

SAVIOR

A Throne of Fire Short

Erin Duffin

Chapter 1

The girl's strange eyes bore into mine. Her hands were on my cheeks as she studied them with the same intensity I was studying hers. I'd never seen anyone with eyes so round. It was hard to imagine she could see anything at all through such small spheres. She was just a little younger than me, with straight brown hair and a slender figure. She was taller than me by a few inches, though, and moved with a grace and confidence I had yet to find.

"Cynthia!" Carol, her mother, barked, relaying something I couldn't understand. The girl looked over at her without taking her hands off my face, replying to her comment. My eyes darted to the woman's stern face. I didn't want to cause any trouble for the girl, so I gently pulled her hands away and stepped back. I let the small bit of training I had take over and retreated to the wall to stand unobtrusively. Cynthia didn't look frightened as she hopped off the table where she'd been sitting and strode toward her mother. She gave Carol a quick peck on the cheek, causing her mother's stern features to soften before she continued on to her bedroom. Cynthia called to me from her door, waved, and closed it behind her.

I envied the relationship they had. I'd never kissed my mother on the cheek. From an early age, I learned never to show her any affection she didn't solicit, as it was unwanted by the burdens that were her children—me especially. My older sisters had already been paired off into suitable matches. All except Lavender, mother's favorite, and until recently, the one with the best chance at a status-climbing match that would put my mother as close to ruling as she would ever get. I'd always been the disappointment. I could only imagine what she thought of me denouncing my birthright and coming to serve Zane Blackskin. She had not spoken to me since I left Greenwing Castle. A relief in many aspects, but part of me feared she was plotting some retaliation that would cause me a great deal of pain. I was a possession to her. The last stone she could throw into the arena of political power to serve her ambitions. But I'd taken that opportunity from her when I'd abruptly left the royal court. Only time would tell what punishment she dreamt up for me.

The hour was late; I had the night shift. I knew Hudson chose me for this job because he didn't want to spare any of his combat trained guards for such a low-level assignment. I knew he would have hated to be in my shoes, but he didn't know how content I was to be free of my family. I didn't want to fight. I didn't care if it was to save my own life or the lives of my family—not that they deserved it. I didn't want to bite or claw at another dragon until they fell from the sky. I simply wanted to be put on these so-called low priority assignments and live out the rest of my days. Of course, I would defend Zane to the death. He deserved at least that much from me.

Once all the lights from the rooms went out, and I was sure my charges were asleep, I moved to the fireplace and stoked up the flames, then settled myself on the floor. I pulled a book from my bag that I'd borrowed from the library in the barracks. I suppose in the grand sense of the word, it wasn't a real library; at least not like the ones I was used to visiting in the various castles and palaces around the realm. Just two shelves in the common room crammed full of books of almost every genre. It was rare that I ever had the opportunity to sit quietly, turning the pages of a book of my choosing.

I was fortunate enough to find a book on *The Tales of Minton, The First Dragon*. With the alignment approaching, I thought it would be a good read. I was a little less than halfway through the book when a noise coming from one of the bedrooms drew my attention. The door opened and Hunter, the Apophis-made dragon, came out, a thick blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders. He moved slowly with a slight hunch. I stood as he approached, setting my book on the hearth. I

wasn't sure what to do. He didn't seem like he needed my assistance in walking, though his movements were careful and deliberate. He was managing just fine on his own. I hoped he didn't need anything pressing, because I wouldn't be able to understand him if he did.

I crossed the room, meeting him halfway and waited nervously, unsure of his needs or my ability to fill them. In all honesty, I wanted to do the right thing and help him, but I just wasn't sure I could do anything for him. I was raised as a royal; what did I know about providing care for the sick? He paused, giving me a confident smile, then he spoke to me. I wasn't sure why, as he knew I couldn't understand his language. His voice had a gentle strength that negated his slow movements. I cocked my head slightly, and he pointed to the fire.

As he started to move, drawing closer to the warmth of the flames, I took a step to get out of his way and accidentally stepped on the tail of the blanket he was dragging. His foot caught on the blanket, trapped by my weight, and he started to pitch forward. I reached out to grab him to prevent his fall, but my hand slipped off. Twisting, his long arms reached out, releasing the blanket and wrapping around my waist. He pulled me close in an effort to keep himself upright, but I had never been as graceful as my sister, and we both toppled to the floor.

For a moment, his arms were tight around me, my body pressed against his in a way I'd never felt a man's body before. There was a strength in his grip that told me in his healthier days, he was quite strong. I suddenly realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. My cheek was resting against his bare skin, breathing in his unfamiliar scent. The warmth of his body was wrapped all around me, and for several seconds, he didn't let go, and I didn't move. Then I felt him stroke my back. The feel of his sure, nimble fingers gliding over my body sent a strange thrill to my system. I'd never been so close to a member of the opposite sex, and I'd certainly never touched the bare chest of one.

Embarrassment, shock, and fear all entered my mind at the same time, and I reacted like that of a frightened child. I sprang away from him, disentangling myself, and scooted back as if he possessed some otherworldly power to destroy me. But there was something so exciting in being that close to him, I felt compelled to linger. My eyes drifted to his chiseled abs, stirring a desire to touch him again.

I knew it was wrong, even dangerous. There had been a royal two years ago who I had taken a fancy to, but my mother didn't think his status was worthy of her. I'd tried to hide my inclination toward him, but Mother was a shrewd, observant woman. She watched everyone, me in particular, especially around possible distractions, as she put it. Lex was a viscount from Whitetail, who had given me a piece of dragon glass with a note asking me to meet him in the garden. My heart raced with the anticipation of the meeting, my cheeks flushing at the thought of the encounter. When I arrived, he was not happy to see me. He spit in my face, then called me the most awful names.

My mother was waiting for me when I returned to my room in tears. She smacked me so hard my neck cracked. She proceeded to execute her favorite form of punishment by placing a quell around my neck, then ordered me to make cuts on my arms for each infraction she thought I'd made. There were ten on this occasion. When her voice was hoarse from yelling, she left, locking me in my room. With the quell around my neck, I was unable to heal myself. Normally, this punishment would last for a number of hours. My attraction to Lex had been a major infraction, so she left me in my room for three days with open wounds.

Hunter said something from where he remained on the floor, looking at me, his tone flirtatious and his eyes confident. I stood, straightening my tabard, and flipped my hair over my shoulder as I glared at him, my royal upbringing coursing through me. The sensation of being in

his arms unnerved me, and I felt unduly defensive. Not to mention, the guilt I felt for this sudden desire trying to wiggle its way into my fingertips.

I don't know why I reacted as I did, but for a moment, words I was raised with raged in my mind. *Bumbling ingrate! How dare an abomination like you lay a finger on me!* Vicious, demeaning commands that only a Greenwing could wield power over threatened to cross my lips. I clamped a hand over the offensive weapon before I could harm the poor man. Turning away, I squeezed my eyes tight as my mother's voice played out a tirade of assaults in my head. The image of Hunter sticking his hand in the fire, or with a knife sticking out of his palm were all too vivid in my mind. How was I supposed to escape these awful things?

What was wrong with me? How could I even consider harming him or trying to control him in some way? For what? He didn't mean to make me fall too; it really was my fault anyway. What did it say about me that my first instinct was to lash out at him? Maybe there was no hope for me. Maybe there was no way to redeem myself. Was running away from my mother's control not enough? Had she already changed me into the same monster she was?

Something touched my face, causing my eyes to spring open. Hunter was standing right in front of me with a look of concern etched into his stricken features. This man was dying, and he was worried about *me*.

He took my hands and lightly tugged them away from my mouth. I was shocked.

He smiled at me.

What was he doing?

I shook my head, trying to make him understand that he shouldn't be concerned about me, that I was not the one in any sort of danger here. Holding my hands, he mumbled something over and over, creating a rhythmic pattern that would have been quite comforting if I had been a normal dragon who deserved to be comforted. But I wasn't a normal dragon, and I certainly didn't deserve to be comforted by someone who was dying. Much less, one I'd just considered harming. If he knew what I almost did to him, he would not be standing this close to me.

"Stop," I told him as I pulled away. I took a deliberate step back, watching as his arms fell to his sides. His bare chest seemed to consume my view. Part of me wanted to be close to him, to touch him again, to pretend I wasn't me. But I knew who and what I was. I knew I didn't belong in his arms, or any others for that matter. I had no business even considering the possibility.

He stepped back half a step, but he was still too close.

"Laberta." He knew my name. It was one of the few words I could understand from him. He knew names, along with "yes" and "no."

"No. Stay away from me," I told him coldly. "If you knew what was good for you, you would stay far away."

He looked at me, confused, and a little hurt. For some reason, he was trying to apologize to me, as if anything that had happened was his fault. He didn't know what I was. He didn't understand that I was angry with myself for almost hurting him. He thought he could trust me. He trusted the queen, and she'd told him we wouldn't harm him or his family, that they were safe here, but they weren't safe. Not around me. No one was.

"No. If you knew what I almost did, you would hate me," I tried to explain. He gestured to the chair with one hand and reached for mine with the other in an effort to lead me over. I pulled back. His eyes were full of something I didn't deserve, so trusting and sure. "Hate me," I ordered with the full power of my Greenwing abilities infused into each word.

A simple command. I'd seen my mother use her power on other Apophis-made dragons, so I knew it would work. The language barrier was not an issue when using our power.

Hunter's hand, the one that had been reaching for mine, shifted and connected with my tabard. I felt the fabric bunch in his tight grip, his eyes shifting to a lethal glare. His jaw flexed, and the muscles across his bare chest rippled. He pushed me back until I was pressed against the wall, his free hand coming up next to my face to use the wall for support. His voice was a low, guttural mess of vitriol and malice. I didn't need to understand the words he was saying to know his meaning. His breathing was erratic. I had no idea what to expect, but didn't I deserve whatever he was about to do?

Without warning, he pulled back sharply, as if I'd smacked him. The grip he had on my tabard loosened and he turned, leaning heavily on the wall. I stepped away from him, quickly moving to the other side of the room, out of the light from the fire. After a few moments, he seemed to catch his breath. When he stood upright, he looked around, and when his eyes landed on me, he glared angrily, but his strength was gone now. I could tell he wouldn't cross the room to try and attack me. I was not worth the effort. Instead, he stumbled to a chair next to the fire and collapsed into it. For several minutes, he sat there scowling at me, but even that seemed to wear him out after a while. Once he was asleep, I picked up his blanket and placed it over him, covering him as best I could without disturbing him. I spent the rest of the night in the darkened corner, waiting for Grace to relieve me.

Grace had flown over from Redblood several days before, specifically to watch over Hunter and his family, since she was one of the few dragons in the realm who could speak English. When she arrived, Hunter was already awake, and immediately launched into a tirade about me. I could tell by the way he flung his arm in my direction and said my name. Grace was a shrewd member of the guard. She knew instantly that something was not right.

Grace tried to calm him, but he would have none of it.

"What did you do?" she demanded, turning her attention to me.

"Nothing," I replied, keeping my face blank.

"Then how come he can't explain what you've done to upset him?"

I looked away from her, feeling ashamed, but not enough to admit what I'd done.

Grabbing my arm, she urged, "Listen, the king and queen have taken the entire guard to Blackskin Castle. Everyone left is pulling double duty just to keep Bluescale safe. There is no one else who can protect the queen's friend while they are away, so you better find a way to get along with him."

She was right.

I needed to pay more attention to my duties than to my personal feelings and insecurities. But I didn't want to set Hunter right in front of Grace. I didn't want her to know what I'd done, because it was just another thing for me to be ashamed of. I was sure she suspected I had used my power on him, but she had no proof. Hunter could live the day hating me. If my magic didn't wear off by this evening, then I would take back my order when I returned for my next shift.

Shaking her arm off, I strode past her and out the door. I supposed it was a good thing I'd been raised a royal and not a commoner, because I probably would have caved and undid the magic I had done on Hunter right then, showing Grace that I deserved to be reprimanded for my actions. But as it was, I didn't want to suffer any more consequences.

As a Greenwing, I knew manipulating emotions was more powerful than the simple ordering of a task. If I'd just used my power to send Hunter away, he would have simply let me go, most likely returned to his room to sleep the night away, and no one would have suspected what I'd done to him. After considering my actions, I could only pray that Grace didn't tell Zane.

He was kind enough to give me this opportunity, and here I was, using my power against an innocent. After what Lavender put him through, I was sure he would have an issue with my actions. If he sent me away from here...

The thought turned my stomach. I couldn't go back to Greenwing, so my only other option would be the Smothered Sisters. As brave as I'd sounded when I laid my options out to Zane, I really didn't want to join their order.

When I returned to the barracks, I could hardly sleep, my guilt eating at me in familiar ways. Only this time, I'd acted freely instead of being forced into it. The knowledge that I was capable of harming another gave me terrible nightmares. I'd always thought it was my mother and sister who were the evil ones. Was I only pretending to be offended by their actions? If I was capable of hurting Hunter, what else was possible? Was this just the beginning? Did my mother and sister start out like this too?

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By the time I was set to relieve Grace, I was anxious to find a moment alone with Hunter so I could release him. I knew it wouldn't undo what I'd done—that was a lost cause—but I hoped it was a start at making amends.

Hatred was a dangerous emotion to manipulate, as there was no telling what a person would do when they were angry enough. I had no idea what sort of person Hunter was when he was angry. Last night, he'd simply sat in his chair, glaring at me until he fell asleep, but now he'd had all day to work himself into a state over me. Not knowing what to expect made walking up to his suite a journey ripe with trepidation. Not only did I have to face Hunter, Grace would be there as well, and depending on what sort of person Hunter was when he was angry, Grace could be my greater concern. She could harm me more than Hunter ever could by reporting her suspicion to Zane once he returned. In my opinion, that was far worse than anything Hunter could think of as retaliation.

When I knocked on the door to Hunter's family suite, Grace answered and stepped out into the hall, pushing me back as she closed the door behind her.

"I don't care that you are royal," she said in a low, severe tone. "You will undo whatever you did to that boy. And if you don't want me to tell the king, you'll owe me a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"I'm going to put your power to much better use. Why you would waste it on this Apophis-made dragon is beyond me. But if you like to toy with people, I have just the thing in mind."

"Please don't—"

"Do you want the king to find out about this? You know what he did to your sister. Do you want to end up in The Limit too?"

"No."

"Don't even think about using your influence against me, because I've made arrangements in case you decide to do so." She walked away, leaving me feeling horrified. Running away from my mother wasn't good enough; I needed to escape myself too. I wondered what she meant by "arrangements?" Had she told someone else about what I'd done? Would they now hold it over my head and force me to use it to fulfill their purpose? Was this all I was good for, using my power to manipulate and abuse? Wasn't that what I did to Hunter last night? Maybe I just needed to accept that I was only good for one thing—I was designed to hurt others.

Reluctantly, I slipped into the suite. I had a duty to fulfill, and I needed to undo what I'd done to Hunter. I found him sitting next to the fire, and the only member of his family in the sitting room when I entered. It was a relief I could get this over with as soon as possible, and then I could go to my corner and wait out my shift.

He was working a knife around a small piece of wood, concentrating so intently on his task, he didn't notice me until I quietly called his name, as I was too scared to say it loudly. If he started yelling at me and drew the attention of his family, I was afraid they would witness me releasing him from my magic. I was already in enough trouble as it was; I didn't want to add to it. His hands froze in place, his knuckles turning white around the knife in his hand. Slowly, his eyes met mine. I knew it was foolish to hope my power would have worn off by now, as I'd put a lot into that one little command. There was only one way to set this right. I knew I deserved the hatred in his eyes, and every malicious thought I was sure was running through his head. It was a testament to his character that he held his tongue, his jaw flexing with the effort. His teeth were clenched so tightly together, I was sure it was causing him pain.

I approached him with my hands up in surrender. I needed to look him in the eye again if I was going to rectify this properly. That meant he would have to let me get close to him.

"Hunter, please," I urged softly.

He turned his face away from me.

I dropped to my knees in front of him, putting my hand on his cheek to force his eyes to mine. He transferred the wood he was carving to the same hand as his knife, his now free hand coming around my wrist to pull it away. Once he was in control, he looked at me as he started to demand something in a harsh, gravelly voice.

"Don't hate me," I begged over his vitriol. "I'm sorry I used my power on you. Don't hate me. Just feel however you want to feel."

His rant stopped instantly, his features going slack in confusion as he reeled from being released. I'd seen it before, so I knew it would take him a moment to readjust. I held still as I watched him closely. He would figure out what I'd done and would now hate me all on his own. Or he could brush off the incident, unable to work out the changes in his own mind.

My heart raced as he continued to recover from the effects. It was a strange holding pattern where I waited for him to move, and he stared back at me as if he couldn't figure out what I was. His gaze became too intense, so I slowly started to pull away from him. He seemed to accept my withdrawal, his hand on my wrist dropping to the arm of the chair, allowing me to rock back on my heels and stand. I turned, prepared to retreat to my corner, but was met with Cynthia. Her hands were firmly planted on her hips as she launched into a thorough reprimand the likes of which made me glad I didn't understand.

Hunter stood, and I felt his movements more than I saw them. He was inches from my back, his voice soft.

"Cynthia," was all I could make out as he tried to soothe his sister, but she was having none of his efforts. Her fury quickly turned to him, and his tone escalated to match hers. When Cynthia stepped closer, I found myself sandwiched between their aggression, and without warning, she turned back to me, demanding something I couldn't understand. I raised my hands in surrender and shook my head in apology. I knew Grace must have told her I did something to Hunter. I knew they were angry with me for that, but how could I apologize without the words to do so?

"I'm sorry," I pleaded, trying to put remorse into my voice.

Hunter said something else to her that she didn't like, because her hands suddenly flashed out and collided with my shoulders, shoving me into him. I stumbled back, stepping on his bare

foot, and when he jerked away, I was pitched forward. In an effort to stop myself from flying at Cynthia, I leaned back, off balance, and ended up falling back against Hunter instead, suddenly feeling a sharp pain in my back. I gasped in shock, trying to get away from him, but his arm quickly came around my waist, holding me to the pain.

Hunter held his hand out in front of me to show Cynthia before barking something out at her. Turning, she ran to her parent's door. I knew these events happened, but all I could focus on was the blood coating Hunter's outstretched hand. I hated the sight of blood, especially my own. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I felt sick to my stomach. I needed to heal myself, but Hunter was still holding me in place. When I thrashed against him, my back ripped with a new pain. I dropped to my knees, bringing Hunter down with me since his hold on me was still too tight.

He pulled his arm out from under me, releasing his hold, and I instantly tried to get away from him. As I struggled to stand, he sprang on top of me, pinning my body to the floor just as his father, Hank, began to rush over. Hunter launched into a rushed slew of words. His mother, Carol, came out next with Cynthia.

When Hank reached me, Hunter shifted his weight and I tried to stand, but Hank pressed a firm hand on my back while Hunter pinned my legs. I was helpless against them. The more I struggled, the more of them held me down. I gave up any sort of fight when all four of them had their hands on me. I don't know why I never thought to transform into my dragon to force my way free. It must have been the years under my mother's rule that kept the thought from my mind, or it was the sight of my blood that sent me into an illogical state of panic.

As I lay on the floor, panting for breath, Hank spoke in a calm voice. Now that I'd given up, he released the pressure on my back. Carol stood and moved around the room, gathering a few items before returning and handing one of them to Hank. She also had a small orange tube that shook with a clatter of small objects inside. After opening the bottle, she shoved something into my mouth. Instantly, the bitter taste hit my tongue and I spit the object out. She then said something to Hank before shoving another of the small, foul things into my mouth, but this time, she placed her hand firmly over it so I couldn't spit it out. At the same moment, Hank did something that shot a sharp pain through my back. I gasped in response, and inadvertently sucked in a breath. As I did, it hit the back of my throat, and I ended up swallowing the thing.

Once that was done, Carol removed her hand and placed it on my head, stroking my hair out of my face. It was strange to feel her finger caress my forehead and gently move over my temple. It wasn't long before I started to feel strange. My head spun, and I suddenly felt tired. I couldn't keep my eyes open, and I eventually succumbed to the sleep that became impossible to fight.



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I woke slowly, forcing my way out of sleep, becoming conscious of each sense one at a time. The first thing I registered was a dull ache in my back, then something heavy pressing my legs down, securing me in place. I cracked my eyes open and found I was lying on my stomach on the sofa in the sitting room. Pulling my arms in, I then pushed up on my elbows so I could look around.

Hunter was sleeping in a chair next to me, one of his long, heavy legs spread across the sofa, across my upper thighs. I tried to wiggle free without waking him, but when I moved, a stabbing pain shot through my back, causing me to whimper.

His eyes popped open and he jerked awake, pulling his leg back at the same time. Finally released, I managed to stand. As soon as I was on my feet, the room spun around me, and I had to reach out to the back of Hunter's chair for support. While I was still trying to catch my breath, his arm came around me, supporting me. I pointed to the bathroom and he guided me there. Once I reached the door, I forced myself to step away from him and stand upright for a moment before pushing my hand against his chest as I closed the door. Fortunately, he stepped back, leaving me alone.

I leaned against the counter as I lifted my shirt so I could heal my wound. I was surprised to find a torn-up bed sheet wrapped around my midsection. Unwinding the long length of fabric was a chore, and by the time the thing was a pile of blue at my feet, I was sweating and breathing hard. The room was spinning again, and I had to rest my head against the cool wall for several seconds before I could gather enough grit to blow the healing fire I needed into my palm.

The wound was in a hard place to reach. I pulled my shirt up with one hand and tried to reach around with the other to cover the wound with my healing fire, but I missed, and the delicate flames smothered under my hand, leaving me in pain. I tried again, this time twisting my body as far around as I could. Biting my lower lip as the pain intensified, I lost my balance, and my hand slid across the counter, knocking several items over, but I still couldn't reach it.

My head and back were throbbing. The door opened as I blew a third round of healing fire into my palm.

"Laberta, no!" Hunter ordered, rushing toward me and grabbing my wrist, preventing me from healing myself.

His eyes bore into mine with a wild fear that I couldn't comprehend.

"Hunter." I tried to soothe him, but my voice came out weak, like I was begging him for something instead of trying to reassure him. It then occurred to me he could do it, because he was an Apophis-made dragon. I tried to pass the ball of fire to him, but he jerked away from me.

"No," he commanded, followed by a slew of other words I couldn't understand.

"Please," I pleaded with him as I attempted to pass the fire to him again. This time, instead of backing away, he grabbed my wrist and twisted my hand until the fire fell to the floor, and proceeded to stomp it out with his bare foot. "Why are you doing this?" I asked, knowing I wouldn't receive an answer. Had using my power on him angered him this much that he wanted me to suffer?

I was sure I deserved it, but that didn't mean I would submit to him forcing this pain on me. "Don't move," I commanded him. Instantly, he froze. I blew another ball of healing fire into my palm and passed it to him, his eyes growing wide with dread as he watched my actions. It was obvious he didn't understand what healing fire was. In his mind, he thought the fire I was passing him would burn him, but I needed his help, and there was no way for me to explain what was happening. "Press this over my wound."

I turned my back to him as I held my shirt up with one hand, while bracing the other against the counter so I wouldn't fall over. Then I felt the sweet relief of the healing fire spread over my wound and burn away the mortal injury. I sighed as the pain evaporated.

Hunter gave a sound of shock, and then I felt his fingers glide over the spot where my wound had been. He probed the area for a moment before resting his palm on my back. His prolonged contact was inappropriate, but I didn't care. I was trying not to sink to the floor as the room spun around me. I didn't know what was wrong with me, as I'd never been sick like this before.

Wrapping his arm around me, I leaned into him for support as he walked me back to the sofa. I knew I should report my condition to another of the guard so they could take over, but when Hunter lightly pushed me down, I realized I lacked the will to protest. I stretched out and was asleep before Hunter settled back into his chair.

The next time I woke was to Hunter's hand firmly on my shoulder as he shook me urgently. He didn't wait for me to come fully to consciousness before he was pulling me from the warmth and comfort of the sofa. He rushed me to the bathroom, shoved me inside, then closed the door. I stood there disorientated for a moment, until I heard Grace's voice as she reported for duty. For a moment, I was panicked. What would she do when she found out I'd slept through my shift? She was already set to blackmail me into using my power for her, so what would she do once she learned about this mishap as well?

As I looked around the powder room, I recalled the urgency in which Hunter had ushered me in here. He'd been trying to make sure Grace didn't know.

He was trying to protect me.

The thought was shocking.

After everything I'd done to him, he was trying to help me?

I turned to the mirror, hating the green eyes looking back at me. I took in my appearance and realized Hunter had been right to shove me in here. My hair was messy, and my eyes looked heavy. I ran my fingers through my hair several times to smooth it out before splashing water on my face, scrubbing the sleep from the corners of my eyes. I tucked in my shirt and adjusted my tabard to hide the hole and bloodstains.

There was still a dull, persistent throbbing in my head, but I was feeling much better, and the room no longer spun. Holding my head high, I exited the bathroom. When I went back to the sitting room, I found Hunter sprawled out on the sofa where I'd slept, looking like he'd been there all night. His shirt was off, and the covers were slung haphazardly across his waist.

I looked at him, but he was looking only at Grace, speaking to her in a flirtatious tone, winking and flashing her his winning smile. One of his hands glided across his bare chest, accenting his strong physique, and Grace giggled. I couldn't believe it. She was twice his age, but whatever he was saying to her, she found flattering. For some reason, this hurt. My heart constricted as the small bit of something I'd felt at the thought of Hunter helping me died.

I said her name, but it sounded too timid, too unsure. Not like a royal at all.

She looked over at me, unashamed that she'd just been flirting with her charge. "Perfect timing. I need you here an hour early tonight."

"Why?"

"My friend will arrive today, and I'll need your influence for that little job."

"What are you doing?"

"You are relieved. Now, get some sleep. I need you nice and rested for tonight." I started to say something else, but she snapped, "Do you think I'm stupid enough to tell you anything?"

“No,” I admitted.

“Then I suggest you take your leave.”

Chapter 2

There was a buzz at roll call. Tonight, Blackskin Castle would fall under attack if King Titus didn't surrender. There was a nervous excitement running through those of us who remained at Bluescale, as the only thing we could do was wait for news. What if they failed? What if they succeeded? What would Balaan do next? I was sure that even if they managed to remove King Titus from his post, Balaan would find other means, other allies with which to attack us. I knew this wouldn't be the end of the fighting, but hopefully, it would give our side a much-needed victory.

Against my better judgement, I showed up for my shift an hour early as Grace instructed. I didn't want to use my power for her, but I also didn't want to end up in The Limit next to Lavender. Zane had been lenient with me when I'd confessed my sins to him, and helped him seek his justice against her. He wouldn't be so gracious when he found out I was still using my power to manipulate others. I couldn't let him find out about what I'd done to Hunter, as he was a personal friend of the queen's. I knew it wouldn't sit well with either of them.

Grace was waiting for me when I reached Hunter's suite. When she saw me coming down the hall, she marched toward me, gave a terse "Come on," and continued past me. I followed her down to the lower levels of the castle, but when we started the descend to the vaults, I was sick to my stomach. I could already see where this was going.

"What are we doing down here?" I hissed.

"You are not here to ask questions. You're here to do as you're told."

Just before we got to the vault area, one of the guards stepped out in front of us. I didn't recognize him. He wasn't among the guard I'd seen each day at roll call and duty assignments.

"This her?" he grunted, looking me over.

"A full-blood Greenwing," Grace assured him.

"Are you sure she's on board?" he asked her, ignoring me as if I meant nothing.

"She'll do as she's told, or I'll tell the king what a naughty little beast she's been. And from what I heard he did to her sister, I'm sure he won't tolerate the same from this one either."

"It was an accident. I didn't mean—"

"You accidentally forced the queen's dear friend into an irrational rage?"

I swallowed hard. She was right, there would be stiff consequences if the queen and king ever found out about what I'd done, so I followed them to the vaults. Most of the vault doors were in one main hall, but there was one door that was around the corner from the others, out of sight from the majority of the guards. One lone guard watched us approach. There was no alarm in his eyes, only curiosity. We were all members of the guard to him, but I'm sure it was unusual to see so many unassigned members in the vaults at one time.

"What's going on?" he questioned.

Grace turned to me. "Tell him to hand over his key, then to stand over there facing the wall."

I gave the order, ashamed as he unclipped the key from his belt, then obediently placed it in my waiting palm. He turned to face the opposite wall, his nose only an inch from the stone.

Grace snatched the key up and used it to open the vault. Her and her friend went in, pulling sacks from under their tabards as they entered the room. I followed, more out of curiosity than anything else. This vault was smaller than the others. Smaller than the one's I'd been in at Greenwing, but it was full. There was only a six-foot square where the door opened that was free of gold, but the rest of the room was crammed full of the shiny ore. Most of the time, I enjoyed

being around gold, but the sight of this glittering stone turned my stomach as I watched Grace and her friend get to work scooping it into each sack. Once the sacks were full, they each pulled out another. I couldn't believe I was allowing this to happen, but the sight of Lavender lying on the sand floor of The Limit had me keeping my mouth shut.

“What are you doing?”

I whirled around to see the guard I'd just ordered to hand over his key. He was no longer standing against the wall, but hovering in the doorway, and no longer under my control. Grace's friend reacted quickly. Pulling a knife from his belt, he lunged at the guard. I watched his horrified expression as he tried to fend off the attack. The knife went into his arm, his gold blood mixing with the ore.

“Stop!” I cried out to the both of them. Everyone in the room froze, and I knew instantly what had happened. I hadn't put enough force into my order. He was a strong-willed dragon who broke free of my command, and was now being attacked. I was sure the man Grace brought with her would have no qualms about killing this innocent guard, or me for that matter. He would leave our bodies in this vault to rot.

Finish filling your bag,” I told Grace, who went to her task while I grabbed the other sack and topped it off, tying it closed and handing it over to her companion. “This is what you came for, now put your knife away, take your gold, and leave.”

I was almost surprised when they both followed my orders. A part of me feared they would be able to overcome my power as well. Grace glared at me, but said nothing. Once they were gone, I healed the guard's wound. His hand latched onto my arm in a paralyzing grip. I could feel where each of his blunt fingers dug into my bicep, squishing the muscle under the pressure of his fierce hold.

“You're not going to get away with this,” he growled.

I blinked back the tears that wanted to fall. I needed to focus because I *had* to get away with this. “You will return to your post and forget that you had any disruption tonight.” He started to turn away from me to follow the order, but I grabbed his arm, refocused my energy, and repeated the command for him to forget, just in case I left any room for error the first time around.

I reached the suite where the Apophis-made dragon and his family were staying a little after my normal shift time. I could see concern on the faces of the family inside, but I had no idea what was wrong. Were they worried because I was late? Had Grace told them something that would turn them against me? I couldn't be sure. I didn't have the energy to deal with trying to communicate with them, so I went straight to my post in the corner and stood as quietly and discreet as possible, while trying not to let the night's events torment me.

The family sat around their table, talking quietly, occasionally giving me apprehensive looks. I tried to ignore them as best I could, having no idea what Grace could have possibly told them. One by one, they finally went to bed. Hunter first, followed by Cynthia, then Carol and Hank.

I prayed for the war to end, and for Grace to be sent back to her own kingdom, far away from me. My guilt was eating at me. Zane had been so kind and generous when he took me in and gave me this job. I owed him my life, and here I was, stealing from him. What if Grace didn't stop there? What if she wanted something else from me? What if next time, someone really died? I couldn't let that happen; I couldn't allow there to be a next time. I needed to find a way to fight Grace, but how would I do that?

The night my mother forced me to help her and Lavender put Zane under that awful spell played over in my mind. The look in Zane's eyes as he tried in vain to pull free from his bonds.

The way the light in his eyes dimmed while the three of us put him under a spell so powerful, he had no means to fight it.

There was the first time I went into Lavender's room and found Zane on his knees with a quell around his neck. Knowing firsthand the effects of the quell, I was shocked she would subject him to such a thing. But there was nothing I could do to save him. Once I made the mistake of telling Lavender I wouldn't stand for it.

"I'm going to tell him...I'll tell the king."

Her hand flashed out so fast, I didn't have time to react. Her fingers fisted in my hair, holding me in place as her closed fist collided with my face several times before she released me to try and regain her composure. I dropped to my knees, holding my nose as blood started to leak over my hands. The next thing I knew, she had retrieved a quell from her guard.

I was left in my room with a bloody nose and the quell around my neck for over a week before my mother let me out. I could drink water from the bathroom faucet, but no food was brought to my room. During my captivity, I'd contemplated jumping from my balcony, but the guards on patrol seemed to be watching for it, as if they were expecting me to jump. Every time I walked out, day or night, there was always a dragon flying overhead. If I lingered too long near the railing, they would land on the eave of the castle as a warning.

I'd tried to stand up to Lavender, and that failed. Would the same thing happen if I tried to stand up to Grace? I knew she wouldn't stand for me refusing to help her on whatever she and her friend had planned next. I knew he wouldn't have an issue with hurting me if Grace told him I wasn't cooperating. Who else would be hurt because of me? It was hopeless. The only thing I was good for was hurting others.

There wasn't a dragon in sight when I stepped out onto the balcony. I stood there for several minutes before one flew by. He saw me, but didn't give any indication of altering his flight pattern. After a while, I figured out there were two of them, with one passing by every seven minutes.

I stepped to the railing and leaned over. Looking down, I could see the garden outside the kitchen to my left, and the statue of Minton to my right. I would land somewhere between the two. I took the quell that hung from my belt and clamped it around my neck. I knew what to expect. My knees went weak, my eyes started to water, and my limbs felt heavy as I placed my palms on the stone rail. Taking several deep breaths, I pushed against the stone to hoist myself up onto the ledge and stood there for a moment looking down.

Images of Zane and the guard at the vault came to my mind. Even Hunter's eyes, filled with hate after I used my power on him for no good reason. There were others—so many others. When I was a child, one of my mother's guards made a comment she didn't like, and she commanded the guard to smash his foot with a heavy mallet. His cries of pain upset me so much, I pushed my hands over my ears so hard, my head started to hurt. My mother told me if I didn't want to listen to his cries, I needed to tell him to be silent. I didn't understand at the time that commanding him to be quiet didn't mean that his pain had stopped. He'd endured the rest of his shift in excruciating pain, unable to express his agony.

I didn't want to hurt anyone ever again. There was only one way to stop that from happening.

Something bumped the back of my knees at the same time someone grabbed my wrist, and then I was falling, but not toward the ground. I was falling backward onto the balcony. Before I hit the floor three feet below, I came to an abrupt stop as strong arms came around me. Amazingly, I found myself upright and on my feet in less time than it took me to climb up on the railing. I looked up at Hunter, his hands moving to my shoulders, looking as angry as the night I told him

to hate me while yelling something in my face as he shook me. I could imagine what he was saying. He would be asking me what I was thinking, and how I could even consider such an act? I couldn't look into his eyes, and hung my head in shame. A part of me was embarrassed that I couldn't even do that right. Tears started to slide from my eyes, running down my cheeks to land on the front of my tabard. I kept my head down, trying to hide this shame from Hunter as well.

I needed to get out of here, but as I pulled away, his hand came up to cover my cheek. When he lifted my face, forcing me to look into his eyes, there was no longer any hate, only concern. His eyes slid over my face, then landed on the quill around my neck. He fingered it, pulling gently, then held his hand as if he were holding a key, making a twisting motion as if he was unlocking something. He wanted me to take the quill off. He held his hand out expectantly, not moving until I pulled the key from my pocket and handed it to him. Making quick work of removing the thing from around my neck, I sucked in a breath as the power of my dragon surged through me. The feeling was so overwhelming, I had to hold onto Hunter's arm as I rode the wave that almost knocked me off my feet.

When I was able to focus again, Hunter was holding the quill in such a way, I got the impression he'd like to throw it over the balcony, but I quickly pried it from his hand before he had the chance. I couldn't let another guard find it, or I would have to explain how it left my person during a shift. Hunter watched as I secured it back to my belt. I peeked up at him, only to find his brown eyes watching me intently. His focus was a little intimidating, as if he was waiting for me to race for the railing.

The longer I looked at him, the more I noticed the small details, like the green flex in his eyes and beads of sweat that were forming on his brow. Coming out here to save me was taking a toll on him, which was evident in his shaking hand. I could see the effort holding his place was taking, making something in me ache to help him. I stepped to him, sliding my arm around his waist so I could assist him inside. Leading him toward his room, he stopped me and pointed to the chair by the fire. Once he was seated, I retrieved a blanket and handed it to him. When he reached for it, he tried to reach for my hand as well, but I withdrew too quickly for his movements. I wasn't sure why I expected it from him. Maybe a part of me wanted it desperately, but I knew I couldn't accept any comfort he tried to offer.

I took my post in the corner. He watched me for a few minutes, but I cast my eyes to the lush carpet at my feet and refused to look at him. Eventually he took up the knife and piece of wood that were sitting on the hearth and set to whittling. His movements were slow, with long pauses between strokes. He sat there the rest of the night. If I moved, he looked up and watched me intently. Otherwise, he kept his focus on the work in his hands.

The dark hours were passing quickly, and as morning approached, I dreaded facing Grace. I was plotting ways to avoid her when a disruption outside drew my attention. My first fear was Grace had turned me in for her crime. Hunter rose from his seat, going out onto the balcony, and I followed close behind. It didn't take me long to realize that something was terribly wrong. There were more dragons in the sky than before. Hunter called out to one, who landed on the edge of the roof above us, then transformed to his mortal form so he could speak with me.

"What's the news?"

"Blackskin Castle has fallen. The queen and king are missing."

"Missing? How is that possible?"

"Balaan's son took the queen to the castle before it fell."

"You keep saying that Blackskin fell. Tell me, what does that mean?"

“The castle was destroyed, and is nothing but rubble. The king and queen were seen going in, but no one saw them leave.”

“Paige?” Hunter asked me.

I shook my head and shrugged. How could I explain to him everything that was going on?

“Is there any hope?” I asked the guard.

“They are the Silverfang line.” The false determination in his voice left me feeling unmoored. My world was spinning out of control. Everything I tried to do to make myself feel safe was slipping away. Zane was missing. If something happened to him, what would that mean for me—for the realm? If Balaan wasn’t stopped, would it matter that I just helped Grace steal four sacks of gold? If Balaan didn’t kill me, what would he force me to do?

Horrible possibilities started to invade my already troubled mind, growing upon each other, each more disturbing than the one before. They wrapped around and tangled to the point I couldn’t see any possible outcome that didn’t end with me enslaved to a heartless master.

When Grace entered the suite, Hunter set into a rapid-fire dialog with her, which I feared was a report of last night. As he spoke, her eyes slid to me. I hung my head, avoiding her scrutinizing gaze, and like the coward I was, I slipped out while Grace was distracted by Hunter’s words.

I made my way back to my room in the barracks. I actually had a roommate, but she was off with the rest of the guard at Blackskin Castle. I was grateful for the privacy while I waited for the knock that would be the end of my stint as a Bluescale guard. Of all the people for Hunter to tell about last night, why did it have to be Grace? He was giving her more information to hold over my head, more weapons to use against me.

Yet nothing happened.

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I endured a sleepless day locked in my room, as my nerves caused my leg to bounce and my insides to twist. By the time my shift started again, I had to force myself to leave the barracks. Grace had all day to figure out how she was going to use me next. Perhaps she needed to report to her friend, and he would come up with a plan.

At roll call, there was no news about Paige or Zane.

I slunk to Hunter’s family suite, dreading an encounter with Grace. Instead of going straight to their door, I waited down the corridor, hidden behind a plant until Grace left. Once she was out of sight, I reported for my shift.



## Chapter 3

I took my post in the corner. Hunter was sitting by the fire with his knife and his piece of wood, while his family sat around the table engaged in their own tasks. Slowly, they began to trickle away, Carol stopping to say a few words to Hunter and giving him a hug before retiring to her room, yet Hunter remained in his seat. It took me a while to figure out he wasn't going to bed anytime soon, carrying on with the same vigilance over me as last night. Every time I moved, he would watch me for several minutes before returning to his work. He looked tired today. His hands shook more often, and he took longer breaks. There were moments when he nodded off, only to jerk himself awake. I wanted to tell him that he didn't have to worry about me, but I didn't have any means of communicating that to him.

Tonight I was keyed up for a different reason than last night. I was hoping that word from Blackskin would come. Not wanting to fight didn't mean I didn't hold the same stakes in this war as any other dragon. I suppose that made me a coward, letting others go off and risk their lives while I stayed relatively safe at my post. Luckily, I was too young and lacked any kind of proper training to be sent to the battlefield, so I didn't necessarily have to admit I was a coward. I could simply chalk it up to my lack of training and experience. I was more likely to get someone killed rather than help them. Any member of the guard would agree with that assessment.

The fact that Paige was only a year older than me, and had minimal training, made me feel even more inadequate and cowardice. She was leading a whole army. I tried assuaging my ego with the fact that she was the queen and it was her duty, but I knew she could claim the same naivety and ignorance as me, yet she had chosen not to. Though she had a strong companion at her side, guiding her and helping her every step of the way, she was now a Silverfang, which made her untouchable.

I wondered what that would feel like, to love another so deeply as Zane loved Paige. The way Winnifred had loved Minton, the tale of their love still told to this day. A commotion outside drew my attention. Rushing out onto the balcony, I found what seemed like hundreds of dragons filling the night sky, their shrieks echoing over the sea. As I stood there, people were scrambling from the servant's quarters to investigate.

Hailing a passing dragon, I was not prepared for his reaction when he landed and swept me up into a bear hug, lifting me off my feet. "The queen lives and Balaan is dead!" he shouted with glee.

"Are you sure?" I questioned, stunned as he sat me down.

"The news is spreading across the realm. It came from Hudson."

Relief and excitement consumed me in a way I'd never felt before. "Balaan is dead?" I shouted.

"And the queen lives!" the guard shouted back before jumping up on the balcony, then launching himself into the air so he could take his dragon form once again.

Turning, I only had to say one word to Hunter before he understood that all was well—"Paige!" Like the guard, his excitement was uncontained, and he as well pulled me into a tight hug, only he didn't release me for a long time.

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A few days after Paige and Zane returned to Bluescale, I entered Hunter's suite to find Zane and Paige sitting with Hunter and his family. Carol was crying as she clung to Hunter's hand. There was a grim look on Hank's face, and Cynthia looked furious.

Paige was talking quietly with Hunter, who nodded, then ran his hand down his face, leaving it over his mouth as Paige put her hand on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Zane, who was standing off to the side.

“Paige is letting Hunter know the cure may not work on him.”

“I thought Maze and Sophia figured out how to reverse it?”

It works best on newly-turned dragons. The chance of success decreases the longer they have been dragons.”

“How long has Hunter been a dragon?”

“I think about three months, but Balaan had him in his dragon form so much during that time, I think it has accelerated the effects of the spell.”

“So there is nothing that can be done?” My eyes stung as I thought of Hunter dying. I knew I shouldn’t let the news affect me; he’d been dying since the day I met him. I’d always known it would come to this, but Hunter didn’t deserve to die.

“They will still try it. A chance at life is better than no chance at all,” Zane murmured. I could tell he didn’t want Hunter to die either.

When Hunter heard Zane and I speaking, he looked up at me with a deep regret in his eyes. I didn’t see the terror of a dying man, only a remorse for a life not lived. For all the opportunities and plans that would never happen.

“Can someone save him?”

“I can’t ask for volunteers like I did last time. Balaan is dead. Paige is not in the same danger. The reality is, fear does not consume the hearts and minds of Ethiolan anymore. Hunter is an innocent bystander. He’s not even a war hero here. If I were to ask the whole guard, I wouldn’t get any volunteers.”

“Then don’t ask the whole guard.”

I peered up at Zane to make sure he understood my intention.

“Laberta?” Paige stood, looking pointedly at me.

“Are you sure?” Zane asked.

“He doesn’t deserve this,” I replied, nodding my head to assure them.

Paige rushed over and hugged me. “Thank you.”

I looked over her shoulder at Hunter, who was looking at me with a mixture of confusion and sadness. He didn’t know why Paige was hugging me. I gave him a small smile as I tried to reassure him in some silent way. This time, I could look out for him.

Chapter 4

“You don’t have to do this,” Zane addressed as we stood in the cathedral, waiting for Hunter and his family.

“I can’t stand by anymore and watch awful things happen to good dragons. I know I pledged my life to your service, My King, so if you wish for this dragon to die, I will submit to your will.”

“You are a crafty little Greenwing. At least Hunter will have the advantage of knowing all your tricks.” Zane smiled at me. “But no, I do not wish for Hunter to die. He is Paige’s friend.”

I gave him a half-smile and looked down at the floor.

“Will you go to the Earth realm with him?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What if you fall in love with him?” Falling in love with Hunter would be easy, because I was halfway there already. The kindness he’d shown me, even though I didn’t deserve it, endeared him to me in a way I’d never felt before.

“What if he learns things about me he can’t live with? He’ll see what I helped my family do to you. There were others...” Glancing up at him, his black eyes didn’t meet mine as he spoke.

“Then you finish the Desma and go your separate ways knowing you saved his life. Just finish the Desma right away. Whatever you do, don’t wait.”

“What will happen if we wait?”

“The need to finish the spell will start to manifest itself in disturbing ways, that strangely seem to make the bond stronger. It would be best if you finish it quickly, then he can return to the Earth realm and put this whole mess behind him.”

I drew in a deep breath and nodded. Nothing about what he said made me feel any better about what was about to happen. Hunter was going to learn things about me that were likely to turn his stomach. I didn’t think he would enjoy the prospect of laying with me after he learned how I helped my mother and sister put Zane under that awful spell. Zane wasn’t the only royal my mother and I had manipulated together. How could Hunter ever want to touch me after he learned how I helped her enslave other royals into giving up their secrets and their treasures for her personal gain? Not to mention, what I’d done for Grace?

Hunter and Paige entered the cathedral, followed closely by his family. I could tell Hank was positioning himself to reach out and catch Hunter should he fall. Paige was talking in a low, urgent voice as Hunter moved slowly alongside her. Today was not one of his good days. The dark circles under his eyes had intensified since he’d arrive. When they reached the front row, Hunter sat in the pew, breathing heavily.

Paige positioned herself next to Zane as she addressed Hunter and pointed to me.

“Laberta, I want to thank you for offering to do this for him. I can assure you, he has committed no crimes against our realm. He’s a good man,” Paige insisted. She didn’t know I already knew he was a good person. She didn’t know he had helped me conceal my failures.

I went over and sat next to Hunter. It was strange to sit this close to him when I knew soon I was going to learn so much about him, things that would only make me more attracted to him, while he was going to learn things about me that would repulse him.

He and Paige had a brief exchange before she turned to me. “He wants to thank you for offering to save his life.” Hunter reached for my hand, while Carol reached over and put hers on my shoulder in an affectionate way.

“I don’t think it’s right to let him die.” Since the war was over, members of the guard were not lining up to take this on. There was nothing left to learn from the Apophis-made dragon’s now that Balaan was dead.

Paige turned her attention back to Hunter and his family, answering several of their questions. I tried to pull my hand free from Hunter’s, as it was becoming awkward the way the coolness of his skin lingered on mine, but he tightened his grip, refusing to release me.

“I have explained to Hunter that you will not only exchange hearts, but you will exchange memories as well,” Paige informed me.

I nodded and looked at the hand I was holding. “Tell him I’m sorry. I wish there was someone else to save him.”

Paige relayed the message, which was followed by even more questions. Zane put his hand on Paige’s shoulder, their eyes turning silver, and I saw the slight distortion in the air, meaning their shield was activated. He spoke to Hunter and his family, saying something that caused Paige’s eyes to glass over.

Carol’s grip on my shoulder tightened to an almost painful pressure. I wanted to get away from them all, just wanting to get this over with. Paige then said something that caused Hunter to give his parents a questioning look, which they returned, until Zane interjected with his own words.

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I told him the Desma will protect him from your worst memories, the way it protected me from Paige’s trauma.”

The death of her family would have been a tragic thing to endure. It was known she had a twin who she loved very much. Zane would have needed protection from so much loss.

“Let him know I don’t expect anything from him,” I informed Paige.

She passed along the message and announced, “If you’re ready, I think we should get started.”

I kept Hunter’s hand as I stood and pulled him to his feet, leading him to where the Desma was to be performed.

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Once I relived Hunter’s memories, I returned to my mortal form first, and Zane stepped forward to heal my chest and seal Hunter’s heart inside my body.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I looked at Hunter, still in his dragon form, reliving my memories. A tear leaked from the corner of my eye as I watched him thrash against the images forced upon him.

Hunter’s family was watching with shocked expressions. Every time he made a disturbing sound, Carol flinched, and Hank pulled her into his side. I felt guilty knowing the only reason Hunter was in this pain was because of me.

“He’s never done anything to hurt anyone. The queen was right, he is a good man.”

“He’ll see that you are a good person too. He’ll know you’ve been doing everything you can think of to make amends for the wrongs of your past.”

No, he would see I was still using my powers for the wrong reasons. He would see I almost got that guard killed, that I used my power on him. That all I’ve ever done is hurt people. He would never want anything to do with me, not after this.

“I hope he can tolerate me long enough to finish the Desma.”

Zane’s hand rested on my shoulder. I knew he intended for it to be comforting, but I felt like he was holding me in place, forcing me to watch Hunter take on my life experiences. When

Hunter returned to his mortal form, Paige stepped forward to heal him. His face was unreadable. Once Paige pressed the healing fire over his wound, he grabbed her shoulders.

“What have you done?” he demanded. “You tricked me!”

“I didn’t trick you,” Paige protested.

At the sound of Hunter’s harsh tone, I took a step back. Zane’s grip tightened and I froze, cringing internally as my features started to twist with remorse. Zane waved off the guards, who were now on edge due to Hunter’s aggression toward the queen. But Zane knew Hunter would never hurt her.

“What do you call it, then?” His eyes lost focus for a moment, then he shook his head. “You said it was like a wedding ceremony. That was so far beyond a wedding vow. The oath I just took with her...” Hunter pointed in my direction, though his eyes never left Paige’s face.

“Hunter, what’s going on?” Carol asked, taking a step toward her son.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to figure out what just happened,” he told his mother.

“Are you okay?” Carol asked.

“No,” Hunter spat.

“Did they cure you?” his father questioned.

Hunter paused for a moment, as if the idea had not occurred to him. “Yeah. As far as they know, I’m cured.”

Carol sobbed in relief, while Hank hugged her, his unshed tears turning his eyes red. Cynthia ran up and hugged Hunter, his mother and father soon joining her, and I saw firsthand the family dynamic that had played over in Hunter’s memories.

Hunter pulled away from his family and said, “But there are going to be some serious side effects they didn’t warn us about.”

Carol put her hand to her mouth. “Oh, no. Now what?”

“Don’t worry, son, we’ll figure it out,” Hank assured him.

“What did you mean by oath? Does that mean you can’t get it annulled?” his sister blurted out.

“I’m sure it can be fixed.” His mother looked at me as if I’d defiled her son in some obscene way. Memories of Carol came flooding to my mind. She loved her son with a fierceness that should frighten me. But all I felt when I looked at her was envious of that love she had for her son. My mother never loved me the way she loved Hunter.

“We’ll figure out what to do next. The important thing is that he has been cured,” Hank insisted, taking Carol’s hand.

“I know, but that girl is a stranger—”

“She may be a stranger to you, but Hunter knows her more deeply than any other will ever know her, just as she now knows him,” Zane volunteered.

Hunter looked at Zane, his face going slack. “This is what you meant when you said Paige told you everything?”

Zane nodded.

Hunter looked past him to where I was standing, staring at me as if it was the first time he was seeing me. As if I were something remarkable and repulsive all at the same time. He stepped away from his family and descended the steps of the platform, not stopping until he was directly in front of me. I gazed up at him, waiting for the words that would damn me, confessing to Zane and Paige every last thing I’d done to hurt another. He could tell them about the crimes I’d committed in service to Grace. My life was in his hands.

He pulled me into a tight hug. He was stronger; I could feel the change in his body. His heartbeat was steady. “What does it mean?” he whispered in my ear.

“What?” I asked dumbly.

“You gave me your heart.”

“Yes, and you’re well now.”

“Well?” he scoffed with a slight laugh. “I feel like I’m going crazy. All your memories are crashing around in my head. I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

“It will settle in a bit, then you can go back to your life. You will go to MIT, get your degree, and become an engineer. Have brilliant ideas and build fascinating things. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

He pulled away to look me in the eye. “And your life?”

“My life is here, serving my king.”

“Is that how you want it to be?”

“Yes. I’m happy here at Bluescale, doing what I can to help the realm. It’s more freeing than I’ve felt in my whole life. You know this.” I placed my hand on his chest, the ridge of the new scar pressing back against me. He also knew my inner turmoil over Grace, and my fears of losing this place.

“A life in the barracks? That’s all you want?” He seemed to be growing agitated, and I couldn’t understand why.

“Yes. We’ll finish the Desma, and you can return to the Earth realm with your family. You can forget all about dragons, this war, and…” Me. He could forget all about me. Strangely, I couldn’t bring myself to say that, though.

He reached for my hand before looking at Zane. “I guess we need a room.”

Zane raised an eyebrow at Hunter, but turned to West and asked that he escort us to a vacant room so we could finish our Desma. It was happening faster than I thought it would. West nodded to Zane, turned on his heels, and started for the main door to the cathedral.

“Laberta and I must do one more thing to heal my body. I’ll return to our room soon,” Hunter advised his parents.

“Is everything okay?” Hank asked, just as Carol demanded, “What do you have to do?”

“Paige can explain it to you.” Hunter left my side to give his mom a hug, whispered something in her ear, then took my hand again and pulled me into step with him as we followed West.

“You’re the same West who entered the Desma with an Apophis-made dragon too?” Hunter asked as we walked across the lawn, back toward the castle.

“Yes. My companion, Sophia, was saved by the Desma, just as you have been.”

“You’re in love with her?”

“She is everything to me.”

“How long after entering the Desma did it take you to figure that out?”

“I suppose I knew immediately, but I kept telling myself it was only the Desma that made me feel that way. It took me about a week to accept that *I* was in love with her. It took her longer to come to grips with our relationship.”

“Why is that?”

“Sophia didn’t trust me. She didn’t know that once I saw her heart, I couldn’t help but love her. Of course, I made the mistake of not telling her from the beginning how I felt.” West looked at me, then back to Hunter.

I had to wonder why Hunter was asking West about his companion. The whole castle knew their story. Hunter knew everything I knew: every rumor and whispered tidbit of gossip that came to me while I was in the barracks. He knew the journey West and I took to Blackskin Castle, and saw how he was affected when Sophia was attacked.

We had just finished at Blackskin Castle and were flying back to Dyad. It was my shift to fly, as West was sleeping in a basket with our witnesses. The flight was going smoothly until West started to shout Sophia's name, thrashing around so violently, I was forced to land, afraid the basket would tip. The others tried to wake him, but he didn't wake for nearly ten minutes. When he did, he was crying.

It took him several minutes to recover from his nightmare. He looked around, disorientated, then got out of the basket and walked away from the group for quite a while. When he came back, he insisted on flying, saying he couldn't sleep after such a dream.

"Are you okay?" I'd asked him

"I suppose I'm fine. It was just a dream."

When we returned to Bluescale, he found out that Sophia had truly been attacked, and it wasn't just a nightmare.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Hunter probed.

"She was my charge. I didn't think I was allowed to care for her, or thought she would ever care for me in return. I thought she could only see me as her jailer."

"How did she get past all that?"

"The Desma brought us together."

"Finishing the Desma will bring us closer?" His hand constricted around mine, but I couldn't tell how he felt about the idea.

"No. We didn't complete the Desma right away. The spell seemed to take on a life of its own. It made our connection stronger the longer we waited. The deeper our connection grew, the more persistent the completion of the Desma became until neither of us could fight against it. By then, our bond was too strong, and we couldn't be separated."

"That's what Zane was telling you," Hunter said to me.

"We have no reason not to finish the Desma, so I don't think we need to worry about the spell altering us any further," I replied.

"Yes. Lewis and Eva completed their Desma the first night. They could not understand my connection to Sophia when we were in Blackskin Castle. Once Sophia and I were separated, it was the only thing that kept me sane during our time apart. It saved my life, along with the lives of the queen and king."

"How is your connection different than any other?"

"If either of us are in danger, we see what the other sees."

"That's bizarre," Hunter mused.

"The king and queen feel each other's pain."

"What else could happen?" Hunter asked.

"I'm not sure. There are not many who wait to finish the Desma." West stopped at a door and pushed it open before saying, "If I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't change a thing. Having this deep connection to Sophia is the most precious thing in my life."

Hunter pulled me inside with an eagerness that frightened me. I was ready to do this, but my nerves and inexperience were screaming at me. I was aware Hunter knew what to do next, but part of me wanted to get this perfect. I knew it would be the only time we would be together.

I hadn't realized how quiet everything was, how alone we were, until Hunter's hand came around my waist, and I felt the heat of his chest against my back. His breath tickled my ear when he asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I want to get this right."

"There's no wrong way to do this next part."

"I'm sure I could find a way."

He chuckled softly. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

I twisted in his arms and stood up on my toes so I could press my lips to his. There was no point in waiting. In fact, waiting seemed like the worst thing to do. I wished there was a way to finish the Desma without being so physically intimate, but this too I must endure.

For a second, he didn't move. Maybe I was doing it wrong? That would be good, right? If I made it awkward and unbearable, then later, when all I had were Hunter's memories, I could blame this moment for being alone. But Hunter suddenly startled into motion. The way his hands caressed my body made the very idea of any unpleasantness disappear. His kisses were sweet and seductive.

A part of me was fighting against the progression of the Desma. West's story about waiting had already caused fantasies to build up in my mind, but it was not right for me to put those dreams on Hunter. He was an innocent bystander, and this was the only way to save his life. It was too much to pretend that he wanted me the way West wanted Sophia. I knew I shouldn't let myself dream of anything more, but he was such an easy dragon to love. Letting him go now that I'd learned everything about him was going to be more difficult than I'd expected.

I had to let him go. I didn't deserve him. I'd done too many bad things to have them all be erased by this one act to save him. His life was not an exchange for the people I had hurt.

I clung to him as the reality of him leaving kept crashing into me. As his kisses deepened, I couldn't keep his inevitable departure out of my thoughts. Every sweet kiss was marred by a soul-splitting sadness the likes of which I'd never felt before. Who would have thought of all the pains my mother put me through, I would be the one to do the most damage to myself?

"Laberta." His husky voice vibrated off my lips. I opened my eyes to look at him, only to discover that the world was blurry. I was crying. His thumb ran over my cheek, wiping away some of the moisture. "What's the matter?"

"It's just harder than I thought it would be."

How had I convinced myself that I could save him and nothing more? Was I really so naive to think I could learn everything about him and not fall in love with him? Hugging me, I rested my cheek on his chest, and we stood there silently for a long time.

"Are you going to stop crying?" he finally asked.

"I'm sorry." I drew in a deep breath, trying to calm myself. He didn't need this from me, and I had no reason to be this emotional.

"Can I help?"

"No."

"Can you explain it to me so I can understand?"

"No."

"I thought speaking the same language and knowing everything about me would make it easier for you to talk to me. Is there a reason you don't trust me?"

"I don't trust myself."

"I trust you."

"You shouldn't. I'm a fool," I murmured.



“You saved my life. I think that’s one of the least foolish things anyone can do.”

“Saving your life may turn out to be the most foolish thing I’ve ever done.”

“Why would you say that?” I heard the edge of anger in his voice.

“I’m sorry, I know you didn’t ask for this.” I lifted my head to kiss him again, but he jerked back so his lips were out of reach.

“Come home with me,” he blurted out.

My eyes widened in shock. I never expected Hunter to invite me back to the Earth realm with him. He couldn’t be serious. He must be confused by the Desma.

“I belong here,” I whispered.

“You belong with me. You are my companion, right?”

“I swore an oath, I pledged my life to—”

“What about the oath we swore to each other? Bind my life and heart to this dragon, Laberta Greenwing? We are bound together by a magic I can scarcely comprehend. We’re sharing a heart for goodness’ sake.”

“I know.”

“But it means nothing to you?”

“I didn’t say that. But you know who I am. You couldn’t possibly want me knowing everything you do.”

“You saved my life knowing I would learn all your secrets, knowing I could turn right around and tell Zane and Paige everything that happened the other night. You took a huge risk trusting me.” He looked at me, scrutinizing my every breath. “I know who you want to be. I know how much it hurts you, that you feel like you can never be that person.”

His words were painful for all the wrong reasons. They were everything I wanted to hear. Shouldn’t I want someone who understood that I was trying? Failing? But I did try. Wasn’t that exactly the reason why I didn’t deserve him? I was failing. Maybe if I had stood up to Grace, and had just accepted the consequences for my actions by letting her tell Zane what I’d done instead of being a coward and letting her use me, then I might be worthy of someone like Hunter. But he deserved better than me. He deserved someone better than I could ever be.

“Rescuing Paige didn’t work out the way you planned. Oh, but here is poor, pathetic me. You could save me, and just think how grateful I’ll feel knowing that someone as good and generous as you spared me a passing thought.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying. I don’t want to be your next project. I don’t need to be rescued just so you can keep up your Saint Hunter status. I rescued myself when I denounced my title and came to Bluescale. I don’t need you.”

“If I didn’t know you so well, I might be offended by what you said. But I know—”

“You don’t know anything. Just because you know all my secrets does not mean you get to stand on your laurels and act like I’m supposed to be grateful for your pity.”

“I already knew you were good. This is not the first time you saved my life. You could have turned me in for hurting you. I’m an Apophis-made dragon, an assumed enemy. If you told anyone I had stabbed you, my whole family would have been in danger. But you saved us all. I’m the one who owes you more than just my life.” Hunter put his hands on my shoulders, his grip firm as he looked into my eyes, silently evaluating me before he said, “I want you to come home with me. I want us to be together. I want to uphold the oath we took. I have been forever altered by all of this, and you are the only one who will ever understand me now.” He cupped my face tenderly.

“I don’t want to stay here, and I don’t think you should stay here either. You can have a fresh start on Earth.”

He was saying everything I wanted to hear, but I was hesitating. Why couldn’t I tell him I wanted the same thing? Why was I standing there staring at him, as if he’d said something incomprehensible?

“We can wait to finish the Desma. My parents need a little time to get used to the idea of me having a wife.

“You know what will happen if we wait,” I whispered.

“Yes, our bond will grow until we can’t see a life without each other. There will be strange consequences that will result in us feeling each other’s pain or seeing dangers. I don’t care what it is. I just want you to tell me what you want.”

“I want to finish the Desma.”

“And after that?”

“I want...”

My mother’s words assaulted me. *“No companion will ever love you. No matter what they say, they will always fear you. Your power will always be there between you. He will never trust you, knowing that at any moment, you could use your power on him. This power is a curse. You will never truly be loved, never truly be trusted.”*

Hunter never said he loved me. He only said he wanted me around because no one else would understand him.

“Ethiolan is my home. I want to stay here.”

Hunter gave me a pained look, then started to kiss me with a ferocious determination. He was a force of nature that I couldn’t stand against. I felt suddenly weak and sagged back against the wall. His whole body was pressed against me, and I could feel every muscle. Every bit of his long, lean body was known to me.

“Laberta.” He stopped kissing me and pulled away. “Do you think it’s fair for you to give me your heart, then tell me you don’t want me?”

“I saved your life. I thought it would be enough.”

He shook his head. “I want more than that.” He looked around, as if searching for something. Releasing me from his embrace, he took my hand and led me over to the blue sofa next to the empty fireplace. He used some of his inner fire to light the logs in the hearth before saying, “Please, Laberta, don’t push me away. Everything that’s happened is so overwhelming. I need you.”

“I told you, it will pass.”

“What if it doesn’t? What if it’s like West said? He knew from the beginning he was in love, but he didn’t trust his feelings. What if everything I’m feeling right now only gets stronger? I can’t leave here without you if I feel this way.”

“You can’t make me be with you.”

“But you could.”

“What?”

“You could make me be with you. You could make me finish the Desma right now, and I would have no means to stop you.”

“Hunter, I promise I will never use my power on you again.” I balled my hands into tight fists in my lap. The idea of me doing it was making me uncomfortable. I wanted to run away, but I forced myself to stay. We needed to finish the Desma.

“That’s good to know, because that’s the only way I’m going to finish it right now.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, I don’t want to do this right now. I want you to talk to me about what you’re thinking and feeling before we proceed. I want to give this a little time to see if I really do love you.”

“I told you, I want to finish the Desma and return to my life.”

“Will you even consider returning to the Earth realm with me?”

Yes, a thousand times, yes! But I couldn’t let that word escape my lips. Hunter deserved better than me. He knew me, and he said he wanted me, but that was only now, because everything was too fresh in his mind. My memories were causing him to react in a way that was instinctive to him. He was a protector. His instant reaction to protect me and save me was the motivation for his words. Now that we’d entered the Desma, I was on his mind. I knew after he adjusted, those feelings would fade. He would soon push my memories away and focus on his life. When that time came, I would only be a burden to him. I couldn’t tell him yes.

“No, Hunter, I can’t.”

He reached for my hand. “Laberta, did you learn something about me that’s turning you away?”

“No!” I replied too quickly. Some of my true feelings were evident in my reaction.

“What is it? What are you not telling me?”

“This is my life, Hunter. I’m making my own choices and living it the way I want, so let’s just finish the Desma and be done with it.”

“That may have been true an hour ago, but you made the choice to bind us together in a way I never dreamt possible. Now your choices include me.”

I took a deep breath. “I know this is confusing for you, and my memories are probably screaming at you right now, but that will all settle down in a few days, and I will be nothing more than an afterthought.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple, and you don’t know for sure that’s true. I personally don’t believe anything your mother told you about entering the Desma. Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

“Blazes, Hunter. Let’s just finish this.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no?’” I demanded, my voice rising. “I make my own choices now, and I will not have you coming in here and trying to control me.”

“Then command me to finish the Desma.”

I stared at him, shocked.

“I know you well enough to know, you’re not telling me everything that needs to be said right now. And until you do, the only way I’m going to finish the Desma is if you use your power on me.”

His challenge made me angry. I couldn’t use my power on him—it was unthinkable! But he was making this nearly impossible. Why wouldn’t he just let me do what I wanted to do and be done with it all?

“You heard what West said will happen if we don’t finish this. Neither one of us want that.”

“Really? What was your first thought when West told you about it? Did you even for a moment consider what it would be like if we waited?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“My first thought—”

“I don’t care what you thought.”

I stood and ran from the room as quickly as possible, leaving our Desma undone, and Hunter’s unspoken words behind me. I ran back to the barracks, straight to my bunk. Throwing myself in my bed, I laid there as Hunter’s memories washed over me, everything I loved about him bombarding me. But my mother’s voice was there, too, telling me that everything he said was a lie, that I didn’t deserve him. Only days ago, I’d used my power and someone got hurt. I couldn’t be trusted to be with someone like Hunter. I knew eventually I would hurt him too, or use my power on him again.

## Chapter 5

The next morning, I went to Hunter's family suite. I needed to talk to him and get the Desma squared away once and for all. There was no guard stationed outside the door, and when I knocked, there was no answer. Turning the knob, I entered the room, and was surprised to find it empty. There was nothing. What I did find was a note on Hunter's chair by the fire with my name written across it.

Laberta,

love you. I wish you would have talked to me. After spending last night going over your memories and talking with Paige., I know my feelings are real. They are not some biproduct of the Desma. I know it seems crazy and fast, but truly, Laberta, you are my heart.

Now that I'm cured, my family wants to return to their normal lives. I'm going with them. I think this time apart will be good for you to come to grips with your feelings. If you really want to finish the Desma and be done with me, Canaan can bring you to me. He knows where to find me. If there is a chance that you love me and want our bond to grow, then I hope you'll stay away as long as you can tolerate our separation. I know it seems counterproductive for me to leave, but our home is on Earth, and I need to keep progressing there to give you the life you deserve. I hope we will not be apart long, and I look forward to the day when you come to be with me.

Forever yours,  
Hunter.

It was so short, but I knew Hunter was not the type to lament his feelings in a long, drawn-out love letter. But it was still unexpected.

I sat in his chair, reading the note over and over while I studied his handwriting. I couldn't believe he was gone. It felt wrong. I wanted to yell and scream at him for leaving, for making me feel like everything rested on my shoulders. What did it mean that he told me he loved me and then left? Why didn't he tell me in person? I didn't trust that our bond would grow if he was not here. Zane and Paige, West and Sophia, all spent time together getting to know each other better. Hunter was gone and expected me to get more attached to him somehow. It was absurd. If he cared for me even a little, he would have stayed to say goodbye. Obviously, he was playing some game with my emotions, or punishing me for my past indiscretions. Could he still harbor some ill will toward me? He may not be willing to tell Paige about what I did, but perhaps he was determined to exercise his own justice for my actions.

I tried to tell myself that Hunter wouldn't do that, that he meant what he said. I tried to tell myself that he loved me, but the idea wouldn't be silenced and festered into something that had me vowing to never seek him out.

Three weeks later.

I settled into a new routine. In the mornings, I had training for four hours, then I slept most of the day. At night, I patrolled the castle. It had been fairly peaceful since Balaan was defeated,

and his forces had retreated almost overnight. We received word of some factions of followers that had been eradicated in Orangeclaw and Whitetale, but Bluescale had been quiet these last few weeks. Byran was not taking any chances, though. With the alignment approaching, he was still on high alert. With Hudson still heading up the search for Balaan's followers, I had no doubt the castle would remain so until he returned. I was sure that until there were a few more Bluescales flying over this castle, Hudson would not consider decreasing the number of guards on patrol within the castle. We had passwords that changed each shift, and every member of the guard had to stand before Paige while she assessed each of our feelings toward the realm and Balaan. It was a long process. She was still working through all the members of the guard.

I knew the Desma was starting to affect me, but I ignored the feelings as much as possible. Most of the time, I could distract myself enough that I didn't dwell on the fact that my heart beat out an irregular rhythm, or that some part of my mind was always focused on Hunter. I couldn't do anything without being reminded of him. If I saw a stone, a memory of him learning how to skip rocks across the water would come to mind. If I saw a flower, I would see Hunter pulling weeds in his mother's flower bed.

The memories and the irregular heartbeat were expected, but one thing I didn't expect was to start hearing things. It started out as a rush of wind in my mind. After a while, the noise morphed into indistinct whispers, as if someone in a room down the hall was talking. But whenever I got to the room, it was always empty. Then the night came when the voices started to make sense. It was my own name. It came like a whisper in the wind, but it was distinct, and there was no wind blowing inside the castle.

A shiver ran down my spine and I spun around, calling out, "Who's there?" The castle was silent. I was on night patrol, roaming the halls, inspecting my designated route that took me from the grand hall to the vaults. I heard someone distinctly say my name. I looked around, but couldn't see anyone, the halls empty except for me. I tried to shake off the feeling of unease hearing the voice caused, but it was unsettling to think that someone was in the hall, calling out to me, then hiding.

Inhaling a calming breath, I imagined Hunter standing next to me, reassuring me that it was nothing. Thinking of him calmed me, which was one thing the Desma had given me. In those moments, I loved him. I knew I was a walking contradiction. I hated him for leaving, but found comfort in the thought of him. I suppose it was easy to love him when he was not standing in front of me, asking what I was feeling and to trust myself. Loving him from a distance was safer. I would never be tempted to use my power on him or hurt him again.

I wondered how long it would be before I felt the need to finish the Desma, but I'd yet to have any urges beyond some erotic dreams. My sleeping mind seemed to want him more than my conscious mind.

I made my way down to the vaults, where a guard was posted at each door. "All clear?" I asked each as I passed. They gave me the assurance that everything was quiet, and I continued on my route. Just as I turned the corner, I heard a husky whisper of some apparition call my name again. I looked back down the hall, but didn't see the guard I'd just passed coming after me. I walked back to him. "Did you call me?"

"No," he replied, giving me a puzzled look.

Logically, he was the only one it could have been. Hurrying away from the guard while feeling like a fool was annoying. Was I going crazy? Should I ask Canaan to take me back to Hunter and finish the Desma? Of course it would be my luck to lose my mind instead of developing

a deeper connection with Hunter. I was right. Being separated was not working out the way he'd planned.

I completed my shift without another whispered call, and was thankful the disembodied voice had stopped. Perhaps it was only my imagination, or the water rushing through the waterways. These explanations didn't stop the paranoia that was forming in my mind, though. As I crawled into bed, I was unable to sleep because I kept straining my ears to make sure I didn't hear the voice again. It was well into the afternoon before I saw my "Dream Hunter."

He was waiting for me. It was like we were starved for each other. We didn't speak, as there were no words needed to express what we wanted. His hand was caressing me, his lips on mine. In my dreams, we completed the Desma a dozen times a night. In the evenings when I woke, I was always tired and dripping in sweat, as if we truly had spent the hours together.

I heard the voice three times the next night.

A week after the voice started, it was coming a dozen times a night. Each night, it was becoming slightly clearer. It was definitely growing from a disembodied whisper to something audible. If I were being honest with myself, I had to admit that the voice was starting to sound distinctly like Hunter. I tried not to think about the meaning of that reality, but I knew it was the Desma demanding to be finished. During the week, as the voices plagued me and I clung more to Hunter's memories for comfort, my anger toward him faded. I still couldn't face him, although now it was for an entirely different reason. I wasn't ready to see him for the last time. Knowing that finishing the Desma was the closing of a door made it easy to stay away from him. As long as I didn't finish, he was mine.

"*Laberta,*" the voice called. After two weeks, this one was real and solid, as if Hunter was standing right next to me.

I jumped the first time I heard him so clearly. In my fright, I called out to the voice, answering the call, which I hadn't done since that first night. "Hunter, stop!" I ordered.

"*Laberta?*"

I didn't respond, despite the notable inflection in the way he said my name.

"*Please, Laberta,*" he begged.

I was alone in the hall of tapestries. The clarity of his voice made it impossible to ignore. I closed my eyes and pretended that he was there with me on patrol. "Please, what?"

"*Talk to me. Come home to me—anything! Just so I know you haven't forgotten me.*"

The words came in a rush that made my head hurt. I reached out for the wall to brace myself against the feeling. It was then I realized the voice was only in my head, and not from anywhere in the castle. There was no one standing behind a tapestry playing a cruel joke on me.

"I am losing my mind."

"*Don't say that. This is amazing. Laberta, it's really me. I've been trying to reach you for over a month.*"

"I've heard you."

"*Why did you answer me this time?*"

"Your voice is clear now. You startled me into a reaction."

"*I'm in my dragon form.*"

"Hunter, is that safe?"

"*I'm at my parent's house in the basement. No one will see me.*"

"How are you doing this?"

"*I needed to talk to you.*"

"That is not an answer."

*“The Desma. I was thinking about all the things I needed to tell you. All the things I left unsaid. Then, when you didn’t come for so long, my desperation only grew. I heard you ask ‘who’s there?’ once, but since then, you’ve been quiet. But that one response gave me hope that I could reach you.”*

I pressed my fingers to my temples, his words making me dizzy. “I feel sick. Your voice is hurting my head.”

*“I suppose it will be something we have to build up to.”* I could hear the optimism in his voice. *“I’ll try again tomorrow.”*

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

*“Why don’t you call out to me next time?”*

“I don’t know how.”

*“You just have to want it. Focus on how much you care for me, then you’ll feel... It’s hard to explain, but you’ll just know something spectacular is possible.”*

“It does not feel spectacular,” I grumbled, pressing my fingers more forcefully against my temples.

*“I think that’s because you’re fighting the Desma.”*

“You’re an expert on the power of the Desma now?”

*“No, but I think I’m starting to understand how it works between you and me.”*

It was quiet for a time. I thought he’d disappeared, until he sent a rush of words to my mind that dropped me to my knees.

*“Think about everything I learned from you. Your father would have learned all your mother’s secrets as well. He knew what her heart’s true intent was. Maybe he couldn’t love her after that. Maybe she never loved him to start with. We don’t know what really happened between them, but we do know each other. Laberta, I love you for all the good that lives in you. You must trust that I will never ask you to use your power to hurt someone, or to do something that is morally wrong. Love, you are my heart.”*

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The next day, before my shift started, I flew down to the beach and made a comfortable pile of sand to settle into to call out for Hunter, though I wasn’t optimistic about it working. In my mind, I thought his name over and over again, without receiving a response. I knew it was too much to hope that the Desma was working for me the way it was working for him, or that I could accomplish something spectacular like he did. After nearly an hour of failing to communicate with him, I gave up.

That was the first night in weeks that he didn’t call out to me. It was strange how much I missed it. Knowing now it was him trying to communicate with me, that it had been the power of our Desma growing in him, made the times he reached out to me sweeter. Was there something wrong with me that made me unable to do the same? Was I not in love with him like I thought? Did I even know what it meant to be in love? If I didn’t love him, what would stop me from using my power against him?

As the days wore on, and I continued to fail in my efforts to contact him, the idea that I really wasn’t in love with him grew heavy on my mind. If I couldn’t love Hunter, then perhaps I was incapable of truly loving anyone. Had my mother succeeded in destroying my ability to love? I could have been her best candidate for a proper match. Lavender’s problem was that she had loved Zane at one time when she was young, but as he grew up and never showed any interest in

her, her love turned to hate. If I couldn't love anyone, then I could never hate them either. I wouldn't make the same mistake Lavender made with Zane, and would have been the perfect pawn for Mother to control. The idea cut deep. My heart constricted with a pain I'd never experienced before. I had to stand still for several seconds while I processed the sensation.

That was when I made the decision to finish the Desma. I couldn't let Hunter think this was working the way he wanted. Once I was off duty, I would go to the mirrored room and seek an audience with Canaan.

Chapter 6

A bittersweet feeling twisted my heart as I looked up at the modern, geometric shaped building. I knew it was one of the housing complexes at MIT—Simmons Hall, where Hunter wanted to stay. It seemed as if he had succeeded in getting into his housing preference. Lights illuminated the solids and voids of the building's design. Different colors were painted inside the depths of the windows that popped out in vivid contrast to the gray exterior. I wondered which room was Hunter's? Then I wondered if he would be happy to see me. If he was, it wouldn't last long. He would soon know I only came to say goodbye.

He was capable of love, because I'd seen the way he loved Paige. I had to believe him, that if he said he loved me, then it was real for him. I knew it wasn't fair for me to keep fanning the fire that burned in him, and I was going to have to smother it once and for all. It would be the only way he could move on.

Canaan pulled out his cell phone and turned it on while I watched people enter and exit the building. Canaan told me it was Friday night here, just after six. In less time than I'd anticipated, Canaan was putting his phone in the pocket of his pants. I looked down at the clothing worn in the Earth realm Paige had given me, hoping I looked okay.

"You didn't pack," Canaan commented.

"I'm not staying," I told him, looking back at the building. I didn't want to see any judgment in his eyes. "I need you to pick me up in the morning."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes."

"Give it a day."

"I won't need that much time."

"Don't you think Hunter deserves that?"

"Hunter deserves more than I can give him."

"I'll come get you one day from when we left, Ethiolan time."

I turned to protest, but he disappeared before I could stop him. I didn't plan on staying with Hunter the whole time. I could leave his dorm in the morning, then find a park or someplace to hang out while I waited for Canaan to return.

"Laberta!" Hunter called as he ran down the steps to where I stood waiting for him.

At the sight of him, I felt a shift in my body, like I'd been standing at attention for too long, but now I was released. I felt this relaxed state flow through me, washing away all my tension and anxiety. The stress I felt a moment ago at Canaan's words of when he would return were gone.

I moved toward Hunter, drawn by my heart's desire to be near him. He was like a tidal wave as he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. His lips crashed onto mine before I could react, but it was exactly what I wanted, so I didn't try to stop the kiss or his affections. That would happen later. Right now, I just had to glide along in his wake and revel in the feel of him. He did feel good—better than good. Something in me needed him, and I could feel his excitement in the kiss. There was passion in the way he held me tightly against him, as if he could force us to become one if he held me close enough.

My heart was beating wildly in my chest, like it was trying to reach out to him. Like it had missed his presence, and it didn't want to let him go. I would give into this feeling so we could finish the Desma, but after today... The thought stopped suddenly, and I dug my fingers into his thick hair so I could pull him closer and deepen our kiss.

“Hunter! Hey, man...”

Hunter pulled away to turn and face the unfamiliar man. As he did, he loosened his grip on me just enough for me to slide down his body until my toes touched the paving stones once more. He kept one arm wrapped around my shoulder as he pulled me into his side. I was happy he didn't release me completely; my heart wasn't ready for any sort of separation from him. I wrapped my arm around his waist and pressed into him.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“Chaz, this is my fiancé, Laberta,” Hunter announced.

Chaz stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you.” I shook his hand with my heart twisting slightly at the thought of Hunter introducing me as his fiancé. In Ethiolan, he'd called me his wife. I knew the semantics of the title shouldn't matter. I was going to be leaving him as soon as we finished the Desma, so why did I care how he introduced me to someone I was never going to see again?

“She popped in for a surprise visit.”

“Awesome. We were beginning to think Hunter was making you up. He didn't have a picture of you, and apparently, you don't have any profiles.”

“I'm real, I'm just not a fan of social media.”

He stood there for a moment, staring at me, as if he couldn't understand what I'd said. I went over the words in my mind, thinking I got close to what I meant to say.

“Say that again?” he finally said.

Hunter's temperature rose, his body like a furnace next to mine. I looked up at him, his jaw clenched tight. He was still smiling, but it was forced.

“Did I say it wrong?”

He looked down at me with eyes that were so intense, I had a hard time holding his gaze. “No, I understood you just fine.” He turned to Chaz. “She doesn't like social media.”

“Oh, I heard her. I just wanted to hear her exotic accent again.” He winked at me. “I could listen to you talk all night.”

“Thank you. That's very kind of you to say,” I said formally, some of my royal upbringing coming through in my lofty tone.

“Well, if you don't mind, Laberta and I need to catch up on some wedding details.” Hunter turned me and started walking away quickly, not stopping for anyone else who called out for him. He just kept his arm securely around me as he scowled at the floor. He led me down a hall to an elevator door and mashed the button several times.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked as we waited.

“I guess that's going to be something I need to get used to.”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?” He looked down at me, then pulled me into a tight hug. I could feel his body shaking all around me. “It wasn't you. I'm sorry, love. I'm not used to feeling this sort of jealousy. He was flirting with you right in front of me, and the way he looked at you... It made me want to pound him into the dirt.”

“Oh?” I was shocked by his words. “You didn't react like this when I told you to hate me.”

“You were not *my* companion then.”

Through his memories, I knew he thought I was pretty as soon as he saw me, but he knew there was a language barrier and different life expectancies standing in his way. But the night I told Hunter to hate me filled my mind. The memory from his point of view came to me. When his fist had balled in my tabard and he pushed me against the wall, the thing I didn't understand that

night were his words. I thought I didn't need to understand him to know his meaning, but I'd been wrong.

"I heard you talking to the guard at the door. Do you let him touch you? He's allowed to touch you, but I can't? What's the matter? Do I disgust you because I'm an Apophis-made dragon?" The jealousy he felt for the guard had been palpable. The fact that he'd interpreted my reluctance to be near him as a rejection on a deeper level was the thing that drove his hatred of me.

In the morning, when Grace had returned for her shift, Hunter jumped on her, demanding to know what was going on between the other guard and myself.

"I don't know," Grace told him.

"Can't you just ask her? She's standing right there."

"What do you care if she's seeing one of the other guards?" That was when Grace's eyes darted over to me.

"Why shouldn't I care? She's my guard, and I deserve to know."

"What does that have to do with your safety?"

"It means everything to my safety!" Hunter yelled.

"Did she leave last night? Did she abandon her post to fraternize with Simon?"

"No... I don't know," Hunter admitted.

"Then why does it matter what she does in her free time?"

"It matters to me. Do you think it's right for her to let that dirty old dragon put his paws on her? Who else has touched her? What is she, some cheap tease? She prances around here like she's God's gift, then she gets upset when I accidentally touch her. Is she afraid I'll contaminate her pure blood?"

That was when Grace had come over and asked me what I'd done to Hunter.

I'd never considered such a reaction coming from him.

The elevator door opened, and he ushered me inside. Once the doors closed and we were alone, he relaxed. "I can't believe you're here." He kissed me again like a starving man, and I was his only means of sustenance. The strange thing was, being in his arms, I felt the same way, like he was the only one who could fulfill me. He was the only one who could make me feel alive. I realized all this time without him, I had been missing something, and suddenly here it was, as if I had lost an arm that had finally been reattached. My heart raced as he pulled his lips from mine, only to kiss my neck. I never dreamt anything would ever feel so good. My whole body tingled with anticipation.

"Do you have a roommate?"

"No. We'll have all the privacy we want." His hands were already working on my clothes, untucking my shirt. When his hands connected with my bare skin, the need that bled in through his fingertips pulsed across my back, melting me in his arms. As his hands crept higher up my back, he let out a groan.

"What?" As much as my body was responding to him, I still feared doing something wrong. This was already more intimate than I had ever been with a man, and I was feeling a good amount of nervousness.

"I just want you so bad."

The door opened and he pulled me into the hall, almost running. We passed people who tried to greet him, but he just yelled out "Sorry, I can't talk now!" We reached his door and he flung it open, pulling me inside. I barely registered that one wall was oddly shaped before he pulled

my shirt over my head. Suddenly, I was naked from the waist up. It was only then he slowed down. His fingers moved gently over my back.

“You are so beautiful.”

Hunter turned me to face him, his shirt already gone, and the sight of his bare chest shot desire through my body. I’d never seen him look so good. He was more filled out, more defined—so much more than I remembered. His lips descended on mine almost cautiously, his hand rubbing up and down my sides as his chest pressed lightly against mine. In that moment, I knew this was how our Desma would end—slow and gentle, with aching desire.

I felt like I was flying, but there was none of the effort of flapping my wings to keep me up. I just had to cling to Hunter and all was right with the world. My heart beat with his, and I could feel the connection to him intensify as he made every effort to bring me comfortably to the completion of the Desma.

There was an explosion in my heart. In that moment, I felt no commitment to Ethiolan, Bluescale, or Zane. I didn’t care that I owed the King of Bluescale a debt. I only cared about Hunter. I heard Hunter’s voice in my mind, calling my name, but his lips were not moving. He didn’t look like he was capable of forming coherent words with his mouth. His mind could only repeat my name over and over. Once the overwhelming feeling in my heart subsided, I was left with an innate sense of solidarity. Hunter and I were bound together now by something beyond my comprehension of what the Desma was and should be.

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It was late, and Hunter was asleep next to me. I’d slept for several hours already, but had been woken by the noise in the hall. It didn’t seem to affect Hunter. When I first woke, he did so as well. He’d lifted his head slightly, telling me not to worry, then promptly started to shower me with kisses. That was almost an hour ago.

A small light on his desk was lit. As I laid there, I realized I was surrounded by him. I was in his room full of his things, his arm wrapped tightly around me, his masculine scent enveloping my senses as his heart beat a steady rhythm in my chest.

I had always feared who my mother would force me into the Desma with, but I had chosen to save Hunter. Shouldn’t that count for something? Wasn’t wanting to love him enough?

A strong part of me didn’t want to do what needed to be done next. It was tempting to wake him again, knowing he would prevent me from leaving. I didn’t want to do the right thing and give him up. I wanted to be selfish and keep him, even though I couldn’t love him. Perhaps I was grasping at straws. I tried to reach out to him with my mind one last time. If I couldn’t do it now, being this close to him, feeling this connected to him, then there really was no hope for me.

I took a few deep breaths to clear my mind, then I did as Hunter had instructed me, focusing on our Desma and the love I thought I felt for him. I focused on the beat of his heart, and the feeling of wholeness I felt now that we were together again.

*Hunter.*

I called for him numerous times, watching the clock for several minutes between.

*Hunter, can you hear me?*

I could hear my plea becoming more desperate as the noise outside the hall grew quiet, and night stretched on toward morning.

*Hunter, please, answer me.*

Tears were leaking from my eyes as my heart broke. I wanted to keep him, to stay with him, but how could I do that if I wasn't capable of loving him the way he loved me? He deserved to be loved by someone who could truly give him the same.

I moved slowly, lifting his arm and sliding away from him. Before I laid his arm back down, I pulled the pillow I'd been using around so he could hug that instead. When I stood up to look at him, my breath caught in my throat. He was so handsome—a picture of perfection. I tore my eyes away. If he woke now and found me staring at him, he would get the wrong impression, and I knew it would be all too easy to let him grab my hand and pull me back into bed with him.

There was a notebook and pen on his desk. Once I was finished dressing, I grabbed them and slipped out into the hall. He needed to know why I was leaving, and know that I would have loved to stay, but I couldn't hurt him anymore.

Hunter,

I won't ask for your forgiveness, as I don't think you will even understand. I know to you, this will seem impossible, but I have concluded I must be incapable of love. I've tried to reach out to you, to communicate with you silently, but it has not worked. The only explanation I can come up with is that I don't love you. It's not fair for me to hang around when I can never connect with you on the same level. I wish things were different, that I could stay with you, but I fear it would hurt you more if I tried to pretend.

I hope you find someone who truly loves you the way you deserve to be loved.

Laberta

There wasn't anything more to say. I opened his door just a crack and slid the note in on the floor, making sure I didn't look at him again. I was afraid if I did, I would be tempted to stay. I could pretend to love him, because that would be easy. But eventually, he would figure it out. He would realize I never reached out to him first in the same manner he could talk to me.

Hunter made a noise and I looked up, nervous that he had woken and would find me leaving. He thrashed in the bed, the blankets twisted around him, but he was still asleep. He must be having a nightmare. My chest clenched as pain shot through my heart. I wanted to go to him, to wake and comfort him, but I couldn't.

“Laberta, don't...”

I had to do a double take to make sure he was really sleeping. My heart constricted again. It felt like it was shrinking, and it was getting harder to breathe. I had to go, now. I closed the door and turned for the elevator. The hall suddenly seemed so long. My feet dragged along the floor, my steps slow and heavy. With each step, breathing became more difficult, and by the time I was at the elevator, I felt like I had flown from Bluescale to Suneis at top speed. I doubled over, trying to catch my breath, gulping in lungful after lungful of air, each one seeming to contain less oxygen than the one before. I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. I'd never heard of something like this happening to another dragon.

The door opened and I couldn't move. I couldn't take the two steps needed to cross the line into the elevator.

“Going down?”

I looked up to see a girl looking at me with an odd expression. She probably thought I was drunk or on drugs. I couldn't answer her, and I didn't move. She stood there and stared at me until the doors slid closed.

The metal doors of the elevator reflected a blurry image back at me. I was hunched over, my dark hair a mess. The white shirt and blue jeans I wore bled into each other in a distorted way. Strangely, my green eyes were the clearest thing I could make out. Wide and frightened, they reflected back at me. The image was terrifying. That was me, I was distorted. I couldn't love, couldn't be trusted. I was dangerous to those around me. I could turn on anyone at any time, and make them do unspeakable things. If I could have loved Hunter, there may have been hope for me. Since I couldn't love him, then how would I ever stop myself from using my power on him, and eventually hurting him? I couldn't make the guarantee even to myself that I would keep him safe.

I was spiraling. I knew it, but I couldn't stop it. My thoughts expanded into horrors I couldn't fight, each one more terrible than the one before. Not being able to draw a proper breath was making everything worse. My hand shook as I tried to reach for the button to call the elevator. I needed to make myself do this. It was the only way to keep Hunter safe.

*"Laberta, wait!"* Hunter's voice roared in my head at that moment. The ferocity of it shook me to my core. There was unmasked desperation in the way he called out for me. An audible whimper escaped my lips at the thought of the pain I heard coming from him.

*"Please, let me go."*

*"Is that what you really want?"*

*"I can't see any other way."*

*"Then get on that elevator,"* he challenged.

Hearing Hunter in my mind made my breathing and heart shrinking situation worse. I looked at the button to call the elevator, but the bright little arrow seemed like it was out of reach. I tried to force myself to take a step, but my feet wouldn't move. It was like I was chained to this spot.

*"What do you think it means?"* Hunter asked in my mind.

*"I don't know."*

*"Yes, you do. What is your heart screaming at you right now? Why can't you breathe or take a step? Why did this only start when you tried to leave me?"*

I looked down the hall at Hunter's door. The desire to return to him was strong, but could I allow it?

*"How do you know?"* How could he possibly know my heart was giving me pain, or that I couldn't get onto the elevator?

*"You've been projecting your every thought at me since you closed my door to write that note."*

*"I have?"* There was unmasked hope in the thought I sent him. Could I stay with him? Did I love him after all? Would it be enough? Was it as much as he loved me?

*"Yes. Is that enough proof for you? I know you are capable of great love. I have never doubted you. You need to trust your own heart. Please, Laberta."*

Hunter stepped out of his room. As he stood by his door, I felt my heart loosen, just slightly. Breathing was still difficult, but the sight of Hunter was making everything bearable. He stood back, waiting for me to make my decision.

*I love him.* The thought slammed into me with the force of a dragon's paw stomping down on my chest. From the moment I made him fall, I wanted him. He'd been kind to me. He hadn't been angry or upset. He didn't think I was stupid or clumsy.

I took a step toward him, a smile sliding across his handsome face, his eyes dancing with excitement. Even from this distance, I could see the changes in him. Returning to Hunter's arms was like being reborn. I could shed my past and live in the security of this new reality. I pressed

my face into the soft cotton of Hunter's shirt and breathed in his now familiar scent. His arms wrapped tight around me like a bandage, healing me from the inside out.

"You got dressed?" I noted. He was fully clothed—shoes and all.

"I wasn't sure if I was going to have to chase after you."

"You weren't going to let me go?"

"Not without a valiant protest."

I pulled away enough to look into his multicolored eyes. The fire that burned in me had not been smothered—one thing I was happy I failed to do. *Kiss me*. I'd scarcely finished the thought before his lips were colliding with mine. We returned to his room, where he only paused in his kisses to lock the door.

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"Now what?" I asked Hunter as we sat in the cafeteria eating a much-needed lunch. We'd both missed dinner last night, and we didn't get out of bed until the sun was high in the sky and our stomachs couldn't be silenced with our affections.

"Before we go shopping, I'm going to introduce you to my friend Madison, she has a room for rent. You can stay with her until the end of the semester. Then we can get a place together." He was sitting next to me with one hand on my leg while the other held his sandwich. He had hardly let go of me since I returned to his room and I didn't want it any other way. "When was Canaan supposed come get you?"

I paused mid chew. I hadn't mentioned Canaan coming to get me.

"You didn't pack anything, and you tried to leave last night. I can only assume staying was never your intention."

I hung my head, the pain in his voice was enough to twist my heart. "*I'm sorry.*"

"*You don't need to be sorry. You were trying to do what you thought was right. Thankfully finishing the Desma showed you that us being together is the right thing.*"

"*I think he knew I would end up staying. I asked him to come back sooner, but he said I needed to give you more time. He said he'll return one day from when we left Ethiolan's time.*"

"*So... that would be Monday morning? I have class from ten until two, once I'm out I can go to Ethiolan and help you get your stuff. Do you think Canaan would mind coming back?*"

"*I don't have much to pack. I didn't take that much with me to Bluescale.*"

"*I know but I wanted to talk to Paige.*"

"*About what?*"

"*Seeing if she will give you her identity.*"

I put my sandwich down as my stomach twisted into an anxious knot. "I can't."

"Don't worry we'll get your name changed so you don't need to worry about that."

"It's not that. Hunter I stole from the Queen of Bluescale, I helped to enslave the Prince of Blackskin I can't take Paige's identity, I can't keep taking things I have no right to."

"*It wouldn't be stealing if she said it was okay.*"

"*It's too much to ask.*"

Hunter's arm came around my shoulders and he pulled me in close to his side. The move was both comforting and possessive. I knew he was right, I couldn't live in his world without an identification. I knew his people relied heavily on proof of belonging. I'd always been easily identified by my green eyes. No one questioned that I belonged to Greenwing.

"*I know but I fear if we don't get Paige's information you will be forced to use your power to convince someone to give you a new identity.*"

He was right.

I felt a hesitation in his thoughts, his eyes creased with concern, and I knew there was something more he wanted to say. I waited.

“We need to tell Paige about Grace.”

That was all he needed to say for guilt to slice into the back of my throat and cause me to lose my appetite. “I know,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry. We are in this together. Maybe I’ll just write a letter for Paige to read after Canaan brings us back home.”

As much as I like that idea, I knew he wasn’t serious. “No, we can’t do that.”

I took a breath; he was right facing this was the right thing to do. Although with Hunter by my side I knew I could admit my crime and deal with the fall out. Hopefully exiling myself to the Earth realm would suffice as punishment.

“Don’t worry, she’s a Yellowback, she will see your remorse, she is kind and forgiving. She will appreciate your confession.”

If I didn’t have this strong bond with Hunter, the twinge of inadequacy I felt when I heard him praise his ex-love would have been paralyzing. But I knew him, I knew his heart. Better than Paige ever would. I knew he was mine and that he loved me. Most of all I knew we could face anything together.