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Emma Petersen



*Dragon Kin Series:
Dragon's Captive*

By

Emma Petersen

Dragon's Captive by Emma Petersen

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Dragon Kin Series: Dragon's Captive

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Dedication

Deanna and Sable - the dream makers. Where you would be more than reasonable in doing the least, you instead do the most. I am honored to be part of your dream and hope your every wish is fulfilled. I am privileged to call you my publishers but, more importantly, my friends. You two have been crucial in my journey. Thank you.

For Shelli, I can't remember which book you helped me get through—there have been so many. So this one is for you. May you find your own hero to sweep you off your feet.

And as always for the rest of my sisters in ink, Feistilicious, Lisa, Crystal, Loribelle and Lacy. I couldn't love you guys more if we were born of the same womb.

Chapter One

The ache was back. I pushed my pelvis deeper into the sheet-covered mattress beneath me as a whimper crept up my throat and my heart started to pound.

He was standing outside the door. I didn't know his name; it never came up during our interactions. But my body knew he was there, and I didn't need to see him with my eyes for confirmation. Swallowing a sob, I buried my nose in my pillow and tried to concentrate on something other than the arousal that tormented me.

It would continue, lashing at me like the stroke of a careless whip. My sex throbbed, and a languorous heat seeped through my veins like a drug.

I didn't know how long I'd been locked away in this place, but it seemed like forever as my captor's visits became longer and longer in duration.

I flinched at the sound of the door opening, and my clit began to pulse as if it had a heartbeat of its own, as if to signal that he was coming closer.

"Please." The word came from my mouth before I could stop it. As he drew near and the male scent of his body teased my senses, I couldn't say I regretted the tiny lapse in my control. I didn't know if it was because I was blindfolded, but all of my other senses seemed more acute. I could hear his heartbeat accelerate as he approached the bed. And could smell the musky hint of earth that rolled off his skin. He was a member of the

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Born for Earth Dragon Clan. Something else mixed with the scent of moss and fertile soil. Something hot, tangy and pungent, reminding me of fire.

My face was still pressed into the pillow, and I made no move to turn and face him.

I had never begged a man for anything, but here I was pleading with him for something that was usually tossed carelessly at my feet.

Sex.

I wanted him to cram me full until I couldn't take any more, and then I wanted him to fill me some more. My breath came in pants, and I resisted the urge to raise my rump like a cat in heat. To beg him to touch me where I needed so badly to be touched.

The mattress dipped, and heat radiated off him as he sat down beside me.

"How prettily you beg, *takara*, when the needs is upon you." His hand smoothed over the curve of my ass and dipped between my thighs to skim over my panty-clad sex. "But what is it you beg for?"

As if he didn't know.

The word *takara* sounded like a caress. It was the same name he always called me when he came to me. I had no idea what it meant, but I imagined it was something like sweetheart or dearling. Pressing my face deeper into the pillow, I shook my head. It didn't matter what the damn word meant, I reminded myself. I wasn't anyone's sweetheart, and I sure as fuck wasn't their dearling.

Remember who ye are Brigid O'Sinach. Yer a descendant of royal houses and the fiercest of the Dragon Clans, not some tart for any lad to stick his wick in. If ye spread yer legs let it be for a reason, and always be in control of the situation. A queen doesn't rut on her back like a common striapach.

Technically my mother was not a queen, but that fact never stopped her from acting like one. She'd said those words to me repeatedly, until they became my own personal mantra. The first time she ever said them was when I was thirteen and my chest sprouted little buds.

The words she left unspoken were the ones that really stuck with me. It was okay to use your body to get what you wanted, and my mother had. Her body

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had been one of her most dangerous weapons. Combined with her cunning and mercenary mind, there was no stopping her. She had used both to seduce and bend others to her will, and tried to teach me to do the same.

It was rumored that my mother had been the type to raid another's nest, which was an ancient term used for a female *Kin* who didn't respect a mated bite mark. She had been the talk of the territory since before I could comprehend the whispers.

Thief. Whore. Bastard.

Since most *Born for Metal Kin* were large in stature and easily influenced by material objects, thievery was considered the norm among my Clan and wasn't usually looked down upon. Except for when someone's mate was involved. In some Clans, at one point in time, taking someone's mate was an automatic death sentence. At least for male *Dragon Kin* it had been. Since it was rare for a female *Kin* to interfere between bonded, there had never been a law created to prohibit it.

I had long since learned to ignore the whispers, especially the ones with the word bastard in them. It didn't matter that there were doubts about my paternity. My line traveled through my mother and since, at the time of my birth, she had been mated to my da, there was nothing anyone could say or do, even if she had been pregnant by another than the man who bore her mark.

If my da had heard the whispers, he had ignored them, never treating me differently despite the rumors, and that had only made me love him more. And he loved me as well, even though to some my dark-as-pitch hair, ice-blue eyes and tiny frame could be construed as proof of his mate's infidelity.

I ground myself deeper into the mattress in an attempt to get away from his touch, and fought to hold on to my mother's words. To say it was difficult would have been an understatement. At that moment nothing else matter except his hands. Not the fact that I was Primul, nor the fact that he'd broken treaties that could rekindle long-forgotten Clan wars by kidnapping me.

His palm followed the movement, and when I didn't answer he pressed the heel of his hand hard against my cunt. I cried out; I couldn't help it.

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"Mmm...so hot and damp. Your flesh fairly weeps with the want of it, doesn't it, greedy girl? Your panties are soaking wet." His touch sparked a fire in my sex that spread through me, and my ass rose of its own volition, pressing him harder and deeper into the lips of my cunt.

"Ah, ah, ah," he scolded as he removed his hand, and I shivered as I heard him lick my moisture off his fingers.

"You know the deal. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll quench the fire burning so brightly inside of you."

Groaning in frustration, I let my lower body drop back down to the bed. This was the way of it, and had been for what seemed like days. He kept me in this room, arousing me to a feverish pitch, only to leave me aching, frustrated and lonely.

"Hmmm... So we do this the hard way."

His fingers hooked in the straps of my panties, and he pulled them over my hips and down my legs. Kicking out, I squirmed in an attempt to get away from him. It was bad enough I was tied with my arms stretched out above me, but with my lower body totally naked, I'd have no defense from whatever he planned to do to me.

Smack.

I froze as his open palm came down hard on my ass, the heat from the blow stoking the fire between my legs.

My mind struggled to comprehend what just happened. Did he just spank me as if I were a misbehaved child? I should have been humiliated, outraged and ready to kill, but it *wasn't* mortification that spread through me.

"Do I have to tie your legs as well, *takara?*"

I shook my head frantically, knowing if he did it would erase any chance I had of escaping.

"Good, little greedy girl." He smacked my ass again, and I bit down on the pillow to muffle my cry. My sex clenched, and at that moment I would have told him anything he wanted in order to have him inside of me.

"Lift your ass for me."

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I shook my head again, only to have his hand come down on my bare bottom three times in rapid succession.

Smack.

Smack.

Smack.

Each blow was like gasoline thrown onto a fire. I could only clench my fists and pray he'd get tired of his little game and leave me to burn in peace.

I didn't think I could take any more. I wanted him in a way I'd never wanted any man before, and I didn't think it was just because of my breeding time.

"Are you going to tell me where Kaida is?"

Disappointment filled me. It was always the same question.

I didn't know who the bloody hell this Kaida was, but she must be important to him if he'd risk his heart and head for her.

My mind raced. "I'll tell you if you untie my hands." I wasn't down for the count yet.

He became so still I would have sworn he left the room.

"Now why would I do something as stupid as that, *takara*? I know who and *what* you are. And what you are capable of, too, little metal bender, even if you aren't at your strongest." The laughter in his voice skittered along my skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

He knew I could call and manipulate metal. I had suspected he did when I awoke to find myself tied to this bed with velvet ties. It couldn't be a coincident that he was *Born for Earth*. There was only one way he could have known. More and more, I thought Maya Ayida had betrayed me.

The *Born for Earth Primul* was the only other female *Primul* Leader among the *Dragon Kin* and also one of the few who knew the extent of my powers.

There was a dull ache in the area of my chest where my heart was. I refused to believe it was my heart breaking at the thought of being betrayed by a woman I admired, or by one of the men I had shed tears and blood beside on the battlefield for the past four hundred years.

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Get it together, Brighid. Concentrate on what's important, and then you can cry and whine like a little girl later. After you get out of here. Once I escaped, I'd deal with the traitors.

Think, Brighid, think. You have commanded hundreds of men. Manipulated and controlled just as many. This one man should be no match for you.

But he was. I had known since the first time I awoke to find him standing over my bed. Right before he carried me out of my own keep over his shoulder.

"Are you afraid of a girl?" I taunted. "A big, powerful warrior like you?" I laughed and, as I did, I lifted my ass.

He laughed, too, as if we were sharing some great joke. "Would it make me less of a man if I admitted I am wary of you and the power you wield?"

The question confused me. So did the tone of his voice as he asked it. It was as if he was admitting he was afraid of me but didn't seem to be embarrassed or ashamed. After four hundred years of being around warriors puffed up with self-importance, his candor was refreshing.

"You fear me?" I whispered, almost scared to ask the question. I knew how fragile some males' egos could be.

He laughed again. A deep, dark, sensuous sound that encouraged me to smile, and I did before I could stop myself.

"No, *takara*, not in the way you are thinking. I don't fear you, but I do have a good appreciation for your prowess as a warrior and a leader. Any man who said he didn't would be lying."

The roundabout compliment warmed me. It was rare I got them, especially about the way I led or the battles I had fought. Usually when people spoke of me, it was the opposite of praise. Ice Queen, they would call me. Because I refused to take a mate, refused to bow before any man.

Now hearing him say the words and realizing that even though we were enemies he respected me, I felt vindicated. As if everything I had sacrificed to keep my Clan all these years had not been in vain, even though it was likely one of my *Kin* that had betrayed me. This man respected me as a warrior.

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"Will you untie me?" I asked. The arousal had receded a bit, but his nearness made it impossible for it to dissipate completely.

"I can't, *takara*." He said the words as if he regretted them.

"Why?" I knew he wasn't taking orders from anyone. Even though I had no idea where we were, I did know that we were alone in this place. If he wanted to let me go, the decision would solely be his.

"You hold the key to finding someone very precious to me."

"Kaida," I said flatly, hoping he didn't hear the edge of jealousy in my voice. Which was ridiculous. I was his prisoner, not a contender for his affections.

"Yes," he said, and to my frustration left it at that. He didn't explain who the mysterious Kaida was, or what their relationship might be. But he didn't have to. I knew. Any man who'd risk death and war would only do so for his mate.

I hated the way I burned so hotly for him even after knowing he was already mated. It wouldn't be the first time I fell for a mated *Kin*. The first and only time I left myself open and got my heart broken for my effort had been by a mated *Kin*. By the time I had found out, both my virginity and trust had been destroyed.

"*Takara*, your silence is tinged with sadness." He pulled the blindfold from my eyes. Since I could see just as easily in the dark as I could in the light, it didn't take long for my eyes to adjust.

Chapter Two

My breath caught as I took in the man who'd carried me out of my own keep like I was some sort of serving wench. He was huge. Larger than many a *Kin* I'd seen. I knew he was *Born for Earth*, but I couldn't tell his country of origin. He didn't have the same dark eyes and dark skin a lot of his Clan had. Instead he had sandy-brown hair with streaks of gold that came from the sun, which no pricey salon could ever duplicate.

I didn't chance looking into his eyes for long because I'd heard of certain *Kin* who could bend you to their will after they captured you with their gaze. Even if he did have the ability, he didn't need it. The velvet ropes only held me physically captive. It was the freedom and ecstasy he promised if I surrendered for the first time in my life that had me looking forward to his visits.

Still stubborn as the day I was born into this world feet first, I refused to give in even if my body begged for me to do so. "Is this the only way you can get what you want from women? By tying them up and taking them against their will?"

His hand came down on my ass again, harder than the last time. I grunted as the slap stung my tender flesh. He rubbed the area as if to take the sting away before sliding his hand down to dip between my thighs.

"Yes, *takara*, I can see how unwilling you are," he said as he touched the moisture that had dripped onto my thighs.

I struggled again, pulling at the ties that secured me to the bedpost. "Untie. Me."

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The bed moved as he stood up, and my stomach dropped. He couldn't leave. Not now, not when I needed him so badly. Turning my face, I was just on in time to see him put his hand on the plastic doorknob.

"Please." The word tasted foul on my tongue, but I knew the taste of his skin would chase the bitterness away. Pressing my elbows into the mattress I got to my knees, my stomach still pressed to the mattress so my back was arched and my ass in the air. There was no mistaking the gesture. I wanted him. I refused to say the words but, as his nostrils flared, I knew he could smell my arousal and see the tell-tale moisture between my thighs that should speak louder than words.

I didn't think of the significance of my stance. Face down, ass up was usually considered a submissive position and, in the days of old, female *Kin* took it to show their mates they were willing to bare all, especially their necks. Trying to convince myself I *wasn't* doing exactly that, I stayed still.

He hesitated, his hand still on the door.

His shoulders rose and his chest expanded. I knew it was my scent he was breathed deeply of.

Lifting his hands, he unbuttoned his shirt. The material slid off of his shoulders and pooled at his feet to reveal the golden skin of his muscled back. A huge ancestor dragon tattoo ran the length of this back, the wings of it covering each of his shoulder blades and trailing down his equally muscled arms. The tail cascaded down his spine toward the slope of his ass to disappear into his pants.

"Will you tell me what you know?"

"Yes." I would deal with the consequences of that lie later. All I could think of right now was how amazing it would be to feel the muscles of his abs tense against my back as he pounded into me.

Finally, he turned to face me and, looking into those eyes, I knew how right I was to be cautious. Swallowing hard, I tried to make my mouth form the words, to take back that one syllable. His eyes were just as golden as the rest of him. A tiny trail of hair, a shade darker than the hair on his head, ran down his belly into his pants. My eyes followed the path until it ended at the button of his jeans, and my mouth watered. How I

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wanted to follow that happy trail with my tongue. I let my gaze drift below the button to the bulge pressing against his zipper.

So I wasn't the only one affected by his games.

He stopped a few feet short of the bed. "You'll tell me everything you know?"

I nodded; too busy salivating over the shadows and valleys of his chest and stomach to pay attention to the question.

He walked closer to the bed until the bulge I admired earlier was at my eye level. His strong hands flicked the button and pulled down the zipper. Forgetting that my hands were tied, I went to lift them to help him pull his pants down because he was not moving fast enough for me.

Growling in frustration, I tugged at the ties to no avail. He pushed the fabric over his hips slowly, giving me a glimpse of the shadow of hair on his belly, which ended in a thicket of soft-looking hair the same color. He slid the pants down farther, and his erection sprang free, bobbing in the air before curving upward to rest near his belly button.

Imagining how such an impressive cock would taste, I scooted over on the bed as far as my bonds would allow, until I was a hair's breadth away from it. I blew on it. My sex tingled as it jumped from the light caress.

I leaned forward to rub my cheek against it, loving his musky smell, the warmth of his sensitive skin, and the shudder that ran through him at my touch. I nudged him with my nose before I stuck out my tongue and ran it over the curve toward his belly button.

The salty tang of his skin burst over my tongue. He moaned low in his throat and pressed himself harder against my mouth, and I thought I had him. Sucking the soft flesh of his sac into my mouth, I caressed it with my tongue before working my way back up to the head. I dip my tongue into the tiny slit, licking away the moisture that glistened there before taking him deep between my lips.

"Brighid."

It was as if my name on his lips gave me power, and I suckled harder, bobbing down on his cock until it pressed against the back of my throat.

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Closing my eyes, I moaned as his hands tangled in my hair, pressing me closer to him. He started to tremble, and I knew he was a stroke or two away from coming.

"Enough."

He pulled his cock from my mouth. Light-headed, I swayed as his fingers dug into my shoulders and steadied me.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, he grabbed my shoulders and pulled me up until we were face to face. I expected him to kiss my mouth, but instead he pressed his lips against my cheek in an oddly tender gesture.

Who really had who in this situation? Certainly not you, my mind whispered. Words crowded my throat, and I had to swallow them when all I wanted to do was ask him what I had done to displease him.

"Lie down."

I was used to giving orders and had little to no experience taking them. But the look in his eyes and the gruffness of his tone had me obeying before I could think twice.

Lying on my stomach, the material beneath me abraded my nipples as I waited for him to make the next move. My brain warred with my body for control. My body cried out for relief and tried to convince my mind it was okay to give up control this just once. But my ever-diligent mind saw treachery in his every action and knew the pleasure he'd give me would come at a price.

Maybe even your heart.

I closed my eyes and, for the first time in a long time, gave in to the demands of my body and hoped I wouldn't live to regret the consequences.

His hand slowly moved over my bare ass again, and I braced myself for another slap, telling myself I wasn't disappointed when it didn't come.

"Lift for me, *takara*."

Hesitating for a moment, I did as he asked, and he wedged a pillow under my pelvis, titling it slightly so that I was at an angle.

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The bed creaked as he climbed onto it to settle between my splayed legs.

I shivered as the heat of his body stole into my skin as his body draped over mine and he braced his hands on either side of my shoulders. His cock nudged me once, twice, gliding over my hot, slick flesh before prodding my entrance. I gasped as he slid deep, filling me, stretching me and giving my body time to adjust to his strength and size before sliding deeper.

I wasn't a virgin, but I experienced a moment of a virgin's fear as his body covered mine. He retreated slightly only to thrust back in, harder and deeper. My hands were still stretched out in front of me, and there was a foreign emotion going through me that took a while for me to recognize.

Freedom. Not in the usual sense, but in a new, wondrous way. Before him I hadn't been celibate, but I hadn't been getting laid on the regular either. The last time I had sex it had been a hurried affair. Like almost all my other experiences, I had been on top and in control of everything. Riding my partner hard and fast until my need was met, and then ushering him out before the tremors could stop. I didn't allow him or any of the others to linger, nor did I ever let my lovers get in what I thought of as a dominant position. Never on my back or my stomach

Yet here I was, spread before him like some kind of pagan offering, and the experience was like nothing I'd ever encountered. My natural instinct to take over, to bring myself to orgasm using his body as a tool and nothing more, was mysteriously missing. I didn't want to come until *he* wanted me to. I wanted him to make me come, and I wanted him to come inside me, to be able to feel every pulse and twitch of his cock as he did it.

Continuing to ignore my mind's warning cry, I concentrated on the movement of his big body against mine as he picked up the pace. Angling upward, he hit a spot inside of me that I didn't know existed. I cried out as my pussy spasmed and flooded with moisture.

He groaned, and I reveled in the sound as it rumbled against my ear. Wrapping his arm tighter around my stomach, he worked me harder.

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Slammed into me deeper. My moans blended together as he hit that sweet spot inside of me.

“Oh, God,” I gasped, near ready to beg him to let me come. It was too much and not enough. His breath hitched, and I knew he was close as I was. My body trembled and, as the first wave hit me, I cried out. He didn't let me go once the orgasm blossomed inside of me. He rammed into me, pushing me over the edge into another one, harder and deeper than the first.

My breath wheezed out of my chest, and it was all I could do to gasp for breath as I whimpered, trembling uncontrollably as darkness blurred around the edges of my vision. As the second wave hit me, I heard him gasp and his fangs brushed my skin before he bit down, breaking the soft skin where my neck and shoulder met, propelling me into the blackness waiting for me.

Chapter Three

I fought to remain asleep as I returned to consciousness. Burying my head deeper into the pillow, I groaned and stretched like a contented cat after a really good petting. My hands were still tied. If not for the throbbing on my neck and between my thighs, I would have thought the entire episode nothing more than a very good dream.

The bed beneath me was different. Softer. Not that the bed in my cell was rock hard, it was just this one had a feather pillow top that encouraged its occupants to sink in and laze away the day.

I could tell it was his bed, because *his* scent filled my senses. I ignored the pang I got in my chest when I thought about him carrying me and tucking me. I snuggled deeper into the softness beneath me and inhaled deeply, enjoying the soft scent of smoke and damp earth. I didn't know how long it had been since I fell asleep, but my orgasm still pulsed in the flesh between my legs. A whimper escaped my throat as arousal started to build again, just as immense and blistering as earlier.

The throbbing in my neck became more pronounced, and that's when it hit me. Once again, I could feel the pressure of his fangs against my skin before he sank deep. God. He had marked me. Bewilderment swept through me. He couldn't have marked me if he already had a mate, could he?

Fire radiated in waves from the area where his mark was, dipping down, licking along the sensitive skin of my neck and shoulders, pulling

me away from my confusion. My eyes, still heavy with sleep, opened to find him sitting less than a foot from the bed watching me.

I couldn't seem to pull my gaze from the fiery gold of his eyes. Need radiated off of him and, against my will, my body tightened and moistened, responding to the call of his. Closing my eyes, I moaned low in my throat, rolled onto my side, and tried to resist the pull.

"Your thoughts race so, *takara*, I can almost see them."

Ignoring him, I stayed on my side facing away from him. I heard him get up and knew he was moving away from me because the throbbing in my neck diminished a moment before it redoubled. Rolling over onto my back, I looked up to find him standing over me.

His hand closed on my ankle and he slowly pulled me toward him until my legs dangled over the bed. Placing a hand on each of my knees, he spread them wide before pushing them back toward my chest.

He picked up a washcloth off of the nightstand and knelt between my splayed thighs. A fiery blush raced down my cheeks, spreading over my chest and stomach as he brushed the warm cloth over my sensitive flesh, washing away our mingled essence from my body.

Closing my eyes, I let him bathe me without protesting, excruciatingly aware how intimate his actions were. No man had ever done such a thing for me; I'd never given one a chance. He moved, and the warmth blazing along the edge of my skin retreated with each step he took away from me.

I concentrated on breathing and pressed my lips tightly together to stop myself from calling him back. The warmth returned, skittering along my flesh as he stepped back into the room, and I resisted the urge to open my eyes to confirm he was coming back to me.

His hands settled on the outsides of my thighs, and my heart thumped as I waited for him to say something. He didn't speak but instead gathered my ass in his hands and lifted me upward. Air puffed over the lips of my pussy, and it took me a second to realize it was his breath. My eyes popped open, and our gazes met for a moment before he bent his head and deliberately stroked his tongue over my slit.

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Moaning, I arched my lower body in an attempt to get closer to him. I pulled against the ties, and my stomach tightened as the pressure built deep in my belly. Stroke after stroke it wound tighter as he ate me, until it burst over me. Crying out, my thighs trembled as rush after rush of ecstasy pulsed through me.

My body hadn't stopped spasming before he settled between my legs. The walls of my vagina clenched on him tight as he slowly thrust into me, the thickness of him spreading me and dividing my flesh as he pushed ever deeper.

Arching my back, I pushed my pelvis up into his and, impossibly, he sank deeper until he rested against my womb. Moaning, I pulled at the ties again, wanting, needing, to touch him.

"Please," I begged, whether it was for him to let my hands go, or move, or both—I didn't know.

"I plan to, *takara*. I plan to," he said before his head bowed and he took my nipple in his mouth. I cried out as he bit down and the small pain sent fire cascading through my veins. Amazing. My mind marveled that his teeth worrying my sensitive flesh provoked pleasure instead of pain. I had no more time to think as he sucked my nipple into his mouth, drawing hard. Moaning, I pressed myself against him, wanting more of the wet velvet of his tongue stroking me.

Alternatively, he licked, bit and sucked each of my nipples before kissing his way up to the place where he had marked me. Over and over he licked, each caress sending fire to pool where he was lodged between my thighs. Frantic, I moved my hips against his in silent encouragement. I was so close. Just his mouth on me was almost enough to get me there again...but not quite. Moaning, pleading, I worked my lower body against his in vain, all the while he hovered over me, his weight resting on the corded muscle of his forearms.

My stomach tightened as I met his eyes. Fascinated, I watched as his pupils receded and the gold of his iris went from burnished amber to coal black. So he wasn't as unaffected as he'd like me to believe. I clenched the muscles of my vagina and released them in a tiny caress. He groaned. Repeating the action, I lowered my body back toward the bed, and he

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slowly slid out of me. His eyes closed, and his arms trembled. Wrapping my legs high on his waist, I arched up, my flesh gliding over his. Throwing back his head, he groaned again before his eyes opened and he thrust down hard, meeting my movement, and sinking deep inside of me. His lips covered mine, and I eagerly opened my mouth.

Tears smarted behind my eyes as he pressed against me from mouth to thigh. It was as if every part of him was inside of me, and I wanted more. I wanted the possibility of a hatchling, of carrying his child. The very idea stole my breath and, as if he knew my thoughts, he gasped into my mouth and his breath filled my lungs. Closing my eyes, I willed myself to stop trembling. Pulling back, his breath feathered over my lips, then my eyes as he pressed kisses against the moisture on my cheeks.

"Are you okay, *takara*?" he asked against my lips, and I nodded.

His mouth covered mine and our tongues tangled as he moved slowly and gently against me, each movement bringing him deeper inside my heart.

"Yes," I moaned and rocked my body against his as another orgasm gathered deep in my belly. "Yes."

"That's it, *takara*. Come for me."

As if my body had been waiting for his permission, I cried out, my orgasm washing over me, drawing my nipples and the muscles of my vagina tight.

He gasped, pressed deeper before burying his face in the crook of my neck to muffle his groan as he thrust once, twice, and then spilled himself inside of me.

* * * * *

His face was still buried in the crook of my neck as our heartbeats returned to normal. His body was a heavy comfort against mine while he still pulsed inside of me.

Gathering me in one arm, he reached up with the other and released the ties before rolling us onto our sides, and I mourned a little as our bodies separated.

I reached up and brushed the hair back from his forehead. Capturing my hand, he pressed it against his mouth.

"I don't know your name," I said in a tiny voice so unlike mine. What this man did to me. He allowed me to be vulnerable, open, with no self-recriminations.

"Ry, short for Ryu. First-born son of Ryu-Toshiue Hinote, of the *Born for Fire Clan* and Kenses Valas, of the *Born for Earth Clan*."

"Ry," I breathed, marveling that I had fallen so hard and fast for him without even knowing his name.

"Yes, *takara*?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say your name."

"Say it again. I love the sound of it on your lips."

"Ry." I drew it out and it ended on a moan.

"Mmm...*takara*." He grabbed the cheeks of my ass, pressing me closer, his cock stabbing at the tender folds between my legs.

My lower body undulated against his, and I gasped, digging my nails into his back, squirming closer, seeking more pressure against my clit.

"Greedy girl."

I licked his neck, and it was his turn to gasp. Pulling back, I pressed my lips to his chin, then cheek, before covering his mouth with my own.

We broke apart gasping for breath, and our eyes met. His nostrils flared, and I knew he could smell my arousal. Trembling, I waited for him to tell me what he wanted me to do and how to do it.

His hands ran up and down my back before his arms wrapped around me. He stood without effort, bearing my weight and his own. Clamping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, I never once took my eyes from his as he walked us out of the bedroom and into the dark bathroom.

A black sunken tub sat off to one corner and dominated the majority of the space. An endless stream of fragrant water poured from a seamless ebony faucet as steam rose from the bath.

He hadn't bothered to turn on the lights. I slid down his body as he put me to my feet, the soft hair of his chest abrading my nipples as it

brushed them. Taking a step back, he held out his hand. He flicked his index finger against his thumb and a spark rose above it in the air. He held out his palm, and the flame gravitated toward the middle of his hand, hovering right above the center.

My eyes widened. He could call fire. It was the first time I'd ever seen a *Kin* who could call and harness fire. Taking my wrist in his other hand, he bought it up until it was level with his. Turning it over flat, he moved his hand over mine, giving me the flame. The fire touched my palm and I flinched, expecting pain.

I looked down at the fire that shimmered in the palm of my hand before looking up and meeting his gaze. Flames danced in the ebony pools of his eyes, and I drifted, falling into his gaze.

"Take it within yourself, *takara*. It's yours to command. Open yourself and tell it what you want it to do."

The sound of his voice jerked me out of my trance. I shook my head; it wasn't possible. I was *Born for Metal*; the *Kin* of my Clan could do a lot of things, but calling fire was not one of them. The power to harness flames was usually passed through the sire. Shaking my head, I took a step back. No, it wasn't possible. My vision blurred and the flame in my hand grew, feeding off my turbulent emotions.

"What is it, *takara*?" he asked as his hand covered mine, extinguishing the fire before it could get out of control.

"I shouldn't be able to call fire." Tears ran down my cheeks. It wasn't as if I didn't suspect there was a possibility my da wasn't really my da. That was why I was angry—not because I saw the tears as a sign of weakness, but because I had always known the truth deep down but chose to deny it.

Comprehension dawned on his face, and he wrapped his arms around me. "Your father is not *Born for Fire*?"

I shook my head, pushing away from him, denying myself his warmth that I craved to replace the cold that brewed in my veins.

"Damn, *takara*. I am so sorry. Your body responded so greatly to fire, I assumed you knew."

"You marked me." Nausea bubbled in my stomach, and I thought I'd be sick. My body responded to the fire, not him. This all had been nothing more than an illusion. I interfered in the bond of two mated *Kin* for an illusion. He reached for me, and I took a step back. "No." The word was wrenched from the depths of me when I wanted nothing more at that moment than to let him touch me again.

He arched an autocratic eyebrow, an unconscious gesture born of arrogance and breeding. "No?" He repeated the word as if it was the last thing he expected from me.

Bastard. I guess after a good fucking or two, I was supposed to kneel at his feet and wait for him to leash and collar me. Not bloody likely.

"No," I said again, my voice gaining strength and volume.

He chuckled, and the muscles of my vagina clenched.

The sound and my reaction to it enraged me. "You had no right."

"No right?" he asked, his eyebrow still arched.

I growled. "Stop repeating me!"

"Then stop talking nonsense."

I took a deep breath before trying again. "I am *not* talking nonsense. I'm not a nest raider. You belong to someone else. What we did was wrong. What *you* did was wrong. The last I heard, there's no polygamy amongst the *Kin*."

I edged closer to the bathtub and further away from him. "You're like every other male I've met. Say one thing and do the total opposite. You've proven how important your Kaida is to you. If she is stupid enough to believe your lies, she deserves everything she gets." As I said the words I tried to convince myself they were out of self-preservation and not jealousy.

At the mention of her name, his black eyes changed to molten amber and anger radiated off of him. He grabbed my shoulders and yanked me to him and, for the first time since my abduction, I knew true fear.

Not of him but of the emotions he stirred in me. I wanted to bare my neck and encourage him to bite down hard, and I wanted to do the

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same, returning his mark, claiming him as mine whether I had that right or not.

"You shouldn't talk of things you have no knowledge of, *takara*."

"See, and there lies my confusion. Aren't I here because I supposedly have something to do with your precious Kaida's disappearance?"

He dropped his hands and took a step back as if the touch of my skin scorched him. The arrogance erased off of his face. Turning on his heel, he stalked to the door and left.

My eyes burned and the pressure in my chest from earlier returned.

You're not in love with him, I told myself. And you're no green girl, Brigid, with your first man.

But in a way I was. A tear slipped down my cheek, and I dashed it away. Ry had succeeded where so many others had failed. Had accomplished what even the wretched cur that had so carelessly taken my virginity had failed to do. He'd made it safe enough for me to surrender, to allow myself to admit that I sometimes craved someone stronger to take control of the situation and my body.

Another tear slid down, followed by another and another until I was full out sobbing. I stuffed my fist against my mouth to muffle the sound of my anguish as deep, wrenching sobs shook my body. I hadn't felt this betrayed even after finding out the man I thought I loved was mated.

What was it about me and mated males? I guess I was more like my mother than I cared to admit. I could deny culpability in the first situation, but I didn't have the luxury of doing so this time. I had known from the very beginning why he had taken me, and it wasn't to be his bed buddy. Yet, from the moment I awoke to find him standing over me, I had wanted him.

I trusted him. I could admit that to myself now. It wasn't just sexual ecstasy I had gotten from our encounter, it was also a part of myself I had denied for so long for fear it would make me seem weak. Open and bare, I let him take the reins I had held so tightly, and he had dropped them.

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Dropping to the floor, I curled into a ball and allowed myself cry for the first time since my da died. Didn't stifle or censor myself. Allowed myself the burn of my breaking heart and conceded that where other nations and the fiercest warriors had failed, my captor had triumphed.

Chapter Four

I don't know how long I cried. Picking myself up off of the cool tiled floor, I bypassed the bath in favor of a shower. Afterwards I went in search of my clothes, but didn't have to look far. Freshly laundered and laid out on the bed was a pair of pants, along with a sweater and undergarments. A pair of flats rested on the floor at the edge of the bed.

My heart fell. This was too easy, too convenient. Was he letting me go now that he knew I didn't have anything to do with *her* disappearance? I couldn't even say her name. Was it possible to hate someone I'd never even met?

Dressing, I tore my mind away from the thoughts causing me turmoil. I quickly plated my hair before going to the door. I hoped to find it locked still and tried to tell myself I wasn't disappointed when the knob turned easily.

I walked down the hall, too distracted to appreciate the art gracing the walls or the antiques perfectly positioned here and there. At the end of the hall, a door opened into a room that looked to be a combination of a study and library.

Fully dressed, Ry sat on a leather couch near a massive fireplace. He didn't say a word, didn't move an inch, when I walked into the room. The ache in my stomach grew.

"Primul O'Sinach. I have wronged you."

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He stood and handed me a thick envelope. The knot in my stomach loosened into a wave of nausea. I didn't need to look inside to know what it was.

Money. A tribute to be exact, a *contrabalansa*—a formal atonement one can give another for inconvenience they have caused.

The packet dropped from my nerveless fingers as I stumbled backwards, fighting the need to vomit and scream in agony at the same time. It couldn't have hurt more if he had called me a whore. He might as well have. The act of *contrabalansa* was an ancient one, but it was usually used among strangers. Ry didn't belong to me, but we were not strangers. Turning, I ran for the door, praying he would let me go, yet hoping he would stop me.

I thought I heard him call my name, but I didn't stop to see if he followed me. I ran until my chest burned and the ache in my belly coiled into a hard knot. Sobbing, I bent over at the waist, gasping for air as dry heaves slammed through my body.

It's no more than you deserved, my inner voice taunted. You knew he was mated.

Wiping my face, I looked up to find myself in a crowded strip mall. I struggled to compose myself, knowing the last thing I needed was attention from passersby.

I spotted a phone booth. Picking up the phone, I held it a second before I put it back in the cradle. I didn't know who to call, who I could trust. I knew there was no way Ry could have gained entrance to my home without the help of either my staff or someone close to me. Nor would he have known I was in my breeding time. While it was common knowledge female *Kin* came into their breeding time, only someone in my inner circle would have known the exact date. But who could it have been? Who hated me enough to betray me like this?

Before now, I had no doubt of Maya Ayida's intentions. Now, as I picked up the phone again, I prayed I wasn't handing myself into the hands of my enemy by asking her for help.

* * * * *

As I waited for the car Maya sent for me, I tried to convince myself it was nothing more than a coincidence that she lived so close to the man who kidnapped me. Maybe I was being paranoid, but there was only one way I was going to find out.

A black Town Car pulled up to where I stood, and a large *Kin* stepped out. He didn't ask my name, merely opened the back door for me and closed it after I settled into the seat.

Once we arrived at Maya's house, I was shown into a formal drawing room. The door opened but, instead of Maya as I expected coming to greet me, it was Kyran Adogorian.

"*Primul O'Sinach*," he acknowledged as I stood to meet him.

"*Altețã Adogorian*," I greeted formally, dropping automatically into a bow.

Kyran Adogorian was the *Born for Water Primul*, keeper of the Sacred *Potecã*, and Sovereign of all Dragon Clan Nations. Placing his hand on my elbow, he guided me to a settee in front of a large bay window.

Maya's house was perched atop a cliff, and I could hear the waves crashing against the rocky shore below. Those rocks and I had something in common; both of us were battered by an unrelenting force beyond our control. The ocean was theirs; my need for Ryu mine.

Lost in my thoughts, it took me a moment to realize Kyran was speaking. As I looked into his eyes, the same color as the ocean beneath us, I wondered why I couldn't have fallen for someone like him.

His father had died while Kyran was young. Or what was considered to be young among our kind. And at two hundred years old, Kyran had stepped into his father's shoes and continued to keep the fragile peace between the Clans. He had continued to do so for more than a thousand years. He was a benevolent leader, until he was crossed. There was no place on this earth one could hide if he was determined to find them.

"You are well, Brighid?"

I nodded, ignoring his use of my first name. It was his right as my superior to address me any way he chose.

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"I was hoping you'd clear something up for me."

"Of course, *Alteță*," I said, using the word for *your highness* in his native tongue.

He smiled, but I couldn't help but notice how it didn't reach his beautiful eyes. "How is it you come to be in *Primul* Ayida's territory without permission?"

My mind raced as I searched for a plausible answer. I couldn't tell the truth, not unless I wanted to sign Ry's death warrant. He had hurt me, but the thought of him dead hurt me more. I turned away from Kyran, fearing my thoughts were broadcast on my face.

Grabbing my chin in a firm hold, he turned my face toward his until our eyes met again. "The truth, Brighid. I'll have the truth." His voice was cold as his fingers tightened, digging into my tender flesh.

I swallowed a gasp and returned his gaze without a flinch, refusing to acknowledge the pain of his bruising grip or the fear his icy tone sent skittering down my spine.

"My great-grandfather died uniting the Clans. My grandfather and father did the same keeping them united, and I'll not let some greedy scheming *țânc* ruin everything my family bled for." He paused. "You know the punishment for a *Primul* being in another's lands without the proper sanctions."

I closed my eyes as my palms started to perspire. I knew only too well what the punishment was. It was death.

He brought his face closer to mine, his nostrils flaring and scenting the air around me. "You smell like fire, Brighid. What have you been into?"

I didn't have a chance to answer. Silently I thanked God for the small reprieve as a toddler with a mop of wild black curls ran into the room at top speed.

"Uncle Kikee. Uncle Kikee!" The little girl screeched his name, and Kyran let go of my face, rising to stand. The tension eased out of his shoulders, and a genuine smile formed on his mouth.

"Ania, *bebeluș!*" Reaching down, he picked her up, swinging her around before he hugged her tight. "How is my favorite girl doing?"

"I'm wonderful, Uncle Kikee," she said, hugging his neck tightly before pecking him on both cheeks. "I've missed you a whole lot."

He chuckled, and I watched, amazed, that the same man who threatened me with death only seconds before was now laughing and playing with a little girl as if she was his own hatchling.

The two were still chattering to each other when Maya walked in.

"Ania Dogori, didn't I tell you *Alteță* Adogorian was not to be disturbed?"

Kyran put Ania down and crouched until he was at her eye level.

"Is this true, *bebeluș*? Did your mother tell you not to come in here?"

Ania looked down at her shoe and pouted. "Yes, Uncle Kikee but—"

"No, Ania. No excuses," Kyran interrupted. "A good *Primul* must learn to take orders as well as give them." When she wouldn't look at him, he took her little chin in his hand, and I couldn't help but envy the gentleness he treated her with. "Are you a good *Primul*, Ania?"

She nodded, her bottom lip poking out. "Yes, Uncle Kikee. I am," she said solemnly, blinking fast to prevent the tears in her eyes from falling.

My heart ached as I took in the scene, replacing Kyran with Ry and Ania with a little girl with amber eyes and golden hair. A tear rolled down my cheek, but I dashed it away before either of the adults in the room could notice.

"We have rules for a reason, *bebeluș*. They keep order and prevent bad things from happening." This last part, I suspected was more for me than for the child.

Ania nodded before asking Kyran, "You still love me, Uncle Kikee?"

Kyran smiled and hugged the little girl tight. "Always, *bebeluș*. Always."

She returned the hug before stepping back and executing a bow that put the one I had made earlier to shame. "I'm sorry for interrupting you, *Alteță*." Then she nodded to me. "*Primul* O'Sinach."

Kyran watched the little girl leave the room, a look I couldn't quite identify on his face. Shaking his head, he turned to Maya. "And you are sure she is of this world, Maya?"

Maya laughed before going to the door and closing it. As it shut, I couldn't help but notice how quickly her levity vanished, replaced by a seriousness that tightened my stomach.

"Brighid." Maya's voice was cold; nothing like it had been moments ago.

"Maya," I said, wondering what the hell she had to be mad about. After all, she wasn't the one who had been kidnapped from her lands.

Kyran stood and remained standing until Maya took a seat in a chair not too far from the sofa on which I sat.

"*Primul O'Sinach* and I were just discussing the punishment for those who trespass in lands that don't belong to them," he said as he returned to the seat he vacated earlier. "And she was just about to explain why she smelled like fire, weren't you Brighid?"

Maya's eyes narrowed. "Were you also discussing the consequences of not keeping tight enough rein on the members of your Clan?"

It was all I could do not to tell Maya how incredibly ironic her words were. I swallowed the retort, knowing that if she and Kyran knew the real way I came to be there, it could possibly mean Ry's death.

"Not yet, but it seems like something else we may need to discuss." Kyran's looked at me again, and I fought the need to squirm. "But first, tell me why you smell of fire, Brighid."

My cheeks heated as I remembered my time in Ry's arms. Dropping my gaze, I stammered, hoping Kyran and Maya would think my fluster was due to embarrassment and not to the heat glancing through my body as the past twenty-four hours replayed in my mind.

"I can call fire," I said. I didn't have to feign the anguish in my voice as I thought of my da and the disservice my mother had done him. "The man who raised me as his own was not my father."

"Brighid, you cannot expect me to believe that this came as a surprise to you," Kyran said, not missing a beat, the insinuation clear in

his voice. "And if you think me gullible enough to attempt to sell me the moon, answer me this. How did you come to this shocking conclusion? And why pick Maya's territory to make this discovery?"

My head snapped up and my tear-filled eyes blazed at him. My body got hotter, as if my anger affected my its temperature. "I do not ask for your sympathy, *Altețã*, but I do ask you do not make light of something that has caused me great sorrow."

I couldn't help slipping in a little dig about his own brother's son. Kyran's nephew was not only born without the protection of a mated bite mark, but worst was also born to a human female. "After all, am I the only one well acquainted with the sting of being born on the wrong side of the nest?"

His hands came down on my shoulders in a punishing hold as he yanked me off the sofa, brushing my mated mark in the process. "Where is he?" he growled, shaking me so hard my teeth snapped together.

"Where is who?" I yelled, pulling back, desperate to break his hold before he could accidentally discover Ry's bite mark, all the while praying he would attribute my reaction to fear.

His hold tightened, and his gaze zeroed in on the area where his hand had brushed the mark. Jerking down my sweater, he sucked in a breath as he saw the jagged bite mark right above my collarbone.

"What game do you play, Brigid?"

Going limp, I fell back onto the sofa as he skewered me with his gaze.

"Leave us, Maya," he hissed as he stood, towering over me.

"*Altețã*, with respect, I think it's best I stay. You're already upset because of your brother's disappearance. I wouldn't want you to do something you'll later regret."

"Leave us!" he roared.

Maya took a step back, and I said a prayer of thanks that she had only taken a step back but hadn't obeyed his order.

The door slammed, causing Maya and I to jump.

"You should listen to *Primul Ayida*, Kyran," Ry said as he filled the doorway before stepping farther into the room. He held out his hand to

me, and I stood, skirted around Kyran, and eagerly took it. "My *takara* does not know how to use her fire to protect herself yet, but I don't have that problem." Ry flicked his thumb against his index and middle fingers before throwing a ball of fire the size of a baseball at Kyran's head.

Kyran caught it with a grimace. I watched in amazement as he closed his hand around it, causing it to sputter before going out. Steam rose from his hand, and I could see where his flesh turned pink and began to welt. "You dare attack your sovereign?" His tone was incredulous as he looked at Ry he'd never seen him before.

And I could understand his disbelief. What Ry had just done was tantamount to sedition. I took a step closer to Ry and clutched his hand tighter. Heat and rage burned through him, but, as I touched him, some of it faded, and I seemed to absorb it. Even though we both could be dead before nightfall, my heart sang. He cared for me. He had to. Why else would he go against our *Alteřã*, risking his rank, heart and head.

"I dare that and more to protect my mate and my hatchling," Ry fired back as he looked down at me. Even though his fury had dampened, it still pulsed inside of him and my eyes welled. I had secretly hoped for a hatchling, but never really thought it truly possible, but he had. Suddenly everyone and everything disappeared. I looked at the man who had stolen me from my lands, and I knew without a doubt that was not all he had stolen. He had stolen my heart. A tear ran down my cheek, and he raised his hand to wipe it away.

"I shouldn't have let you walk away, *takara*," Ry whispered. "I was a fool."

Placing my fingers against his lips, I stopped his words. I took his hand, placed it against my heart, and told him and everyone in the room, "In my heart I never walked away."

Ry placed my palm against his heart before leaning down to brush his mouth against mine. "I would die for you and our future, *takara*."

"Um... While all of this is rather touching, I don't recall granting permission for you to be mated, Brighid. I assume the bite mark Brighid now wears is yours, Ry." Kyran voice was deceptively soft, but I easily recognized the underlying steel in his words.

He was right; there had been no petitions asked for or granted. As *Primul*, I was supposed to make a formal request before I was to be mated, to allow the sovereign the chance to stop any potential alliances that could later be used in a Clan war.

I cleared my throat, a half-truth on my tongue, when Ry shook his head. "Haven't there been enough untruths between us, *takara*?" He pulled his gaze away from mine and looked at our sovereign. "Who said she had a choice?"

Stepping closer, I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid my head against his chest. His heart beat a steady comfort beneath my ear as I trembled. Kyran was not one to be trifled with, and Ry had all but admitted he had kidnapped me. I wanted to take back his words, deny them because I knew, mated or not, he had committed an act that was punishable by death if Kyran decided to take that route.

Ry wrapped his arms around me, his touch reassuring me without words.

"Explain."

I flinched. Kyran's word fell whip-like sharp on my shoulders.

"I received a missive stating Brighid had my sister, Kaida. For her safe return all I needed to do was bring my *Primul's* hatchling."

Kaida was his sister. Relief warred with guilt. His sister who he obviously cared for deeply was missing, and all I could think was that he could now be mine. There was no faceless opponent to vanquish. I heard Maya gasp. I held on to Ry tighter as he continued.

"Obviously I was not going to kidnap my *Primul's* hatchling in return for my sister, so I decided to go directly to the source. "

The whole time he spoke, Ry rubbed his hand in a gentle circle over my back. I waited for Kyran to speak. I wanted this to be over. I wanted to be away from his place and alone with Ry.

Kyran's breathed hissed out of him, and when he spoke his gravelly voice was more dragon than human, signaling how close he was to shifting. The ability to shift to our original form was yet another one of the reasons the Adogorian family kept the title in their line. The power to

do so was rare, and those who still could were highly respected and feared.

I closed my eyes, but I heard Maya step back from the sovereign. No one in his or her right mind wanted to be within reaching distance of Kyran if he shifted.

"Uncle Kikee. Your eyes looked weird."

My breath rushed from my lungs the same time as Ania's mother cried her name. I pulled back from Ry's chest just in time to see a less-than-composed Kyran pick Ania up. She was right; his pupils were elongated, and scales ran down his arms and onto his fingers, which had lengthened into claws. Yet, when he picked her up, he was as gentle with her as he had been earlier.

Eric, Maya's mate stood beside her, I hadn't heard him enter the room.

"*Alteřã*, please. She is just a child. She doesn't know any better," Maya sobbed, taking another step toward them, only to be bought up short by Eric's hold on her arm. Whipping her head around, she snarled at him and tried to pull free.

"Uncle Kikee, why are you so angry?" Ania asked as she patted her uncle's cheek. Kyran leaned into her touched, and his claws retreated into his hands as the scales slid back up his arms. "Look, Uncle Kikee, I have sharpies too." Ania held up her little chubby hand, showing her first three fingers, which also had extended into claws.

Kyran looked from the child and then to us.

The child, unaware of the tension in the room, continued to chatter on. "Your scales tickle, Uncle Kikee," she said giggling, "Do mine tickle?"

Kyran nodded solemnly as Ania rubbed the back of her hand against his face. "Yes, *bebeluř*, they do," he said. His voice sounded more human as he turned to her parents. "She can shift?"

Maya collapsed against her Eric, and I held tighter to Ry's hand. Even though the little girl didn't know, we all knew how bad the situation could have ended.

Kyran put her down and nudged her toward her parents. "Did you keep this from me?" He sounded betrayed and as if the weight of the world was now upon his shoulders.

"No *Alteță*, we had no idea," Maya rushed to assure him. "Neither me, nor her father, have the ability."

Kyran looked calmer, but his eyes still hadn't returned to normal. "There's treachery afoot. Ry's sister, along with my brother and his child, are missing. There's still the issue of the mysterious *Kin* who was sent to kill Maya before Ania was born." He gaze pierced me. "A *Born for Metal Kin*."

I didn't react, even though this was the first time I had heard of this. I felt a little twinge. Had there been treachery brewing in my Clan this entire time?

Raking his hand over his face, he took a deep breath before continuing. "I am calling a meeting of all the *Primuls* and their *Următors*. Until I get to the bottom of this, no one is to so much as sneeze without my permission."

Sitting back down on the couch, Kyran crossed his legs before casually ordering everyone except Ry to get out.

I hesitated, not wanting to let Ry go, but Maya took my hand and pulled me out of the room behind her. She ushered me into the kitchen and pressed me down into a chair. Taking the seat across from me, she looked at me a long minute before speaking. "Why didn't you tell me, Brighid?"

I shook my head as Eric, with Ania on one hip, offered me coffee. "Tell you what, Maya? That Ry took me from my lands? What is the punishment for that? Why didn't you tell me one of my Clan attacked you?"

She looked at me as if she was trying to decide how to answer. "I should have told you, but at the time I thought Eric had sent him." She held up her hand when I opened my mouth to ask her a question. "It's a long story, Brighid. I'll tell you later. Did Ry hurt you?"

"No. I was only hurt when I thought Kaida was his mate." Closing my eyes, I whispered, "What will happen to him?" Emotions warred in

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me. The *old* me would have been more concerned about the underhanded machinations of my Clan, but I wasn't. All I cared about was Ry.

"What do you want to happen to him?" Maya asked.

I opened my eyes, intending to answer her honestly, but I didn't have time to. A hand touched my shoulder. Instinctively, I knew who the hand belonged to.

"Come, *takara*. It's been a long day and we have to be back here early tomorrow for another meeting with the *Alteță*."

Standing, I placed my hand in his and bid goodbye to Maya and her Eric.

Epilogue

The meeting with Kyran had been long and tiring. His younger brother, Trystan, was missing, so Kyran couldn't help but see treachery around every corner. It had taken a lot of talking to convince him there was no plot brewing between Ry and me. We were two people that found each other under unusual circumstances and had fallen in love.

I was more than a little embarrassed when I had to admit I had no idea where the treachery stemmed from in my Clan. Whether it came from a single member or the entire Clan. Either way, I would deal with it.

Ry and I were back at his house, which would be my home as well until I figured out who betrayed me and we could return to my lands. He had been quiet on the ride home, and I knew it was because he was thinking about his sister.

"All of this was a misunderstanding that could have been avoided if I had just told you everything from the beginning, *takara*. And marking you as mated may have not been planned, but it's done. I won't apologize because I'm not sorry. Not for stealing you out of your lands, not for making love to you, not for marking you."

A tear slid down my cheek, and he reached up to wipe it away before leaning down and pressing his mouth against mine. "Who said I wanted an apology, Ryu?"

"Please don't cry, *takara*." His voice was ragged, and there was a whisper of a plea in it.

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His lips feathered over the moisture on my cheeks before returning to my mouth, this time deepening the kiss. Our tongues met, and warmth radiated through me. Tangling my hands in his hair, I returned the kiss, pulling him closer as tiny moans escaped my throat.

"When I received a package with a lock of her hair and *Amphisbaena* charm in it, I had gone to Kaida's house only to find it ransacked. Panicked, I called our *Primul*. Kaida was—is her *Următor*."

"Maya?"

"Yes," he said and continued. "The *Primul* said she hadn't been there for a year. She didn't say why, but there was an edge in her voice and, in my guilt-ridden state, I hadn't noticed. My sister had been missing for a full year, and I hadn't known."

I edged closer to him until I was able to straddle him. "Don't let regrets eat at you," I whispered. "What is done is done." I wrapped my arms around his back, delighting in the corded muscle and slight scaling beneath my fingertips.

"Ryu," I whispered. "What does *takara* mean?"

He smiled and pressed his lips against mine. "It means treasure in Japanese, and that's exactly what you are. My stolen treasure."

"We will find your sister." Burying my face in the crook of his shoulder, I settled fully onto his lap, shivering as his arms came up and pressed me closer to him. "I promise you, some kind of way, we will."

The End

Author Bio

Emma Petersen wrote her first Romance in high school after falling in love with Historical Romance and has been writing ever since. She's the Paranormal Co-Liaison for the award winning author's resource website and forum RomanceDivas.com. She's a member of RWA, RWAOnline, as well as the Passionate Ink Chapter, where she serves as Vice President. She shares a tiny shack with her cat, Toussaint, and is currently recovering from shoe addiction.