

I DREAM OF DRAGONS



WINGS OF CHANGE

BIANCA D'ARC

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Bianca D'Arc
Dedication

To my family for their unfailing support of my writing dream. Many thanks to the good friends I've made through this dragon world I've been privileged to write about for the past few years, especially Megan, Jennifer and Serena for their untiring support and assistance. Thanks also to Angela James for selecting this story, and Summer Devon and Marie Harte, my co-conspirators in the anthology.

Chapter One

Lucia was more than a little intimidated by the towering castle doorway. Beyond the imposing portal lay the Lair that housed the king's own knights and dragons. It was audacious of her to even walk up to the heavily carved door, but she was on a mission. A life hung in the balance.

Gathering her courage, she lifted the heavy metal knocker. The ornate striker, cast in the shape of a dragon's sinuous body, made an echoing boom as it descended on the plate. It also made her jump, but she scolded herself to be calm. She had to make someone within the castle listen to her.

"What can I do for you, little lady?" A gnarled veteran with a kind smile answered her summons.

She cleared the frog in her throat before speaking. "I need to speak with Sir Kaden."

"Sorry, lass. He's been closeted with the king and council these two days past. The whole castle's in an uproar since the young prince has gone missing."

She should have expected the response. Prince William's disappearance was the talk of the entire city. Her spirits sank, but she refused to give up so easily.

"Perchance, could I talk to Lady Linea?"

"Linea?" The man seemed surprised as he opened the door a bit wider. "Now why would a little thing like you wish to speak with a dragon?"

"And why *my* dragon?" A deep, masculine voice sounded from behind the old man. Lucia looked up, over the old veteran's shoulder to meet the startling ocean blue gaze of what must certainly be a knight of

the realm. The door opened wider and the knight stepped to the side of the guard, looking her up and down.

Lucia cringed, knowing what a pitiful sight she made in her rough work clothes, but they were all she had. What she wouldn't give for just one of the many silk gowns she had once owned. But that life was over.

"Please, sir, I know it's a bad time, but I must speak with Lady Linea. A dragon's life is at stake."

"Of which dragon do you speak?"

Lucia was torn. She'd already said more than she should have. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, but he asked me to say goodbye—" her voice cracked with emotion before she got herself back under control, "—to Linea and Kaden."

"Kaden?" the knight asked quickly. "Sweet Mother, are you talking about Reynor?" Tears threatening, she nodded, biting her lip. The knight swung the imposing door open wide and took her arm, pulling her into the castle. He led her down a wide hall and Lucia caught sight of other dragons moving here and there. If she'd been in a better frame of mind, she would have loved this glimpse into the Castle Lair, but as things stood, she was too worried about Reynor to notice much. The knight stopped in a small alcove that had

seats, but she was too agitated to sit. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

"I'm sorry, milord, but I must speak to Lady Linea. I promised Sir Reynor."

"I'll take you to Linea, but I don't understand why."

Could he really be that blind, she wondered? "They are in love, sir. Linea is his mate."

The knight looked shocked for a moment before a smile dawned over his face. "I had no idea."

“But—” She hesitated as he began walking again, pacing his long strides to allow for her shorter steps.

“Speak freely, mistress. I promise I don’t bite.” His devilish smile spoke otherwise.

“Well, I thought you were Linea’s knight. Did I misunderstand?”

“No, you heard correctly. I’m Marcus, Linea’s partner.”

“Then how could you not know about—”

He grinned down at her as they turned a corner. “About her and Reynor? Actually, it’s pretty simple. The dragons were waiting to tell us until Kaden or I found a mate. Until then, no matter how much they might love one another, they are forbidden to join.”

“Really?”

Marcus liked the way the petite maid’s eyes widened. She really was the cutest little thing. A full foot shorter than him, she would fit snugly under his chin, should they ever embrace. He liked that idea. Perhaps more than he should on such short acquaintance.

But her words had him worried...and elated at the same time. He was worried about Reynor, but ecstatic to know Linea and Rey were a pair. It gave him some idea who he’d be sharing his mate with when they finally did find her. This cute little wench might even be up for the challenge, though the Mother of All knew, few women were cut out to be mated to a set of knights.

“Because of the way dragon mating affects the knights involved, it is imperative the knights already have a wife of their own before the dragon side of the partnership can be allowed to consummate their union.” Marcus gave her the bare bones of the explanation, enjoying the surprise on her lovely face. She had delicate features that spoke of

foreign lands. She was intriguing, to say the least.

“Here we are.” He opened the large door to the suite he shared with Linea, unsurprised to find the dragon basking in the oval pit of heated sand she loved. Her glistening, pale green scales winked at them in the dim light as just her head craned forward to greet them.

The girl made a deep bow, though her eyes never left those of the dragon. It was a mark of respect and good breeding that surprised him.

“Lady Linea,” she said in a strong voice, “it is an honor to meet you. I am Lucia de Alarithia, last of my line, lately of the Jinn. I bring grave news from Sir Reynor.”

“What’s happened to Rey?”

The dragon’s voice rumbled through Marcus’s mind, as it always did, comforting and beautiful. He watched the girl carefully to see whether or not she really could hear Linea. It was a rare person indeed who could hear a dragon’s silent voice.

“You know already he was injured some time ago. The injury has not healed well and he’s been spending a great deal of time at the tavern where I live and work as a serving girl.”

Marcus was struck by the exchange. It appeared she really could hear dragons. His curiosity rose another notch.

“We’ve become friendly,” she continued. “I noticed a dimness in his eyes yesterday, and badgered him until he would let me look at his wound. Lady,” she paused, stepping closer to the dragon than Marcus had ever seen any stranger dare, “infection has set in and it rages beyond my meager skills. He needs a true healer or I’m afraid...” The girl choked up, her emotion clear. “I’m afraid he’ll die.” Her whispered words dropped into the silence of the room as she paused. “He made me promise not to tell anyone, but I can’t sit by and do nothing. He also made me promise if the worst happened, I would tell you and Sir Kaden goodbye. I came here today to speak to Sir Kaden,

but they said he's busy, so I thought perhaps you could do something."

Linea leapt out of her wallow, shaking sand off as she went, clearly agitated. Marcus sensed fear in her like he'd never known before. She was afraid for her mate.

"I must see him! We must help him!"

"We will, my love." Marcus stroked one large hand down her neck, trying to calm her. "But let's bring help as well. Can you get a message to King Roland? Kaden needs to know about this, though how Reynor could have hidden the seriousness of his injury from Kaden is beyond me."

"He feels guilty. He wouldn't even talk to me for the past few days," Linea said, anger, frustration and despair in her tone.

Marcus nodded. "They both feel guilty. And it's completely misplaced." He turned back to the pretty girl. "Lucia, you did the right thing in coming here. Come, let's round up the others and be on our way. A stubborn dragon, and an even more stubborn knight, await."

Kaden sat with the council, once again stewing over the tragic events of the past few days. The king's youngest brother, Prince William, had been kidnapped. Two young dragons had taken off after him, but no word had been heard from any of them since. Others had been dispatched, but the trail disappeared, and now all the Lairs were on the lookout for sign of the prince and those who'd followed him.

Kaden tried to concentrate on the discussion of efforts to find the young prince, but he couldn't help but think of his own problems and Rey's grievous injury. If he'd been a little faster, a little more nimble, Reynor would have never been hurt. Now, because of his failure, his dragon partner might never fly again. It was the worst fate one could

imagine for a dragon. And it was all his fault. No wonder Rey didn't want to see him or even talk to him. Kaden didn't blame him, but he'd never felt so alone in all his life. Without the constant presence of the dragon in his mind, he felt more isolated than ever and his world was without color.

"Kaden!" King Roland shouted his name and Kaden came back to the meeting with a start.

"Yes, my liege."

"Linea tells me Reynor is near death. How could you let this happen?"

"What?" Kaden jumped up from his seat, confused and alarmed.

"A tavern girl from Castleton just came to see Linea, telling her Rey was close to death. You'd better go see what this is about. My wife will go with you. She's tried to contact Rey and he's rebuffing her."

"Sweet Mother! This is all my fault. He didn't want me around, but I thought it was because he blamed me."

At that moment, the queen swept into the room. She was wearing leathers more suited to a knight than a lady, but this queen wasn't your typical noblewoman. "I'm ready to go when you are, Kaden. Tor is waiting in the courtyard."

"Kaden, you and Reynor have serious issues to work out. Don't come back until this is settled." King Roland's expression was unforgiving and Kaden felt the weight of his burdens increase.

"Yes, my liege. I'm sorry." He headed for the doorway to join the waiting queen. "I'm sorry for all of this."

He and the queen headed down the halls at a fast pace. Urgency was required, but if anyone could save Rey, it was Queen Alania. She was a strong dragon healer with a true gift.

"Thank you, milady, for helping Rey."

"You boys have got to start communicating better, Kaden," the

queen admonished him. “I can guess what happened. Rey blames himself for his injury while you thought he blamed you.”

“I blame myself, milady.”

She scoffed. “As I said. Each of you taking blame that should not exist. All dragons get hurt from time to time. It’s a fact of our existence. The enemy—if anyone—deserves the blame for this injury, though both of you deserve to be whipped for letting it go this far. The first thing you need to do, once we get Rey back on his feet, is to clear the air between you. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my queen. Perfectly.”

“All right then.”

They rounded the last corner and came out into a wide courtyard. A giant, sparkling silver dragon waited for them.

“Tor will carry us down to Castleton. Flying is faster than going by land and we haven’t a moment to lose.”

Another dragon waited, pacing at Tor’s side. Linea didn’t conceal her impatience well, but her knight partner’s eyes were compassionate when they met his. He and Marcus had always been good friends.

“Linea and I will take Lucia,” Kaden noticed the small woman hovering in the background for the first time, “and lead the way to the tavern.” Kaden was glad Marcus was there to take charge. Just at the moment, Kaden couldn’t think beyond the fact that Reynor might die because of his stupidity.

Chapter Two

Lucia had never ridden on a dragon’s back before. Today was indeed a day of firsts. Linea flew beautifully and if not for the dire situation, Lucia would have enjoyed her first flight immensely. The

dragon was poetry in motion beneath her, and the strong man holding her by the waist made her feel warm and cared for in a way she hadn't experienced since losing her family all those years ago.

They set down in the tavern yard, the pale green dragon followed closely by the stunning silver beast named Tor. Everyone had heard tales about the royal Ice Dragon who'd been raised by the queen. Lucia strongly suspected the lovely woman riding on the silver dragon was the queen herself.

Jumping down from the dragon's back into Marcus's strong arms, Lucia tried to suppress the little thrill of attraction she felt for the handsome knight. This was no time to start dreaming impossible dreams. Reynor had to come first. His life was at stake here. She led the way into the large tavern—empty now, so early in the day. Part of the old city, the main room had been built on a scale to hold two or three dragons, if they wished to hear some music and join in the merriment of an evening with their knights.

But for the past few days, Reynor had become a full-time resident. Nobody questioned it at first, though they saw to it he had plenty of water. Dragons could go a few days without eating, but everyone knew they enjoyed sweets like melons and bushels of apples, so he had all he could want within easy reach.

Only Lucia would dare go close enough to serve the dragons. She liked them a great deal and had no fear of them, so whenever a dragon deigned to visit the tavern, Lucia was elected to serve them. She didn't mind it at all. In fact, she looked forward to such occasions.

“Lucy, what have you done?” Rey's deep voice shivered through her mind.

“I did what I had to do. I brought help.” She stood before the shimmering blue dragon, unafraid, with her hands perched on her hips, as if daring him to argue. When he

only sighed in defeat and lowered his head to the ground, she walked forward and crouched beside him. “I don’t want to see you crippled...or dead, Rey. You’re too special for me to allow it. Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You have a good heart, Lucy.”

The queen went immediately to the dragon’s left wing. The area near the joint had swollen to three times its normal size and the wound was badly inflamed. Reynor spread his wing at the queen’s gentle urging, though not without a great deal of pain. Lucia stayed by his head, stroking his scales soothingly while the other woman worked.

A man she’d seen only a few times before crouched down next to the dragon on the other side, touching the scaled head and looking deep into Reynor’s jeweled eyes. Remorse shone clearly on the knight’s face. Remorse, fear...and love. Lucia backed off, seeing the two reunited as they should be.

As she moved back, she faltered, but strong arms caught her against a hard chest. Sir Marcus held her waist, tucking her under his chin, her back to his warm, hard front. He gentled her when she would have struggled out of his hold.

“Be at ease, little dragon tamer.” His words whispered over her hair. “You’ve done a beautiful thing by bringing us here. It is a debt we can never repay.”

She settled back against him. Sir Kaden lay on the floor, hugging the dragon’s neck hard as the queen set about her work. The glow of magic in the air was undeniable. Lucia hadn’t seen it since she was a child, but she recognized the subtle scent of ozone and the tingle of strong magic.

When she’d realized how badly Rey was hurt, Lucia had been tempted to try to use the magic talisman given to her when she escaped her homeland all those years ago, but she was too afraid. For one thing,

the precious gift was only to be used in the most dire of circumstances, when all other hopes had failed. Such was the credo of her line. For another, Lucia had never used magic before, though she knew some of her family had once been potent healers. They'd been killed before she could learn or even discover if she had the ability.

Still, Reynor was a special being and she'd felt desperate as she watched him grow weaker. Unable to stand by and watch him die, she'd done what was necessary to get help for him. The queen was reputed to be a strong dragon healer, though Lucia could see Reynor's eyes cloud with agony as the woman worked. He twitched with pain, but his knight held him and comforted him as best he could.

"I only wish I'd gone to the castle sooner." Her words whispered out on a tragic sigh. She became aware of the green dragon's head looming next to them. Linea, it seemed, refused to be left outside.

"Will he be all right? Marcus, do you know?" In her agitation, the female dragon was broadcasting her worries to Lucia as well.

"The queen has said nothing yet, but she doesn't look too worried to me," Marcus replied. *"Judging from her expression I'd say he'll live, though whether he'll ever fly properly again is in the hands of the Mother, I'll wager."*

"It always was," Linea answered. *"The injury was bad enough in the first place, but now those two fools have let it get out of hand!"* The dragon seemed infuriated if the twitching of her tail was any indication.

"May I ask..." Lucia's words were a hesitant whisper. "How did it happen?"

"It was stupid, really." Marcus's hands tightened on her waist, fingers digging into her hips before he seemed to realize what he was doing and released her. "Have you heard about the fighting on the border?" When she nodded, he continued, "We were involved in a skirmish the last time out. Sometimes with these kinds of engagements,

you get caught low, within range of ground weapons. It happens.” He shrugged. “I saw Rey dodge an arrow. He lost altitude and came within sword distance of a group of cavalry. In such instances, the knight can engage with his own weapons, which Kaden did—and very well too—until one got past his guard and a wild swing took a chunk out of Reynor’s wing, down near the joint. It’s one of the few places not well protected by scale—it needs to be flexible, you see. A freak of luck for the adversary, though Rey’s blast of flame took care of him and his horse soon enough. Still, Rey barely stayed aloft and we had to practically tow him back here. The queen saw to him that night, but the kind of healing he needs is tricky. It’s not simply a matter of sewing together something that was torn. A wedge of his wing was actually cut out.”

Tears flowed down Lucia’s face as she heard the tale, watching the beautiful young queen try to banish the raging infection. Turning in Marcus’s loose embrace, Lucia sobbed against the man’s chest. She knew she was overreacting, but she couldn’t help herself. Rey was so special. He was such a good and kind dragon. She couldn’t imagine him crippled for life. It was too painful to contemplate.

“I’m sorry.” She sniffled as strong arms settled around her. She wasn’t above accepting comfort from Sir Marcus. Men of his station never looked twice at her now that she was a serving wench, though once upon a time...

But fairy tales wouldn’t put food in her belly. She’d learned that the hard way when all she’d ever known was cruelly ripped from her grasp. She didn’t have much faith in people, but the knights she’d seen in Draconia had begun to make her think maybe just maybe there were a few good men left in the world. It was her friendship with the dragons that started her thinking about the men they chose as partners. Surely such noble, magical creatures could see into the hearts of the men they chose to fight alongside.

Lucia dried her tears and cautioned herself to restrain her emotions. Coming apart at the seams did nobody any good. She straightened away from the knight, averting her eyes in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Sir Marcus. Please excuse my behavior.”

He tipped her chin up until her eyes met his. She was mortified. She just knew her face was blotchy and her eyes were probably red. Oh, why did she have to look like a watery hag when faced with masculine perfection given life?

“You are a puzzle, madam. You look like a tavern girl, but you speak like a lady.”

She read curiosity in his lovely eyes. Curiosity and a flicker of interest? Surely not.

“The riddle is easily solved, sir. I am a tavern girl now, but I was once a lady.”

A deep, whining moan from the dragon ended their ever-so-slightly flirtatious conversation. Lucia whipped her head around to see what was wrong as Linea shot past, her large green head hovering over her mate. Her long tongue licked out to smooth his ruffled scales with loving attention.

Lucia saw the queen sway on her feet as her power dimmed. Rushing over, Lucia brought a chair for the woman, realizing only then that the owner of the tavern and a few of the other staff were watching the scene from behind the bar. Lucia left the chair ready for the queen and went to the bar.

“Is that lady—?” one of the other girls ventured.

“The queen.” Lucia nodded, bustling about as she poured a stiff, restorative ale.

“Imagine that. The queen in our bar.” The same girl stared as if star struck.

A commotion near the large door meant for dragons caught Lucia's attention. The silver dragon was trying to fit through the doorway, but he was larger than the others and the place was built to house only two or three regular-sized dragons at any one time. With Rey and Linea already inside, their third, larger friend would be a tight fit.

Lucia went over to him on her way back to the queen. She bowed low, holding her laden tray steady with the impeccable balance that had been trained into her as a child.

"Welcome, Sir Tor. I'm Lucia. I'm sorry, but I don't think you'll fit inside right now. Perhaps you could sit in the yard and crane your neck through the doorway?"

The silver dragon cocked his head toward her. "*Can you hear me?*"

"Yes, milord."

"*Great! I'm Tor.*" Lucia couldn't help but smile at the young dragon's enthusiasm. "*Could you help Lana for me? She'll be awfully weak after healing Rey.*"

"I guessed as much. This drink is for her. I will aid her in any way I can."

"*You're nice. Thanks.*"

"It's my pleasure to be of service." With another bow, she left the giant dragonet in the doorway and moved back to the queen. She was sitting in the chair now, looking exceptionally tired. Lucia approached in a respectful way. "For you, milady. It's the best ale we have. I hope it's to your liking. Or I could get you something else."

Queen Lana reached out with shaking fingers and lifted the glass, drinking deeply. She smiled, her every move dripping with fatigue, as she placed the half-finished drink back on the tray Lucia still held. "Thank you. It's delicious."

"Can I ask? Will Sir Reynor be all right?"

The queen tilted her head, quizzing Lucia with her gaze. “He’ll live. Whether he flies again or not is in the hands of the Mother.”

“All is in Her hands.” Marcus’s deep voice came from just over her shoulder. The man could move silently when he wished, it seemed. He swept to one knee before the queen. “Thank you, milady. Lucia told me Reynor and Linea are mates.”

With what Marcus had told her about how dragons and knights mated, if Reynor died, Linea might never find another mate. And if she didn’t, in all likelihood, neither would her knight. So more than one being’s future depended on Reynor’s recovery.

Queen Lana reached out and stroked Marcus’s hair in a familiar way that annoyed Lucia. Jealousy blasted through her. She’d never felt such immediate, violent possessiveness about anyone before. And certainly not a man she’d only just met. Sure, she’d cried on his shoulder, but that didn’t mean she owned him.

Lucia backed away, needing to put some space between herself and the unreasonable reaction. She stopped, though, at the sight of the other knight, sitting now at Reynor’s side. He held onto the dragon’s neck with one arm, embracing him, offering comfort. Rey’s jeweled gaze had more fire now and had lost that worrisome, unhealthy dimness.

Kaden stopped her, catching her hand in his. She looked down at him, surprised by his warm touch.

“Rey told me what a good friend you are, Lucy. I can’t—” He broke off, looking away as he blinked rapidly. “I can’t tell you how much what you’ve done means. I can never thank you enough.”

Seeing the depth of this man’s feelings for the dragon touched something deep inside. She had to get a hold of her own emotions before she started crying again. She stiffened her spine, fighting back the empathy this man evoked with his sad blue eyes.

“Just you take care of each other,” she said in a harsher tone than

she'd intended. "No more of these misunderstandings."

"Yes, ma'am." Kaden let her go and stood, towering over her, much as Marcus had done. Impulsively, she reached up to move a lock of golden blond hair back from his face. She gasped when his arms came around her. He hugged her close, crushing her against his muscular chest.

"You're a special lady, Lucy." His gruff words drifted past her ear. "Thank you, sweetheart." He surprised her yet again when she felt his lips pause in front of her ear, kissing softly, just once, before he let her go and stepped back.

Lucia looked up at him, feeling the tears gather behind her eyes again, much to her dismay. Before she could let them fall, the dragon nudged her with his snout, breaking the spell. Reflexively, she reached out and stroked his scaly head.

"Are you all right now, Rey?"

"I've been better," he quipped.

"He can't be moved for now. I don't want to undo everything I've just done." The queen stood beside Lucia, speaking to the dragon, the knights and—shockingly—Lucia as well. "Can you work around him?"

Lucia scrambled to answer the queen of all Draconia. "He's been here all week. I know Sir Reynor enjoys the music in the evenings, and many of the customers talk to him, though none can hear him." She lowered her eyes modestly.

"Except you." Marcus spoke from her other side.

She nodded. "Except me." She'd never come out and said she could speak to dragons before, though she knew many in the tavern suspected.

"Then, if it's all right," the queen glanced over to the nodding tavern owner who watched from behind the bar, "I'd like Rey to stay here for

a few more days. Will you be here to nurse him and bring water and food to him?"

Lucia curtsied. "Yes, my queen. I would be honored."

"I hope you'll come to the castle and visit with us after Rey is feeling better. There aren't many women who can speak with dragons." The queen sounded tired, but Lucia heard the hint of order in her tone.

She inclined her head politely in acknowledgement. "If you wish, Your Majesty."

"I do." Green eyes sparkled with laughter. "And I want you," the queen turned to Kaden, "to stay with Reynor and work out this guilt between you." She touched both males on the head, joining them with her small, healing hands. "Neither of you are to blame for this. Work it out. Partners should communicate better than this."

Both heads bowed and the knight flushed with embarrassment. "Yes, milady."

The queen sighed and released the males, turning away. She headed for the doorway where the silver dragon waited, pausing only to stroke her hand once over Linea's pale green scales. A few moments later, the young silver dragon was gone and the queen with him.

Chapter Three

Kaden moved into the tavern that very afternoon, paying the innkeeper a few days in advance for room and board for himself and his dragon. Marcus and Linea stayed near as well. The two dragons lay quietly together, side by side, their necks entwined. Reynor had to be cautious in his movements, but he seemed to do better with Linea at his side.

Lucia went about her business, tending the customers who

frequented the tavern. Sir Kaden left on some sort of errand, but Sir Marcus stayed behind with the dragons. Quite a few busybodies came in to see why all the dragons had flown in that day and why, especially, the queen's easily recognizable Ice Dragon had been to visit. Lucia let the other serving girls gossip, but took no part in it herself. She felt self-conscious enough with Sir Marcus's penetrating gaze following her about her duties. She didn't want to make it worse by gossiping about the situation.

Sir Marcus was a handsome devil, but as she learned more about him, he began to remind her painfully of all she'd lost. His courtly manners and polished appearance made her think of things better put away. She could never regain her past. It was better to just forget that, once upon a time, she'd been a noble lady with every expectation of marrying a man much like Sir Marcus.

Oddly though, he didn't seem to mind her fall in stature. To be sure, he was curious about her. That much was obvious from the way his eyes followed her every movement. But he didn't seem to be mocking or judgmental. Mostly, he seemed inquisitive. She feared the questions he'd ask given half a chance and did her best to avoid him, but inevitably, he cornered her at the end of the bar during the usual afternoon lull.

"Tavern work is harder than I realized."

She was polishing glasses when Marcus spoke, surprising her so badly she fumbled the costly glass in her hands and would have dropped it. Marcus caught it before it could shatter, placing it back in her hands with a lingering caress. He didn't immediately let go, making her keenly aware of his warmth and the unexpected calluses on his warrior's hands.

"What?" She'd lost his words to the shock of his appearance. He gazed so deep into her eyes, she thought he might be able to see all the

way down into her soul.

“I said you work harder than I thought here in the tavern. I never considered before how much there is to the job.”

She pulled away and put the glass behind the bar with its clean fellows. Her limbs trembled as she lifted the next glass for inspection and polishing.

“I know you’ve been watching me and frankly, Sir Marcus, I don’t enjoy it.”

Marcus stepped back, appearing surprised by her outburst. She’d surprised herself with the bald truth, but she’d never been one to play games.

“I’m sorry if I offended you.”

She tilted her head, considering the glass and avoiding looking at the handsome knight. “Offend is too strong a word, but I accept your apology.”

“Please,” he edged closer once more, the heat of his presence causing tingles of awareness in her body, “isn’t there some way I can make it up to you?” His words sent shivers down her spine, making her think of how his cultured voice would sound in passion. The low, persuasive tone, coupled with his devilishly handsome face should be outlawed. It made a girl think of sex—truly pleasurable, scream-the-house-down sex—all too easily. “I’m already in your debt,” he went on, “for the service you preformed for Rey and Kaden. I’d hate to think I owed you even more for my own inept attempt to make conversation.”

Gathering her courage, she rounded on him. “And why in the world would you—a knight of the realm—want to *make conversation* with me? Sir Marcus, I know just how far apart our stations in life are.” Lucia fought not to let her emotions get the best of her.

“Stations in life?” He seemed genuinely puzzled before realization dawned and he drew closer. “Sweet Lucia, social rank means very little

here in Draconia, and to me, personally. It's the measure of the person that really matters. I don't know how it was where you come from, but surely you've seen how it is here? I may have been born of a wealthy family, but there are no expectations about whom I *make conversation*—or other things—with.” His smile was downright sinful and she knew full well he meant to be provocative. He succeeded too. Her abdomen rippled with awareness.

“Sir Marcus,” she forced herself to step away from him, “I haven't been in Draconia long but even so, I know the difference between a knight and a servant.” She raised her chin with a hint of the pride she'd never lost.

Marcus didn't give her a chance to retreat. Right there, in full view of the few people in the tavern, he stepped up and took her into his arms. Before she could protest, his lips covered hers in the most arousing kiss she'd ever known. He conquered her, plunging his tongue into her mouth. His taste was rich and divine, the feel of his strong body against hers like heaven.

But it couldn't last. He reminded her too sharply of the past that was gone forever.

When he eased up, there were tears in her eyes. Hurt and recrimination entered his gaze when he saw her expression, but she didn't want him to feel guilty for something that wasn't his fault.

“I can't apologize.” The words were torn from his lips as he held her in his arms.

“I don't want you to, but...”

“What is it, my sweet? Why do you look so sad?”

“It's not your fault.” She sighed, resting against his hard chest for just a moment out

of time. “It's complicated.”

He nuzzled her hair. “Why don’t you try to explain it to me?”

“I’m not sure if I can.” She pulled away from him and turned so she wouldn’t have to look at his too-handsome face. “It’s just— You remind me of things, Marcus. You represent a part of my life that’s gone forever and it hurts to think of those days, now long over.”

When she looked back at the knight, his stiff posture and the muscle ticking in his jaw indicated he hadn’t taken her explanation well. Still, she thought she knew him well enough not to fear him. Lucia only regretted the hurt in his eyes.

“I apologize, Lucia.” His words were terse. “It was never my intent to bring back your sorrow and I have no idea how to fix it, but know this...” he moved in close, his words for her ears alone, “...I will find a way. I want you, Lucia and I mean to have you.”

Lucia tried not to let his ardent words affect her, but they seemed to go straight to her womb. Luckily her trembling knees were hidden by her skirt, but she fought to control her breathing which had grown betrayingly shallow. One thing was clear though, she had to fight fire with fire. This complex man wouldn’t take anything less.

“Won’t Kaden have something to say about that? Or did I misunderstand the way you knights work your kinky little threesomes?” She kept her voice to a hissing whisper, though there were few people in the tavern and none seemed to be paying much attention to them in the dark corner of the bar.

Her words seemed to set him back on his feet and he regarded her with hooded eyes for some moments before responding. When he did speak, his words offered little comfort.

“You’re right. We both will want you in our bed, if you’re the woman I think you are. Have you given any thought to how you’ll handle that? How it will feel? How good we can make it for you?” With each question, he drew closer until she was almost back in his

arms. “I’ve never shared a woman before, but I’ve heard accounts from some of the mated knights in the Lair. The pleasure is said to be beyond measure. Especially when the dragons take to the skies in a mating flight. The backlash on the human part of the family is said to be a pleasure like no other.” Marcus cupped her ass with one big hand and squeezed.

They were next to the bar where no one could see his groping and she found it hard not to jump at the intimate caress. This knight was less a gentleman than she’d believed, and all man. In that moment he didn’t resemble the discrete noblemen of her youth, but more the rough Jinn warriors she’d known since leaving her home all those years ago. He was even more alluring now than he’d been just a few short minutes ago, and altogether much too dangerous.

“One of us will claim your curvy ass, Lucia. Have you ever had a cock up there?” She gasped as he sucked her earlobe into his warm mouth. He let go and whispered into her ear, “I promise, we will make you crave it like your next breath.” Then his tongue traced the swirls of her ear, making her squirm. “We’ll take turns with you and make sure you never forget how we feel inside you. And when the dragons fly, we’ll take you together to a place you never dreamed of.”

“Marcus!” It was all too much. No man had ever spoken to her this way. She shocked herself at how hot it made her.

“You’ll scream my name in pleasure, Lucia. One day soon. This I promise you.” He backed away slowly, his gaze boring down into hers. “But I’ll give you time. Time to accept the future and come to terms with the past as best you can. You know now I’m like no man you’ve ever known before. I’m a knight—nobly born, I grant you—but when it comes to you, I’m a barbarian, Lucia.” He chuckled at his own words and stepped back, shaking his head. “Damn, what you do to me, woman. You should be outlawed!”

Lucia sank back against the bar, afraid her knees wouldn't support her. "I was thinking the same thing about you."

He laughed outright at her honest words and she blushed, laughing as well. Things were by no means settled between them, but he seemed to have come to some kind of decision for now. Lucia would steer clear of this all-too-dangerous man, but she feared a reckoning would come in the future, if she stayed in his company for any length of time. That was to be avoided at all costs.

Marcus sauntered away and she turned back to her task, finishing up as quickly as possible. When she'd put the last glass safely on the shelf, she took off for a moment of privacy in her room. At least there, she wouldn't have to feel the handsome knight's eyes on her.

As Kaden walked back to Castleton after fetching a change of clothes from the Lair, he mentally kicked himself over and over, unable to understand how he and Rey had reached such a point where dragon and knight couldn't even talk to each other. That should never happen in a partnership as deep as theirs. That night—his first in the tavern Kaden was so tired from grief and worry, he fell into the bed in the small rented room and slept soundly until well after dawn. Breakfast awaited him in the common room, as did Rey.

They talked little, both unable to articulate the problems between them, but just being near each other helped. Linea had spent the night, though Marcus was nowhere in sight. Kaden spent the afternoon gathering more of his belongings from the Lair and bringing them to the tavern. He needed clothes and some grooming supplies for Rey. Dragon scales could dry out when a dragon was ill and didn't get enough exercise. Kaden spent the hours before dinner oiling and

polishing Rey's scales in the areas that didn't pain him too much.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Kaden sat at a table next to the dragons and ate in sullen silence while the tavern filled up around them. Most of the patrons were Jinn, as were the proprietor and the serving maids. They were of the working class, but not rough. Merchants, tradesmen and others mingled as a hearty dinner was served, followed by fine ale and even some entertainment. The Jinn were noted for the talent of their minstrels and a few played in the background while the conversations of the customers hummed around them.

Kaden drank a bit more than he probably should have, keeping vigil at Rey's side. The other patrons moved around the tavern, most giving the dragons a wide berth, though some came over to pay their respects and offer melons or other large fruits to the dragons as snacks. Marcus joined Kaden after dinner and sat with him deep into the night. They'd always been friends and he found the other knight's presence both comforting and reassuring.

The only serving girl brave enough, it seemed, to serve the dragons and knights was Lucia. She brought tankards of ale after clearing away the remains of Kaden's dinner. He watched her as the night wore on. Marcus sat with him, watching and speaking little, but it was a comfortable silence.

Kaden noticed how Marcus's gaze followed Lucy. Kaden couldn't help but watch her himself. There was something appealing about the confident way she moved, and she was a proven beauty—inside and out. No other woman had ever braved the castle gates to summon help for an injured dragon. Only Lucy.

"She's quite a woman," Marcus commented, raising his tankard in Lucia's direction. Kaden realized he'd been caught staring at her. Again.

"I can't figure her out." Kaden sat back, trying to be nonchalant.

“She seems comfortable in this atmosphere, but she speaks like a gentlewoman.”

“She doesn’t really belong here,” Marcus agreed. “She was born a noblewoman, but fate has brought her here.”

Marcus’s words seemed portentous. “For some reason, you think?”

“I do.” Marcus lowered the tankard. “I believe she may well be our mate.”

The idea shocked Kaden, but he felt an immediate warmth flood his midsection at the idea of bedding Lucia. A wife would be shared between them now it was clear Rey and Linea were mates. Such was the way with dragons. It was rare to find a woman who would willingly live in the Lair with dozens of dragons. Rarer still was the woman who could hear a dragon’s silent speech.

“It feels right,” Kaden admitted. “She can bespeak dragons. Even in the Castle Lair, not all the women can do that.”

“It’s a gift,” Marcus agreed. “And it’s clear she loves Rey already. I think she’s fond of Linea too.”

“But what about us?” Kaden nearly cursed. The woman had seen him at his absolute worst. She probably despised him for the way he’d seemed to ignore Rey’s life-threatening injury.

“Why don’t we find out?” Marcus stood, stretching and surveying the quiet tavern. It was late in the evening and most customers had already headed for home. The serving wenches were cleaning their assigned areas, but there seemed little left for them to do. He went across the room, toward the bar where Lucia was washing out tankards in a large bucket of water.

Chapter Four

Lucia was just finishing up her chores when she noticed Sir Marcus

walking in her direction. The man should come with a warning label. He was so good looking, and the way he walked should be outlawed. Long limbs rolled loosely across the tavern floor and his arresting gaze held hers the entire way.

They hadn't spoken since their run-in the day before and seemed to have achieved a somewhat uncomfortable truce. He gave her the patented Marcus melt-your-bones smile that all the other serving girls had been sighing over. It had been nearly impossible to talk to any of the other women at the tavern without being either teased or grilled for information about the knights. Of course, the girls were still frightened by the dragons. No matter how many times Lucia told them the dragons were gentle creatures, the others refused to go anywhere near them. Not even to flirt with the knights.

"Are you nearly done for the night?" Marcus's deep voice rolled over her.

"Just about." She wiped her hands on her apron and untied the strings holding it in place over her simple dress. "Why? Does Rey need anything? Or Linea?" She pointedly left him out of her query.

"No, they're fine. Sleeping, actually." He glanced over his shoulder at the dragons' entwined necks. "I thought maybe you could sit with us—with Kaden and me—for a bit. We owe you much for coming to the castle and haven't had much time to get to know you. We'd like to remedy that."

Surprised and wary, Lucia couldn't ignore the voice inside telling her to grab whatever time she could with these strong men. Such men didn't cross her path at all in the normal course of business, unless she was serving them food or drink. But Marcus and Kaden both had treated her as an equal, not as a servant. The idea was too tantalizing to pass up. It had been so long since she'd sat at a table and shared conversation with an educated man. She missed it. And playing with

fire was something she'd always done, regardless of her propensity for getting burned. She went around the bar and allowed Marcus to escort her to the table.

Kaden stood when she neared and pulled out a chair for her. His manners were polite and she was hard pressed to decide which of these men was more handsome. Marcus had a suave beauty to him, a grace of form and movement, but Kaden was pure power in human form. His muscles spoke of long days spent training at arms, while the cunning in his sparkling eyes betrayed keen intelligence.

"Please, Lucy, won't you join us?" Kaden captured one of her hands, lifting it to his lips for a gentle salute.

Barely able to nod at his unexpected chivalry, she took the chair he offered, sitting lightly. If she hadn't felt the scratchy linen of her shift against her skin, she would have thought she'd gone back in time.

The men sat after she did, both focusing their considerable attention on her. She resisted the urge to fidget. Since she'd met him, Marcus had been the focus of her thoughts, but watching Kaden interact with Reynor made her want to understand the more rough-cut knight better. He wasn't quite as effortlessly gallant as Marcus, but had a charm all his own.

"We can't thank you enough for looking after Rey." Marcus poured a bit of the wine they'd ordered earlier into an empty glass and offered it to her.

She accepted, taking a small sip of the fruity vintage. She'd had better, but not recently. "It was my pleasure. Sir Reynor is a sweetheart."

Kaden laughed at that, surprising her with his change in demeanor. Since he'd been here, he'd been alternately worried, dour, sad, or remorseful. Sometimes all at once. It was good to hear his laughter. It touched her, and brought home just how strongly she felt for them all

on such short acquaintance.

Of course, talking with Rey over the past days, she'd learned a great deal about his knight. She knew some of Kaden's likes and dislikes, his moments of heroism and the reasons Rey loved him. From the dragon's descriptions, she'd felt she already knew the most important things about Sir Kaden, but meeting him now, she could see there were still depths to his personality to explore and try to understand. And Marcus's warnings of the way they would make love to her tantalized her imagination. She couldn't help the vivid images in her mind as she sat between them, doing her best to keep the betraying heat from her face.

"Were he awake I'm sure Rey would scoff to hear himself described as sweet. He's a fierce dragon, don't you know? You can't call a fire breathing beast *sweet*. It would ruin his image." Kaden's teasing seemed a good sign for the recovery of both dragon and knight.

Lucia chuckled, answering with the same lighthearted air, glad of the distraction from her scandalous thoughts. "Reynor has a heart of gold and he knows I think he's sweet, though like you, he scoffs when I say it."

"How is it you can hear dragons, Lucy?" Marcus asked. "It's not a common ability."

She shifted uncomfortably. "I've always been able to communicate with magical creatures. I grew up in a distant land and we had many different kinds of magic there."

"Lucia de Alarithia, last of your line, late of the Jinn'. That's how you introduced yourself to Linea," Marcus said with deceptive casualness. "Perhaps you'll enlighten us. Where is Alarithia?"

Lucia sighed, remembering days long gone. "Alarithia is a coastal city in the Doge of Helios's domain. I grew up there, a child of the House of Alagar, ruling line of the

city.”

“What happened?” Kaden folded one of her hands in his, offering comfort.

“What usually happens when one group wants the power of another? War. And assassination. I was the only survivor, and only just barely. If I hadn’t fled the city, I’d be dead as well. For that reason, I don’t often publicize who I once was, though I doubt anyone cares to send an assassin this far, after so many years.”

“How did you escape?” Marcus leaned forward, listening intently.

“The Jinn hid me in their caravan. They adopted me when it was clear I had no home to return to. They’ve been good to me.”

“But you’ve never forgotten your origins, or your ladylike manners,” Kaden observed, squeezing her hand. “You are Jinn, but not. There’s a lot of the lady still in you, sweetheart.”

“Much to my dismay at times,” she agreed. “It makes me stand out too much from the other girls.”

“You would do that regardless.” Marcus lifted her free hand in his, tangling their fingers. It felt good to touch both of them, though she was confused by the emotions swirling through her. Sad thoughts of her lost home mixed with the empathy coming from these two wonderful men.

“But what magical creatures did you talk to in Helios? I’m not familiar with your city at all, and I’ve only heard bards’ tales of that land. Surely no dragons live there.”

“No, no dragons. But there are several kinds of magical sea creatures, and gryphons nested along our cliffs. I used to play with the hatchlings when the adults would let me. They were so soft and fluffy, and while still babies, they couldn’t talk yet with their beaks. It takes time for them to learn that skill, so they spoke in my mind, much like the dragons.”

“I’ve never seen a gryphon, but they’re said to be deadly and

incredibly powerful creatures.” Kaden’s grip tightened on her hand.

“They are both, but if you know how to approach them from a position of strength, they will sometimes accept you. My father taught me how to gain their respect and a few of the mated pairs allowed me to play with their young. I was just a child then myself, of course.”

“So your playmates were baby gryphons?” Marcus looked impressed. “No wonder you’re such a formidable woman.”

“Me?” She laughed outright. “I’m hardly formidable. I’m only a serving wench after all.”

Kaden tugged her closer to his warm body. “You are so much more, Lucy. More than you realize.”

His lips settled on hers with delicate urgency, testing first to see if she would accept his kiss. Giving in to her own deepest desires, she settled into the kiss, cataloging every touch, every caress, every sweep of his daring tongue, against the moment when she would wake from this dream.

All too soon, he released her, though he didn’t let her go far. One strong hand continued to hold hers, while the other settled at her waist. She could feel the heat of his fingers through her thin dress. It did something to her insides, making her belly quiver in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. It felt like magic, only different.

“You taste sweeter than I would have dreamed, Lucy. I’m so glad Rey found you.”

The intensity in his eyes was hard to answer. She realized Marcus still held her other hand, and she looked at him with shocked eyes, but he was smiling.

“My impetuous friend may be rushing things, but I’m inclined to do the same. It’s hard to hold back when heaven might be right before your eyes.” Marcus sounded almost philosophical, but his tone was deep and mysterious, his eyes dancing with lights of

pleasure as he leaned closer. Before she knew what was happening, his lips were on hers. Again. When she'd promised herself she wouldn't let it happen. She gave up thinking as his tongue swept in as if it owned her, taking up where Kaden left off and driving her higher still. The two men together were a potent combination.

Was it shameful of her to accept another man's kiss so soon after learning the taste of Kaden? Was it wrong to enjoy them both? Her head was spinning.

An amused female voice sounded through her mind. *"Is it really so hard to understand, little sister? You could be the mate of this family. You could be the tie that binds us all together."*

Marcus ended the kiss, his gaze seeking hers as he drew back. "Don't let her frighten you off. Linea," he addressed the watchful dragon with a glance, "don't pressure her."

The female dragon snorted delicately, a spiral of smoke heading for the high ceiling. *"The girl needs to understand she can have you both."*

The thought tantalized as she looked from one knight to the other. Both of these incredible men were looking at her as a potential mate. The idea was staggering, though her conversations with Marcus should have prepared her for it.

Kaden stroked one finger along her hip. "It's a rare woman that can hear dragon speech. You like Rey and Linea, don't you?"

She nodded, still being cautious. "Yes, but—"

"And you don't hold disgust for either one of us." Marcus's eyes twinkled as he teased her. "Do you?"

"No, but—"

"Then there's no reason for us not to see where this might lead," Kaden said in a determined voice.

"No pressure though," Marcus assured her, as if reminding them all. "We like you a great deal, Lucia. You've already proven your care for

our dragon partners and they love you for it. I think the Mother of All put you in our path for a reason, and I don't want to frighten you, but knights often know immediately when they meet the right woman." His eyes sought out Kaden's over her head. He took a deep breath, as if for courage, then went on. "I felt something when I first saw you, but the danger to Rey and the revelation that Linea was his mate had my head spinning. But it feels right to have you here, with us. I think you were meant for us, Lucia. I think I could spend the rest of my life loving you."

Lucia caught her breath at the tender revelation. No man had ever said such things to her, and she realized from any other man, the declaration would have been wrong. But from Marcus...it felt right, but altogether too scary. He still reminded her of the life she'd been forced to leave behind. He'd tried to show her other facets of his personality, but when she wasn't caught up in his passion, she still saw his polish and poise, his rich garments and cultured background. They'd have to work on that before she could ever be truly comfortable in his presence.

Kaden squeezed her waist, claiming her attention. "I owe you gratitude, no doubt, but this feels like so much more. I want to get to know you better and see if you could fit in with our little family. You could complete us, Lucy, and make us the happiest of men—and dragons." He winked at her.

"But there's no pressure." Marcus's words belied the very real pressure she was beginning to feel. He knew it too. The irony in his tone spoke volumes.

She liked Marcus's dry sense of humor, and the fact he acknowledged the depth of the position they put her in made her feel better somehow. Unable to deal with much more, she shook off their hands and stood, looking down at them both. She drew on all her childhood lessons of deportment to face these two with a dignity she

wasn't feeling at the moment.

"Gentlemen," she tried to sound stern, "I have no idea why you're teasing me this way."

"Sweetheart," Marcus spoke for both, "we're not teasing. We're in earnest."

"Then," she sniffed and blinked back the tears welling in her eyes, "I have no idea what to say to you. Please," she grabbed the sides of her rough skirt, "give me time to think. I wasn't raised to expect anything like this."

"Talk to Rey and Linea," Kaden advised, catching one of her hands when she would have fled. "Let them explain how it is between knights and their mates if you cannot ask it of us."

Swallowing, she refused to look at either of them as she nodded, though she discovered Kaden's concern was easier to bear than Marcus's. Kaden was rough where Marcus was smooth and he didn't remind her of the painful past, but rather of the protective Jinn warriors who'd put their lives on the line to save hers. Kaden let her go and she took off across the room to the area behind the bar, where her small room—and safety—was located.

"She's magnificent," Marcus said as they watched her flee with a grace few tavern wenches ever achieved.

"And beautiful," Kaden agreed. "Too good for the likes of me, though with your highbred manners, she's a perfect match for you."

"You sound jealous!" Marcus rounded on his friend, teasing in his expression, though underneath there was serious thought behind his words.

"I am, dammit." Kaden swiped the glass off the table and finished his wine in one swallow. "If not for Rey, she would never look at a rough soldier like me. I don't know how to talk to her, how to handle her, how to—"

Marcus cut him off. “But you know how to love her.”

That stopped him cold.

He did. He knew very well how to love her. In fact, the seed of love was blooming even now in his heart. He looked at Marcus—the man he’d share Lucy with, if she could handle being their wife.

“You too?”

Marcus sighed and propped his head on one hand, elbow on the table. “In the tumult of the past days, I didn’t realize it at first. It just felt so good to have her around. It felt right to have her caring for Rey and talking with him and Linea. Like that was the way it always should be. And then I realized...it probably was. But she fears me, Kaden. Or rather, she fears the memories I bring back.”

“How’s that?” Kaden was shocked by the sorrow in his friend’s tone. Marcus was one of those knights who always seemed sure he could overcome any obstacle. His positive attitude was something Kaden aspired to, but never seemed to achieve, and here Marcus was, as down as Kaden had ever seen him.

“I kissed her yesterday.” Marcus rubbed one hand over his face. “Actually, I propositioned her, and grabbed her butt. Damn, she has a fine ass.” He seemed lost in reverie for a moment while Kaden seethed. “She nearly ran from me, Kaden. She came right out and told me I reminded her of all that she’d lost and tried to leave. Then I became a barbarian and grabbed her ass.”

Kaden laughed. He couldn’t help it. It just sounded so ridiculous coming from Marcus in those cultured tones of his.

“It’s not funny,” Marcus snapped.

Kaden tried to wipe the smile from his face. “Sorry. All right. What happened then?”

“She seemed intrigued, but in the end she ran away.” Marcus

sounded so glum, Kaden could almost forgive him for making the first move on Lucy.

“So how do we get her to agree to be our mate?”

“You court her. Woo her. Do whatever it is human males do to show her how good you will be for her.” Linea spoke to both knights. She was resting quietly with Reynor, who slept on, but her jeweled eyes followed the knights.

“Good idea, milady,” Kaden said, “but most human women don’t expect to have two husbands. The idea of it might be unsettling to her.”

“Judging from the way she kissed you both, I think she’s more open to our ways than you believe. Still, it couldn’t hurt to show her the Lair. Let her talk to some of the other women. Maybe you could have some of your friends visit here and bring their mates so she can meet them. I doubt she’ll want to leave Reynor here while he’s still so sick.”

“You are a clever strategist, Lady Linea,” Kaden acknowledged, toasting her. “We’ll do that.”

Chapter Five

The next day, they put their new plan into action. Several knights and their mates came to visit Rey and Linea throughout the morning and afternoon, the dragons craning their heads in the special, large doorway to see their comrades in the small space. The tavern became more popular than ever, with folks coming in for lunch, dinner and evening entertainment, and to see the dragons and knights up close. It was a treat, even for those who’d lived their whole lives in the shadow of the castle.

Reynor was doing much better physically and seemed to enjoy the attention and well wishes from people he didn’t even know. Lucia was kept busy delivering fruit people sent to Rey and Linea as well as

drinks they bought for the knights. It was a kind gesture they gladly accepted and returned.

Lucia watched the other knights and their wives, astounded at first by the casual way the threesomes came and went. They were comfortable with each other in a way that spoke of love and deep understanding. Lucia had seldom seen such obvious commitment among lovers, and each new trio seemed happier than the last. After her initial shock, Lucia scrutinized them when they weren't looking, wondering if their apparent happiness wasn't some elaborate hoax. It seemed odd to see so many three-partnered relationships with nary one unhappy member or any hint of discord, but that's exactly what she saw. The thought gave her pause.

"Lucia." Marcus caught her attention as she passed their table. The hour was late and many of the tavern's patrons had already headed for their homes. A quick glance told her the knights had drunk more than their normal share of the libations sent to them as they laughed and talked with their friends. Four other knights and two ladies sat with them, several dragons crowding the tavern yard.

"Yes, Sir Marcus? Is there something you wanted?"

"That's a loaded question, my sweet." He winked. "Can you stop for a moment and join us? You've been rushing around all night long." His tone was disapproving, but she heard the teasing in his words. Still, he was right about the workload. The tavern had been busier than usual, thanks to the attraction of knights and dragons.

The work was more demanding, but the money was good. Increased patronage meant increased gratuities for her, and more income for the owner. He wouldn't begrudge her a few minutes rest now the crowd was dissipating, surely. Not after her actions had brought the dragons and knights—and their windfall—to his door.

“I guess I could sit for a minute or two. If you’re sure.” She felt distinctly uncomfortable, noting the difference between her rough clothing and the costly silks in which the ladies were dressed.

Kaden took one of her hands and squeezed, offering reassurance in his touch. “Join us.”

It was the sparkle in his dark blue eyes that decided her. Allowing him to tug her closer, she took the seat beside him, which placed her next to one of the other women. Lucia looked at the others with some trepidation as Marcus made the introductions.

“Lucia, this is Hal and Jures and their mate, Candis. They’re from the Northern Lair, visiting for a few days. And across the table is Bellon and Jeth and their mate, Marta.”

Far from turning up their noses at her common appearance, the women made her feel welcome. They shared small talk for a few minutes and Lucia learned that Marta and her men lived in the suite next door to Marcus and Linea. They were neighbors in the Castle Lair, though they appeared older than either Marcus or Kaden.

After a bit, the men started talking among themselves and the ladies turned to her with friendly smiles. Lucia sensed no animosity from either of the women though the difference in their stations couldn’t have been plainer. Lucia was a servant. She’d been waiting on them all night, in fact, but these women spoke to her as if she were an equal.

“So do you have any questions for us, Lucy?” Marta asked. “Is it all right to call you that? Kaden seems to call you Lucy, but Marcus is a bit more formal.”

Caught off guard, she smiled and squirmed a bit. “Sir Kaden probably calls me Lucy because Sir Reynor decided early on he liked the sound of it better. And it’s fine with me. I actually like it.”

“Still so formal? Calling them sir?” Marta looked deflated.

“Well, I’m only a servant, after all. It wouldn’t be right—”

“That’s garbage.” Lady Candis’s pronouncement was blunt and sounded rather final. “I was a farm girl when Hal found me. You’ll discover we don’t care much for rank in the Lair, only that our men and dragons are happy and well cared for. If you can do that, you’ll be welcome among us.”

“But—”

“They haven’t asked her yet, I bet.” Marta’s glance slid from Marcus to Kaden back to her with a speculative gleam. “The fools.”

“Asked me what?”

“To live in the Lair,” Marta said with breezy assuredness. “It’s clear the dragons already love you. You’d be welcome, Lucy.”

“But the key is,” Lady Candis chimed in, “do you love them?”

“Yes, of course. Reynor and Linea are both dear to my heart.”

“Not the dragons, silly,” Marta chided her. “Though that’s important, of course. Do you love Marcus and Kaden?”

Stunned by the woman’s blunt question, Lucia’s gaze shifted to the men. Each was attractive in his own way, though she still feared the memories Marcus brought back, though she couldn’t deny his attraction, and she had no such qualms about Kaden. Both men had sought her out, made her feel special, and kissed her as if she really mattered to them. Each was unique—Marcus with his debonair flair and Kaden with his rough warrior ways—and she felt deep stirrings of admiration and passion for them both. But was it love?

She didn’t dare answer, even in the privacy of her own mind.

“I’m not used to the idea of having more than one lover.” She hedged with the ladies who eyed her with varying degrees of expectation.

“Oh, that’s the best part.” Marta’s eyes glowed with mischief. “Two men are most definitely better than one.”

“Mmm,” Candis agreed with a laugh, “when one makes you angry

you can ask the other to punch him in the nose for you.”

“But disharmony in a Lair relationship is rare indeed,” Marta jumped to reassure her. “The men know if their lady is unhappy, they will both suffer, and the dragons too. And nobody wants to deal with unhappy dragons.”

“So that’s why all of them looked so happy. But,” Lucia lowered her voice, “how does it all work exactly? Do they take turns?” She blushed at her own brazen question but the ladies didn’t seem to take offense.

Marta patted her hand again. “Occasionally, but at heart, we’re a triple. We do *all things* together.”

Lucia shook her head, confused. “I just don’t see how it’s possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible, all right,” Candis confirmed with a knowing grin. “And darn pleasurable. There’s nothing quite like having two men to warm you on a cold winter’s night. Two men to see to your every need. Two men to cherish and protect you. And two men to love.” Her gaze drifted fondly to her mates, talking animatedly with the other men.

“Give Marcus and Kaden a chance to prove it to you, Lucy. They say you can hear dragons. It’s clear you were meant to live in the Lair.”

“You can’t?” Lucia was surprised by the longing in Marta’s tone.

Marta shook her head. “Sadly, no. At times I hear echoes, but I do love the dragons and know they enjoy my company too.”

Lucia couldn’t imagine what it must be like to live in such close company with dragons and not be able to hear their silent speech. Her heart went out to the other woman.

“Say you’ll give it some thought, Lucy,” Candis urged. “Come to the Lair and see if you could be happy living there. You’ll find a lot of people—and dragons—will be happy to welcome you.”

“I will think on it, but they haven’t asked. I wouldn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“Oh, they’ll ask.” Candis grinned and a knowing smile lit Marta’s

pretty face as well.

“You know, you two still have to clear the air,” Marcus reminded Kaden and Reynor later, after the other knights and their ladies had gone. The tavern was empty now. Only Lucia remained with the two knights, sitting companionably between them.

They’d drunk, perhaps too much, but were reasonably sober as Lucia observed the men and learned more about them. Marcus had been charming. Kaden had been quiet but earnest when he’d worked up the nerve to speak. His reticence was endearing and the way Marcus included him rather than shut him out as other men might have done, impressed her.

Kaden lost all reticence now though, as he sat back and drained his cup. He glowered at his friend.

“It’s none of your business.”

“Actually,” Marcus stared down the other knight, “it *is* my business.” He looked from Linea to Reynor and back again with a pointed glance.

“*Leave it be, Marcus,*” Reynor said with a smoky sigh.

“With all due respect, I cannot.” Marcus shook his head. “When you and Linea join, what affects you and Kaden will affect us all.”

“*If I cannot fly, there will never be a mating flight,*” Reynor shot back. “*Much as it pains me, Linea must seek another.*”

“*There will be no other.*” Linea reared her head in annoyance. “*You are my mate, whether you can fly or not.*”

Kaden shot to his feet, his eyes wild with a mixture of anger, regret, pain and remorse. “I’m sorry,” was all he could choke out before leaving the table. He stormed away toward the back of the tavern and

the room he'd rented there.

"Go to him, Lucia," Marcus pleaded, shocking her with the pained compassion in his gaze. "He's hurting."

"What's going on?" She didn't understand everything that had just been said. She felt out of her depth, but her heart ached for the knight and dragon who were so wounded.

"He blames himself for Rey's injury."

"I don't blame him. I've told him that over and over, but it does no good." Reynor's voice in their minds was both exasperated and weary.

"He needs to put this guilt behind him and concentrate on Rey's recovery. Perhaps with all of our prayers, Rey will fly again."

"You will fly, Rey, if I have to throw you into the sky myself." Linea's loving determination eased some of the tension.

"If you say so, my love."

Chapter Six

Lucia didn't go back to the guest quarters often, and never for social visits. While some of the other serving girls spent time entertaining the guests in a very private manner, it was neither expected nor encouraged. This was a respectable establishment, a tavern first and foremost, with a few guest rooms for the odd traveler. It was not a brothel.

She knocked on Kaden's door with trembling fingers.

"Go away, Marcus."

"It's me. Lucy." Reynor called her that, as did Kaden, though nobody else in this land of dragons used the shortened version of her name. She liked it though. Especially from those two males.

"Lucy." The whisper reached her on the other side of the door. He was in pain. That much was clear from his tortured tone. Daring

greatly, she tried the door, finding it unbarred. She pushed it open, peering around the edge.

Kaden sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees, head down in a pose of utter dejection.

“Kaden?”

Bloodshot eyes rose to meet hers. “You shouldn’t be in here, Lucy.”

She took a step forward, letting the door close behind her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” He laughed, but it had a bitter sound. “Talking changes nothing. My partner is crippled because of me. What kind of knight allows his dragon partner to be so injured?”

“He doesn’t blame you.” She took another step forward until she was standing right in front of him in the small room.

“I blame myself.”

“Then you’re the only one. When the queen was here, she said dragons get hurt all the time. It’s part of their life. She didn’t blame you either.”

Kaden shook his head, not meeting her eyes. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.” She sat at his side, taking one of his hands. He was such a big man, with big, calloused, warrior’s hands. She couldn’t stand to see him hurting. It touched her as deeply as seeing Rey in pain and she’d already proven she couldn’t just stand by and watch the dragon hurt. The same seemed to be true for his knight.

“If Rey can’t fly, he can’t truly join with Linea. But dragons mate for life. Linea will never have a hatchling. What’s more, she and Marcus won’t have the partners in fighting they should. When dragons mate, their knights train together, fight together, live together with their mate. It’s a complex relationship. If Rey can’t fly, all of that goes out the window. All because of me.”

“That’s a heavy burden you’ve assumed.” She rubbed his hand as he dealt with a difficult excess of emotion. His expression was full of pain when he could meet her eyes, though he avoided her gaze more than not.

“That’s my reality.”

“No,” she faced him, “that’s what your guilt is telling you. It’s not the reality I see.” She didn’t give him a chance to respond. “I see a dragon who loves you. Two of them, actually. Rey needs you to be strong now, when he can’t be. He needs your encouragement, not this depression that surrounds you like a cloud. He needs Linea and Marcus...and especially you, Kaden. He loves you.”

“I love him too,” he whispered.

“Then be strong for him.” She moved closer, stroking his cheek and holding his hand close to her heart. “I’m willing to bet he’s always been there for you. Now it’s your turn. He’s full of doubt and fear, but I think dragons don’t normally know such emotions. He needs you to help him sort it all out so he can overcome it and learn to fly again. To live again.”

“What if he can’t fly?”

There it was. The crux of the matter. The fear that ate away at both dragon and knight.

“My father used to say that all things are possible if you believe. I believe in Rey and I believe in you, Kaden. Now you need to believe in yourself.”

“Oh, Lucy.” He pulled her into his arms. She felt the slight tremble of his muscles and marveled at the emotions this strong man kept bottled up inside.

“I’m here for you, Kaden. For both of you.” She whispered near his ear, turning to kiss his jaw lightly. A kiss of affection...and love.

Kaden held her until his emotions settled down. But other things were stirring, such as the hunger that built in him every time she was near. It had been almost unbearable tonight, watching her chat with the other women. He'd wanted so much to take her and claim her as his own, as the other men had done with their mates, but she wasn't his. Not yet.

Perhaps this was the time. She'd come to him. She'd reached out. Perhaps she would welcome his advances. Perhaps she'd come to terms with the idea of sharing his love— and Marcus's—after talking with the other women.

There was only one way to find out.

“Lucy.” He pulled back. Holding her gaze, he sought the frayed ribbon holding her tightly braided hair with his fingers. Little tendrils had come out of the braid as she worked, to frame her beautiful face. “Sweetheart, you're too good for the likes of me, but so help me, I want you. I need you, Lucy.”

He searched her gaze, hoping for a glimmer of something. What he found made his heart race. Her expression was one of beauty and understanding, and something that looked deceptively like affection...or maybe even love, though it was too soon for him to expect she could feel as deeply as he did.

“Oh, Kaden, you've got it all backwards.”

“Backwards? How so?” He leaned his forehead against hers, digging through the braid sections and unweaving her lustrous, dark hair with gentle motions.

“You're the one who's too good for me. I'm just a servant.”

Kaden was surprised by her words. Surprised and a little hurt for her. “Servant or queen, you're a special, rare woman, Lucy.” He kissed her, unable to help himself. She was soft and pliant against him,

womanly and warm. All the things he wanted in his life and had never really had. “Let me love you, sweetheart.”

“Yes, Kaden. Yes.” Her breathless sighs shot straight to his cock. He was more than ready to show her just how good it could be between them.

But he wanted to go slow. He wanted to savor this first time, for this would be the beginning of their life together—whether she realized it or not. He knew it with certainty, and wanted this time to be special. As special as the woman in his arms.

He laid her back on the bed, coming over her, sheltering her in his warmth. He would have been content just to gaze down at her, soaking in the magic of the moment, but his eagerness won out.

“I knew you were part of us from almost the moment I laid eyes on you, Lucy. Certainly from the moment I saw how you cared for Rey.” He kissed her cheeks, drifting down to peck at her lips and under her jaw. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Kaden.” She untied the small closures on her simple dress. He felt like a king at her impatience for his touch. He moved back to help her, revealing the soft swells of her breasts, a bit larger than he’d expected, the nipples rosy and tight with need.

Leaning down, he licked her, zeroing in on one excited bud, tonguing her as she panted. He used his teeth, abrading the soft flesh with the utmost care, his fingers molding and squeezing her other breast as he opened his mouth and sucked gently.

Lucy cried out, writhing in pleasure under him. Kaden felt satisfaction, hearing her whimpers of delight. She was very responsive to him—more so than any woman he could ever remember bedding—and they hadn’t even gone very far yet. He couldn’t wait to be inside her, but he wanted her to feel everything he did...and more.

He licked her nipple, driving her higher as his hands roamed down

her lithe body. He removed her dress with gentle touches that belied the urgency he felt. The simple garment slipped down, revealing a ripe femininity he'd only guessed at until now. She took his breath away.

"You're beautiful, Lucy." He rose over her nude form, his hands circling her generous breasts as he looked at her.

Her legs wriggled under him, making him want to claim her hard and fast. He had to slow down. Lifting away slightly, he gazed deep into her eyes, liking the dazed sensuality in her expression.

"Kaden?" She whimpered.

"It's all right, sweetheart. Just relax and let me love you. I want you to feel nothing but pleasure." He drew patterns on her soft flesh with his fingertips, lying at her side, staring down the length of her lovely body.

"It's all right, Kaden." She smiled at him. "I've done this before, you know. Not too often, but a few times." Her cheeks flamed pink, charming him.

He nipped her shoulder with playful nibbles. "From now on, there will be no others. Only me...and Marcus."

"I don't know—"

"Shh, sweet. No reason to worry about that now. All will happen in its time." He shrugged. "Or not. But know this—after tonight, you are mine."

"Kaden—"

He stilled her with a kiss, sipping the words from her mouth as she turned toward him. She fumbled with the ties on his tunic and he reveled in her unskilled touch. He was glad she wasn't a virgin. He didn't have enough control to bed a virgin and not hurt her. But he was equally glad her difficulty with his laces proved she hadn't undressed too many men in her life. He liked the idea of having her to himself. Well, himself and Marcus, of course.

Though the idea of Rey and Linea being mates was new, Kaden already felt comfortable with the idea he would share his mate with Marcus. He'd always been a good friend and after this latest trouble, he'd proven to be closer than a brother. The formal joining of their dragons would only cement the family ties—if the day ever came when Rey could fly and claim his mate. But Kaden put aside the guilt for the moment. At the moment, Lucy was in his arms, where he most wanted her to be. He'd deal with the mess he'd made of his and Rey's lives later. For now, all he wanted to do was forget his problems in the arms of this giving, tender woman.

“Let me.” He stilled her fumbling fingers with his own, rising to stand at the foot of the bed as he dealt with the lacings on his shirt.

Pulling it over his head, he threw it to the corner as she rose on her elbows to watch. Her every subtle movement enticed him. When his fingers went to the lacings on his leggings, she blushed, but didn't look away. Instead, her gaze roamed his torso, focusing finally on his cock straining against the leather to get to her.

When he shucked his leggings, her eyes widened and he felt himself grow even harder, if that were possible. The sexy gasp that issued from her reddened lips urged him on. He stalked over to her, one knee resting between hers as he moved onto the bed. She lay back as he covered her with his body.

He liked her breathless moan when he rubbed his body over her soft skin, so he repeated the move, watching her reaction. It was every bit as gratifying the second time she wriggled beneath him, his chest touching hers, his cock brushing the soft swell of her stomach. He stifled a groan.

“I love how you feel against me, Lucy.”

“Come down here, Kaden.” She circled his neck and drew his head downward. His name was a trembling sigh against his lips as she kissed

him, for the first time initiating intimacy between them. As far as he was concerned, she should do it more often. Her tongue tangled with his as she became more demanding, stunning him and driving him higher.

Her legs parted as he placed both knees inside hers and pushed outward, making room for himself. She was warm and already wet for him. Kaden growled in pleasure as he aligned their bodies, rubbing his aching cock in her slick folds as she rose up to meet him. He broke the kiss.

“Do you want me, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Kaden. Oh, yes!”

“What do you want, exactly?” His smile dared her.

“I want...” She licked her lips, flushing a bit. “I want you inside me, Kaden.”

He moved one hand downward, shifting only to tangle his fingers in the curls

between her thighs. Sliding briefly around the nubbin that made her gasp, he stroked one finger into her core.

“Like this, Lucy? Is this what you wanted?”

“Kaden! Yes, but—” She whimpered. “I want more!”

“Do you want my cock, Lucy? You’ll have to tell me exactly what you want.” His words teased, as did his fingers, driving her higher. She was on the precipice as he took his hand from her pussy and slid it upward, circling her nipple with wet fingers.

“Kaden! You’re killing me. I need you!”

“Not until you say the words, Lucy.” He kissed her, then pulled back to watch her expression. Flushed with excitement and a hint of embarrassment, it was clear she liked

his teasing.

“I want your cock, Kaden. I want you inside me. Now. Please!”

“Well, when you put it that way, my love.” He positioned himself.
“How can I refuse?”

He slid home with a long, powerful thrust. She bore down to accept him, though he could feel the difficulty she had accepting his girth. She may not be a virgin, but her cunt was tight, as if it hadn't been used this way in a very long time. Kaden liked the idea of that, but he knew he'd have to temper his passions until she became accustomed to him. It was all right, though. He loved being inside this special woman. She was tight and hot around him. Warm and slippery, wet and welcoming.

Home.

She felt like home to him. It was a feeling he wanted to keep with him for all time, and if he had anything to say about it, he would. She would be at his side when he and

Rey moved back to the Lair. She just didn't know it yet.

“Are you all right, sweet Lucy?”

She made a small humming sound when he stroked just the tiniest bit within her,

testing the fit. She was growing used to his presence, her body stretching to accommodate his size.

“I'm all right, Kaden. Please, don't stop!”

“I'll never stop loving you, Lucy. Never.” He punctuated his words with kisses as he began to move. He took his time, making small movements at first, then increasing when she urged him on. Her legs rose to wrap around him, her heels digging into his butt.

“I'm sorry, my love. This time it's got to be fast.”

“Not fast enough, Kaden!” She cried out as a peak hit her. Kaden could feel her inner muscles working his cock. The spasming of her tight sheath drew him with her, into blissful oblivion as his seed shot into her depths. He shuddered at the last, releasing his pent up fury as

his body tightened and then relaxed into a peace he had never before known.

He kissed her forehead with tired lips, rolling with her to their sides. Cradling her in his arms, he stayed deep within her body while one of her knees rode up the outside of his leg to his hip.

“You’re mine, Lucy.” His breathing slowed as he held her. She fit so perfectly in his arms as he rested his chin on top of her soft hair.

“Kaden.” Her whisper touched something deep inside when she fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Seven

Lucy woke to movement. Kaden, she recalled instantly.

He was inside her—or perhaps he’d never left. The last thing she remembered before falling into a deeper, more peaceful sleep than she had known in years, was Kaden making love to her. He’d been so strong and gentle, so caring and daring. She’d never been pleased like that before, though her past experiences had been admittedly few and far between.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up and join me.” His growling voice teased her ear.

“Feels like you got started without me.”

“Just warming things up, milady.” The nibbling kisses he placed in the crease of her neck tickled.

She rolled with him as he took her to her back, sliding deeper inside her slick channel. He felt so good. Like heaven brought down to earth. It was as exhilarating as flying on the dragon’s back, only warmer and much more intimate.

Kaden kissed her as he stroked into her with deep, sure thrusts. She pushed back, aligning herself for best entry. He brought her such pleasure there was no question of withdrawal. She was shocked by her

own wanton behavior, but Kaden seemed to like it and pleasing him was suddenly very important to her. She came with explosive ease and he followed a moment later.

They lay together, their breath slowing to a more normal rate as Kaden stroked her arm with a trailing fingertip. She felt his eyes on her, watching, measuring. He looked like he was working up to something.

“When Rey’s able to be moved,” he finally broached the topic that was clearly on his mind, “I want you to move to the Castle Lair with us. I want you to live with me and Rey, warm our home and our hearts for the rest of your days.”

“That sounds serious.”

“It’s very serious, sweetheart.” He stroked her hair. “I know it’s sudden, but I care for you deeply, Lucy. As does Rey. If the worst happens and he never flies again, you would be a comfort to him. You make him sparkle, Lucy, and you make me happy in a way I’ve never been before.”

She was surprised. They’d only known each other for a few days and only become lovers the night before. But she felt the rightness of it as he spoke the words. He was a good man who didn’t deserve the pain he or Rey had been suffering. Her heart went out

to him and she was tempted. Oh, so tempted.

“What about Marcus and Linea?”

“In the fullness of time, I hope you might come to accept them too. To let them into

our lives and our union. When you’re ready. We won’t rush you.”

“Kaden, I don’t know...I just don’t know if I can handle two men. It wasn’t something I was raised to expect.”

“I know. I don’t mean to pressure you, sweetheart. Just think about it, all right? And think about coming with us, for a start, when Rey is safe to move in a few days. He needs you. And I need you more than I can say. Besides, if Rey can never fly again...” His expression grew

bleak. “Your worries may be for naught. If he can’t claim Linea, Marcus will most likely never become an issue. So for now, will you consider living with just me, Lucy? Me and Rey?”

“I’d be leaving behind the only security I’ve known in years, Kaden. You’re asking a lot.”

He hugged her. “I promise you’ll always have a place in the Lair, whether it works out between us or not. A woman who can hear dragons is rare and special. The Lair folk will welcome you with open arms. Trust me.”

“I do trust you, Kaden, but it’s an awfully big step.”

He spoke no more of it over the next days. Each evening Lucia would sleep in Kaden’s arms, making love with him deep into the night. Each day, she would care for the dragon who was quickly becoming the center of her world.

Marcus was there most days, following her with his eyes and making her uncomfortable with his pointed stare. She felt conspicuously like a mouse being sized up by a hawk on the hunt. Given her earlier run-in with Marcus—and the scandalous thoughts he’d planted in her head about lying between the two men—the fact that she continued to be Kaden’s lover made her feel self-conscious in the extreme. She knew without doubt all it would take was one word from her and she’d have two knights in her bed, when she was only just getting used to one!

The troublesome idea plagued her, refusing to be put completely from her mind. She served in the tavern during the day, comfortable with Kaden’s easy-going treatment and hyperaware of Marcus’s continued scrutiny. She couldn’t deny she was attracted to both of them. Marcus’s courtly manners still brought back memories of times past, though as she got to know him and observed him with Kaden and the dragons, he became more familiar to her and less a reminder of her

sad past. Kaden, by contrast, didn't remind her of those things, but kept her with him—firmly in the present. He was good for her in that way, and he was a considerate lover.

Lucia also agonized over Reynor's slow progress and wondered if there was more she could do. Each day, she offered solemn prayers that Rey would heal on his own. Marcus had asked what she was doing on the first day when she placed wildflowers as an offering in the small window above Rey's place on the stone floor. She prayed according to the teachings of her youth, which were different from the way things were done in Draconia. Marcus asked pointed questions, but the next day brought beautiful hothouse blooms from the queen's own conservatory to add to the small vase she'd placed in the sun.

Each day after, he brought a new flower for her offerings—rare orchids and lilies, simple daisies and roses. Each day a new flower and a presence at her side while she offered her prayers over the healing dragon.

Silently, he'd stand with her while they added the blossoms to the growing collection, weeding out wilted flowers each time new ones were added. She was touched he would respect her beliefs in such a way and glad he didn't push for more than friendship, though she knew he hoped for far more. Still, there was Reynor to consider.

Lucia decided to take the chance of moving to the Castle Lair with Kaden. For one thing, she was falling in love with the rugged knight. She already loved Rey and wanted to be on hand to help him work through his recovery. She couldn't imagine being left behind when the dragon left the tavern.

And so, with some trepidation, she let the owner know she'd be leaving the tavern when Reynor and Kaden left. The other girls didn't seem surprised when Lucia packed her few belongings, and each of them wished her well. She was touched by their friendly gestures and

the small parting gifts they gave her. A ribbon for her hair from one girl, a carved comb from another. They were small gifts, but dear to her for the true friendship they represented.

When Reynor was able to walk for short distances under his own power without causing more damage, the knights arranged for his removal to the Castle Lair. A huge flatbed wagon was pulled into the tavern yard, drawn by a team of eight sturdy draft horses. Rey walked out to meet it, suffering the indignity of being hauled up to the castle in stoic silence. Wellwishers lined the streets as he was wheeled by, speaking prayers for him and offering their quiet support.

For the second time, Lucia entered the Castle Lair, worry foremost in her mind. Rey had been silent as they moved him. It took some time to negotiate the late afternoon streets and by the time they pulled up to the castle, night had fallen. The cart brought him as close as possible to the large door, where he was able to lower himself to the ground and walk painfully through the Lair to the suite that had been prepared. The other dragons watched his slow progress, silent and solemn. Rey didn't raise his head. He was the very picture of defeat.

Lucia's heart went out to the dragon who'd become one of her closest friends. It hurt to see him this way. He walked gingerly, pain evident in every step as he made his way to an area of the Lair she hadn't seen before.

The Lair section of the castle was constructed in a series of circular ledges with the center being open to the sky above. Stairs for the human inhabitants wound through the inner walls, but it was clear the dragons negotiated the different levels through flight. Rey couldn't strain his wing, so a ground floor suite was set aside for them. Rey didn't speak or even make a sound as he struggled for each step, Kaden, Marcus and Linea following close behind.

Kaden had prepared the way, taking a few hours the day before to

move his and Rey's belongings from their old residence, higher up on one of the upper floors. He'd told Lucia all about the new suite. It was larger than their old one, and more luxurious. He thought Rey would like the larger sand pit, and Lucy looked forward to seeing the place he took such obvious delight in.

As the small party slowed, Kaden moved in front of his dragon partner to open a huge door, big enough for the dragon. Lucia noted the mechanism on her way through. Rey could've opened it easily with a stretch of his neck, but perhaps it was too much for his healing hide. Better that Kaden do the stretching for the time being.

A surprise awaited them as the group came to a halt inside the large suite.

"Welcome home, Sir Reynor." Alania, the queen of Draconia and her twin, Princess Arikia, also known as queen of the nomadic Jinn people, sat on the lip of the sandy oval that was clearly Rey's domain. The two women stood, Draconia's queen in leathers, as Lucia had seen her before. Her twin sister wore an ornate green dress that matched her emerald eyes.

Lucia lowered herself in a respectful curtsy, though her eyes never left the two powerful women. She straightened only when the men greeted the two queens. They checked Rey's wounds and the tang of ozone and magic scented the air as they used their healing powers in tandem on his tough hide. After some time, the women moved back and Rey was encouraged to settle into his warm sand wallow.

"The heat will be good for him." Queen Alania faced the knights. "Just leave him be for a while. We've done all we can, but I fear it may not be enough." She looked back at the dragon and Lucia wasn't surprised to see him already asleep. All the activity had no doubt tired him out.

Queen Arikia of the Jinn produced a pot of herbal salve from a low

table near the door. “You can use this on the scab. It might help loosen the joint a bit.”

Surprisingly, she handed it to Lucia.

“See that he rests. No running around the Lair.” Her smile gentled the stern words. “I’ve heard good things about you from the Jinn, Lucia. Be welcome here and if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Flabbergasted, Lucia nodded and dropped a small curtsy as she clutched the pot of salve. She remained in that position until the women left.

Linea loomed in the doorway, but backed away as Marcus took his leave. It was clear the other knight didn’t want to go, and neither did his dragon, but they did leave, for which Lucia was glad. She had to get used to this new arrangement before she could even consider the three-way relationship the knights proposed. And there was Rey to consider. If he couldn’t fly, all her worries might be for naught.

When they were alone, Kaden closed the door. He came up behind her, drawing her back against his chest as they gazed at Rey.

“Will he be all right?” she whispered, unwilling to disturb the dragon’s rest.

“He’ll be better now that he’s back home among his own kind. The tavern was a friendly place, but the good folk who came to see him couldn’t communicate with him as we can.” He settled his chin atop her head as she snuggled into his arms. “Perhaps it was a good thing for the first part of his recovery, but it’s best he’s here.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Come now.” He tugged her toward a doorway to their right. “One of the lads brought your belongings to our room. There will be time to unpack tomorrow, but for now, I think we could use a good night’s sleep.”

“Just sleep?”

“Well, I can think of a few other things to do before we sleep.” His roguish smile lit a fire in her womb. “If you’re interested.”

“I am most definitely interested, Sir Knight.”

She tugged him toward the doorway. There was a large bed—larger than any she’d ever seen before—against the center of the far wall, laid with soft blankets in colorful hues. It was one of the grandest rooms she’d seen since she’d left her homeland.

“I arranged to have some things made for you, Lucy. I hope you’ll like them.”

She spun to the sound of his voice, finding him by a carved wooden closet. He’d opened it and was holding up a whisper thin silken nightgown in a pale blue. It was a costly garment, indeed. Lucia hadn’t seen anything so fine since she was a child in her homeland and she’d been too young to own such a daring, inviting garment.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I want to see you in it.” Kaden’s eyes flashed at her. “But first, I want to show you our new bath chamber.” He led the way to the adjoining room where a large mosaic pool was filled with clear steaming water, waiting for them. Even in her homeland, she’d never seen such a large and beautiful bathing chamber. She stepped forward with some hesitancy into a room, tiled in gorgeous, rich hues.

“How does the water stay warm? Where does it come from?” She looked all around to see if she could discern how they’d managed such a feat.

“All Lairs are designed with a mix of science and magic. This being the Castle Lair, it’s probably a bit grander than the others, of course. All the water comes from two sources—one deep within the mountain on which this fortress was built and the other from large cisterns

designed into the structure that collect rain and snow and funnel it where needed. The heat is a byproduct of associating with dragonkind. Most often, the resident dragon in each suite will provide heat for his family, but some friends made this ready for us at my request just before we arrived. I wanted your first night here in the Lair to hold every comfort.”

That this rough knight would think to do such a thing touched her heart. She turned and kissed his cheek.

“You’re a sweet man, Kaden. Thank you.”

He tossed the silk nightgown to a nearby bench and grabbed her around the waist, drawing her close.

“I don’t know about sweet, but I know I’m a lucky man, to have you here with me, Lucy. If there’s anything you want, all you have to do is ask. I tried to think of everything you might need, but with Rey so ill, I’ll admit I’ve been a little distracted. Still, I asked some of the women for help. They stocked our chamber and arranged this.” He gestured toward the wall where a series of small bottles were arranged next to a mirror. They looked like lotions and creams, but she’d have to look more closely to see exactly what had been provided. Towels and soaps lay near the mosaic pool, ready for use. All in all, the chamber was fit for a king...or at least a princess. Lucia felt tears gather behind her eyes.

“It’s perfect, Kaden. I can’t believe you thought of all this. I can’t believe you’d do this for me.”

He bent to nuzzle her ear. “I’d do anything for you, Lucy. Absolutely anything.”

She didn’t object when he rid her of her rough dress, discarding it on the floor. She helped him unlace his shirt and leggings, and soon they were both naked, kissing deeply as Kaden edged them closer to the steaming pool. He helped her in, steadying her when she felt the

incredible warmth of the water against her skin. It had been so long since she'd had a hot bath, and never one this decadent.

Kaden followed her into the water with a splash. He set about lathering her long hair, rinsing with an ingenious device that sprayed hot water in rivulets over her head. She did the same for him and then they were sliding against each other's soap-slick bodies, cavorting like children as they laughed and played in the soapy water.

Lucia's temperature rose as the water cooled. Kaden produced more than enough fire to keep her warm. It wasn't dragon fire, but rather, the fire of a man who knew how to please his woman. And she was his. There was little question left in her mind as to that. Somewhere along the line, during the worry over Rey and the doubts about her future, she'd fallen in love with Kaden.

Chapter Eight

She already loved Reynor, so loving his knight shouldn't have surprised her. Still, it did. After losing her family, Lucia hadn't thought she could take the chance of loving anyone ever again, but Kaden proved her wrong. It hadn't been a conscious decision. He'd just worked his way into her heart and now he was there for good. Come what may, her future was tied up with the rugged knight and his dragon partner.

"Out you go now." Kaden swatted her rump with an open palm, making her squeal, but it didn't really hurt. Lucia was taken aback by the spike in her desire from Kaden's playful spank. She looked at him, breathless in her discovery as he smiled, slow and calculating.

He followed her out of the tub and wrapped her in a towel, watching her all the while. She grew uncomfortable under his intense regard, but he wouldn't let her go. When they were both dry, he moved back a

pace.

“Put on the nightgown, sweetheart. Slowly.”

Her gaze shot to his. He was watching her with a sizzling look of intent on his chiseled features. His masterful words made her stomach flutter in excitement. This was something new. In the few days they'd been lovers, it had been intense, but usually free and easy between them. Tonight, the intensity was even greater, but the easiness was gone. In its place was a commanding man who knew exactly what he wanted and demanded no less than obedience.

Lucia didn't understand why that made her so hot, but it did. She followed his orders, tugging on the nearly see-through garment, fitting it to her breasts as best she could. The gown had probably been sewn for a less well-endowed woman. It hugged her breasts and pushed them upward, and she wasn't surprised to see Kaden's gaze riveted to the spot where she nearly overflowed the plunging neckline.

“Turn around. Slowly.” He twirled one finger as he gave the command and she watched him while she moved to do his bidding. His cock was erect and he looked as hungry as she'd ever seen him. His words commanded, his eyes held a fire that was matched by the roiling inferno in her womb. This new, masterful Kaden was something else again.

He reached out one rough hand and smoothed it over the silk at her waist. The fabric was so thin, she felt his touch as if it were against her skin, but with the added tactile delight of the ultra-soft silk. She moaned when his hand moved upward, to cup her breast.

“You're beautiful, little girl.” He took her mouth, conquering and demanding a response she was more than willing to give. She would give him anything. Everything. He owned her pleasure. It had never been more clear. When he let her go, he stepped back and put pressure on her shoulders in a clear command.

Confused, but willing to see where he would lead, Lucia sank to her knees. The straining arousal that met her eyes cleared up any questions she might've had.

“I've never done this before, Kaden.”

The muscles in his thighs clenched, as did his hands in her damp hair. “Then I'm honored to be the first.” There was no question in his voice, no room for argument. His surety made the fire in her belly grow hotter.

“I don't know if I can.”

“You can and you will, Lucy. Lick me now. I need it.” He exerted light pressure on the back of her head until she was close enough to reach out with her tongue. She'd never imagined doing such a thing, but suddenly she wanted it more than anything. Kaden was so strong and powerful in so many ways, it humbled her to see him tremble at the first

tentative brush of her tongue over the head of his cock.

“Oh, yeah. Just like that. Take me deeper.”

Warming to her task, she grew bolder. Her gaze flew upward, seeking his approval as she took the tip into her mouth and swirled her tongue all around. His hips surged and pushed him deeper into her mouth, but she didn't mind. In fact, she reveled in the look of bliss on his handsome face as he watched her with half-lidded eyes.

There was no doubt in her mind he was enjoying himself. She liked the feeling that gave her, knowing she could give him such pleasure with such a simple act. Lucia also liked the salty taste of him. His flavor and scent reminded her just the tiniest bit of the ocean near where she'd grown up. They were good memories, wild and free.

He pulsed deeper as she got into the rhythm. Like the ocean, nothing could tame this man, but he could temper himself. For her. Every move he'd made, from the moment they met, had been gentle and

considerate. Just once, she wanted to push him beyond that. She wanted to make him wild.

She sucked as he surged, earning a groan from him that made her wet. How she loved this man. Strong, yet caring. Bold, yet thoughtful. He was a generous lover and an even better friend.

“That’s enough, sweetheart.” He withdrew quickly, disappointing her, but the sparkle in his eye promised even more delicious pleasures to come. He lifted her by the elbows, then scooped her into his arms and carried her to the huge bed. Placing her at the edge of the wide expanse, he parted her legs and stood between. She understood now why the bed was built so high off the ground. His cock was at the perfect height for her pussy without any bending or straining, but he didn’t take her yet.

Instead, he sank to his knees, kissing her reddened kneecaps one at a time. “I’m sorry, my love. Next time, I’ll remember to put a pillow on the floor so you don’t hurt your pretty little knees.” She sighed as his hands stroked up the insides of her thighs, spreading her folds to his view. “You sucked my cock so well, I think you deserve a reward. As do I.” He grinned with wicked intent as he lowered his head.

The next thing she knew, his lips and tongue were teasing her clit and she could form no more coherent thoughts. Pleasure was her only goal. Her body strained toward a peak, wetness issuing forth as he rumbled approval, but he wouldn’t let her come. Kaden sat back and she felt his loss keenly. She rose on her elbows to see what he was about.

“You’re the most beautiful, responsive woman I’ve ever had in my bed, Lucy.” His expression was solemn. “I’ll never let you go now. You know that, don’t you?” Two fingers pushed into her, sliding through her excitement and driving her higher. “I couldn’t live without you now, Lucy.” Removing his fingers, he stood and pulled her hips

forward to meet his cock. He slid home with little fanfare and her body convulsed almost immediately. Then he stilled until she met his gaze.

“I love you, Lucy.”

He moved then, as she cried out once more in pleasure. His declaration of love astounded her, warmed her and made her feel whole. She loved him with all her heart and let him know it, crying out the words as he made her come over and over again.

He took her on the side of the bed, in its middle and from behind, making her spasm in bliss many times throughout the night. Just as often, he demanded the words of love, giving them to her in return. By the time they finally slept, there wasn't an inch of her body that wasn't sore—but in the best possible way.

The next days were filled with loving, caring for Rey, learning about life in the Castle Lair and visiting with friends. Linea and Marcus visited often, but there was no overt pressure. Of course, she felt Marcus's gaze following her and Kaden delighted in teasing her about how jealous the other man was. Kaden also began to tease her when they were alone, with enticing descriptions of how Marcus and he would take her, if given a chance. He wove intricate, detailed fantasies of dual loving that started to become more and more appealing.

Her life with Kaden was near perfect, except for poor Reynor. As Rey's injury healed it became clear he would never fly again. The thought broke her heart, and as the days marched forward, she gathered her courage. She knew there was one thing left she could try. It was a long shot, and would be very costly to her, but if it could save Rey's wing—and therefore his ability to fly—she would give anything.

Coming to her decision late one night, she left the wide bed with a final kiss for Kaden. He slept on, oblivious as she retrieved a very special item from her belongings. Armed with only that, she snuck down into the dragon's wallow. Rey was dozing, but woke when she

neared. She held the precious gift in one hand and the dragon's head reared when he scented its foreign magic.

"What is that?"

"Something from my homeland. Something sacred. Rey, I want to use this on your wing, if you'll give me permission to try."

"It reeks of powerful magic."

"Only the good kind, I promise you."

"I sense that. It's pure and formidable. How can you handle such a thing?"

"I'm the last of a long line of priestesses. Some in each generation of my family were entrusted the ability to wield this power, to be used only in the most deserving of cases. I believe yours qualifies. Will you let me try?"

Rey shrugged, lifting his injured wing as much as he could. *"It could do no harm. My wing is the next thing to useless as it is."*

She could hear the despair in his words. "Courage, my dear friend." She stood at his shoulder, where the injured wing met his body. A jagged chunk of membrane and bone was missing, crippling him.

The surge of magic caused every dragon in the Lair to take notice. Questions flew from one mind to the next, but Reynor calmed them all. He counseled them to patience as he noted the changes in his wing. Something was happening back there, but he'd be damned if he could feel anything except the delicious tingle of powerful, foreign magic.

He was in no pain, which was quite a change from the past few weeks. Lucy had gone silent, standing behind his wing now, holding a single golden plume over his wound with both hands as if braced against the flow of the energy she commanded.

"What's going on?" Kaden's sleepy voice came to him from the doorway of the bedchamber. The knight was ruffled from sleep, but

keenly aware of something strange happening in his suite.

“Your mate is a priestess of great ability. She’s taken the pain away, Kaden. For the first time in weeks, I don’t hurt.”

But Lucy did. Kaden could see it on her face as he stumbled toward the edge of the sand pit. Her expression was one of agony as the glow of magic enveloped her. She stood with her feet braced far apart in the warm sand, wielding the longest feather he’d ever seen like a sword that was much too heavy for her.

She staggered and fell just as the glow flared and he was momentarily blinded. When he could see again, Lucy was sprawled on the sand beneath Rey’s wing. Rey’s *fully healed* wing.

It was a miracle.

But Lucy was down. Unconscious.

Kaden leapt into the wallow, tripping in the sand as he rushed to her side.

“Call for help, Rey!”

Kaden felt a shocking tingle of magic as he scooped her into his arms. It flowed through her petite body so powerfully, he was afraid he might drop her. But no more harm would come to this woman if he had anything to say about it. He took her back to bed, lying her down as the dragon watched from the doorway.

“Will she be all right?”

“I have no idea. She’s breathing, but I can’t rouse her.” Insecurity filled him. Was she yet another casualty of his inability to keep Rey safe in the first place?

No less than Queen Arikia answered the summons for a healer. She took one look at Lucy and clucked like a hen, ordering Kaden about as she made her charge more

comfortable. Riki was Prince Nico's wife and had a powerful healing talent. Unlike her twin sister, who was more of a dragon healer, Queen Riki had used her healing talent primarily on humans from an early age. If anyone could help Lucy, it would be this woman. But Riki jumped back as if burned when she tried to move the long feather out of Lucy's hands. Kaden hovered near and moved to help, but Riki stayed his hand.

"What is this?"

"I'm not sure, but she used it to heal Rey. She told him it was from her family."

"Then it stands to reason, only family may touch it. Sir Kaden, do you take this

woman as your wife?"

"Yes, of course. I love her with all my heart."

Riki smiled. "Good, then. You try to remove the feather."

Kaden reached out and felt only a slight tingle as the feather settled into his palm. He

placed it on the long table along one wall, out of the way.

"Darn thing zapped me when I tried to touch it," Riki observed with a small grin. "It's got some powerful magic indeed."

"It healed Reynor completely." Queen Lana's voice came from the doorway. "It did what I couldn't."

"But what did it do to Lucy?" Rey was clearly worried.

"From what I can see," Riki spoke as she worked, "it channeled the pain away from you, Reynor, while magic reconstructed what had been lost, but I think Lucy got some of the backwash of pain. She passed out in agony. I can feel the residual in her even now."

“Sweet Mother.” Marcus rushed in and fell to his knees at Lucy’s bedside, taking one cold hand in his while Kaden watched helplessly. “Will she be all right?”

“It’s hard to say. Something similar happened to me a few times before I knew how to channel my power, but this magic came from outside herself. I don’t know what that might do to her. My advice for now is to let her sleep it off. Judging by my past experiences, she could sleep for a day or possibly two. I wouldn’t worry until then. Chances are, she’ll come out of it on her own, none the worse for wear, but wiser about how to use that...thing. Whatever it is.”

Riki turned to leave, but Lana had more to say. “She healed Reynor completely. I don’t know what kind of magic could do that and I don’t know how your mate was able to bring something like that here undetected, but my husband will want to speak with her when she wakes. In the meantime, count your blessings. She’s given Reynor—and you all—what none of us could, and suffered for it.” She looked over at Lucy, lying so still and pale in the bed. “She must love you an awful lot.”

With that, the twin queens left.

Rey stuck his head into the bedchamber as far as he could reach, licking his long tongue out to touch Lucy’s cheek. She seemed to settle into a more restful sleep and some of her color came back as Reynor touched her. Dragons had healing in their touch and breath, though they used it only rarely on humans who were not their knight partners.

Kaden put one hand on Rey’s neck, the other on Marcus’s shoulder as he sat at Lucy’s side, her hand tucked against his heart.

“Will she be all right?” Marcus asked in a quiet tone that betrayed his fear.

“She’s got to be.”

“Don’t worry,” Rey said to them both. “We’ll all watch over her until she wakes.”

“But what if she doesn’t wake?” Kaden’s voice was raw with pain.

“She must.” Linea’s voice rumbled through their minds. “The Mother of All would not have chosen her for you only to take her away so cruelly. Lucy is part of our family now. She’ll come back to us. Reynor’s been granted a second chance at life. As have we all. That was a gift from the Mother. She would not be so cruel as to snatch your mate from you now, when happiness is finally within our grasp.”

Marcus rose, laying Lucy’s hand at her side, and went to his dragon partner, looming in the doorway next to Rey. He threw one arm over her pale green neck. “I love you, Linea. Your faith is stronger than mine, I fear.”

Fear not, she answered simply. “Enjoy this moment as much as you can, for this is the moment on which our futures will be built. Reynor is whole again. Praise the Mother.”

Marcus touched Rey’s neck. “Praise the Mother, indeed. It’s good to see you looking so fit, Rey. It’ll be a pleasure to have you back in the skies at Linea’s side.”

“It will be good to fly again and when we’re all ready, to consummate this union.”

When the dragons flew in their first mating flight, the knights and their mate would be truly joined. Each time after, whenever the dragons mated, the knights would find the same sensual solace with their mate. Dragon sex drive was strong and the knights were so closely linked with their partners, when the dragon half of the partnership felt it was time to play, the human participants had little choice but to follow suit.

“We all look forward to that day,” Marcus spoke for them all, “but first we need our mate in good health once more.”

“Agreed. I would do anything for her after all she’s done for me. I

never thought to feel this way about a human female, but,” Reynor hesitated, tilting his head to one side as he considered the woman on the bed, “I find that I love her deeply.”

“As it should be,” Linea agreed. “We all must care for one another if this family is to work. As the Mother of All intends.”

Chapter Nine

Lucia woke with a persistent, dull ache in her head. Fuzzy with sleep, she became aware of two powerful heat sources on either side of her. One was definitely Kaden. Her legs tangled with his and her cheek rested against his chest. But then what was the other source of incredible heat against her back?

She peered behind her with bleary eyes.

Marcus.

In bed. With her. And Kaden.

She tried to remember what had happened, but drew a blank.

She eased out of the bed, doing her best not to wake either of the men, and headed for the bathing chamber. After relieving her bladder and cleaning up a bit, she moved to the kitchen area, noting the empty wallow where she'd expected to find Rey. The empty wallow reminded her of what she'd done, but she couldn't remember anything after that final surge of magic. Still, she took his absence from the sand pit as a sign that Rey had been healed by her efforts and was now out and about, perhaps flying for the first time in weeks. The thought made her smile.

Going about the steps to make a soothing tea for her headache, Lucia tried to work out some of the kinks in her muscles. She was slow to get going this morning, and didn't remember much after approaching

Rey the night before. Her neck and shoulders were stiff and she still felt a little groggy.

Strong, masculine hands settled on her shoulders and started to rub as she sighed.

“Marcus.” She knew his touch immediately, so different from Kaden’s, but was too weary to be afraid.

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek from behind. “Good morning, Lucia.” His arms circled her waist, pulling her backward against his warm chest, just holding her. “By the Mother, I’m glad you’re all right. How do you feel?”

“A little stiff. That’s all. I guess Kaden put me back in bed last night.” She didn’t dare ask when he’d joined them. Something odd was going on, but she had a hard time focusing.

“Sweetheart, you collapsed. You’ve been asleep for three days.”
“You’re joking.”

Marcus released her and she turned. His expression was serious.

“You’re not joking.” She was shocked.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I feel a little sore, and still a bit tired, but otherwise all right. Why?”

“We weren’t sure what that magic would do to you.” She saw the concern on his face as he cupped her cheek. “We were worried, Lucia. Really worried.” He tugged her back into his arms, squeezing her close in a tight hug. “Kaden and I took turns sitting with you all day, each day, but you slept and slept. The only hope we had was because Queen Riki told us what to expect. Still, you slept longer than even she predicted.” He kissed her hair. “Don’t ever worry us like this again. I don’t think I could bear it.”

“I didn’t mean to.” She pulled back. “But I had to try to heal Rey. It was the only gift I had to give.”

“You’ve given us more than we ever could have expected, but you risked yourself too much, Lucy. None of us liked seeing you so still and pale.”

“It was the only way.”

“What exactly did you do?” He was curious, but she should have expected that.

“Where is the plume?”

“Still on the table in the bedroom where Kaden put it. The darn thing shocked Riki when she tried to touch it.”

“Oh, no. Is she all right?” Worry wrinkled her brow.

“She’s fine, but what *is* that thing?”

“A gryphon feather.”

Marcus stoked her hair. “That’s some powerful magic.”

“It is.” She nodded. “Which is why it’s only used in the most dire circumstances. I take it Rey’s all right?”

“He’s out stretching his wings as we speak.” Marcus tightened his embrace, sending a thrill down her spine. Was it wrong to feel so attracted to Marcus? The men wanted her to be wife to both of them, but she wasn’t completely sure. Marcus had become less a reminder of her past and more a troublesome temptation of something she dare not desire. Still, being in his arms didn’t feel as audacious as she’d once thought. It felt right. Right, and...thrilling.

“Oh, Lucy, I was so worried about you.” His whispered words held passion as he lowered his lips to hers. The kiss wasn’t tentative, but rather a claiming, a welcoming and a promise of more to come. Marcus swept inside, licking fire along her senses as his tongue explored her mouth, finding all the sensitive spots that cried out for his attention. Lucia moaned as she slid against him, the strength leaving her knees as

Marcus seduced her with his masterful kiss.

A moment later, she felt the smooth stone of the kitchen wall against her back as Marcus pressed against her. She didn't mind the hardness at her back any more than she minded the very masculine hardness pressing against her belly. Marcus was built on the long side, if she was any judge, and he was more than eager.

The question remained could she welcome him into her body as she'd welcomed Kaden? Should she?

As Marcus kissed her, the answer to that question became more and more urgent. The man was on fire and she had to make her decision. Acknowledging the desire they both felt was the first step on a much longer road the men wanted her to navigate. She wasn't at all sure about the future, but the present was becoming more insistent with every moment, every twist of Marcus' hips against hers.

He broke the kiss to meet her gaze. "I realized one very important thing over the last three days, watching you, lying there in that bed." Her temperature soared as he pinned her against the wall with his muscular body.

"What's that?"

"I learned that life is precious yours most of all. Without you, our lives would be empty. All of us. Me, Kaden and the dragons too. I know we've only known you a short

time, but you're part of us, Lucia. We love you. Don't you feel it?"

Slowly, she nodded. "I love you all too."

"But I love *you*, Lucia. I want you to be my wife. Mine and Kaden's."

"I don't know—"

He stilled her words by placing one long finger over her lips. "Don't answer now.

Let me show you how much I love you. If, after that, you can still walk

away, I'll try my best to let you go, though I can't promise not to beg you to stay." He slid his finger along her lips in a caress. "I love you too much not to fight for you."

"Oh, Marcus, I—"

"Don't say anything now. Just let me prove it. Let me in. Let me show you how good it could be." He placed small, biting kisses over her face and neck as he whispered his words of love, and she was lost.

"Show me, Marcus. Please!"

Marcus growled in triumph as she gave in. He had her pinned against the kitchen wall. Not exactly the most romantic of places to make love for the first time, but he was a desperate man. It seemed, when it came to claiming his mate, he was always going to be more barbarian than nobleman. He couldn't wait any longer.

Blindly, he reached for the hem of the nightshift they'd put her in. Kaden and he had taken care of her while she slept. He knew she was bare beneath the shift and he was glad of it. Right now, he couldn't spare the time to sort through all the bits and pieces women normally wore.

Finding creamy flesh beneath his palms, Marcus slowed. He had the soft cheeks of her ass in his hands as he lifted her higher against the wall. Urging her legs to wrap around his waist, he lowered one hand to test her slick folds.

She was hot and wet, ready for him and so responsive, she stole his breath. She whimpered as he stroked her, gently at first, then with firmer motions. He was glad of her headlong response. Never had he been so close to coming before getting inside a willing wench. At least not since he'd been a raw young boy.

No way would he embarrass himself this time. No, this time he would come inside her the way he'd longed to do for days now. She

was willing and he had something to prove to her—his love and devotion, his desire to please her and make her his. His and Kaden's. Never would she be alone again. Between him, Kaden and the dragons, she would have a family again and would never lose them, if he had anything to say about it.

“Lucia,” he whispered, nibbling on the lobe of her ear as she shivered in his arms. He loved how responsive she was to his slightest touch. Sparing only a moment, he tugged at the laces on his leggings, freeing his cock and aiming it for the place it most wanted to go. “I’m going to love you now, Lucy.”

“Marcus! Please!”

Her breathy tones were music to his ears as he aligned himself and began to shove home. He tried to go slow, lest he hurt her, but she was more than ready. Her slick warmth engulfed him as he moved deeper into her heat. She made alluring sounds of ecstasy as he ground himself into her. When he was fully seated, he stopped for just a moment, savoring the feeling.

Her eyes opened and sought his as she writhed on him. He could feel her inner muscles clenching and holding him, stretching to accommodate his width and length. She fit him perfectly. More perfectly than any woman ever before and he knew it was because this was *his* woman.

“You’re mine now, Lucy. Can you feel it?” He leaned in, boxing her against the wall with his large body, kissing her yearning lips as he began to move. It wouldn’t be long now. He was too close. And so was she, judging by her breathy sighs and the way her sheath rippled around him. He would fly to the stars with her and then do his damndest to convince her to let him do it again and again and again. For the rest of their lives.

He thrust harder and faster, trying to watch her reaction as he began

to lose control. But he needn't have worried. She was with him. Her cries grew louder as he rammed into her until that final breaking point. The little death. The point between the sky and the stars.

Together they came in a rush of pleasure so intense, Marcus thought his knees would give out. He leaned against her, crowding her against the wall as she writhed in his arms. She screamed at the last, her orgasm taking them both to a point higher than he'd ever flown.

"Marcus!"

"Lucy, my love."

He rocked against her, pulsing more slowly now as he came down from the peak. She continued to ripple around him in aftershocks of ecstasy. The sensation was like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

Moving with caution, he snagged a nearby chair in one hand, pulling it closer. Lifting her away from the wall, he supported her on his cock, unwilling to separate now that he'd finally claimed the heaven of her body. He sank onto the chair with her still seated firmly on him, facing him with his hands on her perky ass.

"Are you all right?" he murmured in her ear as he placed kisses along the side of her face.

"Mmm. Better than all right, if you must know the truth." She tilted her head upward as she smiled at him. "You called me Lucy." Her gaze searched his, but he didn't want to think just yet. Instead, he took her lips in a deep, probing kiss.

She was breathless as she pulled back, her eyes dazed.

"Looks like you two are having fun."

Kaden's voice came to them from the kitchen doorway.

Chapter Ten

Lucia gasped, embarrassed and guilt-ridden. She tried to scramble

off Marcus' s lap—and his cock—but he held her there with firm, unyielding hands.

“Don't stop on my account. Marcus has been giving me hell for the past few days because I had you all to myself.” Kaden sauntered over and placed a small kiss on the crown of her head.

Confusion replaced fear. Kaden seemed happy to discover them together. The proof was in his actions, his words, and in his eyes. They sparkled at her with approval...and arousal.

“You don't mind?” She searched Kaden's expression.

Kaden shrugged. “Mind? I was waiting for this.”

She felt Marcus swelling within her. He was hard and ready, her own body weeping for his renewed possession. Marcus's strong hands at her hips urged her to move and she was helpless against the passion flaring between them once more. Her gaze flew from Kaden to Marcus and back again. Both men were clearly enjoying this and she found herself titillated by the appreciative eyes following her every move.

“Unlace his leggings, Lucia,” Marcus ordered in a husky voice. Her womb jumped at his commanding tone. Dare she? Marcus tweaked one nipple to gain her attention. “I want to watch you suck him while I'm inside you.” His gaze held hers as she debated the scandalous order. “Do it.” He stilled within her tight channel, depriving her of the delicious friction. “I'm waiting.”

With trembling fingers, she reached for Kaden. He stood close enough that all she had to do was turn slightly on Marcus's lap. The twisting motion seated Marcus's hard cock a little differently inside her, hitting a spot she hadn't known about before. It felt good. Damn good.

She squirmed on Marcus while she freed Kaden, stroking him with her fingers. Kaden was wider around than Marcus, though just a little shorter. Both men touched off different kinds of fireworks inside her,

though both were incredible, to say the least.

“Lick him, Lucia.” Marcus ordered again, his low voice firing her senses.

Leaning forward, she slipped her tongue around the head of Kaden’s cock. She liked the deep groan of satisfaction that rumbled through his body. Marcus too, rewarded her by slow, deep movements within her. Between the two of them, she felt incredible. She’d never dreamed of such a thing until she met them, but found she enjoyed pleasing both these special men. And they pleased her as well.

Kaden was hard and ready, but pulled from her mouth minutes later, still hard. She clung to Marcus when he rose from the chair with her still impaled on his lap. His strong arms supported her as he coaxed her calves up around his waist.

“What are you doing?” The precarious position seated her more fully on him than she’d been before, setting off sparks of desire through her womb.

“Relax, little one. We need more room for what comes next.” He set off for the nearby bedroom with her riding in his arms, each step driving him into her, shooting her higher. She didn’t know if she would last until they reached the bed, but somehow, they managed it. Even then, he didn’t disengage while placing her down on the rumpled sheets.

He stood while he stretched her out on the tall bed and untangled her legs from his waist. Holding them up and out, he surged into her, pumping his hips a few times while Kaden watched over his shoulder.

“Now isn’t that a pretty sight,” Marcus commented to his fellow knight. Just the idea that both watched while Marcus took her sent a rush of warm wetness to her pussy.

Kaden reached out and stroked her clit lightly. “Very nice,” he agreed. “She likes you, my friend.”

“Hmm.” Marcus held himself deep within her for a moment before

pulling out completely. Lucy whimpered at the loss. She was far gone and ready for anything these men might ask of her, if they'd only let her come. She was desperate for it.

Marcus moved aside and Kaden took his place with little fanfare, pushing home while Marcus moved onto the bed. He stroked her breasts, watching while Kaden powered into her below.

“Marcus!” She met his eyes as his fingers teased her nipples.

“Oh, I like that,” she heard Kaden say. “Tell him what you want, Lucy. Tell us both.”

“Keep. Doing. That. Kaden,” she panted as he rammed into her. She was close now, but she wanted to take both men with her when she came. “Marcus,” her eyes sought his, “I want you.”

“Where do you want me, little temptress?” His tone was teasing, but his expression was tight with want.

“Mouth,” she breathed, barely able to form the words. “In my mouth. Please!”

Kaden groaned and Marcus's gaze sharpened to glints of blue steel as he moved. “Then you shall have me.” He spoke the words like a vow as he positioned himself near her head. All she had to do was turn her head to the side and she had him exactly where she wanted him.

She tasted herself on his long cock, which only reminded her of the passionate moments in the kitchen. She writhed as Marcus fucked her mouth, mirroring Kaden's thrusts into her pussy. Marcus thrust shallowly, but Kaden's cock grew bolder and more forceful as their excitement grew. She whimpered with each coordinated thrust, but was powerless to withhold the small sounds. The men stroked in tandem, faster and deeper now as they approached climax.

Lucia was already there. Her womb clenched on a massive orgasm, every muscle in her body tensing around the men who meant more to her than anything in the world. She came hard, taking them with her.

Kaden pulsed warmth into her body as Marcus tried to pull away from her mouth, but she held him there, wanting to taste him. She'd learned how sucking Kaden's cock pleased him, and she wanted to give that same pleasure to Marcus.

"Lucy!" Marcus groaned as he came. She swallowed what she could, but some residual stickiness found its way onto her skin. After a long, hot moment where all three reached for the stars together, Marcus collapsed onto the bed, dragging her into his arms. He stroked her breasts, massaging his come into her skin as she relaxed back against him.

Kaden dozed at their side, drained in the aftermath of their first time coming together as a threesome. Lucy wondered idly if it would always be this way. This urgent, this hot, this amazing.

"It's good to see you three getting along so well." Linea's amused voice rumbled through all their minds. Lucy looked over to find the pale green dragon's head resting in the wide doorway.

"I didn't know you were such a voyeur, Lin." Marcus continued to stroke Lucy, holding her securely in his arms. She felt a little uncomfortable with the dragon watching, but the knights didn't seem to mind one bit. Still, she tugged at the blanket near the foot of the massive bed with one foot and Kaden took pity on her, reaching down to lift it over her nude body.

"Just checking on my new family. I never knew human sex could be so...inspiring. It'll be even better, I think, when Reynor and I can join in the fun."

"And when will that be?" Kaden asked from his boneless sprawl next to them.

"Soon," Linea purred. *"He's practicing his flying skills even now. He wants to be ready for the mating flight. It's a good thing he was such a good flyer before the injury, and wasn't grounded too long. He*

only has a small amount of muscle mass to make up.”

“He’s been eating like a pig for the past three days,” Kaden teased. “A whole cow each day and more besides.”

Linea’s smoky amusement sent sooty spirals toward the ceiling. “*He wants to gain back what was lost before we take to the sky. It’s a good plan. Mating is not to be taken lightly among our kind. You should, perhaps, consider the idea as well. Once we fly, we won’t want to stop for a good long while.*”

“I don’t understand,” Lucia voiced her confusion.

Kaden sat up, laughing. “It’s simple.” He reached out to take her hand, folding it between his. “We’re deeply bonded to our dragon partners. When they make love...so must we.”

“Every time?” The idea was somewhat startling, though she’d had some indication from what the knights had told her before. Still, she was fresh from her first-ever threesome. Now they were saying she’d be involved—at least on a mental basis—with a quintet of some kind? She didn’t quite understand how that could work.

Linea’s head bobbed in the doorway. “*Every time,*” she confirmed. “*Fear not, Lucy. From what we’ve heard, our influence will only increase your pleasure. We can’t help the spillover of our passion to our knights, but they will benefit from it in ways that will make you scream in pleasure. Or so the older dragons have assured us. And then later, when the babies come, you and I will take turns mothering our offspring.*”

“Babies?” Lucy was floored by the idea. She hadn’t thought that far ahead yet, but obviously the dragon had.

“*In time,*” the dragon nodded. “*If the Mother of All so decides to bless us.*”

Something wondrous blossomed within Lucia at the thought, but there was also trepidation. The knights—and dragons—would have to

be told about her heritage before this went any further. Fear filled her. What if they rejected what she was? What if it conflicted with their allegiance to Draconia?

She hid her thoughts carefully as Marcus settled in to sleep beside her. Kaden dozed as well and Linea remained silent. Watching.

Lucy had to talk to someone about this. But who?

“The queens are very good at solving problems, if you have one, Lucia de Alagarithia.” Linea’s jeweled eye winked at her once before shutting. The dragon, too, dozed as Lucy’s mind spun.

Chapter Eleven

Later that day, Lucia woke to the smell of roasted meat and herbs. Her stomach growled and she realized she was famished. The bed was empty except for her and she wasted no time bathing and dressing, eager to get some food into her deprived body.

When she reached the small kitchen, she was surprised to find two women there before her. Marcus and Kaden were nowhere in sight, and neither were Linea or Reynor. It seemed the two queens had come to cook dinner for her and Lucy realized her moment of truth had arrived. Whether Linea had arranged this or if it was the queens’ idea, she didn’t know, but the time to reveal the truth—and seek advice—was finally at hand.

“Good evening, Lucy,” Queen Lana said. “We thought you’d be hungry after sleeping so long. I hope you don’t mind our taking over your kitchen.”

“Not at all, Your Majesties. Thank you.”

“Oh, please call me Lana, and this is my sister, Riki. We aren’t very formal and we’d like to get to know you a bit better, if that’s all right.”

Lucia knew darn well the two women hadn’t been raised in privilege

as she had. Everyone in Castleton knew the story of how they'd been stolen from their home and sold as child slaves, only gaining their freedom and birthright as members of one of the royal houses of Draconia in recent months. Both had married into the ruling line. Lana was married to Roland, King of Draconia, and Riki was married to his brother, Prince Nico, king-consort of the Jinn. Riki herself had been crowned Queen of the Jinn just weeks before, in a surprise move that still astounded many of her Jinn brethren. It seemed Riki and Nico had fulfilled some mysterious and ancient prophecy, revealing themselves as the ceremonial head of the wandering Brotherhood.

The two queens dished up three plates of roasted meat and vegetables, setting them on the table. They sat and Lucia followed suit. She was a bit uncomfortable in the presence of such gifted women. Both were healers of great renown with magical abilities far beyond most people.

"Please be at ease, Lucy," Queen Lana said with a kind smile.

They began eating and her hunger reared its head again. She devoured half her plate before coming up for air. When she did, she met understanding smiles on the faces of the two women. They were watching her closely and Lucia flushed with embarrassment at her poor manners.

"I'm sorry." She wiped her mouth with the napkin. "I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

"Don't worry. We've been in your shoes, Lucy. Healing takes a lot out of you and when you finally wake up and get over the lethargy, you're ravenous. Not to worry. We understand." Riki's green eyes were kind as she continued to eat. "In time you'll learn to channel the energy so you don't wipe yourself out. We can help you learn, if you like."

"Um." She didn't quite know what to say. "I'm not a healer. Not like you are."

“Well, you did what we couldn’t and that’s saying a lot. You healed Rey completely.

All our combined power could do was make him more comfortable, not heal such dreadful damage.” Lana’s eyes glinted a friendly challenge.

“But that was the plume. Not me.”

“Yeah,” Riki set down her fork, “do you want to tell us about that feather? That thing packs a punch.”

“I’m sorry it zapped you.” Lucia blushed again. “It was a gift to my family from a...”

“A gryphon,” Queen Lana supplied, surprising Lucia with her knowledge. The queen shrugged. “Well what else could it be, with such power? Besides, the dragons have been gossiping and that’s what they’ve come up with. Were they wrong?”

“No,” Lucia smiled, shaking her head, “they’re not wrong. My childhood home was near the nesting grounds for several mated pairs of gryphons. My family had a pact with them. For as long as my family was in power, the gryphons would be protected and left in peace. The pact lasted for seven hundred years.”

“Until your family was overthrown,” Riki guessed.

“Murdered in their beds.” Lucia nodded sadly. “I only escaped because I’d stayed the night in the rookery. Nrathrella had just hatched a few days before and her sire allowed me to play with her. For the first few weeks, gryphlets are somewhat nocturnal, so her parents were glad to have me there to help keep an eye on her. Or so they claimed.

Looking back,” she smiled fondly, “I think they were just humoring me. Ella and I bonded from almost the moment she hatched. She was special.”

Queen Lana’s hand covered hers on the table. “I know how you feel. Tor and I bonded like that. We’ve never been apart.”

“You’re lucky to have him with you.” Lucia withdrew, steeling

herself to tell the rest of the story. “I had to leave. My father’s enemies were looking for me. Syrruss, Ella’s sire, flew me away that very night. He left me with a Jinn family he knew and they took me in, hiding me in their caravan. I was passed from Jinn to Jinn, eventually becoming part of the Feather Wing Clan. I’ve traveled with them for years and when the call to gather went out, I came with them here, to Draconia.”

“So whose feather is that and how have you managed to keep it safe all these years?” Riki brought them back to the subject of the plume.

“On the night I left, Syrruss gifted me with one of his plumes as a reminder of my birthright. I’ve kept it with me, on my person, for all these years and never even tried to use it...until Rey.”

“What exactly is your birthright? Are you a princess? A queen?”

Lucia considered. “Perhaps, but my family ruled Alarithia not by force of arms or political means. We were chosen to rule the human population by the gryphons themselves. It was more of a religious calling than anything else. My ancestors were priests and priestesses of the Lady. You call her the Mother of All. The gryphons serve Her and we serve both the gryphons and the Lady. The gryphon magic was gifted to certain members of my line, down through the generations, to benefit both our races in peace. My mother was the last chosen priestess and she had hopes I would be the next, but I was never consecrated. I don’t even know if I would have gained the gryphons’ approval once I reached my age of majority. By that time, I’d been away from them and my homeland for more than a decade.”

“I feel sure that if you’d been with them at that time, you would have been the next priestess in your line, Lucy. Their magic flowed freely through you and didn’t harm you. That’s the mark of a truly gifted priestess of any sect.” Queen Lana spoke quietly as their meal lay forgotten before them.

Lucia nodded solemnly. “I just don’t know if what I did was right. I

mean,” she was quick to clarify, “nothing could be more important than restoring Rey’s ability to fly, but I might have been selfish in my motivations. If Rey can fly, my own future is somewhat assured, after all. I was always taught the power should never be used lightly or purely for personal gain. I’m afraid I may have overstepped, though I didn’t see it at the time. And just this morning Linea mentioned children...” Terror filled her heart. “If I am cursed for having misused the gift, then I fear it will pass down my line. I didn’t think of that when I wanted to heal Rey.”

Riki came to her defense. “No, I’ll wager you only thought of Reynor. And Kaden and Marcus. If I were to judge, I’d say your motives were pure, Lucy. Any gift you have may well pass to your children, and if so, it will be a joyous thing.”

“Even here?” she challenged the Queen of Draconia. “In the land of dragons? Will gryphon magic be welcome here?”

“Any magic used for good,” a deep male voice spoke from the wide archway across the room, “is welcome in our land.” Lucy was surprised to see not only King Roland, but Kaden and Marcus standing in the wide opening. They’d heard everything, from the look of them.

The king strolled into the kitchen and kissed his wife on the cheek, motioning for Lucy to stay seated. “I’m sorry to intrude, but what I just heard makes recent occurrences much clearer. Lucia de Alarithia,” his green gaze pinned her where she sat, “guests have arrived to see you.”

“Guests?” Lucia was confused.

“Gryphons,” Marcus clarified with a teasing grin. “A pair of them just flew in and landed on the battlements. They asked the nearest knight, very politely, for an audience with the king.”

“And then,” Roland picked up the thread of the story, “they demanded to see you.

Seems they only asked for me out of courtesy. Polite brutes they are.”

Lucy dashed to her feet. “Do you know who? Who’s come?”

“Let’s go and see, Lucy,” said the king. “I’ve left them in the throne room, for the time being, with Nico. If they haven’t torn him limb from limb yet, perhaps we can find out.”

Lucia ran from the room, taking time only to retrieve the golden gryphon plume. Kaden and Marcus flanked her and the royal party came up behind. As they exited the suite, Linea and Reynor joined the group. Lucy walked fast and all scrambled to keep up with her. She didn’t even take time to tell Rey how good it was to see him whole and happy once more.

Gryphons had come! She was either in big trouble, or...well, she wasn’t quite sure what the alternative could be. Would they want to take her home? Would she dare consider leaving her new family?

Questions raced through her mind, but she knew immediately that no matter what, she would never allow herself to be parted from Kaden, Marcus, Reynor and Linea. They were her family now and she loved them more than anything. But still...gryphons! She couldn’t wait to see who had come or what they had to say. Her entire future hinged on the next moments and she was eager to greet them.

Marcus and Kaden guided her through the maze of hallways and into the more public parts of the castle. The throne room was immense and Lucy scolded herself to walk with dignity toward the magnificent beasts that stood facing the Prince of Spies. Nico had a devilish grin on his face and it was clear he was studying the new guests as much as they studied him.

Lucy wanted to run to the gryphons, but she couldn’t. She’d been trained since childhood how to approach a gryphon from a position of power. These were strong and magical beings who had strict protocols when it came to dealing with humans. She couldn’t show weakness

now, though inside her heart cried out at the sight of the male and female gryphons, both showing signs of only recently growing out of their juvenile plumage. She could still see a few stray tufts of downy white where the new, golden, adult feathers had pushed through.

The gryphons must have heard her approach across the massive room. The female's head turned and Lucia was struck by an amazing sense of familiarity. It couldn't be!

She motioned the group behind her to stop as she walked right up to the female. She stood firm, her eyes never leaving the enormous creature who looked down on her with narrowed eyes. Gryphons were about the same size as dragons, but sleeker, with feathers and fur rather than scales. And their beaks were formed in such a way that they could speak, with practice, though some people found them hard to understand.

"I am Lucia de Alarithia, lately of the Jinn. I greet you, and ask your forgiveness."

One talon rose to push against her shoulder. Lucia knew the gryphon used only a fraction of her immense strength to push against her. Still, Lucia had to brace herself not to stumble back. This was a good sign. The gryphon was tempering her strength. It meant she was willing to parlay.

"Do you not remember me, my friend?"

Lucy searched the gryphon's mobile features. They were so familiar...

"Ella? Nrathrella? Is that you?"

The female gryphon clacked her beak in their version of laughter. "I am grown up. Asss are you, if you are indeed, the Lucccy I remember."

"It's me, Ella. I still have your sire's feather."

"Ah, yess. That iss what bringss uss here. We felt the magic of it dayss ago and have flown long to find you."

"I'm sorry. I had to use the magic. Reynor was injured too badly. He

would never have flown again if I hadn't intervened." She was frantic, unable to understand what was happening. These gryphons were acting so differently than she remembered. "Please forgive me."

Lucia felt a warm presence at her back. A quick glance over her shoulder showed Reynor moving up behind her. That he would stand with her against two such powerful beings touched her deeply.

"There iss nothing to forgive." The male gryphon spoke for the first time. "To losse the ssky you were born to navigate iss a ssad thing. We do not begrudge your usse of our magic to resstore a dragon to the air."

"We are pleased that you have found your birthright and that by sso doing, we have found you, Luccy. I have ssearched for you most of my life. Do you not sstill feel the bond?"

"Oh, sweet Mother, Ella. I do. Bless my soul, I do." Lucia moved forward once more, reaching out to stroke the soft feathers of Ella's face as she had when they were little. "I've missed you so much, my sister."

"Asss I have missed you." The gryphon's voice was as soft as she'd ever heard it. "Thiss iss my mate, Grallorin. I call him Lorr for short." She winked at the male beside her. "It iss our hope we may sstay here with you, Luccy. The lasst priesstesss of Alarithia sshould not be without her gryphon ssisster."

Tears flowed freely down Lucia's face as she beheld the creature who had been her best friend in those last days before all she had ever known was ripped from her life. She'd missed Ella perhaps most of all, next to her family. And now the gryphon was grown, with a mate, and wanting to stay in this land of dragons with her. It was too good to be true.

But there was more than just her own feelings to consider. Now she was on the verge of creating her own family and they had to be included in her decisions, her past and her future, as well.

"You would be welcome here, Lady Nrathrella." Linea surprised

them by speaking. *“Lucy should have friends near for her wedding.”*

“Wedding?” Ella’s eyes sparkled with delight. “And who iss the lucky man?” Her beak shifted from side to side as she looked from Marcus to Kaden and back again.

Lucia shifted back, unsurprised to find Kaden and Marcus on either side, with Rey and Linea towering behind.

“We both are,” Marcus and Kaden spoke in unison as they linked arms with hers. She supposed she should have expected something like this after accepting them both into her body the night before. She cringed inwardly, waiting for Ella’s reaction, but unwilling to gainsay either man. They were both hers now—shocking as that still seemed.

Ella and Lorr’s beaks clacked in laughter, surprising Lucia. “We had heard about your sstrange wayss, but until thiss moment, I didn’t quite believe it,” Lorr said. “Congratulations to you all.”

“Then all that remains is to receive our king’s blessing to have you stay for a bit.” Linea took charge again, turning attention to Roland, who stood with his brother Nico and their wives.

“As long as you come in peace, you’re welcome in our land. We’d be honored to have you as our guests.” Roland was nothing if not diplomatic, though Lucy was certain he’d never expected to be entertaining gryphons in his throne room when he woke this morning.

“You will find, ssire,” Lorr spoke in sonorous tones, “that our enemy iss your enemy ass well. I think it iss a good thing to begin relations between our peopless, before the real battle begins. We may be the firsst of our kind to vissit, but we will not be the lasst. Even now, your brother makess friendss among our kind.”

The king and everyone in the room were instantly alert. “You know what’s happened to my brother, Wil?”

Lorr bowed his head in acknowledgment. “If what we ssurmisse iss true, he iss is no danger at the moment. Hiss journey back to you will

be dangerous, but he has good companions on his wings.”

The king asked more questions about his brother, young Prince Wil, who'd been kidnapped, and Lorr answered in the same reassuring, but vague way. Finally, the king gave up at his wife's urging, seeming willing to accept for now that these strange, magical creatures meant no harm, but would not say anything further on the subject. Lucia was glad. She'd run up against gryphon obtuseness in the past and knew when to quit.

She was so thrilled to be reunited with Ella. She would concentrate on that happy event rather than the sadness overshadowing the castle since the prince's abduction.

Chapter Twelve

The gryphons caused quite a stir among the folk of Castleton who saw them flying to and from the castle along with the dragons. They were distinct. Their feathers and fur gleamed rather than sparkled like dragon scale. Their beaks were sharp and hooked like an eagle's and their bodies those of great cats, tail and all. Their forelimbs were feathered like an eagle's ending in wickedly long talons, while their hind legs were muscular and furred, with massive, clawed paws. Jinn minstrels who knew the tales of gryphon magic were in great demand the next day, though the gryphons stayed some distance from the people of Castleton.

Preparations were well underway for Lucia's wedding. The knights began moving their belongings into a much larger suite on an upper level of the mountain castle that had a sand pit large enough for two dragons and a hatchling or two. Rey was flying and training every day so his wing would be as good as new, or perhaps even better. Having almost lost his ability to fly had made it all the more precious.

Lucia spent much of her time, when not busy preparing her new

home, with the gryphons. At first the knights and other Lair folk kept their distance, but she knew they were curious about the visitors. Ella and Lorr had been given an empty suite next to Rey's and Lucia spent the better part of the first day of their visit, speaking with her old friend and learning what had transpired since her departure from Alagarithia.

The following day, Prince Nico and his wife, Queen Arikia, came to call at the gyphon's suite while Lucia was there. Nico insisted on informality and Lucia found it hard to resist his charming ways. Before she knew it, she was chatting with them both as if they were old friends.

"But tell me," the Prince of Spies leaned back in his chair as he regarded the gyphons, "how did you know to come here? I suppose it had something to do with the magic Lucy worked."

"My ssire knew immediately when sshe called on hiss power. Our magic iss linked very clossely to oursselvelss. Not like you dragonss."

Nico and Riki both started, though Nico hid it better.

Lorr trilled at his mate, stepping forward. "The dragonkin king sshould have known all of thiss already, but your ssire wass murdered before he could passs along the knowledge." He settled into a sitting position near the Prince of Spies and his mate, eyeing them as a teacher eyes their student. "Dragonkind are not of thiss earth. Like sskithss, you were created wholly by wizard magic. Our kind, by contrasst, originate with two sspeciess that already roamed thesse landss long ago. Wizardkind meddled in our creation ass well, of coursse, but sstill, we are tied much closser to this world, while you are tied to itss people more than the land."

"Fascinating," Nico replied, clearly interested, "but why—?"

The gryphon cut him off with a raised claw. "I'll come to the point ssoon, but you musst know the hisstory firsst." Lorr settled onto his hind paws, sitting comfortably. "The wizard Gryffid created our kind.

He took two beastss and merged them into one creation, ussing the power of the land that already flowed through them to make uss what we are. We took our sstrength from the land becausse we were part of it. We love thiss world and will do all in our power to protect it.” He sat back. “But becausse dragonkind were not tied to the land, the wizard Draneth ssaw a need to tie them to itss people. He did that by merging with hiss creation. You and your brotherss are the ressalt. It wass a good plan.” The gryphon nodded as if in approval of the ancient wizard’s ideas.

Ella prowled up and sat next to her mate, picking up the story. “But the wizard Sskir grew jealous of Draneth. They had always been rivals and enemiess. Sskir created the sskithss to kill Draneth and all hiss creationss. At firsst, they were mighty creaturess— even worse than the sskithss you know today. Many dragonkin died. But sskithss had no tiess to the people or the land. They cared only for themsselvess. Sskir abandoned them when they did not ssucceed in desstroying all dragonss.”

“So you’re saying,” Queen Riki asked, “that both dragons and skiths were created by wizards, but only dragons were made part of the world they inhabit.”

“Yess.” Ella clacked her beak in approval. “Dragonss have a place here, with the people they have joined their magic to. Sskithss do not. They will always be unnatural and evil. Dragonss may be unnatural, but they will never be evil becausse of the care their maker had for them and hiss willingness to become one with them and impart hiss own ssoul for their ssake. Dragonkind owess much to Draneth the Wise. Asss do we all.” She bowed her head in acknowledgement of the long-dead wizard.

“The plume Luccy ussed came from my ssire,” Ella said after a respectful moment. “He gave it to her when sshe had to flee. Gryphon magic is part of the land and therefore, sstronger even—in ssome

areass—than dragon magic. It iss part of uss. We do not give our magic lightly. It iss tied too clossely to oursselvess. My ssire did not want to losse Luccy permanently, sso he gave her meanss to both protect hersself and call to him, when the Mother Goddesss deemed the time wass right.”

“But why?” Lucy whispered.

Ella reached out a huge paw and touched Lucy’s leg. “You are beloved by all gryphonss, Luccy. Can you not guesss why?”

“Or why the foreign assasssinss came to kill off your entire line?” Lorr stood, facing her as she sat next to the royals. “They came from Sskithdron, ssent by King Lucan.”

Ella rose too. “Lucan sseekss to revive the old warss. He sseess himself as the heir to Sskir, though he hass no wizard blood. Sstill, he iss dangerouss.”

Nico leaned forward. “So that’s why he merged with the skiths? He sees himself as Skir and he wants to battle all of Skir’s old foes?”

Both gryphons nodded solemnly. Lorr spoke. “He wass already oppossed to Draconia. He wantss your land and power for himself. It’ss why he hass worked for yearss to desstroy your family, but the dragon magic in you hass made it difficult.”

Nico’s eyes shifted to Lucy. “Skir was also at war with Gryffid, wasn’t he?”

Ella clacked her beak. “You are asss quick asss your reputation.”

“I don’t understand.” Lucy was at a loss.

“You are beloved by we gryphonss, Luccia de Alarithia,” the gryphons faced her, both on their feet, “because your line desscendss from Gryffid and the first priesstesss, Leandra de Alarithia.”

Shocking her to her feet, the two gryphons knelt on their forelegs,

bowing to her. She well knew gryphons didn't bow to anyone.

“This can't be right.”

Queen Riki patted her hand, imparting a gentle tingle of magic that helped calm her. Lucia was glad for the woman's presence and help as panic had threatened to overwhelm her.

The gryphons stood once more, facing her. “It iss right,” Ella assured her. “Gryffid placed pairss of uss in sstrategic placess all over the world. We do not call any one land home. Insstead, we care for all landss. When Gryffid vissited Alagarithia, he left two pairss of our kind, but he also fell in love with a woman of great power. Leandra wass High Priesstesss of the Lady—what your people called the Mother Goddesss even then— and Gryffid left her with child when he had to move on to the next land to fulfill hiss quesst. He promised to return, but never did. The gryphonss knew he had not abandoned Leandra, but had fallen to his enemiess. He wass not dead, but he wass too weak to return to her. Her love never waivered.” Lucia felt tears gather in her eyes for the woman who had been her ancestor. “Sshe raissed their child, a girl sshe named Genfer, and helped look after the firsst of the gryphletss to be born. They forged a friendsship that has lassted through to thiss time. We resspect the fact that you carry Gryffid'ss blood, but we love you for you, Luccy. You were the playmate of my firsst dayss and I love you ass a ssisster.”

Lucia did cry then, feeling tears slide down her face as she moved forward to meet the gryphon. She buried her face in Ella's neck feathers, as she had when she was a little girl.

“I love you too, Ella. I've missed you so much.” Her whispered words were for the gryphon alone and they stood together, comforting each other for some time before the storm passed.

Lucia drew back, surprised to see everyone still there, watching her with understanding eyes. Ella stayed near.

“Your marriage is the first sstep,” Lorr said from her side. “Our brethren’ss involvement with Prince William iss another.”

“Steps in what?” Nico asked. Though it was clear from the tightening of his expression he wanted to know more about his missing brother, he focused instead on the bigger picture. For the moment. Lucia had no doubt he’d do his best to grill the gryphons about Prince William as soon as he saw a better opening.

“Sstepss in uniting the forcess that will be needed to fight Sskir if Lucan managess to free him.”

“Sweet Mother!” Nico started, clearly upset. “But I thought the wizards were all dead.”

“Not dead. Not all,” Lorr confirmed. Sskir wass confined for hiss crimess in a place called the Citadel. He hass sslept in frozen ice thesse many centuriess. Lucan sseekss to free him.”

“So that’s what his search parties are doing in the north.” Nico shot to his feet.

“It iss what we believe. Gryphonss do not ussually fly that far north, but we have ssome friendss among the Ice Dragonss. They are wild, but they help protect the Citadel. It iss what they were created for.”

“Roland needs to know.” Nico made a move toward the door, but one very large, feathery wing stopped him.

“That iss why we told you, Prince of Sspiess, King of the Jinn. You, perhapss more than any other man, have many piecess of the puzzle already. You, perhapss, know more than even we gryphonss.” Lorr trilled, his amusement plain.

“We would create an alliance between oursselvess and the heirss of Draneth, as Gryffid and Draneth were allied in timess passt.” Ella cocked her head to the side, watching them. “The Mother Goddess hass brought the line of Gryffid here for a reasson, we believe. The union of Luccy with a dragon pair and their knightss, iss the firsst contact, but there will be otherss between gryphonss and dragonkin.

Soon. This

marriage will pave the way for our alliance if, and when, it is needed.”

“I had no idea.” Lucia was shocked.

“Neither did we, at first.” Ella nudged Lucia fondly with her beak. “Events have come to pass as they will. We merely struggle to understand.”

“Well, that makes me feel so much better.” Her dry comment startled a laugh out of Queen Riki.

“I know how you feel, Lucy. I only found out a few months ago I was descended from one of Draneth’s sons. It’s a little confusing at first, but then everything starts to make sense.” She turned her attention to the gryphons, a sparkle in her eyes. “Like the way she was able to use the gryphon magic in that feather, when it would probably never respond to anyone else.”

Ella nodded. “You are right, my queen. Lucia carries Gryffid’s blood. Only she may use the magic. Her family and chosen mates may handle the plume, though it will shock anyone else who tries to touch it.”

Riki rubbed her hand. “Yes, I know.” She chuckled and the gryphons trilled as they shared a moment of amusement. They talked a while longer, but Lucia was overwhelmed by all the information. She’d had no clue about her ancestry or her birthright, except as a priestess. Wizard blood, now that was something else again. The idea was startling and scary.

Marcus and Kaden entered the suite, seeking Lucia immediately.

“What’s wrong?” Marcus pulled the gauntlets from his hands as he neared her. “We left practice when we felt your distress.”

“Already they are closely bonded,” Ella trilled with satisfaction. “This is a good sign for the future.” She stood and padded past the knights toward the door.

“We should talk more with your brother, I think,” Lorr said to Nico. “Leave these lovebirds to comfort each other.” One large eagle eye winked as his beak clattered in gryphon laughter. He padded after his mate, sharp claws clicking on the polished stone floor.

Riki and Nico left with them, smiles on their faces as they walked behind the gryphons, hand in hand. That left Lucia with her mates. She was glad. She needed their support right now.

She related what the gryphons had told her, much to their astonishment. Marcus held her while Kaden asked pointed, strategic questions about the threat they’d hinted at. Kaden gave up the interrogation when she’d told them all she could, but Lucia hadn’t minded sorting through all the startling information with him. It helped calm her nerves, but also reminded her of the true gravity of what had been revealed.

War might well be coming, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since wizard times.

Chapter Thirteen

Lucia sought comfort with her mates that night, sleeping between the two after loving them each thoroughly. The dragons slept side by side for the first time in their new suite, though they had yet to join fully. That would come. Tomorrow.

The wedding feast was set. All the knights and their ladies and dragon partners were ready for the celebration. The young prince was still missing and that sorrow had cast a cloud over the castle for the past week or more, but even the royal family thought going ahead with the wedding was best for all concerned. For one thing, it was important strategically to bring Lucy and her gryphon friends into the family, as it were, but on the purely human side of it, the Lair folk needed something to be cheerful about. Prince William was much beloved and

the two young dragons who'd taken off after him, Jenet and Nellin, were sorely missed. Rumors flew as did the dragons, back and forth from all the outlying Lairs, but no one had seen or heard from any of them in days.

Lucia flitted through her day, going over the things she'd learned about the traditional knights' wedding ceremony. It was different than most other nuptial celebrations. There were promises made, which was familiar enough, but afterwards, there were a series of ritual dances. It had been years since Lucia's dancing lessons as a child, but she'd picked up the basic steps very quickly when the women of the Lair showed her. These dances were completely foreign, and very daring, because they were performed with two men. She'd be dancing with both her knights at the same time. And from what the women described when they showed her the layered garments she was expected to wear, they'd be slowly undressing her throughout the ritual.

The other married knights would join in the dancing with their own ladies, and by the time the final dance was performed, the knights and their ladies would be ready to join their counterparts, the dragons, as they took to the air in a mating flight. The human partners would seek their own beds while the dragons would soar into the heavens, but both sides of the partnership would be seeking and sharing pleasure. The very idea of it took her breath away.

The ceremony was beautiful. Surrounded by dragons, knights and their ladies, plus the royal family and two preening gryphons, Lucia, Marcus and Kaden spoke their vows. Reynor and Linea shared their vows as well and then the feast began in earnest. A lovely dinner was followed by the ritual dancing. By the time they reached the last of the sequence of dances, Lucia was hot in more than one way.

The men tossed her around, leaving her clothed only in the barest necessities. Three by three, the married trios left. The newlyweds ran

down the corridor of the Lair as Reynor and Linea took to the air. The other paired dragons followed suit, reaching for the stars together. The single dragons trumpeted and roared, adding their joyous voices to the drumbeat of wings that filled the air all around the castle.

Marcus, Kaden and Lucia barely made it to their suite before they were naked, grasping for one another. The knights were in a frenzy of need, urged on by the dragons' strong connection to them both. Lucia didn't mind one bit. The other women had warned her about the way the dragons' passion would incite the knights. Secretive smiles and teasing remarks had forewarned her about how hard the dragons would drive their lust and how well she would benefit from it.

Trusting her men, Lucia let them carry her, position her, treat her as they wanted. The women had advised letting them have their way this first time, and she wasn't inclined to argue. So far, everything they did only made her want them more.

Kaden lifted her over Marcus, lowering her onto his cock. She was just getting used to the sudden intrusion—though in truth, she'd been wet and ready half the night—when Kaden pushed her forward. The move took her by surprise, but she went willingly. Kaden's powerful hands were rougher than usual, but she found new appreciation of his strength. It made her senses leap higher.

Marcus swept his hands down her body, cupping her ass as he claimed her mouth. His kiss was demanding. More demanding than usual, but altogether enthralling. When he let her up for air, his smile stretched wide and fierce across his handsome face.

“How are you doing?”

“Never better.” She jumped when something slick and chilly touched her backside. Marcus chuckled and cupped her ass cheeks more firmly, lifting and separating. The chill came again, but this time she felt Kaden's blunt fingers behind the slick wetness, teasing her back

entrance.

“Don’t worry, my love.” Marcus nipped her lips. “We’ll be as gentle as we can. Damn. I’ve was warned about this, but nothing beats the feelings Linea is broadcasting to me at this moment.” His eyes danced with the fire of his passion.

“What’s it like?” She gasped as Kaden’s finger entered her, stroking the cream inside, stretching and preparing her.

“It’s like feeling echoes of a love so strong, it would kill you to stand in its full glory. It’s...”

“Amazing,” Kaden said as he slid two fingers into her. He loomed over her shoulder, biting down gently on her neck as he stretched her. “How are you doing, sweetheart?”

“Kaden!” She cried out when he twisted his fingers, but it wasn’t in pain.

“Good?”

“Oh, Kaden,” she gasped.

“We can’t wait any longer. I’m sorry, love.” Kaden knelt between her and Marcus’s splayed thighs, coming over her. He’d removed his fingers, and now sought to replace them with something a little bigger. Make that a *lot* bigger.

She felt their fire rise as Kaden began a slow, careful entry. She’d never done this before, but the women had warned her about it and she thought she was ready. Nothing though, could prepare her for the incredible feelings Kaden was causing. Marcus lay still, only pulsing occasionally, when he couldn’t help himself, while Kaden breached that place that had never been breached before.

Lucia accepted their ardor, just as she accepted their love. Kaden wouldn’t hurt her. It twinged a bit, but she knew they would bring her bliss.

The dragon's lust drove Kaden onward as he joined fully with Lucia. Marcus was in her pussy and he felt the other man through the thin barrier separating them. It was a new sensation, but not unpleasant.

Hell, with the way Reynor's fire was pushing him, Kaden would do anything at all to be one with his mate at this moment. Her love, her acceptance, her joy in their partnership made this all worthwhile. Without her, Kaden would never have been able to stand the heights to which Reynor's passion forced him. It was an echo only, but it was stronger than anything Kaden had ever experienced. Now he understood why fighting dragons were not allowed to mate unless their knight partners had a love of their own.

He felt the deep bonds of love tying him to Lucy, and through her to Marcus as well. The bonds were snapping into place, never to be broken. They were strengthening with each moment and would form indestructible links between their souls. It was beautiful and breathtaking.

Almost as breathtaking as the echoes of dragon lust driving him to claim his mate in a frenzy of need. He felt the moment Linea and Reynor became one. Rey's triumphant cry as he finally joined with his mate was echoed by Kaden as he slid fully home within his new wife. Moments of blinding fury—a firestorm of passion and lust followed. Then, as Rey came, so did Kaden. Fast, hot, strong and longer than he'd ever come in his life. The dragon echoes affected the knights, pushing them to feats of endurance and virility no human man could achieve naturally.

Kaden collapsed, welcoming the spasms of his mate's body around his that let him know she'd climaxed hard and was still feeling her own pleasure. At the last he'd been blinded to all but the dragons and his own scorching finale. It would get more manageable in time, they'd been told by older, wiser knights, but for right now, Kaden didn't think

life could get any more perfect.

He rolled away, disengaging himself carefully from Lucy. Marcus rolled her between them and both knights stroked her soft skin. She was a miracle.

“Are you all right?” Kaden’s voice was rough.

“Give me a few minutes to revive and I’ll let you know.”

“That good, huh?” Kaden rose on one elbow to look at his lovely mate.

“That devastating.” She raised one tired hand to cup his cheek. “I love you.”

He placed a kiss in her palm. “I love you too, my wife.” He stared at her a moment before rising. He moved into the bathing chamber and cleaned himself, then returned with soft cloths to bathe his mate. His wife. Kaden couldn’t stop smiling.

Marcus was kissing her when he returned, both of them exchanging words of love. Kaden felt his heart expand in his chest, willing to include both of them, and the dragons as well. His new family stunned him. They were his. Finally, he had a family to call his own.

He stared a moment more, then bent to his task. He would have to take care of Lucy. They had much more ahead of them this night and in the days to come.

* * *

The newlyweds—both dragon and human—spent the next few days lost in each other. The dragons flew almost constantly and when the dragons caught each other in the sky and reached for the clouds, so too did their human partners.

On the second day, Lucia took a few minutes in the afternoon to visit her gryphon friends in the suite next door. She sat with Ella while Lorr was out stretching his wings, flying with some of the dragons in their training flights.

“Lorr and I want to move,” Ella pronounced carefully.

“You’re leaving?” Lucia felt her heart break.

“Not leaving, ssilly chick. Jusst moving. We will nesst on the mountain, with the king’s permission. This warm ssand iss nice, but not what we like for our hatchlingss.”

“Then you’re—?”

“Pregnant. Asss are you, my dear. Our babiess will grow up together, asss we did.”

“I’m—?” Lucia stuttered in her excitement.

“Did you not ssuspect?” Ella chided her with clacking gryphon laughter.

“I’d hoped, but I wasn’t certain.”

“Be certain.”

“Oh, Ella!” Lucia hugged the gryphon’s neck tightly in joy. “I have to tell Marcus and Kaden!”

“We heard.” The men stood in the large archway, both wearing identical expressions of stunned amazement.

Congratulations and hugs followed, with much time spent fussing over the expectant mothers—both human and gryphon. In the days to come, another female joined the others in expecting her first offspring. When Linea told her family about the egg that would soon be deposited in the warm sand to incubate, their joy was complete. For the first time in centuries a gryphlet and a dragonet would grow up together, as friends.

It boded well for the future, uniting the magical creatures and the people who loved them, and were loved in return. Lucia still feared the resurrection of an ancient war, but with her knights at her side and the children who would depend on them all, she knew she would persevere and prosper in this land of dragons and knights.

About the Author

To learn more about Bianca D'Arc, please visit www.biancadarc.com. Send an email to Bianca at bianca@biancadarc.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Bianca D'Arc! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BiancaDArc/>

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Prince of Spies

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Fourth book in the Dragon Knights series, but can be read on its own.

Prince Nico is known as the Prince of Spies for a reason. Not only is he the Spymaster of Draconia, but he's a cunning shapeshifter able to take the form of a dragon at will. The gift of his royal heritage comes in handy as Spymaster for the king, but it's a great secret known only to a few.

Riki lives in misery, chained up to serve a mad king's perverted

magic. Forced to use her draining healing skills to keep King Lucan of Skithdron alive, Riki is a shadow of the woman she should be.

Nico knows Riki is the woman he's been searching for and wastes no time breaking them both out of the enemy palace. Thus starts an adventure that will take them across two countries, through peril and danger, and the discovery of an undeniable love and mutual respect. Will Nico have the courage to let her fly free, trusting she'll return to him, or will his love smother the fledgling beauty who is breathing free air for the first time in her tragic life?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prince of Spies:

“This is a fine blade,” Nico nodded at Drake. “Good choice.”

Drake nodded, passing a set of knives to Nico. “Try these. There's a fairly good swordsmith in town, willing to work quietly and not ask any questions.”

“Ah, the best kind,” Nico agreed, testing the weight of each of the blades with a critical eye. “These are fine too. Your smith is a good one. Did you manage to get anything for Riki?”

Drake grinned broadly and with a flourish, produced a bright red dress with yellow trim and enough frills to make Riki blink twice. It had a wide, tiered skirt, and a neckline that would scoop low over her breasts, but the sleeves would probably come all the way to the middle of her forearms, hiding the worst of her scars and providing some warmth. It was flamboyant, but beautiful, and Riki could barely believe it was meant for her.

Nico took it from Drake with gentle hands and walked over to the bed, sitting at her side. He draped the dress over her legs. “I want you to wear this, sweetheart. I know it's a little bright, but we're posing as Drake's cousins from the Jinn. Most of the Jinn women dress in very

bright colors and it will help to camouflage you.”

It touched her that he would worry over whether she liked the dress or not, but he didn't truly understand her apprehension. Somehow, she needed to make him understand.

“It's a beautiful dress, Nico,” she said softly. “Neither the color nor style bothers me. It's just...I've never worn something so pretty. Or so new.”

Nico reached out and pulled her into his arms, rocking her close to his solid chest. “You will have rooms of new dresses and gowns when I get you home to Draconia. I'll see to it myself. Nothing is too good for you, Riki.” His fervently whispered words brought tears to her eyes as he rocked her ever so gently. “Put on the dress, sweetheart. Let's begin your new life with this small step.”

He pulled back slowly and unwrapped the blanket from her shoulders. She let him. Tugging her old dress up, he pulled it over her head, but the light in his eyes was only partly sexual. No, his heat was tempered with care, gentleness and something she couldn't quite name, but the flavor of it humbled her. Holding her gaze, Nico dropped the new dress over her head and tugged it down over her breasts and against her waist.

“Stand up, sweetheart.” Gingerly, she got to her feet at the side of the bed, allowing the material to swish down around her legs. The dress fell nearly all the way to the floor, swirling around her ankles, delicate as moth's wings. Nico moved behind her to tie the sash that would fit the dress around her waist snugly and for the first time in her life, Riki felt feminine and pretty in the soft red dress. She spun and the voluminous, light skirt trailed a few seconds behind her movement. Experimentally, she tried moving a bit more and delighted in the swish of the silky material.

“It's so beautiful.”

“*You’re* beautiful,” Nico breathed, watching her. Her eyes flew to his and she read hunger in his gaze—hunger and admiration that set her knees to wobbling.

“I agree.” Drake spoke from behind her, breaking the spell. “You look like a Jinn princess. It’s a perfect disguise. All it needs is this around your beautiful hair.” Drake produced a matching red, patterned scarf with lovely long fringe all around. He moved close to place it in her hand and Riki sighed at the whisper soft material that met her touch. “Silk, from the eastern shores, for the Jinn princess, and golden bangles for your arms.” Drake produced three gold bracelets and held them up before her with a devilish smile.

“They’re perfect, Drake.” Nico stepped forward to examine the jewelry, holding out his hands for more. “What else did you get?”

Drake handed Nico a few other items but Riki couldn’t see what they were and she was too entranced by her new dress to really care. The men were the experts at this spy game, she was just a new player who must work hard to keep up.

Nico turned and captured her hand, surprising her for a moment. Gently, he slid the bangles onto her arms, then placed a plain gold band around her finger, holding her gaze all the while. She knew in some lands, such rings were meant as mating gifts and it touched her that he would place such a mark on her finger. She noticed then, looking down to admire the ring, that he wore a matching band on his own finger.

“We’re mated,” he said shortly. “Nick and Ari from the tribes of the Jinn, come to visit and travel with our cousin Drake.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer just to stay hidden?”

“It’s always better to hide in plain sight,” Nico assured her, caressing her hand before letting go. “And I far prefer being your husband.”

“But we’re only pretending.”

“For now.” He agreed, but his eyes held a deeper message she was almost afraid to read.

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