I drop you inside the barrier, you will have more sense not to wander outside it after this," he called back to me. "Who am I kidding? You're Drelconian. You don't have common sense."

Seeing that he was headed in the direction of the human doctor's house, I played nice. "I'll pay you whatever you want if you will let me heal at your house."

"Never!"

"Please."

"What's the difference? You'll heal. You'll be on your way. Even the greedy humans couldn't fault you there."

I didn't want to admit to him the real reason. I suspected he would out me for the fun of it, but I had to take a chance he wasn't all bad. I was pushing it with that hope, given he had tried to kill a bunch of humans and Drelconians a few years ago.

By the time we reached the settlement, my body hadn't healed the least little bit. I needed to sleep. Feeling exhaustion wash over me, I made another plea. "The humans here don't know I'm Drelconian. I live as a human among them, never shift. I want to maintain the assumption. You can understand disassociating yourself with the dragons, Ladon."

He didn't say anything in response, but I had to hope he would find even a shred of compassion deep inside him. The Drelconian lords and the elders had turned their backs on the female dragons when they had become barren. I wanted nothing else to do with them. Not now, not ever.

Chapter One

I woke with the sun beaming on my face and tested my limbs. No pain. My body had healed itself. Glancing around, I noted I lay on a cot in the corner of a small room. Tables lined the walls, and on each were jars of colorful substances. On a counter near the door, a purple-spotted plant sat with gloves and a gardening tool next to it. While the place was spotless, it looked nothing like a doctor's office. I wasn't sure where Ladon had deposited me.

A moment later, I heard his voice outside the door. The woman he spoke to was a frequent visitor to the

bar where I worked and was my new friend. I hoped he hadn't told her I was there.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I discovered I was still naked. "Bastard." I stood, and the door opened. Ladon paused to sweep his gaze over me. I stood my ground daring him to comment.

He shrugged. "Aren't you going to produce scales to cover yourself?"

"I don't live like a dragon anymore," I snapped at him. "I told you last night. It was last night, right?"

He shut the door behind him and moved to the counter with the gloves and herbs. "One night too many. You're healed now. You can go back to wherever it is you live."

I found a shirt lying on the bottom of the bed and slipped into it. "Why do you have all these jars? It looks different from when you ran the clinic on Earth. What are you up to now?" He ignored me, barefoot and bare-legged next to him. When I reached to examine a jar, he smacked my hand.

"Get out, Tiam. I let you stay here. Your precious humans don't know you're a Drelconian. Oh, and you're welcome for saving your life."

"Thank you." I stood there staring at him, taking in the long black ponytail, the ruggedly handsome features almost identical to all Drelconian golden dragons. Yet, the kindness which had marked Ladon, a gentle guard who cared more about his people than anything seemed long gone—dead. "What happened to you? Why has your heart died?"

"Spare me."

"You're not the only one who has ever lost someone they love, Ladon. Arnetta was—"

He was on me faster than I could blink. Something crashed to the floor, and tall as I was, Ladon had me inches off the floor, held up by my arms. "Say it again! Say her name again. I dare you."

His teeth sharp, and his nostrils blowing smoke, he waited for me to take his challenge. We could fight it out, and neither of us would win or lose unless we were willing to kill. A Drelconian didn't die easily.

I kept my mouth shut. After a while he lowered me, but did so in a way that made my body glide along his. I fought to free myself. "Let me go."

He was stronger. The wiggling around pleased him. "Do you have a lover?" he breathed, running his nose along my neck and taking in my scent. The sudden switch had my head whirling.

"I..."

"I haven't had a woman in years. We would be compatible in bed, I'm sure. I won't take a human again."

Placing my hands on my hips, I tilted my head to the side examining him. "With the hate I see in your eyes vying with the lust, I wouldn't take you to my bed if you paid me."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't pay for it."

I had been abused enough. I moved around him and headed for the door. A peek outside revealed an empty street. No one came out when the sun was hottest for three hours in the day. I didn't understand the science behind it, but it allowed me wonderful freedom. I had done some silly things during high sun, as the humans called it, even running down the street naked. The only thing I hadn't done was shift into dragon form and fly. As I had told Ladon, I put shape-shifting behind me. The only reason I had done it the night before was to try to save my life, what little good it did me.

Thoughts of the attack reminded me that I wanted to ask him what he had sprinkled on those creatures to make them let me go. He probably wouldn't tell me.

I strolled to the edge of the boundaries and held a hand up to my eyes. Heat waves distorted the mountains in the distance. The creatures lived near there. I had been caught halfway between the mountains and here. In a smaller outcropping was a key ingredient to my best-selling drink at the bar. Its creation got me off the hook when I rejected my boss's advances. His eyes constantly glued to my rear indicated he wanted one thing only.

The drink I made was popular among the colonists. They consumed it by the buckets, which was why I had risked travelling beyond the barriers to get it at night. I had learned my lesson.

After a quick change at my tiny mud home, which was on the other side of the settlement from Ladon's place, I headed out to my sweet spot past the barrier. My boss assumed I had gotten the spice from the north side where the area was safer, greener. The colony rules didn't apply to leaving the compound over there.

Finding my bag and the spice inside, I slung it over my shoulder. I kicked around my shredded clothing with bits of an odd substance clinging to it that looked like water but couldn't be in the heat of the sun and with what happened. No one would come out here, so I left it and headed back.

While I walked, I thought of what excuse to give the humans about my disappearance and about why I had missed work. I only hoped my friend, Sandy, hadn't come by looking for me and found my place empty. But as I struggled to come up with a plausible explanation, all I could think about was Ladon and his proposition.

Chapter Two

"Tiam!" Sandy dragged me into her arms. "Where were you last night? I stopped by, but you didn't answer. What, you got a new boyfriend and couldn't climb out of his bed to bring your butt to work?" She laughed her usual high tone, which had taken some time to get used to. The pitch hurt my sensitive ears.

"Yeah, right." I had picked up human informal speech quickly. "There are not many good choices among five hundred colonists."

She bumped an elbow to my side. Oddly, it ached a little.

"Mack likes you. I swear if he asks you to dinner one more time." She shook her head and went back to wiping off the bar with a damp cloth. "I suppose he's not all bad. This place probably pulls in a good bit, and Mack's not ugly anyway."

"Thanks!" came a booming voice. "Tiam, get your ass in here." I glanced over to find him leaning out of his office door with an unlit cigar hanging from his lips. "Now!"

With a look for my friend saying, "Here we go again," I shuffled over to Mack's office doorway. Willing myself not to be appealing to him, like it would do any good, I said, "Yeah?"

"Get in here and close the door." When I did, he let me have it. "Where were you last night? You think because you're hot, you can take advantage of me? Shake your ass and I'll give you what you want? Is that it?"

My eyes went wide in surprise. I had thought no such thing. I knew of human women who worked a man in such a way, but I had been raised to know my place. All Drelconian women did. I got what was offered and was grateful. Of course, now I was just bitter, but aside from that, I hadn't been manipulating him.

I drew myself up to my full six feet. "You mistake me for a h—uh, no, Mack, I would never do that. I

respect you. I need this job and want to stay on Orel-X Four."

"No one said anything about firing you or kicking you off the planet."

Allowing his eyes to travel up and down my body, he frowned. I was a little sensitive after being asked to leave Shale where the silver dragons and a few golden ones lived. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, still watching me. I tried my best to look ordinary.

"Where were you, Tiam. I know you weren't at home. I stopped by there. Your neighbor said she hadn't seen you since midafternoon after high sun ended."

That pissed me off. He had no right to go checking up on me after missing one night of work. I put in plenty hours, even did double shifts for most of the girls because I required little sleep. "I work my butt off for you, Mack. I don't need to be treated this way."

His eyebrow shot up. I rarely stood up to him or any of the others. Better to stay hidden. The frown left his face, and a questioning look came into his eyes. "I admit I worry about you, Tiam. You do things the others don't do, and it concerns me."

My heart beat a tattoo. "What things? Tell me specifically." Those "flaws" would disappear by tomorrow if I could help it.

He laughed. "Always trying hard. You are an incredibly beautiful woman, but you're more concerned about what people think of you than anything else. I've never seen such a low self-esteem."

That's not it!

Mack stood and came around his desk to take me by the arms. I wanted to pull away but held myself still. "Your self-esteem and the hair are two qualities keeping me from thinking you're a Drel."

I looked away. The humans in the last few years had taken to shortening our species name to Drel instead of Drelconian. Most of us found it offensive, but what could I say?

Mack reached up to stroke my hair, hanging loose around my face. "You're a perfect beauty like they are, tall and strong like them. I've never seen you ill, but with your personality and this one streak of white in your long, black hair, you're not goddesslike enough to be a Drel."

"Thanks!" I spat. "You're so kind."

He laughed. "I said you're beautiful, didn't I? That's a compliment."

I disengaged his fingers from my arms and turned toward the door. "Well, I hate the Drelc—Drels—as you do, and believe me, if I could look less like them, I would."

He moved behind me and let his fingers trail down my back to stop at the curve of my ass. I closed my eyes in annoyance. He wanted me, and I wanted sex. If I could do it without him knowing, I'd bring us both to a screaming climax.

I would have left, but he stopped me. "Where?"

"If you must know, I went to get my spice for the Silver Bomb, the drink your patrons can't get enough of. It's in the forbidden area, and since we were low last night, I took a chance to—"

"You what!" He spun me around. "Are you out of your mind, Tiam? The barriers are put up for a reason. You could have been killed." He tugged at his reddish-brown hair leaving huge finger holes at intervals in it. Again, his gaze swept over me. "At least you are none the worse. They didn't attack?"

"Yes, they did." Damn, he had given me my out. *When will I learn tact?* "I mean, *before* they attacked. I

think a Drel was out there for some reason. The beast came and got me out. I didn't know one of them was living here. Why is he?" I hoped that by redirecting the conversation to Ladon, he would let the matter drop.

He shrugged. "He has these herbs or something he gets from farther away than we can get because he can fly. They're helpful to all kinds of ailments indigenous to this planet. Our doctor can't help with them. And you know he's not going to share his knowledge," Mack grumbled. "Wish they were all dead."

So Ladon wasn't all bad now. "You just said he helps, and you want him dead? He saved my life."

"Probably because it was convenient for him. Stay away from him, Tiam. He's blackhearted just like those ones they said who led all those experiments on his own people. He was a doctor, a researcher. Probably wrapped up in the thick of it with the rest." Mack reached past my head to a shelf to show me a small glass jar. "See this? It's a cream I use for ... never mind what I use it for, but the Drel sold it to me for forty simoleans. Can you believe it? He said if I didn't like his price, I could just suffer."

I sighed. He hadn't been too nice to me, and after his sex offer, I realized why he had saved me—hoping I would become his lover. His dick could dry up and break off for all I cared. "You don't have to worry, Mack. I hate him as you do. And"—I held up my leather satchel—"I got plenty of spice to last us a few months."

He looked at me like I'd taken leave of my senses. "Fine, but after this, you'll have to invent something else with ingredients right here in the safe zone. Got it?"

I nodded. "Got it. So, I'm not fired?"

"Not today. Now, get out of my sight unless you want to spread 'em on top of my desk."

I left at a run.

Chapter Three

I scraped a chair across the dusty floor of my home to stand on and push open my skylight. The sun filled the living space, allowing me to turn off the lamps. Orel-X Four was the most backward place I had ever encountered. Mud on the outside of the buildings to block against high sun and modern furniture on the inside from Earth. Solar powered electricity and minimum modern technology. The colonists would go back to basics if it meant never depending on the Drelconians again. Those on Earth would cling to the blue gem forever if necessary.

I repositioned my mirror on the wall to better reflect my body. Lifting my blouse, I examined the skin to the left of my navel. A small red splotch had developed, and my body wasn't healing it. I had been on Orel-X for six months now, and I had never been affected by any sickness or skin ailments the humans had. For a second, I wondered if I was becoming human, but that pipe dream was too silly to think on.

No, I was still the arrogant Drelconian I had been bred to be, but there was something about them that drew other species to them, even in their weakest form.

The spot on my stomach itched and burned, which was impossible. How could it burn me? I grew my nails out and scratched, tearing the skin a little. The skin pulled back together quickly, but the spot remained.

"Ugh! What is this?" Could it be from the attack? Had those desert creatures infected me somehow? "Like I didn't have enough going on with my people's history?" *I don't even know if I'm no longer sterile.*

I considered going to the human doctor, but dropped the thought right away. Ladon was out of the question, but he was most likely to know what this was and what to do to get rid of it.

A boom overhead rattled my tiny home. The supply ship had arrived. Once every three months, a ship traveled between Orel-X Four and Earth. Carrying correspondence and import-export items made me think we weren't independent no matter what we liked to think.

The rash caught my attention when another flare of itching rose. I tore at it angrily only causing it to grow redder. I had no choice. I had to ask Ladon about it.

A siren went off all over the settlement, the high sun alert. "Perfect. I can get down there, and no one will be the wiser." Deciding I better not be too obvious by leaving my sky light open, I stood on the chair again and closed it. Next, I retrieved my hammer from the table where I had left it and banged the handle on the panel to close over the window in the roof. I needed to get it looked at since it jammed on a regular basis, but I hadn't gotten around to it. Not like it was vital to my survival.

Then again, it was possible Sandy could be caught at my house after high sun. I would not want her injured because of my neglect.

I caught myself brushing out my hair and wondering if I should change into a nicer outfit before I reminded myself I was only going to see Ladon. As I stood looking at myself, I considered for the umpteenth time cutting my hair. But it grew back too quickly, and the humans would notice.

"I'm in a prison of my own making!"

The siren gave two strong blasts indicating it was now high sun. I stepped out into the street and began the trek to Ladon's shop. The place was painted a dull blue and had a place squared off in front where he set up his wares. I banged on the door. He took his time about answering.

"What do you want, Tiam?" he said at the same time he was opening the door.

"How did you know it was me?"

He pointed to the sky. "Who else?"

"Can I come in?" When I noticed I was twisting my fingers, I shoved my hands into my pockets. He stared with curiosity into my eyes and then stepped aside. I had to squeeze by his hard, muscled frame, which blocked most of the opening. The bastard did it on purpose. His cock was solid. I admit I wanted to brush closer, because I was too needy with one touch.

When we were in the room where I had watched him work with the herbs, he crossed his arms over a wide chest and made no move to hide the lengthy bulge extending into one pants leg. My teeth sharpened, and fire rose in my belly. I hated him.

"I need something," I blurted out. "Medicine." I rushed to the jars on the counter.

"Unless you want your hand smacked again."

I put my hands to my sides. "It's for my friend, Sandy. She has a rash. She hates Drelconians and is afraid of you. She sent me. Let me describe it. It's—"

"No! Get out, Tiam."

I whirled on him. "What? Why? She needs the medicine. I thought that's what you're here for, to make money off the humans. There are no others on this planet, unless your customers are the creatures out there in the desert. Maybe it's how you knew what would make them let me go." If I thought he was going to reveal his secret, I was doomed to disappointment.

He stomped across the room, barreling down on me in three long strides. I backed to the far wall, but he followed and soon pinned me in place with his body. My panties were ruined within two seconds.

With the tip of his finger, he traced the edges of my teeth. I blew out a small burst of fire, and he reveled in its warmth while stroking my lips. I gasped. "Stop."

"You want it." His eyes shifted to yellow and black, the eyes of the golden dragon. "You want me to kiss you, to push my tongue inside your mouth."

"Jackass!"

He covered my mouth, and I curved my body to his. He grabbed my ass, pulling me tighter, pressing his hard-on between my thighs. We kissed for long minutes, his mouth wonderfully hot. I knew that I need not worry about mine. I wouldn't burn him. I could let myself be me if only for a little while.

"Mm." Hearing my own moan of desire, I drew back and shoved him hard. His feet skidded in the dirt, but he kept his balance. A human would have crashed into the opposite wall, maybe have broken bones. "What about the medicine?" I demanded.

"If your friend is too good to come here, she can suffer."

"Ladon..."

"Save it. I would also need to look at it. There are several agents which cause rashes to the delicate human skin on this harsh planet." He turned away and continued his work. "You can leave now."

I screeched in frustration. "You are impossible! Do you know that? When are you going to get over it! Never?"

His look was a warning.

I blew out a breath and approached him lifting my shirt. "It's me. I have the rash. I don't know why I'm not healing there, but it itches like crazy, and when I tear the skin from scratching, it heals but not the rash. What's wrong with me?"

Ladon's eyes went wide. "That's impossible. We don't get rashes." He dropped to his knees in front of me, hooked a finger on my pants, and pulled them lower, a little too close to my pussy for comfort.

I shoved his hand away. "You can see it fine. Now can you do something about it? Or know what caused it?"

"No. Not without doing cultures and blood tests." He ran his fingers over my skin."

"Shouldn't you have on gloves?" I demanded.

He stood. "Hm, you're probably right. Whatever it is affecting you might mean I'm vulnerable." He washed his hands and donned protective gear, which disconcerted me even though I was the one who suggested it.

"Lie on the bed."

I scanned the room. The only one available was his cot. "Don't you have a patient bed? You sleep in this cot."

He grumbled something I didn't catch. "I do not see patients. Therefore, I don't need a patient's bed. If you want my help, you will get in my bed!"

I did not like the sound of that! I faced the bed, thinking it over and growing my nails to scratch. He caught my wrist pulling it away. I couldn't break from his steel hold. In the grand scheme of things, I was still a woman, and he was a man. With all my ability, he was stronger and had been trained as a guard to the Drelconian lords. He could whip my rear whenever he was ready.

"Fine. I'll lay down, but if you try anything..."

"You'll what? Seems like I have all the cards here, Tiam. Don't forget it."

I gritted my teeth and bore his poking and prodding. Finally, he finished, and I sat up. "Well?"

"I'll run the tests and get back to you. But, Tiam..."

"Yes?"

He stared at the vial of blood he had drawn from my body. "If this turns out to be a challenge, something I'll have to investigate while giving you herbs to ease the symptoms, you need to consider what you'll do."

My stomach knotted. "What do you mean?"

His black eyes held mine in place without a touch. "My fee won't be simoleans. It will be you under me, in this bed. You will need to decide if your health is worth becoming my lover."

Chapter Four

Jerk! Bastard! Asshole! I ran through all the human expletives to describe Ladon. If I didn't know any better, I would think he planted the rash on me to force me back to him. He knew that I would do anything to protect my identity and that I would freak out when my body didn't expel the germ from my system.

Clutching my bag of supplies Sandy had told me to get, I had paced all over the settlement at least three times. Hoping the walk would settle me enough before I went to the community center to meet her, I was fifteen minutes late. Still, my temper flared. Had anyone come near, that person would have felt the heat.

Sure, I was horny as Ladon was. I had wanted to take a lover and had been a real idiot on Shale because of the desire, but I didn't manipulate anyone. Well, not entirely. The thought of my past actions helped to calm me. I had made foolish choices, ones I wasn't proud of. Some people said men have less control than women. I should give Ladon a break.

"It doesn't mean I'll give in to him." I scratched my stomach. The itch wasn't too bad. Arriving at the door of the community center for the second time, I stopped and knocked. The metal door swung open, and Sandy grinned at me from the dim interior.

"Yea, you made it. Come in. We'll have lots of fun."

I followed her inside. A fire churned in my belly at the prospect of spending so much time with the other women. I had had to be on my guard not to blurt out my ignorance on many topics with Sandy. This might be an exhausting experience in itself.

Soon, we were settled around a long rectangular table. Sandy stood at the head. "Girls, this is my friend Tiam. She works at the bar with me. Most of you work over in the bio section and don't venture down our way to imbibe."

"Yeah, we do that at home in secret!" one of them called out. Everyone laughed.

Sandy continued and introduced the ladies one by one. Their names slipped past me as I concentrated on the screeching in the distance. I knew it was too far for them to hear, but it was there. The sun had gone down, and those things in the desert were stirring. My heart pounded as I remembered my experience with them.

"Tiam, you okay? You look pale?"

Sandy touched my arm. I drew away. "I'm okay."

"Whew, you felt a bit warm, sweetie. I've never known you to be ill. Are you sure?"

I willed my body to cool. "Yeah. I went on a nice long walk before I got here to get my daily exercise."

One of the ladies patted her generous hip. "If only I had your body. I should be out there with you." All laughed, and the awkward moment passed. I tried not to hear what was happening in the darkness beyond the barriers.

"Okay, girls, take out your needles and thread."

We are going to embroider, whatever that was. Sandy had said the ladies gathered once or twice a month to do it and that I might like it. I had no idea how to use a needle or yarn. I hadn't even known the name of the supplies.

As we laid out everything, I watched them closely. They measured thread and clipped it with scissors. Sandy leaned over me instructing me to watch her after I had threaded my needle. With my fingers trembling, I picked up the scissors and proceeded to try cutting with my hands positioned wrong. I caught my finger in between the blades. Blood stained the little square of cloth, the table, and my fingers.

The older ladies exclaimed, Sandy shrieked, and I pressed my other hand over my finger.

"Oh boy, that looked bad, Tiam. Let's get it cleaned up."

She pulled me to my feet with me resisting. "No, no. It's not bad. It's probably already stopped bleeding." All the while, she shoved me to the back toward the bathroom. I shuffled along, hiding the injured hand and slicing into it over and over to keep at least a bit of blood coming out.

"I saw that gash, Tiam. We have to at least clean it up and get some iodine on it. Might want to see the doctor. You know protocol states we report it whenever there's an injury. Too much we still don't know about this planet."

She turned on the water, shoved my hands under it, and then moved to raid the first aid kit hanging on the wall. I sighed, cleaning away blood from a nonexistent cut while wondering how I was going to get out of this. Stupid of me to think I could mingle with them doing ordinary things when, one, I had no knowledge and, two, my secrets were too easily revealed by a slipup.

Sandy brought over bandages and iodine. I sliced my finger again and winced at the sting. I stared at the pink water swirling down the drain. "Sandy, leave it there and let me do it. I'm humiliated enough. *Please*. I've never been good with my hands—not at ladylike stuff. I should have known I would make a fool of myself."

When she hugged me and kissed my cheek, it startled me. "It's okay. We've all been there. And I can't believe you wouldn't be a natural at this. You picked up mixing the drink and twirling those bottles like nobody's business. Maybe it's your talent." She laughed. "You might be right. Bartending isn't pulling a needle and thread. I wanted to include you."

"Isn't there something else I can do? What do the men do?" That might be worse, because I needed a bed companion bad. A Drelconian was not meant for celibacy by any means.

She handed me a cloth. I squeezed it over my hand while puncturing my skin once more for good measure. When she turned to ready a bandage, I nearly dumped the entire bottle of iodine on my finger.

Sandy burst out laughing. "You really hate going to the doctor's, don't you. Okay, we'll keep this between us. It's doubtful the knitting ladies will remember beyond tonight. I guess we both have to meet some

ladies around here closer to our age. I heard there were one or two on the south side, but they're scientists." She rolled her eyes. "Won't catch them slumming with the blue collars on our end."

I wrapped a bandage around my finger while Sandy scooped up the mess and disposed of the wrappings and soiled cloth. Before an explosion shook the foundation of the settlement, I heard the screech and scrapings of the desert creatures. They were much closer.

The ladies in the front room screamed. Sandy took off for the door, and I followed, but stopped and went back. The bloodstained cloth lay at the bottom of a trashcan. I stooped to peek under the bathroom stalls. No one was there. With one shot of fire into the metal trash receptacle, the cloth was consumed. Only ash remained.

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Chapter Five

Outside was utter chaos. People ran back and forth screaming, demanding to know what was to be done. The men whose job it was to protect us all lined the parameter with guns, one of the few hi-tech gadgetry available on Orel-X Four. They shot lasers instead of bullets but were flawed because they could overheat if used too long. Not such a good thing when under attack.

"You led them here, Drelconian!" one of the men shouted looking up into the sky. I followed his line of sight to see Ladon circling, shooting fire at nothing, or what seemed like it. I ran up to the edge of the barrier. Someone grabbed my arm to yank me back.

"Careful, Tiam." It was Sandy. "He doesn't care about anyone but himself. Several of our men were nearly burned when he shot his fire out.

But something was attacking him. He was several feet off the ground one minute and came crashing down the next. I broke free from Sandy. "Shoot them! They're killing him!"

The humans looked at me like I was a filthy dragon lover. I clamped my mouth shut. Sandy sidled up next to me. "You know she's an animal lover, Jeff." Her comment rankled and made me want to burn *her*, but I kept my mouth shut.

"We've been given orders not to interfere unless they try to cross the barrier," Jeff explained. "The bastard set off something. Felt like a bomb."

Where was the liquid he had poured to burn them? I looked up. He didn't have his satchel. My guess was that they had taken him unaware, crept behind him and waited until he was almost here to strike. And there were many. I could hear them shuffling around, their claws scraping at the dirt from one end of the settlement to the other and far back into the desert. They had no scent that I recognized or that could relate to what I had smelled before. I remembered the experience as nothingness, like empty space which swallowed you. That was a part of the fear they generated in others, including me.

With all eyes on Ladon, I slunk back from the crowd and moved between two buildings. In the shadows, I jumped up to the roof of someone's house and crouched on top, a better vantage point to scour the area. There, about fifteen feet from where Ladon fought, was his pouch. Next to it was a canister I assumed held the miracle water.

"Dumbass, get your potion," I whispered.

He rolled a yellow and black eye toward me and called out in our native tongue. He had tried to get his potion, he said, and if I weren't such a human lover, I would help him.

"You don't deserve it!" I replied in our language.

The others had only heard him speak but didn't know what he said. No human had desired to learn our language, which in many ways was a good thing.

Ladon became weaker. He took longer to get up. Still, he fought a harder battle than I had. The things seemed to toy with him. The way his wings and body were weighted one minute and freed the next, I knew they covered him and then released him, covered and released again. His fire level was much depleted. They were freezing him to death in some way.

Suddenly, I remembered the irrigation pipe leading to the lake on the forbidden side. The pipe came up in the water past where Ladon battled. If I could get inside it, I could go out there and get his bag before the creatures knew I was there. With any luck.

While everyone was at the edge of the barrier, I jumped to the ground behind the houses and ran to the water building. At the side was a grate leading down to the pipe. When I had first arrived, myself and those with me had been given a tour to show and explain to us the way everything worked in harmony for our little community.

I scanned the area. Seeing no one, I melted the lock on the grate and removed it. Finding a groove where I could hold on just below the opening, I grabbed on and hung while replacing the grate. I hoped no one was around when I returned.

Water plopped somewhere in the dark. I dropped down into a puddle and wet my shoes. A ledge was built into the wall to the side of the pipe I would need to use. It ran from the lake across the small room I was in and on into the water building. I would have to open a hatch to it. I removed my clothing and placed them on the ledge. When I had forced the hatch open, I morphed to my snakelike form, the one that had disgusted Shannon, Ryuu's wife.

"Can't be beautiful all the time."

Three hundred feet to the lake. I would have to hold my breath and swim fast. There was little wiggle room in there. My heart pounded, and I was almost out of my mind with fear, but I couldn't let those things kill Ladon, even if he was a loser. He had saved me. I owed him.

Soon, I was whipping through the frigid water. My lungs pleaded for air. My body wanted to expel fire, but doing it would have been suicide. I would more likely drown more than dry up the water. Having tossed the grate on the other end aside, I broke the surface of the water, not soon enough. I sucked in a breath and then tried to quieten it.

Listening, I caught Ladon's pitiful calls and a few short bursts of the laser guns. Now they helped when he was no longer able to rise. I slithered over the ground praying I wouldn't bump into the creatures. I longed to know what they looked like in the light of day. Or maybe the sunlight hurt them. Interesting theory. The lasers seemed to be little help.

I located the satchel and the bottle. Judging that the people couldn't see me, I morphed to dragon form and flew high enough into the sky so when I flew closer to the settlement, they still wouldn't spot me.

I poured the liquid onto the creatures. They screamed in pain, which hurt my ears and Ladon's, as it singed them. He grunted unmoving. The enemy retreated. I wondered how I would get Ladon back to his home with him too close to the barriers, but he had found the strength on his own. He transformed to the snakelike form and slithered slowly across the line. The humans exclaimed in shock, but he ignored them and continued to his shop. I stayed high in the air watching.

When he disappeared into his shop, I flew over the water building and dropped to the roof. In humanoid form, I jumped to the ground and hurried to the underground room to dress. I blew fire into my hands and combed my fingers through my wet hair. My bandage burned off.

At lightning speed, I made it back to the community center, rebandaged my finger, and picked up the

scissors to try cutting some thread. By the time the ladies returned, I was calm, dry, and making no progress at all.

"Tiam, when did you come in here? You missed the creature changing into something else. Something hideous."

I shrugged. "Well, I didn't miss much, did I? I don't want to see it. Might give me nightmares."

She laughed and removed the scissors from my awkward hands. "Sweetie, let me help you. You're dangerous. I hope we never have to depend on you saving us. We'd be in big trouble."

I forced a chuckle. "Uh, yeah. Sure would."

Chapter Six

At high sun, I visited Ladon. He was already up, sort of. He sat on the side of his cot with his head in his hands. Lacerations covered his bare arms and back. Upon closer inspection, I saw they were healing, if slowly.

On the bed beside him were a few jars with something bloody inside each. I bent down to see and drew back in horror. "You're a mad scientist!"

He winced. "Lower your volume, damn it! Scientist, yes. Mad, no. I had to take skin grafts to test. I need to know if what's growing on you will grow on me."

"Growing?" I yanked my shirt up to look. The rash was the same size to my relief. "It's the same."

"To the naked eye. I won't go into it, because I'm still too worn out. Otherwise, I would gladly horrify you with the gritty details." He brushed aside his jars and fell back on the bed. "Get out, Tiam. I don't have the strength for you."

"You're a fraud, Ladon. Since I discovered you on Orel-X, you've been no more than rude. You've helped me twice."

"And you have repaid me once. I'll extract the second favor later and throw you to the desert ice afterward."

"Desert ice?" I thought about the name, fitting for the creature's effect. "I wonder how they would affect the humans."

Lying prone with his arm across his eyes, he said, "Let's test it on that one guard. I detest him particularly."

I flopped onto the bed, unable to take my eyes from his naked body. He had made no move to cover himself, and why should he? The Drelconians were not ashamed of our bodies. Humans covered the sexual parts, and I had grown used to living the same way. When clothes weren't available, we could cover specific parts of our bodies with scales.

But Ladon didn't bother in my presence, so I feasted with my eyes. His skin was tanned. Bulging muscles defined his shoulders, chest, arms, and abdomen. I could have licked him from his strong feet to his chiseled jawline. I wanted to nip at his lips and snake my tongue into his mouth. I bet he tasted good and salty, hot like lava.

"I feel your eyes on me." His cock grew out thick and long. Every male in my species is built to a woman's pleasure. I bit down on my lip to keep from panting. It wasn't helping.

"You're full of yourself, Ladon." I turned away.

"You can touch it if you want. I don't mind at all."

Instead, I focused on his cuts. They dissipated as I watched. Giving myself an excuse to touch him, I traced one of the places, now no more than a whelp. He flinched under my touch and moaned. I told myself to stop but couldn't. I wanted to drive him out of his mind, to punish him for making me want him.

Tracing the line of hair extending from his chest to below his navel, I leaned closer to breathe him in. Earthy, manly. Desire hit me hard. I resisted climbing atop him to straddle his erection. An idea came to me.

"Poor Ladon. All alone in this little box of a shop dreaming of me. What do you think of at night, lover?" I positioned my head over his cock and blew on the head. The tool jumped violently. I thought it might leap into my mouth. I parted my lips then took hold of myself. "Do you dream of me taking your big cock in my mouth, Ladon?"

"Don't toy with me, Tiam. You don't know what you're doing."

I laughed. "Why? Are you so bad that you'll rape me?"

He dropped his arm above his head, his eyes ice cold. I thought he would do nothing but look at me, intimidate me. I was wrong. In the blink of an eye, he flipped me. I landed on my back with him on top of me. His mouth was less than an inch from mine. My panting was full on feeling his cock wedged between my legs. I was glad I wore pants, and disappointed at the same time.

"Rape? *When* I fill you, it won't be rape." Kissing me, he showed me what it would be like with his cock buried inside my pussy. His thick tongue invaded my mouth. To my shame, I sucked it greedily. I moaned and lifted my head for more. I ran claws down his back, digging into his skin. He growled and pressed me into the bed. It hurt.

I broke the kiss. "Ladon!"

He leaned up but kept his hips wedged against mine. "Still want to play games, Tiam?"

"No."

He leaned down and tore my blouse's buttons off then spread my shirt open. His eyes lit up at finding me without a bra. I had removed it before I came. Who did I think I was fooling putting him off? I wanted Ladon bad, and he wanted me. His gaze stilled on my nipples. They pebbled under his scrutiny.

He circled one with his tongue and guided it in between his lips to suck. My back came up off the bed. "No, Ladon. You shouldn't." I moaned, squeezed my breast, and held the back of his head. I was telling him no, but feeding him. *Get up and walk out of here, Tiam!* I screamed to myself. "W-Who are the-the—" *Oh goodness, someone save me.*

I tried again to push him away. "Ladon, who are the Desert Ice? Are they reasoning beings?"

Ignoring me, he sucked harder. I was on the verge of an orgasm.

"I could be contagious!" I shouted.

He drew back. "What?"

I pointed downward. His eyes grew wide, and I laughed. "The rash on my belly. I could be contagious. Unless you know what it is, or planted it on me?"

His eyebrow went up, and he smirked but rolled off me. His body was strong again, the cuts and bruises gone. Scales grew out to cover his cock and ass. The precome I had glimpsed before he covered himself was definitely a loss. I watched with regret while he dressed.

"You are right. I don't know what it is. But I will find out, if only for my curiosity." He eyed me. "And for the pleasure of having you. Needless to say, I'll rule out me getting infected first."

Despite his rude disregard for my health, I laughed. "Or maybe this hideous planet is toxic to me, and I should go back to Shale or Earth. I could try finding the golden dragons."

I thought he was ready to slap some sense into me for that remark. The first chance he got, Ladon would kill the elders. Our people were far from our original ideals. It broke my heart. But I hated the elders like he did. I was nothing to them, a casualty of scientific experiments. Never mind that I was still alive. For a moment, I wondered how the other females were doing, if they felt lonely or hurt over our treatment. My guess was that most still thought they should quietly obey the elders and lords and should humbly accept any smidgen of attention they might receive. All of us left were barren, but the elders didn't give a damn.

"Well? What are the Desert Ice?" I asked again. "They have some power of ice, like they are our opposites, but stronger. My fire did not affect them. Our scales, normally impervious to anything, might well have been skin for all the good it did. What are they?"

"They are demons, from an icy hell! From what I've seen, neither a human nor a Drelconian can defeat them."

Chapter Seven

I shivered staring up at him, praying he was wrong. After all, he had discovered how to drive them back. The water or whatever the substance was had hurt them. "You have the liquid. Won't that kill them?"

He had gone back to his studies, and I thought he wouldn't answer. I brought the two sides of my blouse together and tied them into a knot. I crossed to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

The haunted look in his eyes took me by surprise. I thought he mumbled Arnetta's name when he dragged me into his hold. We kissed. This time, I didn't fight him. He needed it. I balked, but I knew the pain of loving someone who would never be there, never return that love. Ladon had lost the love of his life, but my love for Draco had never and would never be realized at all.

He trailed kisses down my neck and kissed my cleavage. He explored me, squeezing, caressing, and driving me tighter to his body. If he asked me right then to share his bed, I would have, but he pulled away. He turned his back so I wouldn't see the emotion close to the surface. I thought I should leave, but he made a small sound. I waited.

He cleared his throat. "I'm not sure if they are reasoning beings, but they do have bodies."

I gasped. "How do you know?"

"Because I've seen the bones." He spun to face me. "Would you like to?"

Horror filled me. I glanced at my watch to see we still had two hours before high sun was over. "Um, I guess. Sure. You keep them here?" I glanced around as if the bones would jump out any second from their hiding place. The space was barely big enough to hold what he had let alone storage."

"I have a storeroom in the basement. Some things must be kept at cooler temperatures. However, it's not here." He nodded toward the mountains, the known location of the Desert Ice. "They're out there." His

cruelty resurfaced. "What's the matter, Tiam? Chicken?"

"Go to hell." I wanted to tell him no. I was chicken, a big, feathery, squawking one when it came to dead bodies. When the plague the elders had caused hit our people, so many of them died that for days, we had been clearing away their bodies, most our close loved ones. By the time I was able to leave Drelcon to strike out for a new world, I was happy to go. It had been a nightmare I would never forget. I did not relish seeing more death, even if it was those heinous creatures.

He strapped on a satchel with adjustable strap to fit a dragon's neck and filled it with tools, a couple of trowels, a hand shovel, and other things. He headed outside, and I followed.

Once we were in the air, he gave me curt instructions. "Keep up. Once we get there, don't wander off. Don't touch anything I haven't given you permission to touch. There are holes at intervals in the ground in a circle around the burial site. Don't go near them. Don't stick anything in them. Got it?"

Had I not been in dragon form, I would have saluted him. "Yes, General. Anything else?"

"Yes. If you break even one of the rules, you risk all the colonists' lives."

He was being dramatic. *Surely*. Ladon wanted to be mean, and he liked when I was afraid. No big deal. But I couldn't stop thinking about how he had said we couldn't defeat them. I already knew from hearing them that they outnumbered us by maybe three to one, and with their seeming invincibility ... My chest ached thinking on it.

I trailed his heels when we landed and watched for the holes he had mentioned. I spotted them right away, about a foot and a half across, spaced six or seven feet between. I wondered how Ladon knew what not to do. Had he done it and learned the hard way? Surely someone would have heard. Then again, the humans liked to pretend Ladon didn't exist until they needed an herb or some other restorative.

We came upon a huge patch of loose sand. Even without digging, I saw the blue-white bones sticking up through the granules. Something kept them in one piece, and the full body was not humanoid. They had a tail and an overlarge head with a bone crown similar to ours when we were in dragon form.

Ladon squatted near one and pointed to a spot on the skull, a hole on one side of the mouth. "I came here once when one wasn't fully decomposed. There were sacs there. I got a sample of the goo inside. Cold as ice. I believe they have a way of either excreting large amounts of this stuff, or they can shape-shift into it."

He must have lost his mind. "Shape-shift into ice goo?"

"I'm not sure. I have no evidence and can't make heads or tails of their skeleton. I can't study it here, and when I tried taking one away, they knew."

My breathing became constricted. "They knew?"

He nodded. "That's why I say don't disturb anything." He pointed to the holes. "I believe they live here underground in those holes and sometimes farther in the mountains. They bury their dead on top of them in this pit. Since there doesn't seem to be a lot, I'm thinking they live a long time, like we do."

"They come out only at night?"

He nodded. "Darkness enfolds them, makes them invisible."

Surveying the area, I wanted to go back to my place. Something told me there would be nightmares tonight. I considered sharing Ladon's bed so I wouldn't have to be alone. A wimpy thing to do, but these creatures scared me enough to want to leave the planet. I glanced at Ladon. His eyes were narrowed. He took dirt samples and ran a cue tip over the bone. No, I wouldn't leave. He was gruff, but he was lonely, and I was too.

"What are those blue things?" I pointed to a mushroom-like plant outside the circle.

Ladon glanced up, then walked over to gather some. Following behind, I nearly bumped into him when he stopped. He showed me. "This is what I made what you call the miracle water from. I call it blue mushroom water." He chuckled. "Nothing fancy. It was accidental, but effective. They have the liquid form we both felt, like bubbles weighting us down, taking our strength and seeping the cold into us. A sprinkle of this, and they are forced back into their original form."

I closed my eyes and thought about the night I had listened from the roof and what I had heard when I came out of the lake. "No, Ladon, you're wrong. They're not shape-shifters at all."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

I snapped my fingers trying to remember the one time I watched a show on TV back on Earth. It had been a science fiction movie I had thought was stupid and short sighted to what was really happening in space. One thing it did get right though. "Ladon, they're symbionts!"

With the clue I gave him, his scientist's mind put together the pieces he hadn't been able to fit all along. He stared at me a second and then kissed me. "Yes! I can't believe it." He dragged me back to the bones. I groaned wanting to return to the settlement. He explained his understanding. "These sacs aren't goo. They are the symbionts, and the creature carries them where they want to go. I'm thinking for a short period. They can leave these sacs to attack, but I believe they are also most vulnerable then."

"Yeah, vulnerable like a steel door," I muttered. But I got it. "Last night, I heard them coming. These creatures have claws that scratch at the dirt when they walk." I shivered. "And when the symbiont leaves the sacs, the creatures don't move. It's like they're paralyzed."

"Incredible." He tapped his chin. "The symbiont is vulnerable to the potion, but not overly so. I think if we distracted them outside the body, then the creature can be killed."

I shrugged. "I'm all for it, but is it right to kill them when they leave us alone for the most part? What if there is a way to communicate with them?"

Ladon seemed hesitant to answer my question. He gathered his equipment and busied himself putting it away. I covered his hand.

"What aren't you telling me, Ladon?"

"I have no doubt they communicate. And it is my belief that the humans are trying to form an alliance with them, because they far outnumber the Drelconians." He lifted my chin to be sure I understood. "If the Desert Ice attacks our people, and we have not confirmed how to kill them, we will be wiped out."

Chapter Eight

A few days later, Ladon showed no signs developing the rash, and he had eased my symptoms considerably. I finally concluded that it would hurt nothing if we were intimate. Spending time in his presence had made me grumpy, because his incredible body turned me on more than any man I had ever met. I needed a taste.

A minute after high sun began, I leaped to my rooftop, morphed into my dragon state, and flew down to his house. As a humanoid, I knocked at his door completely naked.

He opened his door, took his time surveying my curves and then stepped back to let me in. "You changed

your mind, I see."

"Not to trade my body in exchange for treatment, but to take a lover." I glanced at him through my lashes—maybe I did have feminine wiles. "To be sure you're not confused about exclusivity, I have started dating someone. He's human." My statement sounded like the cat getting into the cream, but I wasn't taking it back.

He smirked. "Ah, he's not man enough. You needed more?"

I cursed him under my breath, but he only laughed. "No, I'm taking it slower with him. Until I'm ready to tell him what I am."

He positioned himself in front of me, inches separating our bodies. "When will you learn, Tiam? They are not worth it. They will double cross you. They *hate* you, and you should hate them right back. Stop trying to be human. You will never be."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" I wanted to walk out, but I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to sleep with him, and our time was limited. A Drelconian could spend hours upon hours making love. We had three.

"Remove my clothes," he commanded. I cast him a dirty look. His eyebrows went up. A female dragon served her lover.

With resolve, I unbuttoned his shirt and feasted my eyes on each glimpse of his smooth, tanned skin. When my fingertips brushed him, he moaned. I began following my finger trail with kisses and swipes of my tongue. I reached the band of his pants, and my temperature jumped a hundred degrees at least. I dropped to my knees and yanked down the material. His cock sprang forth, bumping my lips. I took him into my mouth to savor the salty precome coating his thick head.

"Ah! Tiam, take all of it." He clutched my hair and pushed himself deeper. "Damn it, your mouth is warm. Suck me!"

I took it all, nine inches with my throat adjusting to accommodate him. I sucked until he cried out, and I sucked some more, my mouth gliding up and down. His roar shook the house.

This is what I had been afraid of, pure unadulterated pleasure making me growl and forget myself as Ladon was doing. And yet, I wanted him further out of control. I wanted him begging me for release.

I pulled him out of my mouth and ran my tongue from the base to the tip. I nipped his skin, grating it gently on my teeth. A shudder took hold of him. While I squeezed his slippery cap in my palm, I sucked one ball into my mouth, teased it with the tip of my tongue and then worked on the other.

"Tiam," he grumbled. "I need to come right now. Suck me, baby!"

That was the first I had heard an endearment. I knew it meant nothing. I was a body to please him, and I didn't care because I viewed him as the same. Obedient for now to his commands, I took him into my mouth again, pumping his length while I sucked. With his hands in my hair, he pushed my head forward. I fought to keep control.

At his sharp cry, his thick hot seed filled my mouth. I dragged on his tool and drank all I could coax. The years since my last lover had been too long. I had missed the heavy, tangy taste of a man's come.

After a few minutes with me resting my cheek against his stomach, Ladon hooked his hands under my arms and hoisted me to my feet. He turned me away from him and, with his hands on my hips, walked me to the wall.

He kissed my neck. "This is only about sex, understand?" he spoke close to my ear. "I will never love you."

I pressed my lips together in anger for a few minutes, and then answered, "Oh, don't worry. I won't love you either."

"Because you still love Draco." He drove his cock into my wet pussy. I cried out and arched my back to push my ass into his thrust. He was already hard again, so big! I wanted all of him, deep as I could stand it.

"Don't," I muttered between shuddering breaths.

"Don't what?"

"Don't say his name. Like you don't want me to say—"

"Fine. We pleasure each other. That's all this is." He slid his hands from my waist up to cover my breasts. When he pinched and pulled at my nipples, it was too much. I came, jerking against his body. He nuzzled my neck, licking and nibbling. "Come again, baby." He sucked my lower lip and released my nipple only to capture my clit in a cruel pinch. It set me off again.

He pounded hard until I had to brace myself on the wall to keep from going through it. I screamed with pleasure, thrilled his house was built far enough away and with thick enough walls his nearest neighbors would not hear my cries.

When he had released a second time, his rhythm slowed, but he didn't pull out of me. His arms around my waist, he carried me across the room to his cot and lay me flat on my stomach, following behind with his body, not losing our connection.

I laughed when he checked his watch.

"Not adequate time."

"We use what we can."

"Are you still Drelconian enough to take me up until high sun is almost over?" His voice held a challenge.

"You must be joking, Ladon. I can take you for the rest of the day and all night long." I pushed back into him. His dick twitched inside my pussy. I was ready to come again. "But I will accept until end of high sun."

He soon had me climbing the walls.

Chapter Nine

That ass, Ladon! One minute, he was calling me baby when I was making him feel good. The next, he refused to share how he figured out the humans were trying to form an alliance with the Desert Ice. I had to believe he was lying for his own reasons. I wouldn't put it past him to say anything to make me hate the humans along with him. Hating everybody was a lonely place to be.

Despite this we fell into a routine. I worked my usual night hours and many times during the day, followed by visiting his house during high sun. My boss still chased after me, and Sandy tried to humanize me, although she didn't know that's what she was doing.

"Hey, Tiam. Want to go bowling in the morning?"

Chewing my lip, I thought about how to say, "What is bowling?" without sounding like a fool. "I didn't know we had a bowling here."

She laughed. I did screw it up. "Funny! Doesn't everything seem alien now, stuff we took for granted on Earth?" She shook her head. "The builder guys just finished it. Apparently, one of them is some kind of semipro. It's open twenty-four-seven. Wanna check it out?"

"Can't tomorrow morning," I said with relief. "I have a date." I hadn't been lying to Ladon when I told him I had been seeing a human man. Although technically, this would be our first date. He was a little more respectful when he looked at me, but I could still smell his arousal. I hoped to interrogate him about what the humans were up to. I always wondered why they would choose to settle on a hostile planet such as Orel-X Four. Maybe Lemuel would tell me, and Mack would back off thinking I was taken.

Her eyes rounded. "Not with Mack."

"No, with Lemuel. Have you heard anything bad about him? He works in the water building."

She bent to stack glasses beneath the counter. "No, I haven't heard anything bad. He's sweet. A little shy. I'm surprised he approached you and you said yes. All you do is work, but I've always had the feeling you could get wild if you wanted to." She studied me. I shifted, trying to look innocent under her stare.

"I asked him out. He thought it was a barroom joke or something. It took some convincing. We'll see how it goes. We'll go to the spaghetti dinner at the community center and see the movie they're playing." Around here, with the humans working mostly at night during cooler temperatures, entertainment was often during the day. All except for the bar. Those who drank wanted to do it with the sun down. I didn't really understand it.

"Well, wear something nice," she advised me. "With your cleavage out to remind him of what he's working toward."

"What?"

She shrugged. "Good behavior."

I had to ask as patrons trickled in. "Sandy, I heard the ... people in charge are plotting against the Drels." I had been about to say the humans. I tried to calm my pounding heart, to keep my temperature normal. "Like making an alliance with the creatures in the desert."

She jerked my arm so hard it hurt. I stumbled, and we both went down behind the counter out of sight of others. "Are you crazy, Tiam?"

Panic set in. Maybe all the humans knew, and by asking, I showed I wasn't human. I searched my mind for a viable reason for my ignorance. I couldn't say that I had spent the last few years on Shale. No human lived there except the lords' mates.

"I—"

"You don't blurt out stuff about a plot." She peeked over the counter then ducked down again. "The Drels are shape-shifters. They might be able to take any appearance. They could be someone we know."

I frowned. "They can't turn into different people, Sandy, only dragons."

"You never know."

I grew frustrated. "There's nothing going on?"

"Ask your boyfriend." With this cryptic remark, she stood to serve a man yelling over the counter for service. I stayed where I was and ran through the possibilities. Ask my boyfriend? She knew nothing of me sleeping with Ladon. She must mean Lemuel. Something to do with the water? But the humans drank from it.

When the customer moved away from the bar, I yanked Sandy down. "What are you talking about, 'Ask my boyfriend'? What does that have anything to do with an alliance with the Desert Ice?"

She blinked at my terminology, and then she got it. "I don't know anything about any desert ice or the aliens out there. All I know is my cousin on Earth has a best friend who works in the science lab at the east side. *He* told her they had developed this virus which only attacks the Drels. Those dumbasses have put it in our water, because they had it on good authority this particular virus won't hurt us. They claim to have done tests."

While she spoke, my heart felt like it had stopped. My breathing grew loud. I had to strain to catch her words. She could not be talking about an instant replay of my past. Fate was cruel, too cruel to me. I was near tears.

"I see you're pale as I was when I heard. I went off, saying they could kill us with their experiment and they had no right. But apparently the constitutional rights we had before we signed on to come here became null and void. They can do whatever the hell they want." She shuffled around glasses in her agitation. "Don't worry. We had been drinking it and bathing in it for years before I found out. I guess it has no affect."

"I guess not," I muttered. I looked at my watch. Still half the night to go. I needed to leave now. "Sandy, I'm not feeling well. Tell Mack I went home, please. I'm going to bed and don't want to be disturbed."

She patted my cheek. "I hear you. It upset my stomach for a week. I should have told you before now, but I found out long before you came, and by that time, I had forgotten all about it since we were okay."

I barely acknowledged her words but stood, pulled off my apron with trembling fingers and staggered toward the exit. The rash was an engineered virus to kill Drelconians. By the time I hit the street, I was crying. This wasn't right. I had paid my dues. I had been barren for more than fifty years. I had lived on Shale, the planet that could heal me, but in trying to break up Draco's marriage, I had been kicked off. Now, all I had to show for it was a stupid white streak. I would never be looked at as a proper mate for anyone. Not for a human and certainly not for a Drelconian.

Self-pity choked my cries. I wanted to transform to a dragon and fly hard and fast, to wear myself out blasting fire until my lungs burst, but I couldn't. I was trapped. Not paying attention to whether anyone saw me, I trudged in the shadows aimless until I reached Ladon's shop. I should have realized I sought my own kind.

He opened the door and saw my tears. I waited for him to make fun of me, but he wrapped an arm about my waist and scooped me inside. "I open for my night shoppers in a few minutes. This visit was not wise. What's wrong?"

I didn't say anything. I stood there with my shoulders shaking and tears flowing freely. He moved his big body close to me. I grabbed at his shirt front and buried my face in his chest. Someone buzzed at the front. He didn't budge.

At my cry of anguish, he lifted me and carried me to the cot. He removed my clothes, opened his pants, and pressed his cock inside me. His hard thrusts numbed my mind and made all the blood rush to my pussy. The friction between us, the sound of our bodies slapping together, his grunts, all drove me to the edge of an orgasm. When I was ready to come, he covered my mouth. I screamed into his palm.

Afterward, he pulled a sheet up over my body, and squeezed my cheeks until I opened my mouth. "This will help you to sleep."

"No, I have to—"

He slipped the leaf into my mouth and closed it. To my surprise, it melted, and before I knew what was happening, my eyelids began to droop. I was soon asleep, my worries waiting until I was conscious again.

Chapter Ten

I woke to find Ladon lying at my side watching me. The memory of what I had learned came flooding back. Tears filled my eyes.

"Do you want me to put you to sleep again?" he threatened me.

"No."

"Then don't cry. Talk about what's bothering you."

I sat up clutching the covers around me. "You don't have to be so damn mean, Ladon," I yelled.

"Better." He sat up, slid his back against the wall, and pulled me onto his lap. I resisted, but he held on. "You're angry with me. You can use it to deal with whatever has you upset. Now, talk!"

I considered running my claws down the side of his face, but he might do it back to me. I didn't want to deal with anymore pain right now. "I'm as good as dead. And maybe you are too."

"What are you talking about?"

I told him what I had learned from Sandy. "What I don't get is why you weren't affected, unless it's geared toward the females! But why would they do that when, for all they know, you are the only Drelconian on Orel-X Four? And to put it in their own water supply!"

"People do foolish things when they are desperate." Ladon put me off his lap and walked naked across the room to his table by the door. He pulled out a drawer and removed a small notebook from inside. "My guess is before Orochi disappeared, he kindly offered the humans notes on a virus lethal to Drelconians. It was not fully developed or you would already be dead. They needed to manipulate it and test it. Now I see why they accepted me living here for five years. I had been the guinea pig. Little did they know I did not drink from or use water from their supply."

"Where do you get yours?"

He scribbled something in the notebook. "From another lake well past the mountains. They are limited to this settlement. I am not."

"Thanks for warning me!" I knew looking at the expression on his face, at the time, he hated everyone. He couldn't have cared less if the humans poisoned me. I wasn't convinced he didn't still feel that way.

"Come here," he commanded.

I had been around the humans for only six months, but their influence was strong. I balked at the order. However, I did give in and went to stand in front of him. He lifted my shirt to examine my rash.

"From now on, you will not drink their water or bath in it. You will not even touch it. You will come here to take your baths. I will bring back extra water." He tore off the sheet of paper he had been writing on. "With this list, you will charm your way into the water supply center and find me a sample of the virus. I'm fairly certain it will be a variation of one of these viruses."

"How am I going to do that? I don't work there."

"Your boyfriend, Lemuel."

I gasped. "You've been checking up on me?"

"Of course. If you're fucking another man, I want to know who. Disease, you know."

"Ha, ha. Funny!" I snatched the paper from him and read it over. All the words were fifteen letters or more long. I hoped the humans had kept the same names to make it simple. "What if they don't keep it there? What if they keep it at the science lab?"

"My guess is there is always some on hand. And if not." He shrugged. "You can look for a new beau among the scientists." He smacked my bare ass. "Any one of them would kill to get a taste of your sweet pussy."

His compliment warmed me despite the suggestion I trade my body for information. That didn't bother me much. I would do what I had to, to stay alive.

* * * *

Lemuel walked beside me in the bright sunlight, sweating like a pig. He ran a towel over his brow and offered a shy smile. "I don't know how the heat doesn't affect you. You said you walk out here every day?"

Panicked, I wiped my own brow although it was dry. "At night more often than not." That was a lie. I liked the day because fewer people were out. I could enjoy fresh air at my leisure. I glanced up at the sky spotting heavy clouds. A storm was coming. I missed flying. I missed pumping my wings until I was high in the mountains. "You work around here?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I work around here. We're a small community, huh? Kind of hard not to know everything about everyone else?" His cheeks reddened. "The guys were razzing me about going out with you. I didn't tell them, but somehow they found out."

I ground my teeth. How had he turned the conversation to us dating? I wondered if I needed to break him down with a few dates first, but I didn't know how much time I had. I wrestled with ideas, but he ended up offering a solution.

"I hope you don't think I'm lame, but would you like a tour of the water building?" He looked apologetic. "Everyone gets the same boring tour when they come, but I think you'd like the process we use to filter the water, and you'd be surprised at some of the stuff we pull out of there."

My stomach turned. I did not want to know what was inside the water before I was allowed to drink it, other than the virus. If Ladon could narrow down what Orochi had supplied and see what manipulations the humans had done, then I had hope. I had considered breaking in, but after I'd melted the lock the night I rescued Ladon, security had been increased. I couldn't risk it.

"Sure, I'd love to." I tried to look sweet and innocent. I had watched Sandy with one of the bar patrons she had a crush on. The woman had been confident and strong until he showed up. Then she was all sweet smiles and soft-spoken. Trying it with Ladon made him laugh at me, and I had promptly set his hair on fire.

When we entered Lemuel's workplace, my heart sank. Security guards were all over the place. I wondered where they had come from and figured they had been flown in from the last transport, but that was before I had broken into the facility. Why were they here? Fear that something was up gripped me.

With a hand at my lower back and an expression on his face saying, "Look at what I've got," Lemuel led me from place to place. The building was bigger than I had at first thought. But there were wide-open spaces and few offices. A generator somewhere created white noise. The rumble and recycled air made me feel a little off balance.

Seeing no end to his droning about his position, I turned to him and asked, "Is there a bathroom anywhere, Lemuel?"

He grew pink again, but I didn't know why. "Yes, of course. This way."

"Oh, you don't have to go with me," I told him.

"Sorry, I do."

I sighed and let him lead the way. Once I had closed the door on his eager face, I turned and scanned the bathroom. As I thought, there was a cooling system running through the building. I could shift and crawl around. I would have to make it really fast, because my *boyfriend* was waiting impatiently, and getting caught was not an option.

Chapter Eleven

This time, I removed the screws from the grate instead of melting them. When I had them all out and removed the grate, a blast of cold air hit me. I shivered. A dragon does not like cold. After I removed my clothing and folded it neatly, I stuffed them behind a wide pipe where no one would stumble on it should they walk in. Stoking my internal furnace, I took in a deep breath and climbed inside the duct.

Echoes of voices bounced off the metal. I shoved on. Soon, I came to smaller vents in offices. Humans sat at computers typing away. Only after I had been wiggling along for a good five minutes, did I realize how much of a gamble this was. I might spend too long in the ducts and not find the room where the virus might be kept, or I might locate it and not have time to steal a sample.

My worry turned out to be for nothing. Fate was on my side. When the cool air increased considerably to the point I couldn't move very fast, I thought I wouldn't go down the turnoff where it was coming from, but I remembered something from science class. Scientists could freeze-dry viruses to save them for later study. The humans could have done the same.

I headed down the colder duct and came upon a room with two industrial-size refrigerators. If the virus was in there, then what was up with the damn colder temperatures? Feeling like a nice life-long nap, I dismissed the reason and wiggled through to the empty room. I changed to humanoid form and listened at the door. No footfalls were nearby.

Having swung open the first refrigerator, I nearly cast up my spaghetti dinner. Vial upon vial layered the shelves. Each tube was labeled with a long word. I unclipped the ribbon around my neck and picked free the slip of paper I had hidden inside.

"Myalg—no. Yes!" There were several tubes. I swiped one and shifted others around to hide the hole. I shut the fridge, jumped up to the vent, pulled it closed behind me, and shuffled back to the ladies' bathroom.

Lemuel was knocking on the door. "Tiam, are you all right?"

"Ah, yeah. Sorry, the spaghetti didn't agree with me." I laughed. *Romantic.*

When I hurried from the bathroom, Lemuel hugged me. I grew stiff in his arms. He drew back. "I don't know why I did that. You were only in the bathroom for goodness sake. What's in your hair?"

Just what I needed, dust from the vent. He reached up and tugged at a lock of my hair. I winced, but he soon broke off what it was. Ice.

I gave a shaky chuckle. "Boy, the AC is high in here." I rubbed my chilled arms.

"Oh, you're cold. I'm sorry. Come on let's go. Do you want to check out the bowling alley? I hear some

others are there today at the grand opening."

We strolled toward the front exit. I tried not to look guilty when the guards turned sharp eyes on me. It was a good thing humans couldn't smell fear. "No, I don't think so." I affected a yawn. "It's been a long night, and being only an hour until high sun, I don't want to have to stay in the alley for the next four hours."

He grinned, looking amused. I knew I'd made another faux pas and sighed. "You're different from any woman I have met. You're shy one minute and bold the next. I don't hear an accent, but I bet you're not from America, are you?"

I began to panic. Shouldn't I get this virus on ice? Should I have packed it in ice? "No, I'm not, but I'll let you guess where I'm from on our next date. How's about it?"

He whooped. "Another date. How's tomorrow?"

I rushed outside. "I'll call you."

* * * *

"Ladon!" I scratched at his skylight, having had to take the roof because one last customer, who didn't live far away, was buying something at the front. I wanted to lie up there all day and let the cold melt out of my veins. I wasn't sure about the virus.

I heard him excuse himself and soon saw him below. He flipped a switch and the window opened. Not many did, but I knew Ladon had rigged his to open. We loved the outdoors, and the sun was heavenly.

I handed him the vial, and he rushed it over to a chest, before disappearing through another doorway. I flipped down to the floor.

Ladon came back, pulled me in for a kiss, and then held me away with a disgusted look on his face. "You didn't come here from his bed, did you?"

I glanced down at myself and saw nothing out of order. "No, why?"

"You reek of him. Go and take a bath. We'll discuss your findings after." He left in a huff. I considered rolling around on his bed to distribute Lemuel's scent but thought better of it. Ladon would make me pay for such a stunt.

I headed into the bathroom and stripped out of my clothes. Ladon had a huge tank above his tub. I wondered how he had hauled all the water, but then a two-ton dragon could carry a lot. Allowing myself only a few inches in the bottom of the tub, I reached in to find it cold. A blast or two of superhot steam from my mouth made it just right. I jumped in.

"Ah." I lay back with my eyes closed. Ladon whooshed past no doubt on his way to wherever he left the virus. He hurried by a few minutes later, and I heard him shuffling around at his table.

"What the fuck!" he yelled. "Humans!"

My stomach knotted. Something in his tone told me the hatred and the lust for revenge he had either suppressed to temporarily overcome was back with a vengeance of its own. I leaned forward. "Ladon? What's wrong?"

He didn't answer.

"Ladon?"

"One tweak, Tiam, One! And they would have had the right state of this virus to kill us within twenty

minutes, whether we drank the water or let it touch our bodies. I'm sure that was the next trial!"

"Wait, hold on a second." I jumped out of the bathtub, wrapped a towel around me, and ran to the main room. The front door was open, and Ladon was gone. Not a minute later, a succession of explosions rent the air. I didn't have to be there to know Ladon had launched an attack against the humans in the middle of high sun.

Chapter Twelve

Throwing my clothing on, I ran out the door. Ladon kept a tarp rolled up outside his shop, and on hotter days, he hung it over poles he had stuck in the ground to shade his wares from the sun. The humans appreciated it for keeping them covered. Ladon hadn't cared about added benefit.

I spotted it on my way out and yanked it up to tuck under one arm. I hoped the humans would be too distracted to wonder how a woman my size could wield it, because it was big and heavy.

Screams of terror reached my ears while I ran down the alley. Through the narrow lane, I spotted a gaping hole in the side of the science building and remembered that right next door was the bowling alley. I prayed he hadn't done damage there. My friend, Sandy, and Lemuel were there.

The scene was a nightmare of screaming—burning—people. They hid in the shadows of the ruined walls and pleaded for mercy. Ladon circled above shooting bursts of fire to anyone he spotted in the open and yelling. "You want to kill us? You ungrateful creatures! We saved you from death, and this is how you pay us back! Manipulating a virus to see how quickly it will kill me so you can move on to the others, the very ones who supply your people with the blue gem on Earth."

He railed on, his voice rough and booming in his dragon form. The humans howled in terror with their hands over their ears and cried out louder when an elbow or a foot slipped into the sunlight.

Just what I had feared—Ladon had knocked down half of the new bowling alley. I kept to the shadows but made sure he saw me. "Stop this, Ladon! You're hurting them."

"Tiam!" Lemuel was across the lane, his back against the side of a crumbling wall. "Get back. He'll kill you, baby."

Ladon raged, trying to reach Lemuel with his fire. The man dropped to his knees and crawled around two slabs of fallen stone which had formed an upside-down V. Ladon blasted the rock repeatedly and roared all the while. Lemuel calling me "baby" had fueled his rage. I wasn't sure if he was jealous or if he felt humans didn't deserve Drelconian lovers.

When Ladon made no progress to get to Lemuel, he turned to others who were more exposed. He flew lower to dig his claws into a wall and tore it loose. The rest of the bowling alley began to crumble. People scrambled from within and ran to other shelter. Steam rose from their clothes, and they screamed. My heart seemed to shatter when I saw Sandy among them.

"No! Ladon, no!" I unfurled the tarp, threw it over my back, and ran out to meet Sandy. Ladon was hot on her heels. He let loose a burst of fire. My feet morphed to claws, and I dug into the ground and shoved forward to close the space between me and my friend. Just when the fire reached her, I curved myself around and covered her body. We went down together to the ground.

I knew the tarp had been burned away. I felt the clothes on my back disintegrating. Sandy screamed more from fear and the shock of knowing I had both saved her life and was burning up above her. Her high-pitched voice hurt my ears at such close range, which made me scream too.

In another second, the humans would realize my skin wasn't burning, and my secret would be out. Tears filled my eyes. Resentment burned in me that Ladon's pain and disillusion was affecting my life along with his. And then I heard his roar before his sharp teeth sank into my sides. His powerful wings beat the air. We rose above the ground.

I hung limp in his hold but saw others had come to drag Sandy into the shade. Guards arrived in protective suits, with guns trained on Ladon. Someone yelled they might hit me. I was not worried. The lasers would not penetrate Ladon's scales. I saw how vulnerable the humans were in their soft skin. If I were really one of them, wouldn't I develop something to ensure my enemy didn't have the upper hand, even if I never used it? Maybe I was a human lover.

Ladon flew out of the settlement and toward the mountains. I struggled in his hold. His teeth were painful. "Put me down, Ladon! I can't believe you did this. You may have killed some of them or permanently disfigured some."

He spoke like someone whose mouth was full. "I wanted to kill them all, but you got in the way."

I looked back to see if we were far enough away. We were. I transformed, forcing Ladon to let go. I would have flown back the way we came if he hadn't blocked my path. "Move!"

"It's still high sun, Tiam. What excuse will you give your precious humans when you have been flown out over the desert and you didn't burn up? Or are you through pretending? Do you think they will welcome you with open arms or call you a spy?"

He was right. Another planet, another home lost! Sorrow filled my heart. I wanted to kill Ladon like he had tried to kill the humans, but what was the point? He continued toward the mountains. I followed only because I didn't know what else to do.

Ladon flew to the highest peak. Instead of the temperature dropping, as it normally would high in the mountains on Orel-X Four during high sun, it would have been unbearable for a human. It meant nothing to Ladon and me.

He transformed to humanoid form and lay naked before a cave entrance with his hands behind his head. I landed nearby and changed also. I wanted to kick him, beat him, and spit in his face. I stood over him wondering how he could live with himself. "How could you do that to them? Didn't their cries hurt you? Don't you have any compassion left?"

"Sorry." He sneered. "All used up."

I did attack then—throwing myself on him, scratching and beating at his head and chest. He didn't flinch. He caught my wrists, pinned them together, and flipped us around so he was on top of me. With one knee, he forced my legs apart and settled his hard body there. My stupid pussy came alive, wanting his dick to fill me to capacity and beyond capacity.

"You piece of shit!" I screamed.

His eyes were like chips of black coal. The coldness there chilled me despite the current temperature. "No matter what they do to you, you lap it up and come yipping for more like a good little hatchling." He leaned up from me and pressed a hand over my rash. I gasped at the itching and burning, but it was better after I had stopped using the water. "They did this to you, would have done worse, but there you were saving their lives."

"You don't understand." I fought to move his hand without success.

"What is there to understand, Tiam? You think one human, the girl you almost exposed yourself for, will give a damn you saved her life? She won't. When she knows you are a Drelconian, your status will plummet in her eyes. She will want you dead and will regret ever warning you."

"I said you don't get it, Ladon. You only lost Arnetta." The name made him freeze. I shoved hard and got free for a moment. Flipping to my hands and knees, I crawled away, but he caught me. He wrapped an arm across my breasts, then flattened me against the ground.

"Where do you think you're going?" he growled in my ear.

"What? Will you force yourself on me now?" My body was shaking from head to toe. His cock was wedged between my thighs and had slid along my wet pussy. I had hoped I fooled him with that declaration, because I was not fooling myself. "I lost everyone I loved," I said, to take both our minds off our bodies. "Mother, father, sisters, and brothers. Everyone. The only person I had left was Draco. And now he's not my friend anymore. Yes, I would fight you to save Sandy. You don't care about me. She did."

I squeezed my eyes shut at the last part. I did not like being vulnerable, but lately, I was.

"You're right. I'll never love you." He placed a hand at my hip and squeezed. "She was gentle and sweet. Innocent. Not like them!" His breath warmed my ear, and he ran his tongue along my lobe. "Her scent is still in my nostrils. I try to burn it away, but it's there, haunting me. She was worth more than every human and every Drelconian combined!"

I sobbed. I did still love Draco and had always felt I would be in love with him the rest of my life. I ached for my family who had died during the plague on our planet. But I had begun to think I could *also* care for Ladon, a little. What woman didn't hope in some way that she could change her lover, make him a better man, help shape him into whatever she wanted him to be. Even when it was an obvious lost cause, she tried if she cared for him.

But Ladon was shut off to everything except his pain. I could not compete with a dead woman who had been his soul mate. No one could. I would never amount to more than Ladon's lover, to meet his physical needs. What horrified me most was that I was destined for more pain because compared to his uncaring for anyone alive, I was only bitter. I could love him, and that was setting me up for more loss when he moved on.

Chapter Thirteen

He kissed my ear and stroked my hair, surprising me with tenderness. "Why are you crying, Tiam?"

I sighed, still jerking every now and again. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"Tell me." Leaning his back against the outside of the cave, he pulled me onto his lap to rest. I resisted curling into his warm, protective hold. When he caught my chin and turned my head, I didn't pull away from his kiss. Lying to myself would not help matters. After the tragedy in the valley below, I still wanted him. I understood what he felt, although I liked to think my reaction wouldn't have been the same had I lost Draco, if we had developed a more intimate relationship.

Staring at Ladon's chest, I twirled a bit of his hair around my finger. "I can't change you. I might want you to be kinder, to care for our people and the humans, but I can't make you. Knowing it gives me a sense of hopelessness." He was about to say something, but I covered his lips. "Don't. Just don't say anything. I'm sensitive right now. I couldn't deal with your meanness.

"I've dreamed of my own family for years, a Drelconian husband, a child. Draco has a son named Darke. Did you know?" My voice caught. "He's handsome and smart. I wanted..."

He kissed my fingers, brushed the tears from my cheeks, and rested his face next to mine. "You'll have it, Tiam. I don't doubt that. You're still young." He grinned. "It cannot be me, but I know he's out there. The mushy guy ready to fall at your feet to do your bidding."

I laughed and punched him.

"There, that's better." He rested a hand on my breast. "For now, until you meet this paragon worthy of your love, how about you continue as my mistress?"

I sat up to push his hand away, frowning. "Mistress! You make me sound like I'm beneath you."

"Well, I do like you under me, but if you prefer, you can ride my cock sometimes. I enjoy being in control."

I sniffed, feeling better but waiting for my hiccupping sighs to calm. Ladon appeared to sense I needed gentle words and not his normal biting remarks. He gathered me against his chest and stroked my back while tracing my jaw with feathery kisses. A moan vibrated in my throat. He lifted me higher. His tongue teased my neck down to my cleavage and over to one nipple.

My hands shook braced on his shoulder. Mistress, lover, whatever he wanted. "Ladon,

I..."

"What do you want me to do, baby?"

"M-Make love to me." I thought he might fight me on my terminology, but he didn't. He laid me down on the ground and followed with his hot mouth. He circled his tongue around my nipple, and then he sucked the deep rose peak into his mouth. I whimpered.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, moving down to nuzzle my belly. "How can I get enough of you?"

"Don't. Take me as often as you want," I told him.

He grinned, while an eyebrow shot toward his hairline. "As often? What about *how* I want?" He kissed my mound, nipped my inner thigh inches from my pussy. "If I want to fuck you in the ass, Tiam, would you let me?"

I gasped. "Absolutely!"

"And if I want you on your knees so I can alternate between spanking your ass and driving my cock into your hot, tight hole?"

"Yes!"

I expected him to act on either one of those suggestions to put me over the edge where I was already teetering. My insides contracted and relaxed, which pushed me to an explosive orgasm. I wanted to come now. Ladon used his thumbs to drive my folds open and stared at my clit. A spasm took me in anticipation of his stroke. From the base of my wet opening, he ran his tongue up to my swollen clit. He covered it and sucked hard. Lifting off the ground, I cried and screamed for my release. He pressed me down but didn't stop his cruel torment.

He lapped at my flowing juices then followed with two fingers. My pussy clamped down, luring him deeper. I reached for him, but he pushed my hand. Three fingers in and I rolled over, trapped his hand inside me, and pumped my hips. I thought he would pull me around to my back again, but he followed with his entire body, spooning me on our sides.

He shoved his fingers deeper. I panted, riding them. "Ladon."

"Kiss me!" he demanded. I turned my head toward him, and we wound our tongues together. I tasted and smelled my own cream, and it heightened my desire. My kisses turned voracious.

From behind, he fed his cock into my pussy while pinching and drawing on my clit. I arched back for more.

Driving all the way in and pulling all the way out drove me nuts. I tried to seize control, but he slapped my ass cheek. I whimpered. "Take my cock, Tiam."

"Ladon, I want to come."

"Soon." He tucked his head beneath mine so my cheek was against his. I would die before he let me come, but the wait was sweet agony. He massaged my clit, plucked it, and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. Waves of bliss made me shudder in his arms. Every time I was at a head, he sensed it and slowed his play.

When I was ready to plead, he hugged me tighter for a minute and then positioned his slick rod at my ass opening. The penetration alone made me come. In a blink, a shudder ripped through me. I spouted unintelligent gibberish with the impact of my climax. Ladon pounded my ass, gripped my hips until it hurt, but I came so many times, back to *amazing* back.

After some minutes, he spasmed, and he filled my ass with his release. He spanked me once more. "Damn it, Tiam!" he shouted as if it was my fault he had driven us both mad.

Finished, our throats too dry to push words past the panting, Ladon stood and flung me over his shoulder in true caveman style. He transformed and flew out to the lake where he had told me he gathered his water. We broke the cool surface, and my body temperature began to lower. When he freed me, my knees gave. He caught me up against his chest.

"Okay?"

I nodded. Laying my head on his shoulder while he splashed me with water, I said, "I guess we're leaving this planet now, huh? Where will we go? Back to Earth?"

"No. We can't leave."

I looked up. "Why?"

"Tiam, the threat isn't over. Like I told you. The humans are looking to make an alliance with the Desert Ice. It's up to you and me to stop it."

Chapter Fourteen

"Ready?"

"No!" I snapped. "I don't get why we're doing this, Ladon. You said you heard the communications going back and forth from your basement. And if you couldn't understand what they were saying, then how do you know it's some type of conspiracy. *And!*—why aren't you letting me hear it safely in your basement and not in the holes these creatures have dug?"

"Because they are not in my basement. They are down here somewhere. I want to see them in their natural habitat."

"Are you crazy, Ladon? You forgot we can't beat them?"

He stroked my cheek and kissed me. It did nothing to soothe my fears. I got the warm fuzzies because for the last couple of days, he had been nothing but gentle and attentive, but with the disaster my life was, I had to wonder how long it would last. Sneaking underground to locate the Desert Ice at high sun—when Ladon assumed they would be in a deep sleep—was not my idea of a good time.

"Ladon—"

"Hush or I will send you up top to wait."

"Like I don't want to go!" I growled and stomped behind him. He stopped, which caused me to barrel into his back and hurt my nose.

He glanced down at me with a frown. That was more familiar. "Be quiet, Tiam. I'm going on limited study and speculation. I could be completely wrong, and the Desert Ice are not at their weakest at this time. Besides, we have less than three hours to search these passages and get the heck out of here.

"We don't know if they will pick up the vibrations of our steps just as I caught the sound waves being sent back and forth in my basement. If they do and are disturbed, this will be over before we start. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," I said through gritted teeth.

The underground was rocky, dark, and it stank. Stagnant water mixed with rotting flesh, it seemed to me. The only plus was that Ladon and I didn't need a flashlight to make progress. Once past the holes, the passage was pitch black. I clung to his back, almost wanting to jump on it and ride along. I kept looking behind me, feeling like something would spring out and get me.

When we rounded the first corner, a wave of cool air made us shiver. My teeth chattered until I clicked them together. What was that? Did the symbionts make refrigeration? Did the carrier?

"Wouldn't you think they would be more loyal to us if they're lizardlike creatures?" I whispered over Ladon's shoulder.

"Maybe they are opportunists—whoever pays their price."

"Okay, let's fly out of here and get some money from the golden dragons. I'm sure Draco will give it to you."

He gave me a hard look.

"Worth a try."

He sighed. "You forget, we don't have a ship to fly out of here, and the transport isn't due for another two and a half months. I don't have a radio to contact anyone off-world. Do you?"

"No."

His logic pissed me off. We shuffled on. The temperature drop was progressive. Numbness rose in my limbs. I brushed my hands together, fighting to get some circulation going. Nothing worked. I was about to jog along until I remembered Ladon's warning against causing too many sound waves. Should there be anything to learn down here about our possible enemy, we would soon be too frozen to care.

The stench became overpowering. I coughed and covered my mouth. Ladon choked a little, but he pushed on. I had closed my eyes and walked almost glued to his back. He stopped. I rested my head on him and did not bother to look.

"Tiam."

"Hmm?"

"Look up."

I peeked around him and had to bite off a scream. Piles of the lizard creatures lay all around an open area like they were dead. They stank badly enough. Their eyes, big, bulbous eyes sunk in wide, flat faces with

grayish skin, were closed. These were not reptilian. They were something else, something I didn't want to know about.

"Let's burn them while they sleep," I suggested.

"You of all people want to commit genocide, Tiam?"

He inched closer. I tried to hold him back, but he slapped my hand away. My legs refused to push me farther into the room.

A true scientist, Ladon pulled out a notebook and began scribbling notes while he bent over them. I shuffled from foot to foot.

"What the hell? They're not here," he muttered.

"Who? What are you talking about?" I thought I heard something behind me, but when I searched the way we had come, there was nothing there. I turned back to Ladon. "What are you looking for? Baby, please, let's go."

I blushed over the warm look he gave me.

"They are sleeping, not dead. Their breathing is slow, really slow like a comalike state. But the symbionts are not here in the sacs. They are missing."

The temperature dropped again. An eerie feeling came over me. Fire churned inside. If Ladon didn't come now, I would pop. "Please, come on, Ladon. Something doesn't feel right."

"Agreed!" He turned toward me, but it was too late. They covered him. I couldn't see the nasty blobs, but they were there. I should have known it was possible for the lizardlike creatures to sleep while the blobs did not. They had a natural ability to create the cold. They were killing Ladon. I started toward him. "No! G-G-Go, Tiam! Get out of here."

"I'm not leaving you!" I blew fire at him, but it had no effect on the blobs. If anything, they upped their cooling, but the gray creatures turned to ash. The temperature dropped.

I knew when the blobs jumped off of Ladon to get back to their bodies. They began to move, and they were not happy. I ran forward yanked Ladon up from the floor and turned to jet out of there.

"Run!"

With his strength returning, he locked his fingers with mine and bolted ahead of me. While we were trudging down there, it didn't seem like we had gone far, but trying to get out was a whole other story. Ladon took a wrong turn, and we were forced to stop at a dead end. The scratching noise and screeches started somewhere behind us.

Ladon pushed me back and ran to the end of the passage but had to stop short when the creatures turned into it. They were visible, walking with hunched backs and claws ready to attack. Ladon blasted them. This time, they fell over but didn't burn. The blobs somehow were protecting them. Together, the aliens were invincible from what we could tell. Where was his miracle water when we needed it?

Ladon pressed me behind him and looked around at the dirt packed walls. He looked up. "Wonder how thick that is."

"One way to find out!"

He transformed, his thick body taking up most of the room, but he was able to punch at the ceiling until it began to crumble. Soon sunlight poured through a hole big enough for me to fit through.

"Run up my body and get out," he commanded.

Using his knee to hoist myself, I climbed onto his back. "What about you? Hold my hand, Ladon, and I'll take you with me."

"Get through, Tiam! Now!"

When I refused, he took me between his claws and shoved me up through the hole. I went flying through the air a few feet away from the hole. By the time I stood and got my bearings, I heard his painful roar. "Ladon!" I ran over and threw myself at the hole. With my head poked through, I couldn't spot him anywhere. "Ladon, where are you!"

There was no answer. The cold enveloped me. Something attached itself to my temple, and the next thing I knew, I was falling a long way down.

Chapter Fifteen

I opened my eyes thinking that if I wasn't dead, then I should be lying somewhere buried underground and was *left* for dead. Instead, I was in a room, a white room with a single cot and what I could spot from miles off—a two-way mirror.

I sat up and swung my feet to the floor. "Too cold." I stared down at it and noticed that in the corners of the room, air blew out from small holes all around the edges. Someone was trying to keep me sluggish with frigid temperatures.

Sucking in a deep breath and allowing my fire to build inside, I stood to my feet on top the bed. The blast I expected to tear through the room and shatter the mirror didn't come. A puff of smoke and a cough was all I produced. In front of me, something sparked, and a light came on behind the mirror. It was now a window. I shuffled a few steps to the left to see through it.

Sandy walked up and pressed her palms to the glass. Tears filled her eyes. "Tiam. How are you?"

"Where's Ladon?" I looked past her, but she alone occupied another white room. "Is he okay? Is he alive?"

"Tiam."

I jumped down to the floor with an energy I didn't have to use. I transformed to bang my head against the wall. My body took up all of the space and pressed for more. "Let me out! Where is Ladon! *Ladon!*" A blue streak came down from the ceiling. It looked like a laser but felt like someone had given me a shot of ice in my veins.

I hit the floor screaming, and the linoleum cracked under me. The screech of the Desert Ice filled the room. Their claws reverberated all over my brain. Tears slid down my cheeks, and darkness threatened my consciousness. I fought it hard, but I was out of strength.

"She's dying. Help her!" Sandy yelled. "She doesn't deserve this."

Whether the others heeded her call or not, I didn't know. The cold was too much for me. I began to think if I could take a small nap, everything would be okay. My eyelids fluttered. I sighed, and gave in.

* * * *

The second time I woke, I knew enough not to let on. Someone was in the room with me, not the Desert Ice. Humans were there, and the room was different. I lay on a narrow table, and the people prodded me

with cold instruments. A needle pricked my arm. I fought not to jerk, but I did.

"She's awake."

A screech hurt my ears, and a monitor seemed to interpret what the sound meant. "Keep going. She will heal. More blood."

Ladon had been right. The humans were working in league with the Desert Ice. Now they knew I was awake. There was no need to pretend. I opened my eyes to find one of the gray creatures standing near the bed. Its eyes were unfocused. The blue bubble in its right cheek swelled and contracted. If I hazarded a guess, I'd say the symbiont did the thinking and used the creature's high-pitched voice. The humans had found a way to translate it into something intelligent.

I tried to get up, but my hands were strapped to the bed. "What do you want with me?" I demanded. I tried to transform, but couldn't. That terrified me. The creature pointed to my head. Wires extended from it. A monitor showed wiggly lines. I didn't get it.

The closest human explained. "The Desert Ice has helped us perfect a way to suppress your shape-shifting ability temporarily. The effects won't last long, but we'll have what we need."

Dread made my voice hoarse. "Where did you learn that term? Surely, they aren't really called Desert Ice."

The man grinned. "No, it's some unpronounceable thing, but a little birdie gave us the better suited name, and we decided to keep it."

"Ladon." I blinked and swallowed until I had control. "Where is he? What have you done to him?"

A hand patted my leg. I looked down to find Lemuel at my feet. He looked different, less shy and more in control. Had he known all along who I was? Had he planned this whole thing? "Lemuel, you can't feel this is right? Please, I need—"

"Sorry, Tiam. I have to do what's best for my people, as you do for yours. You can imagine how devastated I was to think my new girlfriend was burned alive or eaten by the Drel, couldn't you? And then to find you had duped us all..."

Calling on my natural strength, I fought against my bands. Nothing happened. The leather cut into my skin. The sheet over me shifted, nearly exposing my breast. Lemuel's eyes widened. He licked his lips, and I turned my head in disgust but considered my options. Perhaps Lemuel could be seduced into helping me.

The Desert Ice and the humans filed out of the room. They left me strapped to the bed. For several minutes, I tried to free myself, but managed only to overturn the table and pin myself under it.

The door opened again, and someone stood there watching me. "You're going to stand there looking?" I snapped.

A hand slid along my thigh and squeezed. When it inched toward my pussy, I kicked out, in hope for a connection. The grunt and the tingling in my toes told me I had success. Soon, I was hoisted upright. Mack held a hand over his crotch with a pained look on his face. "Damn you, Tiam."

"You had no right to touch me."

"You're wrong." He gripped my ankles and yanked them apart. The sheet slipped toward the floor exposing my breast. "Yum, look at that. All this time, I thought I had to respect you as a woman, wait for you to let me fuck you, but you were nothing more than an animal all this time." He leaned in close to sniff me. "I can take you right now."

"You want to fuck an animal?"

He jerked my legs, and I winced, not giving him the satisfaction of crying out loud. The door opened. Lemuel walked in. "Get out, Mack."

"But I—"

"You were allowed to visit only because your cousin, one of the chief scientists, pulled strings. You are entertainment. That's all. Get out!"

I couldn't believe that I had gone out with this man, who had blushed with every other word. After kicking the table leg, Mack sneered in Lemuel's face and walked out. The door shushed closed behind him. I stared straight up at the ceiling. Lemuel strolled around the table and stood at my side. He brushed hair from my eyes and kissed my forehead. "Shall we get to it?"

I looked at him. "Get to what?"

"You want to see your friend. I want you. The tests for compatibility will go on for a while. We have time. I have no doubt in my mind you will make a deal with me to get access to Ladon. Rather than dancing around the issue, we can agree right away." He kissed me. "You let me make love to you, and I will let you see Ladon."

Chapter Sixteen

Lemuel moved me back to another room similar to the one I had occupied earlier. He was not crazy enough to do it alone. He had two guards with guns trained on me. They might not be able to kill me, but they could do serious damage and slow me down. Without the ability to shift or blow fire, I was useless. I willed that the drug they shot into my brain would wear off, and I could escape.

"Thanks, guys." Lemuel waved them out of the room. I sat down on the bed and clutched my sheet around me. When the door slid closed, he grinned in my direction. Not a lascivious grin, but one full of anticipation. "Why don't you take the sheet off? I would like to stand here a while looking at you. Your people are such perfect specimens that it amazes me, yet you're not human."

I shrugged. "Humans don't have the corner on humanoid bodies. There are probably millions of similar species."

His eyes widened. "Are there?"

"I said probably. I have no idea. We, like you, didn't venture very far from Drelcon and our mining planet, Crendon. Boy, do I regret leaving home with all this happening. Tell me about Ladon. Have you hurt him? Ease my mind and assure me he's not dead."

He strolled up to me, his cock hard in front of my face. I wasn't disgusted with Lemuel. He was an attractive man in his own way. I admit his shyness had turned me on. Few Drelconian men exhibited such a characteristic. But Ladon was more than enough lover for me, and I resented having another male offer something in exchange for my body. I was not the galaxy whore.

"He's alive. *I* haven't hurt him."

I hadn't missed the emphasis on *I*. Someone had hurt Ladon, but he was alive. I needed to see him. The desire urged me to attack Lemuel and rip his throat out for holding back, but he wasn't a bad man. "I don't see the same hatred in your eyes, Lemuel. And you don't see me as an animal without rights like Mack did."

"I wouldn't rape you, if that's what you're worried about. You had to agree to this, or it wouldn't happen." He sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I hate your people. I don't hate you. They lorded the blue gem over us,

knowing we were lost without it for energy. They were cruel without remorse."

"Lemuel, it wasn't us, the regular people. Orochi, the chief elder, and his cohorts treated you badly. I would never have done it. Neither would Ladon." The last assertion was the wrong thing to say.

"Ladon?" His bushy brows dropped, almost obscuring his eyes. "He tried to kill us all. Or had you forgotten, Tiam?"

"Have you forgotten you tried to poison me?" I lifted the sheet away from the spot on my stomach, but it had healed, the skin new. Relief washed over me. "Ladon said one tweak of the virus you put in the water and I would have been dead. You think he should have turned his head at that, forgiven you?"

"Perhaps not." He dropped his hand on my shoulder. I stiffened, and he squeezed gently. "Suffice it to say we have both been cruel. And while your elders hurt a planet full of people, you all did nothing to stop them, which makes you guilty, too. I'm not going to interfere with the alliance or with the plans the Desert Ice have for you."

"W-What plans?"

"However, I will have you, Tiam. I'm being paid a lot of money for this mission on Orel-X Four. I would keep you as my wife if you want." He pushed me back on the bed and lay at my side. His hand slid down to my stomach while he nuzzled my neck. "What makes you irresistible? Are all your women like this? I feel like I could come looking at you."

"Marriage?" I could not believe it. My first offer in two hundred years, and it comes from the man involved with enslaving my people. Despite that, I longed to accept, to know someone wanted me enough to make me his bride. I closed my eyes and dreamed of a wedding atop the mountains where the wind blew hard. It would be dangerous to fly there to the perfect location. My husband and I would burn the lattice archway after we said our vows, symbolizing the fire of our love being all-consuming and the unity of our commitment to one another.

I could not bask in the beauty of my fantasy, because Lemuel slid his hand lower. My dream bubble popped, and I blinked at him.

"I can't in good conscience marry you and save myself while my people are enslaved or worse, killed. I will, however, have sex with you to be able to see Ladon. Right now, it's all that matters to me."

He kissed me. His lips were soft and moist, not rough and strong like Ladon's. His body was not hot enough when he pressed closer. I willed my temperature to increase to ease the cold in the room, but it went up only a little. Lemuel pulled the sheet from me and dropped it on the floor. I rolled to my back and waited while he examined me from top to bottom.

"You are beautiful," he gushed.

"You've said." Leaning in to encourage him to get started, I closed my eyes. I heard his zipper lower and the clink of his belt buckle. Holding my breath, I choked when a dragon's roar shook the building so hard that panels from the ceiling, along with dust and debris, fell on us. The roar came again, and Lemuel fell over onto the floor, his dick peeking up through his boxers and looking inadequate. I glanced away.

"Ladon! Someone's hurting him!" I sprang to the floor on my hands and the balls of my feet. Scales rippled over my skin and covered my private parts, but I couldn't change. Looking back over my shoulder at Lemuel, I saw his fear. He knew I was stronger. I could kill him, but I wouldn't. I needed to find Ladon.

With my feet freezing on the cold floor, I jetted for the door and flung it open. A hallway full of doors met me. I had no idea which way to go, and my time was limited. A hand fell on my shoulder. I was ready to fight if Lemuel tried to stop me.

"He's down here." Gesturing to the right, he led the way. I followed, praying this wasn't a trap. At a locked

room with a tiny window to see in, Lemuel stopped. He punched in a code at the panel. I marveled, never imagining they had sophisticated equipment like this on the planet. The mud buildings' simplistic designs were misleading. The humans had been planning this for years. This wasn't about Orochi any longer. The elder had been gone for eight years. Orel-X Four was about regaining control by any means necessary.

I rushed in as Ladon let out another roar. He was turned, parts of his body dragon, the others humanoid. His eyes, yellow and glowing with a tinge of blue around the edges, were wild. They had chained him to a table. Thick iron cuffs bit into his wrists.

"Ladon!" I tried to hold him but he was ice cold. Sweat poured from him, and he shivered. "What did they do to you, baby?" I willed the strength to break the locks, but I couldn't budge them.

"Tiam?" he cried out. My heart broke. He couldn't see me. His eyes focused past my face. "Tiam, get out of here. Go back to Shale. They'll protect you. You're their own."

"No, I'm not leaving you. What's wrong? Did they put the virus in you?" I tried to hold his face, but the cold burned my fingers. I increased my body temperature, but it didn't help him. I had to pull away.

"The symbiont..." He gasped. A look of torment distorted his features, and he roared again. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Ladon! Somebody help him, please!" I turned back to Lemuel, but he had gone. *Coward!* "Ladon, what can I do for you? I'll get you out. I'll take you with me to Shale. The lords must help no matter what! You're one of them too."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "No." For a long time, he fought and writhed in the holds. His hips came up off the bed and slammed down. Most of his clothes had been torn away during his shape-shifting. "The ... symbiont ... is in me, Tiam."

I sank to my knees and pressed a hand to my mouth to keep from being sick. No, it couldn't be. Not now. "I don't believe it, Ladon." I reached up and ran my fingertips over the bunched muscles in his stomach. The creature was in there, maybe not in his stomach but in his body.

I knew what their plan was, to pair fire and ice. They wanted to discard the reptile creature, which had little range of motion and probably limited intelligence, for the Drelconian body. If Ladon was a success, they would attempt to inhabit more of us, maybe change our entire species if they could. And with the humans help, I didn't see why they couldn't.

Chapter Seventeen

A hand came down on my shoulder for the second time. I whirled around ready to defend Ladon to the death. Sandy stood before me with regret in her eyes. "You see what they're doing to him," I shouted. "You can't tell me this is right, Sandy. They're hurting him."

"I'm not supposed to be in here, Tiam." She hurried to the hall. I followed. I would take her hostage until they let Ladon go. But she glanced up and down the hall, then came back in and shut the door. "Lemuel gave me these keys. I think they open the lock—"

I snatched them and began working to release the chains on Ladon's wrists. They kept slipping from my grasp. My fingers had turned blue along with my toes. Sandy took them away and worked the locks. Soon, the massive cuffs clicked, and the chains fell away. I pulled Ladon to a sitting position. Sandy and I both were hurtled across the room when another spasm hit Ladon.

Seeing her struggle to stand on unsteady feet, I knew she couldn't take second blow. "Stay put. I'll get

him." I crossed to my lover with caution. "Ladon? We're taking you out of here."

He growled. "Get the fuck out of here, Tiam. I might kill you!"

"I'm taking you with me!" I dug my claws into his shoulder and yanked him up. "Get it through your head!"

Our progress was slow. Ladon might be for the most part in humanoid form, but he felt like he weighed a ton. And my feet weren't healing because of the cold spread throughout the building, even in the halls and up a stairwell, where I discovered we were several floors below ground level. I began to think Ladon hadn't heard the humans trying to build an alliance. They had already established it. The humans wanted us dead, while the Desert Ice wanted to use us. They came together with one goal.

"Put him back."

I jumped at the eerie voice behind my head. When I looked, it was to find Ladon speaking. His eyes were almost all blue, and his lips moved in a disjointed fashion, like he wasn't used to working them.

"Put him back ... now."

Sandy screamed. "It's the symbiont, Tiam. It's got control of him."

Ladon was still slumped on me. "Not completely. I will kill him before I let you have him, whatever you are. Do you hear me?"

"You won't kill him," it answered. *"You can't."*

I fell to my hands and knees and dragged Ladon up the stairs. I prayed no one would come to stop us because I didn't have the strength to walk let alone fight. At the landing, I lay flat with Ladon on top of me and remembered how many times we had done it this way. I had to blink away tears.

Sandy checked the hallway and nodded. "All clear."

I couldn't stand. "Why are you helping me? What's in it for you? And how do I know this isn't a trap to lead the Desert Ice to the rest of the Drelconians?"

Voices in the hall drew our attention. Her eyes widened, and she pressed the door closed and leaned against it. There was the answer to my unspoken question of where everyone was. She had no idea how we would get out, and unless the crap they injected me with wore off, we were sitting ducks. I had limited strength, could only produce scales and couldn't change. Dragging Ladon's dead weight around was no picnic either.

When the men in the hall passed without stopping, we breathed a sigh of relief. Sandy peeked out again and gave the all clear. I hoisted myself up using the railings. My knees knocked on the way.

"I'm doing this, because you were my friend." Sandy smiled, with a flit of amusement in her eyes. "It was fun watching you pretend you knew what a bowling alley was."

I gasped. "You knew?"

"I suspected after a while. After you asked about the conspiracy, I started thinking about it. You were too ignorant of regular human ways. When I saw them bring you in here a week ago, alive and not burned to death after saving my life, I knew for sure. But I was afraid."

My stomach knotted. "A week ago? I've been unconscious a week?"

"I guess. This is the first time I could get in here. I bribed Lemuel. I think he likes you a lot, maybe even love."

"We just met!"

"You're Drelconian," she said without jealousy.

"Give me a break! I'm tired of humans." I gave her an apologetic look. "No offense."

She opened the door. "Let's go. I contacted a friend. He's in orbit and will land on the south side in twenty minutes. We have to move fast, and he can take us to Shale."

I wanted to ask her who her friend was and how come he happened to have a ship to transport us, but I didn't have it in me right then to question the gift. If it was a trap, well, I had tried. If Sandy really was my friend, then we might have a chance to save Ladon. No, we *had* to save him. I couldn't lose him now. We had just started, and both of us had suffered enough, damn it. I wanted him.

We reached the door and faced our ill timing. High sun! Sandy would not step past the door. "Sandy, if we stick to the shadows—"

"No, I can't. I won't."

"You helped me. They'll kill you." I tried to tug her arm, but she resisted. "You can crouch beneath me. I promise. I'll get you both to the ship if it kills me, Sandy. I can't leave you behind any more than Ladon."

"I'm sorry, Tiam, but I'm not going out in high sun again. When I can make proper arrangements, I'm going to leave this awful planet for good. They won't hurt me." She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. "Until we meet again." She shoved me out the door and slammed it closed. I heard a lock turn. We were on our own.

Chapter Eighteen

"Here we are, mon bébé. The planet, Shale." The pilot turned and winked at me. He spoke with a delicious French accent, but something didn't seem right about him. My sense of smell was back with a vengeance, and if this man was human, I was a winged frog.

"You're not human."

He tapped his nose. "Correct, trésor, but don't tell Sandy. *Non*? She has enough to deal with." He threw a few levers forward and pressed a myriad of buttons. A shushing noise came from the bottom of the ship, and the landing jostled them around some.

I was not to be put off easily. "But what are you? Who are you?"

"I am a simple pilot. Nothing more. Nothing less. You go now." He waved his hands as the door lowered and steps appeared.

"Well, thank you for everything, um..."

He shook my hand grudgingly. I could pick nothing up from his touch. He was a warm-blooded something or other. That's all I knew.

"Pierre, the pilot." He slipped a card into my hand. "You need me. You call. Reasonable rates."

Ladon and I were shuffled from the craft, and Pierre was off to who knows where. I guessed it was to pick up another passenger. Since he knew where Shale was, I wondered if he knew of other planets with breathable atmospheres. I had to keep him in mind should I need to make another escape or needed to

find a new home. Even now, there was no telling whether the Drelconians would believe me when I told them of the humans' plot. Ladon had been unconscious since we left the science building on Orel-X Four. I suspected it was the warmer temperature. The Desert Ice liked to control their environment. The creature had probably fainted and taken my lover down with him.

As I headed toward the village where Draco and Ryuu lived, I prayed they would have a doctor here or scientists who could help Ladon.

* * * *

The children were gathered around the road leading into the village and watched me struggle with my burden. The teenage male dragons made no move to help.

"You're not welcome here, Tiam. What are you doing back?" someone shouted. There were echoes of "Yeah."

"She probably stole him from some other woman," a girl who looked no older than a seven-year-old human said. Shame washed over me. My little act had caused this much animosity. When had my people become so unforgiving? Even the elders had us following faithfully behind them for decades after they had destroyed Drelcon.

"Where is Draco or Ryuu?" I questioned the kids.

"You can't add them to your collection!" I almost laughed.

"What are you doing here, Tiam? And who the hell is the guy hanging on your back?" I turned to find Ryuu behind me. His long white hair blew in the light breeze. He was handsome as always, and it did nothing for me.

"I—"

Draco and his wife came up laughing and looking deeply in love with each other. I wasn't sure what I felt about him and her. Resentment came into his eyes when he saw me. He drew Harmony closer to his side as if I was about to attack her. I never had. He didn't have to go on the defensive.

I lifted my chin. "I need help. I am still a Drelconian."

"Last I heard you were living among the humans and liked it. Why don't you go back? You abandoned your people long ago." Draco's eyes burned with fire. He felt betrayed, I knew. I had spent all those years becoming his friend with the dream one day he would see me as more. It had never happened.

"I didn't turn my back on our people. Our leaders turned their back on me!" I spun away from him. "Anyway, I'm not here to ask for your help. *Ryuu* is leader here." I knew he would feel the slight. "Please, help me, Ryuu. If not for me, then for Ladon."

"Ladon!" they said in unison.

I flipped my lover around and let him lean against me so they could see his face. His head slumped forward, and I pushed it back.

Ryuu stepped up and touched him. "His temperature is too low! What the hell happened, Tiam?"

"Something's inside him. It's trying to take over his body, but the cold wars with the heat. Do you have doctors who can drive it out? The symbiont thrives in cool temperatures." Looking at the sky, I remembered the ten moons and how Shale could get quite chilly in the evening during this time of year. "I'm scared it will wake up and take him over when it gets dark."

* * * *

Ryuu found me at the lake he considered his private sanctuary. I knew no one would go there, and the last I had seen, he was spending time with his wife. My heart felt like someone had wedged a sword in it. With my head on my knees, I cried with great wracking sobs. He touched my head and stroked my hair. I kept myself balled up.

"You love him," he said.

I turned my head in the opposite direction. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ladon, Draco's old guard. You are in love with him. Does he feel the same?"

I let out a small roar. "He lusts for me. We have been lovers for a few weeks, before all this. In case you're wondering, no, he didn't have a girlfriend."

"I wasn't wondering. I know you wanted someone to love you, Tiam. Before I found Shannon, I had several women at once. A Drelconian's got a big sexual appetite. But Ladon had gone bad after the elders killed his human fiancée. Draco and I could only hope he would find peace and heal after a while. I also hope he finds it with you."

Scrubbing my eyes, I stood and moved away from him to stare out at the purple water. "I know no one wants me here, especially the human women." I looked back and rolled my eyes with a grin. "Competition, you know?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. But you're different than last time."

"Yes, I'm different, I guess. I'm not holding the bad things against anyone anymore. It doesn't mean I don't hurt when I think about it, but, Ryuu, I do love him. I *need* him. And if he only wants me to be his lover, then I'll take it. I'll follow him wherever he goes. But I won't let that thing have him."

He stood up. "Neither will I. Come on. You've been avoiding visiting him. I think somewhere inside, Ladon's still there despite the creature using his mouth. Hearing your voice might lead him back to us."

Chapter Nineteen

He was surrounded by hot rocks and was sometimes bathed in fire. The symbiont hadn't taken over in days. I was hopeful it was dead. When we located a specialist who was willing to help, Ryuu had said he could remove the creature without harming Ladon.

I climbed onto the bed with him and stroked his face. He opened his eyes. "Hey."

"Hi." For no reason, I felt shy. "How are you?"

Staring into my eyes and stroking my cheek, he grinned. "Much better now."

My silly heart dared to believe he meant now, because I was with him, but such sentiment wasn't Ladon. He was no longer the soft and mushy type. "Maybe I should let you rest. You've been through a lot." I sat up, but he grabbed my hand.

"Tiam, you're the only one who makes this tolerable. Stay with me."

I looked up at the sky through the window. Yet again, night was coming. I was afraid. I knew Ryuu and the others would increase the heat considerably, and dragons would work around the clock to keep the room at high temperatures, but Ladon still looked pale. He couldn't shape-shift, and when he slept, he moaned in

pain. I ached for him.

"Stay," he repeated.

I lay back down and brought his hand to my lips. His skin was warm but not warm enough. We were in a room with two other dragons. They blew fire into the air at intervals and heated the room. I didn't know if they watched us, but I didn't care either.

"I will warm you, Ladon." I threw a leg over him and sat back gently. He moaned, this time from pleasure. While his half-closed eyes watched, I opened my blouse one button at a time.

"Tiam, you shouldn't."

"You don't want me?"

"You can't begin to imagine how much I do."

I lifted his hand to run his fingertips over my nipples and put my head back. The little buds perked to life under his touch. Teasing them, he pinched and rolled them between his fingers. I murmured for him not to stop. The room grew cooler. I looked around. The men had quit blowing fire.

"You can look, but you must keep him hot."

They nodded dumbly. I glanced at Ladon to see if he minded, and he didn't seem to. We had not worn clothes much on Drelcon. With my shirt deposited onto the floor, I leaned up and worked my pants over my hips. Three gasps were my response when my triangle of hair came into view.

"Tiam," Ladon growled.

"You said you wanted to get warm, baby. I'm helping you." I grinned and spread my legs for him to look. His eyes glowed, but I looked away, too scared to see blue mixed with the yellow and black.

I ran a finger down over my swollen clit while biting my lip. I was wet, even more so knowing I had an audience. The bursts of fire came in fits and starts from the men, and I began to wonder if I could make them come while they watched me please Ladon. "Do you like my pussy, baby?" I asked my lover.

He nodded slowly. "You're wet. I want to taste you." I slid along the bed determined to serve him. His body hadn't regained its strength, so I would need to do it all. I didn't mind giving him what he wanted, at the same time feeling like an exhibitionist.

I stood up in the bed, a foot on either side of his head. He stared. My pussy mesmerized him. "First, a look." I turned to the right and poked my ass out. Ladon followed with his eyes. For a second, I spared a glance to the other dragons who could see me from the front. Their eyes seemed to bulge. I grinned but kept turning.

With my ass now facing Ladon, I bent over with my legs apart. Ladon and the two other dragons roared but then quickly lowered their voices. We didn't need anyone interrupting. I looked over to find the others held their cocks in their hands. "You guys are bad."

"Let him eat you, Tiam. Please!" one of them begged.

I laughed. "A nurse's duties are never done." Repositioning, I knelt over Ladon's head, with my pussy close to his mouth. "Can you handle it, baby? I don't want you to wear yourself out trying to lick me."

He drew in my scent, his expression euphoric. "Lower, Tiam. I need to eat you now."

When I rested my pussy lips on his mouth, my control shattered. His tongue raced up my slippery tunnel. I screamed then clamped down on it. He sucked with fervor, his nose teasing my clit. I had to grip the

headboard, and I pumped into his greedy feasting. The men howled and groaned, shouting, "Yes, eat it all." Their comments heightened my pleasure.

Soon my pelvic muscles began to clench. I was close to coming. I rode Ladon harder. He picked up on the impending orgasm and licked faster. He clamped down on my clit, moaning. I cried out his name as the sensations broke free. I rode my climax in by bouncing while he sucked. The push and pull of pleasure seemed to be unending. I didn't want it to stop. I came three or four times before his energy was spent, and my pussy gave me a break.

Gasping for breath, I rolled to his side and rested my head on his arm. Through locks of my hair covering my eyes, I saw the two men finishing up their own climaxes. They sank back looking satisfied.

But I had only been pleased. My lover needed to come, also. Skimming my fingers over his chest, I watched his reaction. He didn't move, but desire burned in his eyes. "Are you too tired, Ladon?"

"Never."

Still, he didn't move. Praising the convenience of him not wearing any clothing, because they would have been burned up by now, I took his cock into my hand and pumped it. He clenched his jaw.

"Tiam, I'm not going to last."

"Don't worry. I can get you up as many times as you want me to." I stuffed his broad tool into my mouth and tasted the beginning of his salty spray. "Mm, you're delicious," I muttered between sucks and kisses. He jerked.

Forgetting the other men, I focused on Ladon. I climbed up to ease his dick inside me. He cried out and shuddered. I gyrated my hips to force him all the way. Even after making love dozens of times, he was a tight fit. The perfect man with perfect equipment.

I let my head drop back, braced myself on his hard thighs, and bounced hard.

"Shit! Tiam!" He roared. Before I had gotten started good, he filled me, but his cock didn't shrink. It seemed to grow harder and bigger. I pumped, arching my back and driving my hips forward. His slick rod glided a long way in and eased all the way out, but I wouldn't let it end. I wanted to fuck him all night, and if he didn't collapse or if my energy didn't fizzle, I would. He gripped my hips but made no move to guide me. "Don't stop, baby. Don't ever stop."

I didn't. For hours, we made love late into the night. The shift changed, and new dragons came in to keep the room superhot. These two were married, and they did all they could not to watch, but by then, my love and attention was focused on one man. Ladon held my life, and if he lived through this situation, I would be his to do with what he wanted.

Chapter Twenty

I woke up in the morning, alone in bed. The dragons were gone, and the rocks removed. The room had been returned to its regular temperature. My heart pounded in my chest. Did they hate me so much that when Ladon passed, they didn't bother waking me?

I morphed scales over my body in deference to the humans and ran outside. Children played, and teens raced each other in the air. A few adults attended to their little ones, encouraging them to change.

The village seemed to have grown since last I had been here. Once the women healed, they had babies with a vengeance, popping out six and seven before they slowed down. Ryuu lived in a bigger house than

he had when I first came to Shale. He had a good brood started of his own, and his adopted human son, Jake, needed more space now in his teenage years.

When I approached the large but simple-styled house, voices reached me from inside. They didn't sound like they were grieving, but there was a decidedly serious tone. I picked up the pace and knocked on the door. A young female opened. She didn't greet me but swung the door wide to let me in.

The men and women sat around a table talking. I noticed the human women were in the thick of arguing, while the Drelconian wives deferred more to their spouses. They stated their opinions, but the final decision for the household was their husbands'. Things hadn't changed much.

Ryuu sat at the head of the table, and to his right was Ladon, looking pale but stronger. His eyes met mine, and he stood. A beautiful young Drelconian woman stood nearby having sat down a drink before him, and she remained at his elbow. My hands, tucked behind me, grew out my claws. I tried shaking them to calm myself, but they persisted in staying. If I could get the image out of my head of ripping the woman to shreds for daring to bring herself into Ladon's view, everything would be fine.

Ladon's eyebrows went up. I strolled over and stood in front of him. The room had gone quiet. He tugged me close. "You're okay?" I asked.

"I think so." He kissed me, snaking his tongue into my mouth. Someone cleared their throat, and we drew apart. By the time I looked around, the woman was gone. Good. I was not sharing Ladon.

Someone drew up a chair, and I sat welded to his side. Ladon wrapped an arm around me, while I tried not to preen like I was the only woman who had ever had a man. Several of the women gave me approving looks for finding my own. The humans found other things to focus on.

Ryuu continued the discussion. "We think we've located a human specialist who could work with our doctors to cut the symbiont from Ladon's back, but we have face the fact that the humans have rallied against us. I'm not sure what they are using for fuel, but our last shipment of blue gems was refused."

My eyes widened. "Then it's escalated. Are there any more Drelconians living on Earth?"

He shook his head and gestured to the man sitting on his other side whom I didn't recognize. "No, Stone here and his wife were one of the few who lived there to guide the humans back to prosperity and in optimizing the use of the blue gem. They were 'asked' to leave the planet and arrived here early this morning."

"More like ran for our lives at the threat of death," Stone's wife corrected. Her husband and Ryuu looked at her, and she flushed.

Stone explained. "They tried to attack us, but like you've been saying, they are weaker, and even with their weapons, we can dodge and get away. But I heard they were trying to figure out a good way to transport some new alien to Earth. Now, I realize it was the Desert Ice they wanted to bring. They cannot survive in sunlight, and at night, they are most powerful. If they find a way to travel from planets, I guarantee you they will attack Shale. We will be assimilated before we know what happened."

"Whoa!" Draco cut in. "Let's not get dramatic here. As we've all seen, the creatures can be killed. We were successful with Ladon. When Pierre arrives with the surgeon, we are good to go."

I rested a hand on Ladon's thigh. His leg muscles tightened, and he covered my hand. He tried to raise my hand higher, but I resisted, slapping his. I caught what Draco had been saying. "Pierre? You mean the pilot who brought us here? Goodness, he gets around. He's bringing the surgeon?" At Draco's curt nod, I continued. "What makes you think this human isn't spying out our situation and won't try some way to revive the symbiont once he gets his hands on Ladon?"

"Because we will never take our eyes off him. Besides, he's Jake's father," Ryuu informed me. I blinked in surprise. From what I heard, Jake didn't have any family, and Ryuu and Shannon had adopted the teen

years ago. Where had they found his long-lost parent?

Ryuu didn't seem to care enough to explain it to me. He stood, signaling to all that the meeting was over for now. Frustration ate at me. Nothing had been settled. They hadn't formed a plan to defeat the Desert Ice or sent spies to see what they were up to. A defense needed to be worked out in case the aliens adapted to travel, and someone needed to find out what the humans were using for a new fuel source.

I was about to say as much, but Ladon squeezed my arm. "I know you have concerns, Tiam, but now is not the time. The details will be worked out in a less populated meeting."

I looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

He said nothing, but I figured it out. Some of the dragons didn't want me in on the planning not trusting me, and the females wouldn't be included. I wished them luck keeping the humans out of it, especially Harmony. She had so much fire she could be one of us.

"Fine." I huffed. "But you better keep me informed. I'm going to maintain a low profile while here. I learned from my mistakes."

He chuckled. "Yeah, sure."

Chapter Twenty-One

I came around a curve in the path I was following to find three women laughing and chitchatting as twin white-haired toddlers played in front of them. I stopped not wanting to be seen. Shannon, Harmony and the woman who had been sniffing around Ladon were chummy.

"Draco was angry about what Ladon did, and his heart broke with mine at the loss of Arnetta, but we're both glad to have him back," Harmony said.

Shannon rubbed her back. "Yes, I could see right away how close they are. He seems like one of the lords. They treat him with love and respect despite his former station." The two women nodded in agreement.

"The only drawback is *she* brought him here," Harmony spat.

"You're never going to forgive her."

"Why should I? She tried to fucking seduce my husband. The bitch actually laid naked where he would stumble onto her. And when he spurned her, she rubbed her body on his. He told me he was disgusted, and he felt sick. Still, she kept coming at him. Ryuu had to ask her to leave the planet."

My temperature skyrocketed. I marched out to them and stood inches from their startled faces. I considered removing my scales to flaunt my goods in their faces but thought better of it. "For your information, I didn't rub myself on Draco. He got so hot looking at me, he grew a hard-on. We were standing close at the time." I shrugged. "What was his dick to do but find a home?"

"You shit!" Harmony launched herself at me, and caught off guard, I fell over. She yanked my hair and slapped my face. Shannon scooped up her twins and took them out of earshot of Harmony's expletives. I didn't know what the other woman was doing. I was busy trying to extract Draco's wife from my head without breaking her limbs.

I had done it this time. Humiliated at her sharing with the others about how I acted, I had said those things to her. Now, she would tell Draco, and he would hate me more. Somehow, I got her off me, and we crouched facing each other. Her nails were softer than mine, but they burned. Blood covered my fingers

when I touched my face. The skin healed.

Glancing around, I noted the other woman had vanished. I feared she had gone to tell the men. Harmony's nostrils flared. I had thought her plain, but she had grown pretty with being in love and having kids. I clenched my fists at my sides.

"Leave Ladon alone," she told me. "He deserves better than someone like you. He needs someone who loves him, who would be devoted to him. You..." She spat on the ground. "You're up to your old tricks. Don't think it hasn't gotten around how you performed for those dragons guarding him. There he was fighting for his life, while you were busy being a whore."

"You don't know anything about it!" I stood, fighting my temper. "I did it for—"

"For who? Ladon?" Her laugh was bitter. "Make no mistake. You did it for you and only you." She straightened and began to fix her dress. A few buttons had been torn off during our scuffle. Somehow, I knew the fight would be blamed all on me. "Walk away. He would be better off with someone like Ness. At least she fits in here. You never will."

Ness. That was the name of the pretty young woman who had been hanging around Ladon. I don't know why I didn't recognize her from before. But Harmony was right. Even she and her human sister-in-law fit better than I did among my own kind. Maybe Ness was best for Ladon.

They would never forgive me. I had stripped down to try to seduce Draco, hoping after a restrictive period of babies and dirty diapers with the imperfections of a human, he would choose a little fling with me, and maybe something more. Who had I been kidding?

I shook myself. I didn't want to give into self-pity, but I would think of Ladon, and what might be best for him. He had endured much, lost the woman he loved. He said he would never love me. And I knew why. Because I wasn't his type, sweet and innocent. Ness was. She was like Arnetta had been. She lived to serve others, where I lived to survive.

Sitting alone among the trees, I waited for Ladon to come and yell at me, or Draco or one of the others. No one came. I sat with my back against a tree and breathed in fragrant flowers. I didn't remember this land being this colorful, but maybe the women had made it so. I liked it, but I would need to find another home. Lemuel might still want me after I had helped to stop him from hurting my people. That was a bleak option.

* * * *

Night began to fall. I stood and headed toward the village. Powerful engines roared and slowed in the distance. The surgeon must have arrived. By the time I got back, the men were huddled together talking, and the women had their own group. Ladon's eyebrows were bunched together, and his mouth was pressed into harsh line. I knew he was fighting fear about what the doctor would find.

The surgeon was a squat man, thick around the middle with silver eyes matching Jake's. I figured no one had told him he wasn't an orphan but had a father who had come to help Ladon. He stood on the other side of the square chatting with friends. He never once looked the man's way, but Ryuu nodded with a bitter expression on his face to where Jake stood, and the man peeked over every now and then.

I stayed beside the tree closest to the lane I had been walking along, still on the outskirts of the group. The men seemed to come to a conclusion, and Ness broke away from the women to approach them. I moved within earshot.

"Doctor Shep, welcome," she said with a sweet smile which grated on my nerves. "I know you've come alone and might need an assistant. I'm far from done with my studies in the medical arts, but I volunteer my services during your surgery on Ladon."

I gritted my teeth. *Medical-fucking-arts?* Why wasn't she a reincarnation of Arnetta while she was busy

being perfect. Ladon's eyes had gone wide at hearing she had training in his field and seconded the suggestion. I wanted to throw up.

The doctor nodded. "An excellent suggestion, but I will need Ryuu's help also." The man must know Ryuu considered Jake his son and wanted to placate him. "I would prefer to wait until Ladon is much stronger, but I'm thinking we're working against time as it is. If the symbiont is indeed dead, then its carcass may poison Ladon's body. We don't know what affect if any it will have on his healing ability."

The group moved to the building they had allocated to be a temporary clinic. With Shale's natural climate of healing, one had never been needed before, and the silver dragons did not engage in harmful research. I had to wonder why Nessa was bothering with medical arts in the first place.

Indecisive about whether to follow them into the clinic, I stood in place until someone moved up next to me. I hadn't seen Ryuu leave the group, but here he was.

"He needs you with him right now," he said.

"We're lovers, not girlfriend and boyfriend. It's just sex."

He studied my face, which made me shift uncomfortably. "Is that what you really believe, or are you feeling insecure? You'll never know what he feels about you if you don't go to him."

"Give me a break with the romantic mumbo-jumbo, Ryuu. You're no different than the rest, I'm willing to bet. You were the one who told me to leave, remember? I know what they're thinking, and you do, too."

A growl rumbled low in his throat, not loud enough for anyone else to hear but me. I wished he would go away so his wife wouldn't accuse me of trying to seduce him like I tried with Draco. I wasn't clear on what I planned to do.

"The fact of the matter is, Tiam, you love him. You can stand here and disappoint him, make him think you don't give a damn about him beyond being a good fuck, or you can conquer your fear and hold his hand through it." His brow wrinkled. "*Afterward*, you can admit what you feel and let him decide if he feels the same."

"Fine." I offered a smirk in response to his speech. I would hold Ladon's hand, but I wasn't going to be the one to spill my guts about how much I loved him. That had been my mistake in the past with Draco. No way. If he wanted me to continue as his lover, I would stay. If he wanted to explore possibilities with Ness or any other dragon here, I would go. Simple. "Lead the way."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ladon laced his fingers with mine. "Where have you been?"

I shrugged. "Around."

"There's been some talk about what you did with me, in front of the others. Don't let it bother you. It was hot, wasn't it?" Amusement filled his eyes. I grinned, sure that I looked like an idiot, love too bright in my eyes.

"Really?"

He nodded. "Really. I wouldn't mind a replay when I'm strong enough to spank your ass while they watch."

Someone had to remind me he was being prepped for surgery or I would have tumbled on him right there.

Ladon was bad. No way Ness could handle the new him. My heart soared. I knew from the longing in his eyes that he wasn't going to run me off. Ladon still wanted me. When I glanced up, I caught Ryuu's knowing expression.

I held Ladon's hand while attempting to stay out of the doctor's way. Under normal circumstances, our bodies rejected anesthesia. Ladon's took it, but only to the extent that he became groggy and too weak to open his eyes. Letting us know he was still awake, he asked the doctor questions on medical procedures. I didn't like the thought of him feeling every incision.

Glancing at the guards nearby, ready to roast the good doctor if he made one false move, I was prepared to do it if he hurt my lover. Ryuu stepped in front of me in anticipation. "Keep calm, Tiam. He will hurt Ladon. That's a given. You cannot kill the man for doing his job. Got it?"

I frowned. "Got it."

The operation began. Ladon gritted his teeth and tried to rip my hand off while the doctor cut into his back. The human sweated by the buckets it seemed and had to rehydrate often, because we had raised the temperature of the room.

My head spun when Ladon's back was laid open. There it was, the hideous blue blob that had invaded him somehow. But it was longer. Instead of a small ball, it was oblong, maybe five or six inches. I had no understanding of how the internal makeup was supposed to look, but the way it seemed to be glued to Ladon's spinal chord couldn't be healthy.

I started to cry.

"Tiam!" Ryuu snapped. "You will need to leave."

"No. Not yet," Ladon muttered. "Let her stay." He gasped for breath. "Tell me what you see, doctor."

The doctor set down his tools, and Ness swiped a cloth over his forehead. Ladon's flesh fought to close, but Ryuu and a Drelconian doctor who had worked with Ladon on Earth, held it open. Their muscles bulged with the effort.

"I see..." The doctor looked at Ryuu, and when he nodded, the man continued. "I see the symbiont is not dead. It has integrated with your spinal chord. I can't see much, but I suspect beneath I would find tentacles threading throughout your system leading from it. If I kill it or try to remove it, you will die also. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

Ladon went limp. He didn't even fight the pain. I thought he was dead until he took in a deep breath.

"Gentleman, you can let go," the doctor instructed. "We are done here."

Ryuu and the other doctor let go. Ladon's body healed, if slowly. His back looked like it had never been touched, except for the blood stains.

"Ryuu," Ladon whispered. He released my hand. My heart sank. *No, Ladon.*

Ryuu stepped around to crouch down next to Ladon's face. "What can I do for you, Ladon? Name it. Anything."

"Take her out. Get her ... find her someone who will love her and take care of her. Find her a planet to live on where she'll be happy and accepted."

I screamed. "Go to hell, Ladon! I'm not leaving." Someone grabbed me from behind, one of the guards. He hauled me toward the door. Tears choked me, and I couldn't see. "Wait, I can help you. You're not going to die. The human is lying! Ladon!"

I cinched my belt, and Shannon stepped into the room behind me. I spotted her pinched features in the mirror. "What do you want?"

She seemed to be looking for the right words.

I whirled around to face her. "I'm sure you heard what Ladon asked your husband to do, but don't worry. I'm not going to obligate Ryuu to find me somewhere to live." I rolled my eyes. "Or a husband of all things. I'm leaving this planet, and I'm not coming back, rest assured!"

Instead of placating her, I made her angry. "That's your answer? You're going to walk away from Ladon when he needs you the most? He's dying."

"That's right! He's dying. He made his choice clear. I'm to stay away from him. Well, I'm abiding by his wishes. You and Harmony can't have it both ways, Shannon. I can't stay away from him and help him to die, too. Don't come in here telling me what I'm supposed to do. Neither of you will be happy with whatever decision I make. Leave me the hell alone."

Dizziness hit me, and when I sank to a chair, I spotted Ladon's notebook. Inside was the formula for the miracle water. After finding it in among Ladon's things when he was still at the clinic, I knew what I needed to do. I would end this conflict before it began. The Desert Ice would not get another Drelconian body to play with.

When I lured them out of their creature hosts, I would light the bodies and leave the symbionts to roast in the sun. That was my plan at least. I didn't know how I would carry it out with so many of the aliens, but I would try. And then I would get Pierre to take me far away where no one had ever heard of humans or Drelconians.

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded, Tiam."

I didn't answer.

"I want to believe a miracle will happen, and Ladon will be okay." She moved to sit near me. I shifted things around in my pack to find something to do until I heard Pierre arrive. Shannon put her hand over mine. "We have our differences. I'm not going to pretend I have forgiven you for what you did to Harmony, but it is obvious to me how you feel about Ladon. Tiam, when is the last time you ate?"

"Don't worry about it." I jumped to my feet and marched across the room toward the door. I could wait for Pierre at the landing sight. "Don't pretend you care all of a sudden. I'm not going to waste away into nothing for love of Ladon."

"Okay, you get your strength up before you go to Orel-X Four."

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. "What did you say?"

She laughed. "You heard me. Ladon knows you. He told Ryuu and Draco about what you two figured out about how to defeat the Desert Ice. He also told him you'd try to do it on your own." She drew up beside me, amused that she had superior knowledge over me. "It's also why Pierre will not be coming."

"What the hell!" I faced her. "You didn't come here to be all understanding of me and Ladon. You came here to rub it in my face. I failed before I started."

She opened the door crossed her arms over her chest and walked out. "No, I meant what I said. The men will battle. You'll be left to cool your heels here until it's done, unless you do what I say. And first things, first. You eat!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ladon caught my arm when I was sneaking off the ship on Orel-X Four. Ryuu caught Shannon.

"Where do you think you're going, Tiam?" His eyes were tinged with blue. The symbiont was awake and probably fighting for control or at least for its life.

I swallowed the ache inside and placed my hands on my hips. "Where do you think *you're* going, Ladon? You're sick."

"I'm dying. I might as well do something useful before I go." He shrugged it off.

I wanted to slap him for being flippant when I could have wrapped myself around his body and cried my eyes out.

"Besides, I am needed to make the miracle water as you call it. The key ingredient is here."

Searching my satchel, I found his notebook and held it up. "I have your notes. I planned to make the potion. And I don't see what you're fussing about anyway, Ladon. You didn't have a problem before with us fighting together to beat the Desert Ice. You even took me with you underground to find them."

He looked away. "That was before..."

"Before what?"

"It's not important. We need to get moving. We need to have the formula made and be in place to attack." He strode over to the men unloading explosives. I followed but wasn't letting him get off easily. I wanted to know how he felt.

"Tell me, Ladon. Or I swear I'm going to be on the front lines leading the attack."

He whirled. "You're not! You are going to be on the ship out of the way like Shannon."

"Don't treat me like a human!"

"Why not? You wanted to be one not long ago."

I stood there puffing in anger, not knowing what to do or say to make him admit I meant more to him than a body to warm his bed. Maybe I was wrong in thinking it. His heart was dead. He hadn't looked twice at Ness. "Fine. Have it your way, you stupid idiot." To my horror, I started to cry and turned away.

He caught hold of me around the waist and drew me back against him. "I don't want to burden you, Tiam." He kissed my neck and left his lips pressed gently to my pulse there. "Why did this happen? Why did I have to fall in love with you and not be able to keep you?"

I cried harder. We sank to the ground with my head resting on his shoulder. He seemed stronger than he had been days ago. I wondered if it had anything to do with being on Orel-X Four where the symbiont had come from. Yet, Ladon was no less in control of himself.

Kissing my hair, he murmured words of love, unlike him. I drank it in. "I love you too, Ladon. Why did you tell Ryuu to take me away? Why would you deny us both the chance to spend this time together?"

He twisted me to face him. "Because I know what it's like to lose my lover to death, held in my arms. I lost my mind for a while. I tried to kill my own people, people I loved." He rested his forehead on mine. "I won't let it happen to you. I would much rather you see me strong and then go away. I hadn't meant to

admit how much I love you."

Anger rose in me, and I scrubbed the remnants of wetness from my face. "You have no right! You can't decide what I feel or assign Ryuu to arrange my life! I'm going to follow you until you're no more." My voice cracked on that last bit. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

"Tiam," he grumbled, "you're stubborn."

"So are you." I kissed him and looked over to where Ryuu was forcibly carrying his wife aboard the ship. I laughed. "You were foolish enough to love a Drelconian. You can't manhandle me unless you want fire up your ass."

He laughed. We kissed, our tongues entwining. Ladon's mouth was cold, but not so much that I couldn't stand it. My heart ached. When his temperature dropped dramatically, I drew back to stare in his eyes. They were all blue. He didn't appear to see me but turned his head to the horizon. We were on the opposite side of the mountain from where the humans were stationed planning our attack on the Desert Ice, when they were least vulnerable. It was risky, but necessary.

"They know we're here. They know what we're planning, and they're going to use the humans to protect them." Ladon put me from his lap and stood. "Ryuu!"

The silver dragon leader rushed over. "Damn, you need to get in the ship. We'll get the supplies you need, Ladon. Tiam can be your assistant if you need her. I know you wanted me to send her away, but—"

"No, listen to me." Ladon gripped his shoulder.

Ryuu winced, and his skin turned blue like he was being frozen to death. He yanked away staring at Ladon. I considered blasting my lover with fire, but I sensed he wasn't losing control.

Ladon continued. "The Desert Ice are connected to each other somehow. When we landed, the thing in me came alive. I hear its thoughts. It's sending messages to the others, telling them what we plan to do. I shouldn't have come. They are going to contact the humans and get them to interfere. Ryuu, we will slaughter the humans. You know that."

Ryuu paced, scratching his chin. His twin came over. "What's going on?" Draco asked.

"We've got a problem, brother," Ryuu told him.

"What?"

"Your ex-guard has become a spy for the enemy!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Darkness fell. Despite my protests, the others were going forward with their plan. Ryuu and Draco had determined a few human deaths were better than having the Drelconians in this galaxy slaves to the Desert Ice. Who knew how far they would go to find new species to bond with, to spread themselves across the universe like a cold storm.

Ladon had been pressed into making the miracle water, but he was confined to the ship. I almost laughed at his indignation on being treated like a woman. I had hung back, because I would not be involved with hurting the people who had been my friends, especially Lemuel and Sandy. I wanted to warn them the Drelconians were not taking prisoners, but I couldn't betray my people either. The whole situation left me unsettled.

"Ladon, we have to do something." I paced and flicked the curtain aside at intervals to look out on the night.

The explosions would start soon. The Drelconians would act as bait to lure the Desert Ice from the ground. When they left their hosts to attack, the passageways beneath the surface would be blown apart, making them uninhabitable. When the sun rose, even if the Desert Ice managed to get back into their sacs, the heat of high sun would destroy them. I did wonder why they didn't bind with the gray creature's spine like the one had with Ladon, but maybe the creatures weren't advanced enough to make it work.

About to question Ladon on it, I turned back to him. His eyes were blank, and he sat unmoving. I ran to him. "Ladon? Wake up. Please be okay. Ladon!"

"Shh, it's okay, Tiam." He pressed a hand to my cheek. I jumped away. "I get cold when it's active. I'm an oxymoron, an ice dragon." He laughed without humor. "They are coming."

"Who?"

"The humans."

I hurried over to glance out the window but saw no activity, not even lights up at the settlement. If the humans were coming, they were covert. I could not smell them. "Wait a minute, Ladon. I can't smell the humans. I'm beginning to think they aren't up at the settlement."

He shook his head and crossed to the door. The panel slid open, and he left the room with me hot on his trail. "The humans are not in the settlement, Tiam. They're in orbit. Thousands of them."

"What the hell?"

We reached the empty control room. All of the others had gone out into the night. When Ladon punched buttons and turned levers, dragon cries of pain shook the windows. On a monitor, large white blotches covered most of the black-dotted space. He didn't have to explain to me what it meant. I knew. The monitor confirmed what Ladon had said.

I slammed my fist on the button to lower the exit door and ran outside. Ladon followed. Up in the sky, ships descended at lightning speed. They swarmed the area over toward the base of the mountain, on the side where the Drelconians had planned their attack.

"I did this," Ladon cried out. "The creature in me ... we are one now. What he knows, I know. And vice versa. Tiam, we are far outnumbered, and the Drelconians had been ambushed. Already two-thirds of them are unconscious."

"You don't know that!"

He looked at me like I was crazy. I sank to the ground, my hand over my mouth. The Desert Ice had known all along what we planned, even before we arrived. They had called on more humans, and from the looks of those ships, the ones we had considered weak had made other allies, those with the technology to allow them to defend themselves. How did this happen? Our people were mated with humans. We had rescued them from extinction, like they had done for us.

Ladon dove on top of me. Lasers split the hull of our ship, and it exploded sending the two of us flying several feet away. I screamed. "Shannon!" I fought out from under Ladon. "She's still in there."

Rolling to my feet, I looked up to find not only Shannon but also Harmony banging on the glass of one of the windows with flames behind them. They were trapped. I ran toward the ship, but more lasers cut through the craft and lit the ground around us. Explosions made my footing unsteady.

I changed to a dragon to fly. "Ladon, can you change?" I shouted over the din.

"I'm not sure," he called out. A gash on his head let me know he had kept me from being injured. The spot was healing faster than it had before he had completely bonded with the symbiont.

"Well, try, and access the blue demon. Try to produce some ice!"

His eyes widened with the idea, and I took off not waiting to see if he could do it. I landed on the side of the ship with my claws piercing the metal. I tore into the hull and climbed inside as another volley of shots hit us.

Praying I wouldn't crush them to death, I lay down atop Shannon and Harmony until the worst was past. Before it did, a chill wind rushed over my back. I scanned the charred room. The fire was out. Frost coated the walls, and out through the hole was a winter wonderland all around the ruined ship.

"Wow!" I climbed off the women, relieved to find they were alive, if battered. I lowered my head. "Climb on." They did, and I whisked them to the ground.

"What the hell did this?" Harmony asked, slipping in ice. She and Shannon shivered, along with me when I changed back to humanoid.

Ladon hurried up to me and hugged me. I kissed his lips. Worry tinged his odd eyes. "We have to get out of here and regroup. The Drelconians have lost, and the Desert Ice know you are here with me."

"What?" Shannon's eyes were red and wetness covered her cheeks. I had forgotten she wasn't the battling kind, and couldn't imagine why she had come. "Where's Ryuu? Is he okay?" She was terrified for her husband.

I ignored her and turned to Ladon. "What's your plan?"

He nodded toward the mountain. "We fly them there before the Desert Ice get here, and you stay with the humans while I get a ride."

"What ride? Hold on, Ladon." I tugged his arm.

He took me in his arms. "Tiam, you're the only dragon left on this planet. They want you. And they want to study me to see how this thing and I have come together. Our best bet is to find reinforcements, search out the golden dragons, and make new allies ourselves. We underestimated the Desert Ice, and it got our people captured. If we don't move fast, every one of them will end up like me."

"You're not going to die," I said, allowing myself a moment of relief.

He shook his head. "No."

"Okay, let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ladon and I spent only a limited amount of time on Shale. The younger generation was in charge. All the adult men had gone down to fight the desert ice and were now prisoners. Draco's son Darke would be leader, and I hoped he was up for the challenge. While Shale was safe for the time being, it was only a matter of time before the Desert Ice learned to gain full control of the Drelconian bodies they would soon inhabit. I wrestled with whether to hope my people died during the struggle or to hope they would gain control like Ladon did.

He grew stronger as the weeks passed, but there were instances when his eyes went blank, his skin grew cold, and he didn't come out of it for hours. The symbiont fought for dominance, and I was terrified that one day, it would win.

"Tiam?" He stepped into the room behind me.

I closed the journal I had been writing in, in an attempt to gain perspective on what we were dealing with, and spun to face my lover. "Yes?"

"Pierre says we'll be landing in an hour. I thought I'd like some private time with my woman until then."

I laughed and curled into his strong hold. The man's muscles were more solid if it was possible. He caught hold of my tongue and sucked it. I groaned. He kissed along my cheek getting me hot. "You call me your woman, but you don't even have the decency to marry me."

"I told you, baby, I won't bond with you until I find a way to get this thing out of me. I won't give up. Meanwhile, we live as husband and wife. Isn't that good enough?"

"It will have to be." I wrapped my legs around him. "Anyway, we certainly don't want to have kids right now. I mean, who would the father be?"

He growled. "Not funny!"

We moved to the bed. Ladon dropped me on the soft surface to stand over me while undressing. I admired the chiseled expanse of his chest, the rippled stomach I longed to lick and waited until he joined me. Having never bothered to dress in the first place in the morning, I was wet and ready for him.

"I have a surprise for you." He grinned.

All kinds of naughty thoughts roamed through my head, but I thought better of making suggestions. There would be time enough to test out how Ladon felt about our sexual exploration, especially now that he would live. "What is it?"

With a flourish, he brought out from behind his back a cock in shape and size identical to his but made of ice.

My eyes widened. "Wow, nice! How did you make that, Ladon?" I cast him a suspicious glance.

He laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know? Do you want to test it, baby? Oh, and this isn't for your sweet pussy. This is for your ass."

I nearly came. "I'm too hot for that, Ladon." But did I ever want to try.

"Modest, aren't you?" He grinned. "Turn over, woman. Let me show you how I can pleasure you."

I turned, and he knelt on the bed behind me and lifted my rear in the air. He gave me a stroke and a slap across the ass cheek to get me started. I whimpered for more.

"I have to lower your body temperature. I can do it from here." He slid a finger into my slick pussy. My muscles gripped him and worked his finger like we hadn't made love most of the night before. "Or I can stick my tongue in your mouth. Which will it be?"

"Uh, what do you mean lower my body temperature?"

He climbed over me and spooned me to nuzzle the side of my face. His hand slid beneath me, and he tweaked one of my nipples. I pushed back. His cock teased my entrance.

"I promise I won't hurt you. If I lower it, you won't melt the ice fast, and I can fuck your pussy while

running the ice dick in your ass. You want it right, baby?"

"Yes!"

Who needed any further explanation? Ladon parted my lips with his, circling, chilling my warmth until the cold spread throughout me. His teeth grazed my cheek, around to my earlobe, and then to my neck. All the while, I rotated my hips wanting him to fill me, but needing the bliss he offered to go on. A dreamy state descended over me while he ran his palms along my sides to my hips and kept them in place.

He rained nips at intervals along my spine, down to my ass. "Open your legs, Tiam, and lay your head down." I obeyed. When his chilled tongue lapped at my cream, I stuffed a pillow to my lips. I screamed into it. Goose bumps broke out over my skin, something I had never experienced before. Ladon pushed his tongue deep inside me and slipped it out. I pumped his mouth.

My orgasm rolled over me, and I filled his mouth. He lapped it all and returned for more. I couldn't bear it.

"Ladon, do it now."

He threaded his thick cock into my pussy. I reared back until I reached the hilt. He pushed me forward until only the head remained buried. I thought I would faint when he placed the ice dick at my ass opening, and I clenched my jaw. It glided in. I shouted through another orgasm.

Ladon wrapped a strong arm around my hips to hold me still. He pushed his rod into my passage while guiding the ice cock in my rear. My body went limp, but he didn't stop. He pounded my ass, ground deep, and made my breasts bounce. I pinched my nipples and bit my lip. The sensations were too intense. The tight fit made me feel like I couldn't handle it, but his thrust, his roar, and my clenching muscles took me along for the orgasm of my life.

"Tiam, baby, you're going to make me come."

"Come, Ladon!"

The door opened, and Pierre rushed in. "Is everything okay—" He stopped. I glanced at him through my hair, but neither I nor Ladon said a word to him. He didn't move. He seemed mesmerized by Ladon's body curved over mine like we were welded together. "I should go," Pierre muttered.

"Stay," Ladon told him. "See how many times I can make her come for me."

I gasped and looked back at Ladon. His eyes were a cloud of blue. Steam rose from his lips. He flipped me over to my back, and I watched in hungry fascination as he made a new ice dick for me and me alone.

Epilogue

I lay in Ladon's arms on a strange new planet with creatures we had never seen or heard of. But Pierre had heard golden dragons had been seen on this world, so here we were.

"I feel guilty, Ladon."

He stroked my arm and kissed the side of my head. "Why?"

"I feel like we abandoned Ryuu, Draco, Tav, and the others. Did we do enough? Was our decision to leave Darke in charge of Shale the right one? He's young, and what if the others don't respect him because he's half human?"

"Trust me, his mother will support him and stand up to anyone who dares question her son's authority. But there was nothing else we could do. The humans far outnumbered us, and with the Desert Ice, we didn't have much of a choice. We've always believed there were other dragons who escaped Drelcon besides the ones following Orochi. We will find them, and we will make alliances to help us. I don't want to hurt the humans. I want us to find peace some way, but we're not going to have it until we stand strong, united."

I sighed. "You're right. Well, we can't spend all day in bed. We have worlds to save."

The End

About the Author

Brenda Steele loves all things out of the ordinary. She writes to gratify the cravings of her own sexual drive, and then for her dear readers. Hopefully, the two won't be far apart and all who read her work will come away satisfied. Look for her hot "My Lover" series and the continuation of her "Accidental Mates" series.

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