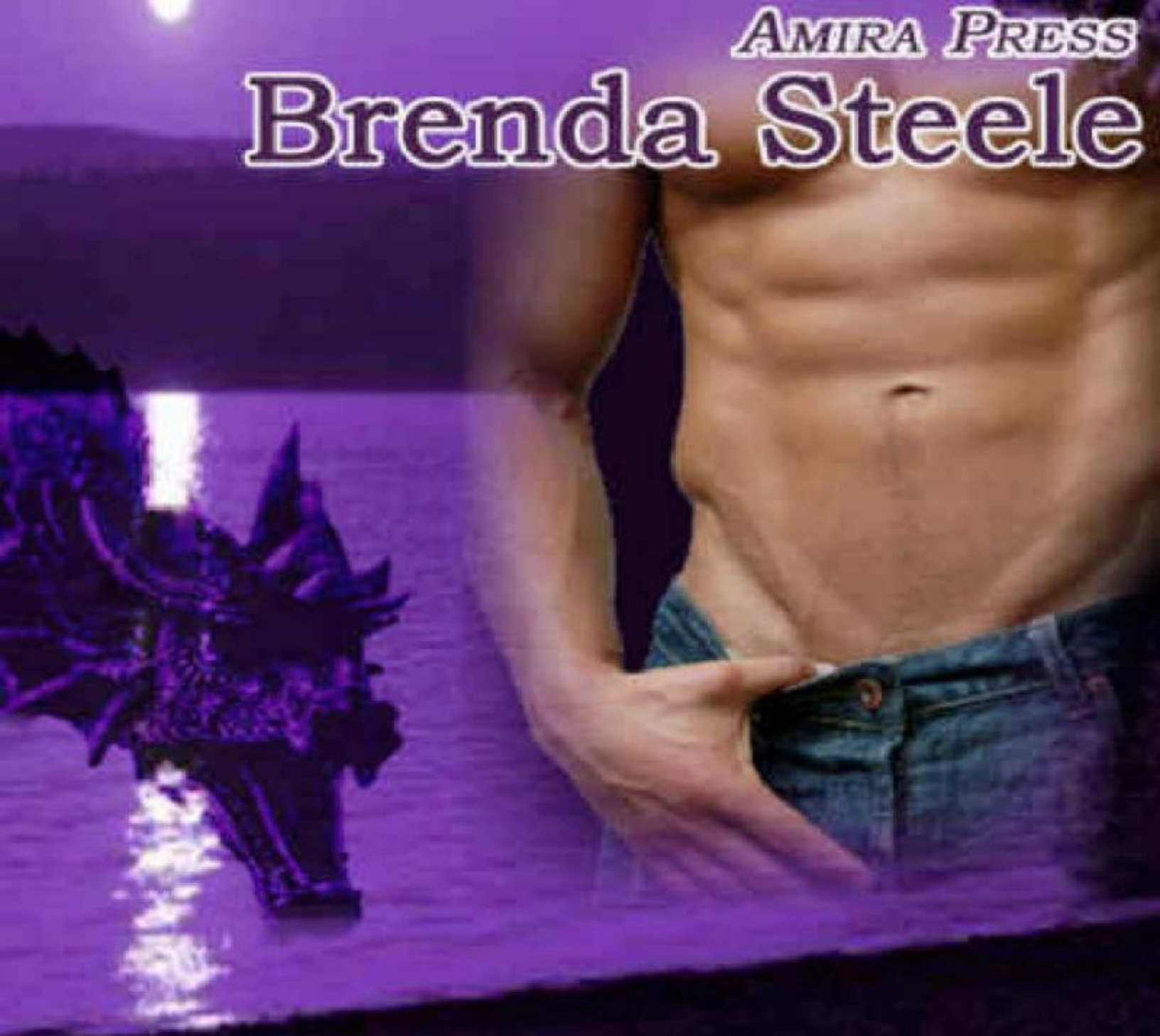


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Brenda Steele



Ryuu

ACCIDENTAL MATES



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Ryuu [Accidental Mates 2]

by *Brenda Steele*

Amira Press

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Accidental Mates: Ryuu

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Prologue

"Here come the draaagggoonnns," Jake sang while perched on a stool, his elbow hanging over the windowsill. I resisted a frown, although I felt one tugging at the corners of my mouth. I loved children, but this particular boy liked to pluck at my patience. Or maybe I should say he liked to wear it down until the poor thing cried out for mercy.

"Jake, you're supposed to be learning your lesson for sticking gum in Kate's hair, not observing the comings and goings of those outside the school."

He rolled silver eyes that reminded me of a dream I had the night before. A man with matching eyes and stark white hair, a body that made my knees wobbly. My mother would have said he was a man to make a woman sweat. So deep was I in reverie about my midnight fantasy man, I nearly missed Jake's response.

"Weeellllll," he sang again, which made me grit my teeth so I hard I caught the side of my tongue in a pinch, "if you didn't sit me over here, I wouldn't have seen them. And you should be interested, Miss Dorsey, because they look like they're up to no good."

On my high horse to put this seven-year-old firmly in his place—I should have been ashamed of how I felt about him, but you couldn't like them all, could you?—I marched across the room to tower over his squat figure. "Jake, the Drelconians normally stay inside their compound, and since they have no children, there is no reason that they would be 6

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at our school. Now, if you will come with me, I think a better place for you would be by the bookshelves." I gathered his textbook, pencil, and paper, and he followed, sluggishly reciting what he knew of our "resident" aliens.

"Auntie says they are all very tall and very handsome, even the old ones. They have long hair that they wear in ponytails and—"

The door swung open, crashing against the wall. Just like my little singing know-it-all had said, the Drelconians filled the opening. They had been in our town for just over two years, and I hadn't had the pleasure of seeing them up close. The speculation among the women—and some had been chosen and rejected for the six lords—was that they were easy on the eyes. I had to agree.

"Cool, it's them," Jake yelled and shot out to get a closer look. I caught him in time to hold him back.

"May I help you, gentlemen? We are in the middle of the English lesson, which requires the children's undivided attention." I gently guided Jake to a seat, and he scowled up at me. I gave him a sharp look before moving toward the shifters. "Maybe you don't know that visitors need to stop by the office to sign in before coming to a classroom." The men looked at each other and nodded. One of them flipped an ebony ponytail over his shoulder and proceeded to step into the room. In two strides, he was face-to-face with me, or, rather, I was nose-to-chest and had to look a long way up.

I didn't get to question his right to invade my class, because he promptly wrapped an arm around me and shoved 7

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my nose into a handkerchief. The kids all jumped to their feet, and then they began to scream and cry. Jake, the bold thing, stood up in his chair like he was ready to launch himself at the dragon.

I stomped the man's foot, elbowed him in the gut, and bit into his hand. He growled, and his hand fell away. Just as I broke free, Jake leaped onto his chest and tore at his hair.

"You leave Ms. Dorsey alone!"

My little hero warmed my heart and heightened my guilt at how I had been feeling toward him. "Jake, get down. Kids, to Ms. Tanner's. Now!" I shouted.

The classroom was pandemonium. Children ran around screaming and shoving their way through the dragons. Jake beat at the man who had attacked me while I tried to get him loose and keep myself away from that cloth. My vision seemed to dip and sway at the fumes coming off it. He had intended to drug me, right in front of the kids. I had heard the Drelconians flouted our laws while holding their own high, but this went beyond anything imaginable.

Jake managed to poke the man in the eye. His buddies climbed over kids in their way to get to us. I yanked at my student and got him free just as the dragon decided to breathe fire from his mouth. My heart hammered painfully as I positioned myself between Jake and the fire. I landed on the floor on top of Jake. Pain shot up my back. I screamed and screamed while someone patted my back, making the torment that much worse.

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Before I could throw up the tuna sandwich I had consumed not an hour ago, my forehead thumped on the floor, and I blacked out.

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Chapter One

The world was an alien one, not Earth. I knew because as dawn edged over the horizon, ten pale moons gave way to the sun. He bathed in a lake of violet waters. They set off the long white hair hanging about his shoulders as it glimmered in the fading moonlight. I caught my breath seeing him run his hands over a chest and abs so defined, my body came alive as I watched.

He must have felt me staring from the shore, for he looked up with silver eyes that teased me to join him. I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came out. I could only watch. Not that I was complaining. I could watch him lather his body all day.

After I found a rock to perch on for my own private show, I sat. When his flesh was covered with the suds, he disappeared beneath the rippling water, and I held my breath. I leaned forward, willing him to come back. My eyes fairly burned with yearning to see him again. The surface of the water fell away as he stood, this time closer to me. My eyes widened at the sight of his cock, long, stiff, and oh so enticing. I licked my lips when he took hold of it and ran his hand along its length. His eyebrows drifted higher in an invitation. I nodded but said nothing. Each step deliberate and carefully placed, he sauntered to the shore. As the remaining night light gave way to day, silver scales replaced human skin. Sharp teeth formed in his mouth and fire exploded from his nostrils. 10

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I vaulted to my feet, a scream on my lips, as pain rent me from my dream.

* * * *

"Stop, stop. Please, I can't take it," I screamed in anguish. The man who stood at my side paused in whatever he was doing to my back. "I'm sorry. I

had to put this ointment on. I promise the pain will ease in about an hour, and there will be no scars."

I brushed a hand across my top lip to wipe away snot and tears. The involuntary sigh took hold, but all I could do was tremble and lay there helpless on the examining table. "Why did he do that? Why did he burn me and try snatching me in front of the children?"

This man, whoever he was, seemed gentler than the men who had come to grab me out of my classroom. He patted my arm during a pause in his treatment. "Trust me, he's being sent away to work the mines. I don't agree with this new plan of the elders, but I have no say in the matter, not with Arnetta threatened."

"What do you mean?"

He turned away to prepare another cloth with the strongsmelling ointment. "That's not important. What is, is that your officials are on the way. Hopefully, this mess will be sorted out before the elders start a war."

I swallowed. *A war?*

Several men crowded into the room. I recognized a couple of the men who had come with my attacker, the ones who 11

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had stood back and watched that bastard hurt me and almost hurt Jake.

I gasped. "Are the children okay? How is Jake?" A man with a look of having too much authority for his own good approached me. "The children are fine. All of your people are fine. *Now.*"

I didn't like the fact that I was at a disadvantage lying down, so I clutched the sheet placed across the lower half of my body and wrapped it over my breasts. I struggled to a sitting position to face off against my enemy. "No thanks to you and your men. What do you mean by *now*?" The man, whom

I assumed was one of the elders the doctor referred to, held up a blue gem in the palm of his hand. When he did, a few of the others, including the doctor, pinched their noses. I made a mental note to ask the doctor later why that was. The elder explained the gem. "This is the precious fuel we provide your people, in its raw form. With it, you power ... well ... everything."

I could have smacked the smug look off his face, but I remained silent, clutching at the sheet.

"It would be a shame if this simply ran out." His hard gaze flicked from the gem to me. I got his drift. "You need fuel to power the machines that purify your water, to transport your food, to make your lives tolerable. If we hold back our gift, your people would suffer a long, painful existence before eventually dying out."

With effort, I kept the horror I felt from my expression, although my voice came out unnaturally high. "So, what do you want from me?"

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"Shannon." He paused. "Can I call you Shannon?" I didn't answer.

"Shannon, I want you to be my guinea pig. You see, I ... we ... my fellow Drelconians and I, have a serious problem on our hands, and we elders will do whatever it takes to resolve the problem. Your government does not see it like we do." He turned that heinous grin on his comrades, and they returned it, just as self-serving. "I want you to go out there and meet with your representatives. I want you to tell them that you have volunteered for this experiment and that the whole classroom thing was a misunderstanding."

"Never!" Hysteria rose in me thinking about what he intended. Visions of horror movies where mad scientists toyed with people's DNA ran through my mind. "I will never agree to something like that. You're evil for what

you did, the way you terrified those children and burned me." He grabbed hold of my neck and squeezed. I fought for a breath. The doctor touched his shoulder, and he eased his grip. "You will do what I say. You see, Shannon, we didn't pick you randomly. We do our homework. You have a family history of psychics—"

"That's nonsense. I'm just a teacher, nothing else."

"I think not." He shifted to within an inch of my face and tapped the side of my head with his other hand. "Inside there is the means to solve my problem. We will awaken your dormant abilities. We will get you to bond with one or more, if possible, of our lords. He will impregnate you, and you will give birth to the first of a new generation of Drelconians."

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Chapter Two

"No!" I shouted. "I won't do it. I would never offer myself to you evil creatures. Why don't you go back to where you came from? Why don't you leave us alone? We don't need you!" Tears rushed down cheeks I was sure were flushed.

"Let me go back to my children." I glanced around at their faces, looking for someone to care about more than the pro-creation of their race. There was not a sympathetic gaze on any face except the doctor's. My heart cried out to him.

"Why are you looking at Ladon?" the elder demanded. "He cannot help you. Ladon knows his duty. He will serve his lords as a guard and in his medical arts." The man leaned an elbow on the bed beside me. I scooted away. Hatred filled me at even the thought of his skin brushing mine.

" *Please.*" My plea fell on deaf ears.

"Who are you, Shannon?" He waved a hand in the air. "No one. No family, no husband, not even a lover. All of that makes you perfect for our means. Now, you're wasting time. You will either do as we ask, or we remove our fuel. See how long your schoolchildren last without food or water." A spasm shook me. This was our new reality—the humans at the whim of dragon shape-shifters? I could not deny them what they wanted. The choice, if it could be termed that, was a hard one. I could not turn my back on the children. I swallowed, not meeting their eyes. "Okay, I will do what you ask."

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"Good." He patted my shoulder as if I hadn't just agreed to put my life in his hands. "Ladon, get her clothes and send her out as soon as possible."

When the elders and guards left the room, I turned to the man they called Ladon. "Please, you can't be for all of this. Can't you convince your leaders to let me go? This is insane. My people won't stand for it, even if I do go out there and say I wanted to volunteer. They grabbed me in front of small children. They nearly burned one of them. Don't you think that those kids' parents will raise a stink over something like this? Your elders put them in danger, and that is unacceptable."

Ladon waited until my tirade ended before he spoke so calmly, I had to grit my teeth and dig my nails into my palms not to lash out at him. "The elders are highly intelligent men. Before they make a move, they calculate all scenarios. They study the responses of those they intend to manipulate, test them on a small scale before they launch whatever campaign they have cooked up.

"What that means to you and me is that they know our weaknesses. You love children, would lay down your life for them. It's why you became a teacher, isn't it?" I turned away as I tried not to give in to tears again. What he said was true. Once upon a time, I had been engaged and all set to have as many little ones as my body could handle. When my fiancé admitted he didn't even want one, I was floored. We had actually dated for four years, yet it had never occurred to me to ask him his desire. I had foolishly thought it was something everyone wanted. How naive of me. Now, 15

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seven years later, I still had not found that special person to share my life, and so my kids at school were my family.

"Yes, partly," I admitted. "I was an only child. I've always longed to fill my house with children. Since I'm not married ... I would protect the children at school, even Jake, no matter what."

He seemed confused as to who Jake was but didn't ask.

"Exactly. I have Arnetta to protect. She is human, and I love her with all my heart. The elders would not deliberately kill a dragon, but they have no problem with human sacrifice." I touched his arm. "Why don't you leave?" He shrugged. "In some ways, I am also a prisoner." His eyes took on a faraway expression. "If I could, I would join my lord and take Arnetta with me."

At first, I thought he meant killing himself. That wasn't the answer. Then, I remembered I had read about it in a tabloid. One of the six true bloods, the princes of the Drelconians, had renounced his position to run away with a human. The story had seemed romantic to me at the time. If he was escaping the tyranny of the elders, it was no wonder. He should have taken this gentle man with him.

When one of the guards poked his head in to see what took me so long, I submitted to another treatment before Ladon moved to leave the room so I could get dressed. I stopped him at the door. "Ladon?" He turned back to face me. "Yes?"

"W-What do they plan to do to me? That man said something about bonding and me having a baby for one of 16

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the lords." The tears threatened to start up again. I fought for control. "So, they plan to rape me?" The hand he ran through his hair shook. His once-tanned skin turned pale. I thought he might faint or vomit as I had felt like doing. Now I was numb.

"No. At least I pray not. I've seen the medical report they have on you. You supposedly have psychic ability. They'll tap into it, bring it out." He held up a hand when I would have protested. "Trust me, if it's there, they'll lay hold on it. Because we dragons don't actually get sick, we do tons of research for

the hell of it. Since we've been here on Earth, that has gone a step further, as you have innumerable illnesses. It's exciting really."

"Okay, so, I make the psychic connection." I grimaced.

"That doesn't translate to pregnancy, does it? I mean, you all don't have mind-sex, do you?"

He held up a finger and slipped out the door. I heard voices in the hall, and soon he came back and shut the door. His expression grim, he crossed back to stand before me. "It has not happened since before the virus that wiped out most of my people, but there were occasions when Drelconians would choose a mate based on the meeting of the minds, so to speak. A man and woman formed a mental bond that became so strong, the natural course was to mate.

"I think the elders hope that if you have that ability and it is enhanced, you will be thrown together with one of the lords and form the bond."

I frowned. "That's a long shot, isn't it? To cause so much trouble just on the off chance I will perform or that we will 17

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bond? And didn't I read somewhere that the lords are all married?"

He nodded. "Yes, but our law allows men to have mistresses. In these troubled times, it will be overlooked that a mistress has her lover's baby. And believe me when I tell you the elders have examined this every which way. You will make a bond, and that bond will lead you to give yourself freely to one of the lords."

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Chapter Three

Like fire captured in a hypodermic needle and injected into my veins, the first series of shots sent my mind on a journey far away from Earth.

He was there in the water again. Sensing my presence, he turned to face me as naked as before. This time it was fully daylight, which allowed me to examine his delectable body at my leisure. He seemed happy to see me. "You're back. Hello, beautiful."

I gaped. "I hear you." I took in a sharp breath, then touched my lips. "I can speak this time. This is so unlike my dreams."

"That's funny. People aren't usually mute in dreams, are they?" He stepped out of the water, which left his shoulders covered in suds, and he walked straight to me. He smelled of smoke and lavender, the latter funny for a man. "Well?" he asked when I didn't answer.

"Oh." I dragged my attention from his massive shoulders and chest. While I had wanted to look lower, up close, I wasn't so bold. "My dreams have always been different, sort of muffled like. I see and feel everything as if I am there, but I can't interact in them. This is a first. Who are you? What's your name?"

He gave a little bow, amusement in his eyes. "I am Ryuu, and you are?"

"Shannon."

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Ryuu took my hand to lift to his lips in the old-fashioned way a gentleman did. Instead of kissing my knuckles as I expected, he flipped my hand over

and ran the tip of his tongue along my palm. I shivered and blinked at him in shock. Did he do that to every woman he first met?

He pulled me toward the water. "Come and swim with me."

"I don't think so. And you have suds still on your shoulders."

As if the suggestion would encourage me to come, he winked and said, "You could wash it off me." With his lips to my ear, he whispered. "Then I can wash you." I pulled away from him and strolled down to the water's edge while I glanced around. "What is this place? Is it Earth?"

No, it can't be."

"It's not. The silver dragons call this planet Shale."

"Silver dragons?"

The look of sorrow in his eyes tore at my heart. I wanted to caress away whatever pain he had. Rather than ask him a bunch of questions as to why the mention of his people brought such sadness, I remained quiet. He could share if he wanted.

Ryuu moved to take my hand again. I let him. We strolled to the rock I had sat on that first night and Ryuu sat down. It seemed like the most natural occurrence for him to tug me onto his lap, even though the man was naked and wet. I curled against him, and when I did, my body lit on fire. Bonding as the elders had mentioned couldn't be any different than this in the real world. Should Ryuu have asked me to at 20

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that moment, I would have spread my legs for him in a heartbeat. The knowledge rocked me to the core.

"Many years ago, a virus broke out among my people. It killed most of them and made all of the women barren." I heard resentment in his voice. I

wondered how much of this was true and not something I was making up in my mind while I lay unconscious on the clinic's bed. "A few of us settled here, on Shale, all of us infected. At first, we were weak like newborn babes, barely able to care for ourselves. But Shale has some awesome properties that my medical staff assure me are the cause of our gradual healing. Our hair and eyes all became as if they were bleached. When we transform to dragons, instead of our natural golden scales, we have silver."

I caught the import of his words right away. "Your groups split in two, and the place in your heart for them stands empty until they fill it again with their presence." He looked away from me. A man like this proud Drelconian would not admit weakness, even in a dream.

"If I kiss you, will you resist me?" he asked suddenly. I looked up at him to find him focused on my lips. "I-I don't know. Maybe you should find out." Without waiting for him to decide, I flung my arms around his neck and pushed myself against him. I had never been ashamed of my body, having decent curves and good-sized breasts. My hair was a few inches past my shoulders, and I kept the boring cinnamon waves jazzed up with a few highlights. I considered myself to be pretty yet not beautiful, but I felt like a goddess with the way Ryuu looked at me. He teased 21

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the edge of my mouth first on one side and then the other. I craved more, would have demanded it if he didn't draw back. He watched my reaction as he lifted a hand and pinched my nearest nipple. Moaning, I arched into the caress. "You shouldn't."

"Do you want me to stop?" He didn't wait for me to answer and began undoing the buttons on my blouse, a top I had not been wearing when I had been given the shots. This was my dream. I should be enjoying it.

I forgot the real world with its hurts and disappointments, and then I stood, turned to face Ryuu, and sat back down. To help him, I unbuttoned my blouse the rest of the way and let it hang open to show off my lime green

bra. He grinned. I reached behind me to unclasp the lacy garment and then lifted it higher. My breasts tumbled free. Ryuu was lost. He buried his face between my mounds, licking and nipping my soft skin.

"You're so beautiful, I could eat you," he declared.

"Why don't you?"

I laughed at his arrested expression. He shook his head.

"No. As hard as it is to say no, I just can't. You don't know what's happening here."

"What are you talking about?" I ground my hips against his erection. With a low rumbling in his throat, he held onto my thighs and squeezed.

"Woman, stop that."

"Come on, Ryuu," I taunted, so unlike me. "You know you want it."

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"More than you can imagine." He stood up, putting me on my feet. "Not yet, my sweet. When I take you, it will be real in every way. Now, it's time for you to go back. Come to me again, huh?"

"Yes, count on it."

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Chapter Four

I woke groggy and achy all over. Someone had moved me to a room, comfortably decorated with modern furnishings. The change from the stark white clinic facility was welcome. A woman stood over me taking my vitals. "Who are you?" I asked.

She offered a friendly smile. "I'm Arnetta. How are you feeling?"

"Like a train wreck."

Arnetta patted my arm. "I'm sorry. The doctor says it will get better." The dark look that came over her face couldn't be mistaken. "I hope he's telling the truth. Oh, I shouldn't have said that. I should encourage you."

"I'd rather have honesty." I examined her. She was beautiful. I acknowledged it without jealousy. "You're Ladon's wife."

"I wish." She sighed. "Long story, one I don't relish going into. Tell me how I can make this whole thing easier for you, Shannon. I hate that they're doing this to one of my people." She continued to chatter for a few minutes as she moved about the room. I noticed that although the room was obviously not in the clinic, someone had brought over a few medical supplies. I tried remembering when the next dosage would be given, but couldn't recall. My memory felt fuzzy. The only thing that was clear was my dream man. 24

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"Arnetta?" I called to her while she muttered over a chart some feet away. She glanced up with a smile. "Do you know a dragon named Ryuu?"

She gasped. "Where did you hear that name? Don't let anyone hear you say it. He is one of the Drelconian lords, an outcast because he killed one of the

elders. I say good riddance now that I know what they are really like, but Ryuu—and now his twin brother, Draco—are considered traitors. Ladon was Draco's personal guard. He loves him and misses him very much. Just like I miss my sister."

"Where are they?"

Someone came in without knocking, and our conversation came to an end. The elder from the first day I arrived in the Drelconian settlement crossed the room and stood over me.

"Well, we're coming along, aren't we? You look none the worse for the wear. Tomorrow, after you have rested, you will meet with Tav, and I hope the bonding will begin." I opened my mouth to tell him I would never allow myself to bond with a married man whom I was being forced to get to know. The elder, anticipating me, leaned down so that his head was on level with mine. He pretended to have an interest in the cover draped over my body. As he flicked away a speck of lint, he said, "A few months ago, I anticipated that I would need to control the humans, and so I gave the order to lessen the flow of blue gems. My excuse was that we had run into a dry patch where we mined, that we would need to pinpoint a new location on the planet where we get them. Over this period, the supply on Earth has shrunk until there is 25

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barely any left. Next week, I have scheduled to replenish the supply, but I can ... *lose* ... the shipment." I stared up at the ceiling, moisture in my eyes. "You win." He left soon after talking down to Arnetta, as if she were stupid. The woman who struck me as being kind and sweet raged on about the elders until Ladon came in to soothe her with kisses. Jealousy did affect me at that point. I thought of Ryuu. He was a real person, so my dream hadn't been all made up. Perhaps I had read about him in the tabloids. But then if no one was allowed to mention his name, how did the papers know of him?

Ryuu, did I really meet you on a planet called Shale?

Of course, he didn't answer. None of it had been real. With the drugs, my mind had simply dug up something I'd read one day and made it into a dream. After all, I had been dreaming of Ryuu before I came to the dragon compound. That proved I had learned of him elsewhere and had forgotten about it.

* * * *

Had anyone mentioned that the Drelconian lords were all the sexiest men in existence? They should have. Tav resembled Ryuu vaguely around the eyes, but his coloring was dark compared to his brother. He stood a good foot taller than me, so that I had to look up at him.

"Hello, Shannon." *A man this beautiful should not be shy!*

"Hello." I had been lectured not to tell Tav I had been kidnapped and forced into this. He thought I was like his wife, a volunteer to help his people. I couldn't respect the sheltered 26

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lords who blindly trusted the elders to behave ethically and morally. Maybe they were too lofty, too pretty to be bothered with such petty things as human lives. I fought to keep my anger hidden from him. "How shall we do this?" He took my hand to guide me along a path. I had to admit to myself, no tingle rushed over me as it had with Ryuu. Even now, I longed to have another dream. The night before had been painfully lacking. The elder, whose name I learned was Orochi, had given me a sleeping pill to make sure I slept well enough to meet with Tav. He couldn't know he had suppressed my dream, probably would have anyway if he knew I had them.

"We walk," Tav told me. "And we get to know each other. If we are to bond, it will happen then."

"How do you know? What does it feel like?" He paused to think about it. "Well, everything about being with the person feels right, feels natural, like

you're supposed to be together. As time goes on, you feel more drawn to that person, so much so, you..." He reddened. "You make love." I studied him. The man was married for goodness sake. He behaved like a young teenager. "Doesn't it feel wrong to be with me when you have a wife waiting at home?" His eyebrows went up. "She knows her place. I might decide to have a mistress or two. That's no concern of hers." Here was the arrogance present in men raised to be spoiled princes. Tav might be shy and possibly good beneath it all, but he was still a Drelconian, and the men dominated their women. He would not think twice about whether it hurt his wife knowing he was here with me, trying to get to a place 27

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where we could have sex. Shame washed over me, remembering that the woman was human. She would not

"know her place" as Tav put it.

"Tav, she's human. She's not going to think like you do. Did you at least share with her what's going to happen here?"

I think you owe her that much. She has tried to give you what you need, and now when there's a problem, you toss her aside." I was getting worked up.

His handsome face creased in a frown. "You do not understand our ways. Everything was explained to my wife before she went through the ceremony. She agreed to it."

"You arrogant son of a bitch!" I screamed. His eyes widened, and I covered my mouth in a fight for control. We stood there on a flowery path staring at each other. *Some bonding this is.* "Tav, I'm sorry. That was completely uncalled for and very rude. I know that you consider your ways first before all others, but try to think of her feelings. *Please.* Human women can rationally make agreements any day, any time, but when emotions rise, logic flies." He blinked at me as if I had already taken leave of my senses for giving voice to such a silly adage. Still, it was true. He needed to realize

it if he wanted a peaceful home. As I thought of Tav's marriage, I began to wonder what their laws allowed when a human woman no longer knew her place. Did they grant divorce? I was willing to bet that wasn't in the instructions she had been given before she participated in the wedding ceremony.

Finally, he nodded. "I will consider what you have said. I think maybe we should try this again tomorrow." 28

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With that, our session was over. I had failed. I could only guess at my punishment.

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Chapter Five

Ryuu had denied me the first time, but when I returned to the lake on Shale through my dream, I was determined to seduce him. I was not shy in the full sense of the word, more like reserved. In my dreams, although I had never had a normal one from hearing others speak of them, I had visited many places. Only now that I had started on the Drelconian treatment was I able to indulge all of those fantasies. They would start with Ryuu if I had anything to say about it. I reached the lake at night, with the moons high in the sky. They lit the sand and water almost as if it was daylight. I searched the area for my soon-to-be lover, but he was nowhere to be found.

For a while, I wondered what to do and tried to decide which way to go. I had no idea where his village lay, and remembering that he could fly, I hoped it was not far.

"Ryuu?" I called in the night, unsure whether we had a connection or not. *This is just a dream, Shannon, just make him appear.*

A slow grin spread over my face. I closed my eyes and imagined him naked and wet before me with that glorious hair unbraided, hanging about his shoulders. Anticipation made me tremble with desire. I couldn't wait, but when I opened my eyes, the beach remained quiet and lonely. I felt somewhat daunted by my inability to control my environment. I started along the beach to the south. If the 30

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village was there, I would find it before I woke back in the real world. At least I prayed so.

After what felt like a mile of trudging along, I began to hear something in the still night. Bursts of flames lit the air in varied places. I quickened my pace. Someone called out, "Lai, stop that right now, and get yourself back to

bed." I smiled. Definitely civilization. After rounding a bend in the dirt trail I had discovered several yards back, I came upon row after row of neat houses, hewn it seemed from mudstone. No wonder they called this planet Shale. Apparently, it was in abundance. I strolled along the quiet rows, wondering how I would find Ryuu and at the same time pondering if anyone else could see me.

Toward the end of one row were two houses similar in style and size. Nothing grand stuck out about them. They were not bigger or better kept, yet I was drawn there. I stopped in front of the first, feeling the slightest of pulls. *Ryuu? Is this your house?*

No lights shone in the window, not that I could have seen. All of the houses had heavy curtains across the windows. I assumed it was to keep out the light of the moons. I moved to the next, and the pull on me was stronger. With a glance back at the first house, I put out my hand to the doorknob of the second.

While I contemplated whether to enter, an ear-splitting roar set my teeth on edge. I spun around and pressed my back against the door. The biggest dragon I had ever seen stood in front of me. Thick white smoke blew from his nostrils. His craggy head with blended horns like a crown was 31

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bigger than my entire body. Blood rushed in my ears; my chest tightened painfully.

"I-I..." What was I going to say? I couldn't control this dream, or maybe I should think of it as a nightmare. The beast dipped its head to the left and then the right. With a frustrated grunt, it dragged in a breath that rustled my nightgown about my legs. I knew then that it couldn't see me, but it could sense that I was there, an unwelcome intruder. The dragon lifted its head and opened its mouth. I knew in a second that I would be roasted alive. I willed my legs to move, to run, but my body wouldn't obey mental commands.

I closed my eyes in preparation for great pain. This was my fantasy supposedly. Would the mental trauma affect my body in the real world? I didn't know, but I did not want to find out.

"I-I don't mean any harm," I mumbled. "Don't kill me." The guard didn't appear to hear me. Fire burst from its mouth. The door behind me opened, and suddenly, Ryuu was in front of me with wings extending from his back and covering my entire body. I didn't so much as feel the heat of the blast. When the attack stopped, he pushed me inside the house and pulled the door to. I listened to the conversation outside.

"May I ask why you've decided to attack my door in the middle of the night, Jep?" Ryuu's tone was good-natured. He was playing dumb.

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Through a crack, I saw the guard transform to a man and bow his head slightly. "I'm sorry, my lord. I thought I sensed something not right. I can't explain it." Ryuu waved a hand of dismissal. "No harm done, but do me a favor. In future, don't be so quick to attack."

"Yes, my lord."

I realized then that the man was completely naked. His cock hung for all and sundry to see. These Drelconians were certainly free with their bodies. Ryuu came in to find me focused on his guard's equipment, and he grasped my shoulders to turn me away. "Quit looking at him. You, miss, should not have been out there. Why didn't you just come straight to my house?"

I pushed back against his body, finding him hard and ready. Tonight would be the night, I determined. "Are you jealous, Ryuu?"

"No, of course not." His voice held a grumpy tone, but it soon fell away. "I am very glad you're here. I've missed you."

"You could have come to me," I joked. I moved out of his embrace and strolled about the room, taking in the simple furnishings. This was nothing like what the golden dragons had on Earth. The knowledge saddened me. "Do you have a hard life here, Ryuu?"

He caught up behind me and pulled me back into his arms to kiss my neck. "No. Granted, it's not the luxury we had on Drelcon, my home planet, or even the comfort the golden dragons enjoy on Earth, but it has been my new home for many years. We are happy here. We're grateful to be alive." 33

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I considered telling him about what was happening to me on Earth, about the experiment the elders were conducting, but decided against it. This was a time for him and me to enjoy each other, not for problems. "Tell me what you meant by me coming straight here? And why can't I control this darn dream? If I could, we would be..."

He spun me to face him and grinned down at me. "We would what? Hmm? Make love right now? Tell me, Shannon, are you a virgin?"

"Would you like me to be?"

"You have a purity and sweetness about you. At the same time, I sense a fire waiting to be ignited by your lover. Me." He kissed me, then trailed his tongue across my lips, and dipped between them before pulling back. I melted in his arms. "I will be your only lover from now on."

"Do I have a choice?"

He frowned. "You must feel what I feel, Shannon. We are bonded."

I gasped. "But ... but..." The elders had said I was to bond with one of his brothers. If not Tav, then one of the younger lords. I would be passed along until one stuck. How could they or I have thought I could bond across space? "Ryuu, is this real? I thought this was a dream."

"Bonding is at first mental and then physical." He squeezed me and then led the way to the second floor, to where I soon discovered lay his bedroom. "Two months ago, I felt a presence. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was special. Eventually, I began to see you at the lake. I commanded that no one was to go to that particular spot." He grinned. "I 34

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hoped that whatever or whoever you were, you would talk to me."

"Didn't it shock you? Terrify you? How can I come here, of all places? I wish I understood it all."

"Trust me, I don't pretend to have all the answers. One of the older dragons found the need to save as many of our ancient books as she could when we fled Drelcon. I have since enjoyed studying about my ancestors. Years ago, we used to marry only the person we bonded with. My suspicion is that's how there became a stronger line of Drelconians. I began to think that there is a woman out there who would bond with me naturally. I admit I did assume she would be a Drelconian, but I'm not prejudiced."

I laughed. "I believe you're right, but it still doesn't explain why I would come to you, and this way."

"You have psychics in your family?" I nodded. "Years ago. I'm the only one I know who is left, but still, this..."

"It's strange, but I'm ready to accept it. I don't know how you can be so physically here for me, but be invisible to my guard. But I'm not going to thumb my nose at fate for bringing me such a beautiful woman." We sat on the bed. Ryuu ran his hands over my nightie. His eyes glowed as if he could see through it. "I wanted our first time to be with us both physically together, but I cannot resist sampling your sweet body tonight. Tell me you want it, Shannon." My breathing turned shallow. "Oh, I want it. I was prepared to seduce you, if need be."

His eyes widened. "Do it. Do it now." 35

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At his firm command, I remembered I was still dealing with a prince. If there could be anything between us, he would have to know right upfront. I was all human, and he would have a serious fight on his hands if he thought he could control me. But first things first.

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Chapter Six

I pushed Ryuu back on the bed. He settled with his arms tucked behind his head, a contented grin on his face. When I pulled down one strap of my nightie and stuck out my tongue to lick my shoulder, he caught his breath.

"Don't you wish this was your tongue tasting me?" I teased.

His pajama pants tented, but he said nothing. I continued by slipping my arm out of the strap and then moved to the other. Holding my only clothing tight against my chest, I climbed up on the bed. Ryuu didn't budge an inch as I stood directly over him.

"Do you know I'm not wearing panties?" I gave him a peek. A growl started in his throat. "I like to sleep without them, much more comfortable." I dropped to my knees, one on either side of his legs. With my arms pressed to my sides to keep my breasts covered, although my nipples had long since stiffened and were clearly defined through the thin material, my hands were freed to explore my lover.

"You're right, baby. I am reserved usually, but you bring out something in me. I want to be bad. I dream of bringing my lover to the point of needing me so much that he begs me to let him fuck me." At my words, I looked away, but he reached out and forced me to face him.

"Take me to that point, Shannon." He trailed his fingers down between my breasts. His hand twitched, and I knew it 37

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was in an effort not to cup one or the other. "No man could possibly resist you. You must taste like honey." I took hold of his hands to place them on either side of his head. I leaned forward and let my bare pussy brush his

cock. The hum inside him escalated. I kissed his neck as I was rubbing. "I shave my pussy, Ryuu."

"Ah! Shannon!"

I climbed up his body to rest my rear on his chest and tug up my nightie. "See? Do you like it?" Stroking myself seemed to set him off. He jerked. He licked his lips, undoubtedly imagining what my flavor must be like. Almost I gave in and straddled his face, but my tormenting wasn't over. He had not begged me to give him what he craved.

My nightie came off with a flick of my wrists. Ryuu moaned. "Woman, your body..."

"You like?"

"Yes!"

I ran my fingers over my taut nipples, always liking the fact that they were so thick normally, even more so when they were erect. "Do you like my nipples, Ryuu?"

"Is there anything not to like?" Desperation colored his tone. I grinned. He was nearing the place I wanted him.

The sense of power I felt at bringing this haughty lord to his knees was incredible. I hadn't had many lovers in my life, and certainly while my fiancé had been handsome, his looks could not touch this dragon shape-shifter. No human male's could. Ryuu was like a god, perfect in every way. He could probably snap his fingers to have any woman at his beck and 38

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call. Here I was, a simple thirty-two-year-old schoolteacher, bringing such a man to the brink of an orgasm even before we made love. I should be nervous or intimidated, but I wasn't. I was made for Ryuu, and his body was made for me. I reared back, bracing myself with one hand between his legs

and resting on the bed. The move exposed more of my pussy to him. He watched mesmerized as I toyed with my clit. When I dipped a finger inside my moist passage, his cock twitched. I threw back my head, closed my eyes, and proceeded to pleasure myself as he watched.

"Ah, Ryuu, I think I'm going to come!" When he gripped my hips, I stopped. "Hey, no cheating. You are only supposed to watch."

"When did we make those rules? I want to touch you, honey." He refused to move his hands. I slipped away to stand at the side of the bed.

"If you're not going to follow my rules, Ryuu, then it's best that I return home." I folded my arms across my breasts. He didn't like that. It obscured my nipples. "Well?" He growled.

"Is that a 'yes, I'll play nicely'?" I laughed.

"Fine, but you better be ready for me when your game is over. I am about ready to come now."

I climbed back on the bed to hook my fingers in his pants.

"Well, in that case, I should see what I'm working with." As bold as I had been all this time, I felt the heat rise when his cock was exposed. I licked my lips much like he had done. His shaft lay long and thick, resting against his stomach and almost stretching to his navel. "Oh!" 39

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Confidence rolled off the man. "I see by your expression you like it."

"That is an understatement."

As I waited for him to settle into his former position, I considered my next move. Something told me it would take a drastic move on my part to get him to beg. I longed to keep the upper hand, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. I had enjoyed stroking my pussy, but truthfully, I didn't think I had

the courage to come by myself, with him watching. Seeing the precome dripping from his rod, I had an idea. I bent to lick away the creamy liquid. Ryuu gasped. I wrapped my fingers around him and lowered my mouth as far as it would go over the head, but I didn't suck. He squirmed and reached down for my hair, but I moved out of reach. When he put his hands back up behind his head, I circled his cock with my tongue, gave it a slight suck, and stopped. He grunted. "Shannon, don't tease. Take it in your mouth, honey."

I threw him a kiss and continued my game. I knew I was playing with fire, but I liked the control. Ryuu growled and complained. He tried pulling my head down several times, but each time I ducked him. I thought he was nearing the point of begging. I won the prize for underestimating a Drelconian lord.

Ryuu pulled my head up by my chin. He smiled once, which left me confused, and then he was on me. He grabbed hold and flipped me around so that my rear curved toward him and I lay face down. I tried to get away, to regain some 40

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of my power, but he pinned my wrists just before the baseboard. He positioned his body over mine. I fought him.

"Who is your master?" he demanded with his lips against my ear.

I gasped. "I don't have one."

"No?" He let his cock brush against my rear. I moaned.

"Who is your master?"

This isn't how it's supposed to go! I wanted him to plead with me, not me with him. That quick, with just a single move, I was so close to giving him

what he wanted. I closed my eyes, which was a mistake. I saw us both in my mind, our bodies joined and making love like life would end tomorrow.

"R—" I bit down on the inside of my mouth. He teased my earlobe with the tip of his tongue. I couldn't help it. I turned my head for a kiss. Our mouths joined in a slow, sweet caress. We didn't suck or even tongue each other's mouths. Only the tender sensors of his lips teased mine, and mine his. We stayed in that position a long while, breathing as one. Ryuu released my wrists to pass a hand beneath me and pull me up to my knees. I thought he would command again to know who my master was, but he didn't speak. He didn't move his lips from mine. His hand, still on my belly, slid lower to my pussy. He massaged my clit, and I moaned, feeling like I might fall down to the bed again.

He glided lower and his fingers pierced my folds to dip into my cream-coated tunnel. I humped his fingers, struggling not to beg.

"You know you want to," he said, seeming to read my mind.

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"Ryuu..."

He pulled back, pinched my clit between two fingers, and plunged his cock, unguided, into my soaking-wet pussy. I turned my mouth from his and screamed. My arms, which I'd been leaning on, gave out, but my rear stayed firmly curved in the air for him to pump against. He took hold of my hips and ground deep and swift. I screamed again. I was about to come, but I held onto it as long as I could. I wanted the feelings of the build-up to torment me forever. My lover smacked my rear, and I whimpered at the sting. He slapped again and rubbed my reddening cheek. How could I have thought I could dominate this man? He was most certainly a master.

I came, vibrating with my pleasure and crying out his name. To my satisfaction, Ryuu came seconds after, clutching me so tightly against him that I thought my ribs would crack. He shoved us both flat against the bed, and he pressed his lips to the side of my throat as he called out my name in return. He might not have given into me the way I wanted, but he was just as shaken. I couldn't ask for much more.

"Shannon," he breathed out. "How can this experience be any better in the physical realm?"

"It can't. Shall I come back again?"

"I will get to you, one way or another."

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Chapter Seven

I left my room late the next day with a euphoric feeling, but that soon melted away in the face of chaos in the courtyard outside my building. Catching sight of Arnetta, I called to her. "Arnetta, what's happening? Why are the dragons circling like that?"

She glanced up, and then together we took in the mad scene of several guards in human form running across the street, apparently in the direction of the gate leading out of the compound. "There's been an attack on the convoy carrying the blue gem from Crendon. The silver dragons were assembled early, but they failed to take control of the ship. Several were hurt."

I clutched her arm, my head spinning. "Who? Who was hurt?"

"Ladies." Ladon hurried up and placed a hand on both our backs to gently guide us toward the clinic. "Your conversation is better conducted inside."

"Why?" I couldn't imagine what the big deal was. The golden dragons already knew what had happened. Although I wondered why Ryuu would lead an attack on the convoy. Didn't he care that my people would suffer if he stopped their fuel? Questions pushed at my mind until I wanted to go back to bed. Last night had been wonderful, but reality brought the issues we were dealing with back with a vengeance. Once we were inside, Ladon closed the door and guided his love to helping him with work in case someone walked in. He 43

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spoke while he scanned paperwork. "I don't know why Ryuu would attack the convoy, unless he hoped to gain control and thereby have leverage against the elders. We know that he has at least a few men from their last attack, the time he whisked away Draco and his wife. I've seen them

myself, and most of the silver dragons he has are smaller and weaker than our guards."

"It's the change brought about by the virus," I blurted out. When the two of them turned to face me, I covered my mouth.

"What do you know about it, Shannon?" Arnetta crossed to stand in front of me, a curious look on her face.

"I ... uh..." I didn't want to admit how I knew, that I had visited Ryuu, that maybe I had somehow bonded with him even while thousands of miles apart.

Ladon, one of the most gentle people I had ever met, saw my discomfort and called Arnetta back to her work. "Shannon will share when she's ready, my love." I breathed a sigh of relief when she let it go. "Was R—

anyone you know hurt in the scuffle?" I asked Ladon. He looked up from the papers in his hand and studied my face. I felt as bare as I had been in front of Ryuu the night before. From the little I knew about his people, the Drelconians were not psychic. Ladon couldn't read my mind. Still, that didn't change the fact that I felt he knew where my heart had begun to turn. He just didn't understand how. "No, no one I knew. A few guards had minor injuries, but nothing serious in either camp."

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Arnetta jumped into the conversation again. "I think he might need fuel of his own. I mean, as far as I'm told, Crendon is the only place where the blue gem can be harvested, and the machines that break it down from its raw form are crucial. Don't you think so, Ladon?" He pulled her into his arms to kiss her. I thought about leaving, but they soon broke apart. "Sorry, Shannon, how rude of us. Yes, I think that's a possibility, but it's been years with no word from Ryuu. It's fair to assume he has an alternate fuel source

of his own. But the blue gem is needed by the golden dragons and the humans. He never gave up until he got Draco, his twin, and I have to assume he's just as concerned for his brothers."

"Especially since we've learned the elders are not such perfect advisors."

Ladon nodded.

Arnetta threw down the pen and paper in her hands and started to cry. "I just wish I knew that Harmony was okay. I can't stand it that it's been so long since I've seen her. I don't know if Ryuu has gone crazy and hurt them or if they're now in league with whatever plans he has. I need to know my sister is okay, Ladon."

I could tell her that the next time I spoke with Ryuu, I would ask him how her sister was, but what if I was just crazy? What if none of what I thought was real, really was? I would look like a fool and get this woman who had been so kind to me all worked up for nothing. I needed a way to prove that my experience was taking place.

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Before I could broach the subject, the door opened and one of the female dragon shifters stood there. She was breathtakingly beautiful and almost as tall as her male counterparts. I know someone had told me her name, but I couldn't bring it to mind. "The elders would like to have brunch with you." Her resentment at being sent to fetch me was plain. "It's not an invitation." *More like a command.*

I excused myself from Ladon and Arnetta and followed the woman out. On the path to the elder's building, I searched my memory for the female's name. "I'm sorry; I can't remember your name."

She frowned. "Tiam. And you're Shannon. Another human." She spat the word as if it was poison on her tongue.

"You don't like us?"

"I'm tired of the men depending on you. We females are supposed to remain silent and let them make all of the decisions, and what leverage would we have anyway? We're barren."

I would have reached to offer comfort, but somehow I didn't think it would be welcome. "All of you?"

"Yes! And when the human women weren't enough for the lords, instead of finding a cure for us, they seek another human. You are not so great." Her gaze raked over me and, without a doubt, found me wanting. "I've heard rumors that the silver dragons are the way they are because of the effects of the virus that made me barren. I've heard that the planet they live on healed them, even brought back their women's ability to have children." She stopped walking and closed her 46

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eyes for a minute before she looked up at the sky. "If only the elders would take that seriously and look into it. We can be whole again and never have to depend on an inferior race."

I put my hands on my hips. "You know what, don't bother to escort me. I can find my way on my own. I'm sure you have a corner you need to get back to, to bitch and moan in." With those hateful words, I turned and stomped away, which left Tiam with her mouth open.

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Chapter Eight

I strolled into the hall where the elders ate, expecting one or two of them, only to be faced with all five lords, each of their guards and four elders. A room full of men, and all eyes were trained on me. If the lords each felt as Tiam had, I could imagine they were sizing me up as I shuffled over to the seat Orochi directed me to.

"I—This is unexpected," I began as I took my seat. Orochi pinned me with a look of disgust. "Tav tells us you and he haven't bonded, that your meeting was a disaster in which you were argumentative and didn't try very hard at all."

I glanced toward Tav. He didn't meet my eyes. What was I supposed to say to that? They blamed *me* because we didn't connect? Didn't it take two? I shrugged. "I didn't find him attractive." I dipped my head and shuffled the eggs on my plate around so they wouldn't see the amusement on my face. This wasn't a joking matter, I knew, but Tiam had worked me up. They should have known better than to send her to get me. "Maybe one the others will work."

"This isn't a game, Shannon," Orochi boomed. He took hold of my wrist and squeezed. I cried out. "You will bond with one of the lords, even if we have to sit and watch you do it."

"Watch me?" I tried pulling from his hold, to no avail.

"What do you mean, watch? Like ... while we..."

"If it comes to that, yes."

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I couldn't believe that the lords would allow such a thing. But as I looked around at the proud shape-shifters, I knew it wouldn't matter a bit to them. They were full of themselves and would probably get off on having an audience while they performed. Unbidden, an image of being in bed with all of them at the same time came to mind. If they were built anything like their older brother, *yummy!* I swallowed and fanned myself with my free hand.

No, I wasn't that kind of woman. Sure, I had fantasies like anyone else, but I was not going to expose myself to them just to give the golden dragons a baby. And what of their wives? I thought of how I would feel if my husband went off with his brothers to pleasure some other woman. If I loved him, that would rip the heart right out of my chest.

"I won't do that. I agreed to..." The elder squeezed my wrist again. I winced. He apparently still hadn't told the lords about forcing me into this scheme.

"I agreed to help you. I will not be put on display, and that's final." I directed my gaze at the elder's hand. "Let me go right now or I will sabotage this whole plan one way or another."

My threat was empty. I had nothing to bargain with, no power. The elder, with a look that said as much, did let me go. I stood. "Thank you for having me to breakfast, but I find I have lost my appetite. As I crossed to the door with my head held high, Orochi stopped me. "Shannon, we have been very ... accommodating to you. We would like to continue in 49

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that vein. Tomorrow night, we will have a party, with you as the guest of honor."

I turned to face him. Maybe he wasn't such a monster after all.

"The party will take place at ten," he continued. I frowned. "But that's when I am given the psychic enhancers or whatever it is you give me. It's usually

administered just before I go to bed." He nodded. "Yes, and that will not change. The lords and elders will be present in a special room set up for the occasion. You will be given your meds at that time. We need to be much more aggressive about this procedure. So, you will go from Tav to his next brother, to the next until you have not only bonded, but mated as well." The room spun until I had to support myself on the wall.

"You are going to pass me around." Around the room, each lord blinked back at me as if this was natural. "You can't be ready to agree to this?" I pleaded with them. Tav spoke up. "It seems the only way, Shannon. I know it's not exactly what you agreed to when you offered to help us, but..."

"Offered!" I screamed. "You stupid bastard. I didn't offer. How can you believe that? I'm forced to be here, a prisoner!" Orochi stood up. "Guards, take her to her room and see that she stays there."

I spun away and ran through the door. The guards were faster. They swooped in, and two took an arm each to drag me across the courtyard back to my room. As hard as I 50

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fought, I couldn't get away. Their strength was unequaled on Earth.

"Please, please don't do this," I begged. "Surely you have a heart. You can't just blindly follow along with the elders. They're evil. They don't care about anyone but themselves and their agendas."

My cries fell on deaf ears. The guards pressed their mouths in firm lines, the expression in their eyes hard. Tears slid down my cheeks. The next night, I was going to be raped. I would not bond with any of those men, I was sure of it. That wouldn't stop the elders from getting what they wanted, and something told me they disliked me enough to punish me in that way. *Where is my government when I need them?*

Where is Ryuu?

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Chapter Nine

I lay on my bed, and my eyes were red and swollen. Arnetta brushed my hair while she chattered to me, as was her norm. "Why don't you tell me what happened at breakfast this morning, Shannon? Maybe Ladon can intervene on your behalf."

A shuddering sigh passed through me. "Intervene?"

Arnetta, there's no talking the elders out of what they want. This situation just went from them pushing me to fall for a hot lord to something else entirely." She stopped brushing my hair. "What do you mean?" Before I could get the words out, I burst out crying again. What could I do? What power did I have? Arnetta had shared with me how her sister had first broken into the compound in order to kill Ryuu's twin, Draco. According to her, Harmony was a "badass." That wasn't me. I had never even been in a fight, never bucked authority, or did anything I was told not to do. When my parents passed away, having had me late in life, I had even dutifully taken on their debt, working parttime to pay the credit cards off. I had no strength against these people.

"What I don't understand is how the lords can agree to this." I sniffled. "I thought Tav was a good person inside, despite the arrogance."

Arnetta lifted my chin so that I met her eyes. "Sweetheart, what are you talking about?"

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"The elders! The dragon lords! Haven't you been listening?" I cried out. "They're going to ... to..." I shoved her hand away and raced to the

bathroom. I slammed the door behind me and dropped to the floor before vomiting the soup she had brought me to eat an hour ago.

As I hung over the rim of the toilet, I thought about my situation and the impossibility of it. *I might not be Harmony, but I don't have to take this. I can at least try something.* I had been standing alone for a long time, and I could make it through this, too.

As I washed my face at the sink, I heard someone come into my room. Arnetta's excited voice let me know it must be Ladon. Before I joined them, I brushed my teeth. I wouldn't tell them my plan, better not to get them involved. They could be truthful when the elders asked.

Ladon's face was grim when I came out of the bathroom. A tremor shook me. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, Shannon," he began. "If it's any consolation, two of the lords refuse to participate in tomorrow night's plans."

"No, it's no consolation."

Tears were in Arnetta's eyes. "I can't believe this. I'm going over there and talk some sense into them. If they didn't get their own wives pregnant, what makes them think it will work with Shannon? The problem is with them, not the humans they mate with. Ladon, you must do something." Her fiancé sighed. "The lords have been examined and reexamined. They have no physical ailments. They are not 53

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sterile. I have spoken with the elders until I am weary. I cannot change their minds."

"Well, something's got to be done!" she railed. "We can't just stand by. I want to go into town. I'm going to contact someone, the president or somebody!"

"You know we are grounded for the time being." Arnetta tore at her hair. She paced back and forth when she wasn't dragging me into a hug and assuring me she would save me. It should have been funny, but it wasn't.

"What are we, children? Are you and I prisoners now, Ladon?"

Ladon slammed his fist against the wall. "You're right, Arnetta! We should just rise up against the elders. Forget century after century of following their careful guidance. Forget that they and not the lords or the guards are the ones who found this inhabitable planet after ours was deemed hazardous. Forget that we ourselves went through a similar shortage of fuel until one of the elders, before he passed on, discovered Crendon and saved our people back then. They make the hard choices. They are devoted to research, to find a better life for all of us. And while I do not condone how they go about the goal of restoring the Drelconians, I know that they have our best interests at heart!" Arnetta and I stood staring at him in shock. She was the first to snap out of it. She walked up to him and slapped him across his cheek. "I never thought you would be like that, Ladon. Shannon is a human being, a defenseless woman. I don't care if the elders gave birth to you! They are wrong, and your people should have risen up against them long 54

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before now. Don't bother visiting my room tonight or any time in the future." She stormed out. Ladon's expression crumbled. He sucked in a deep breath, spared me a glance, and then hurried out after his fiancée. I, too, thought he was a better man than the declaration he had made. To some degree, I understood his loyalty to the elders, but they were taking their guidance of the Drelconians too far. Because the only two people I thought might be on my side were not able to help, I realized I was on my own. Whatever my plans, I would need to execute them quickly. I was running out of time.

As I recalled Arnetta's account of her sister's attempted escape, I opened the doors to my balcony and stepped out. The wall surrounding the settlement

was too high and too smooth to scale. Between it and my room were several buildings, all of which held guards or other Drelconians I was sure were like Ladon—loyal to the elders no matter what they did. Having stepped out at night, I knew sentinels in dragon form patrolled the skies over the compound. Even if I managed not to break my neck while climbing to the roof—I had never been athletically inclined—I would still be caught as Harmony had been. The settlement was not that old, and we were surrounded on all sides by desert. Even if I made it out, I would need a vehicle to get to civilization. While I contemplated my next move, a scratch at the door caught my attention. I turned in time to see a sheet of paper sliding beneath it. I hurried to retrieve it and found a simple note written in block letters. "Ryuu is on Earth."

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Chapter Ten

My heart pounded in my chest. Ryuu was on Earth? I ached to see him in person, to see if my dream was real, that I had somehow visited him across space and made love. The whole thing seemed impossible.

I wrenched open my door and looked around, but no one was nearby. I crumbled the note in my hand and tucked it in my pocket as I walked down the stairs to the street. Shouts of anger came from one of the buildings, but I didn't venture over to see who it was. There were, I had no doubt, several different arguments going on. One at least with Arnetta and Ladon, unless they had made up. Either way, they would be occupied with each other. Then who was my sympathizer, or who would know I had interest in the fact that my dream lover was on Earth. I had not shared my nighttime fantasies with anyone.

As I moved out to the courtyard, I saw a woman on a bench who wrung her hands. I thought I remembered seeing her with Tav, but I wasn't sure. Just what I needed, a fight with one of the wives. I turned to go back inside, but she saw me and stood, waving her hand in my direction. I couldn't ignore her. *Great.*

"I know who you are," she began. I said nothing. "You're the human they brought in to seduce my husband, to get pregnant by him."

"I'm sorry. I had no choice in this situation. Believe me, I would not—"

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"Do you take me for an idiot?"

The look of pure hatred in the woman's eyes was excessive. Jealousy sure, dislike fine, but hatred? She didn't know me, and someone had to have told her what the elders wanted, the elders got. "Listen ... um..."

"Lisa."

"Lisa, I understand what you're feeling, but—" She threw back her head and laughed. "You don't understand shit. When I got that invitation, I knew I had made it to the big time. For years, I had been dreaming of my Prince Charming, the man who would sweep me off my feet. How fucking like fate to bring me a real prince, a Drelconian lord."

"But you got the invite just like hundreds of other girls. You couldn't know you would be chosen." She curved her lip into a sneer. "Look at me." She held her arms out to the side. "I have the body, the face, the background. My father was a fucking ambassador to some godforsaken country that doesn't even exist anymore." *And you didn't learn to speak properly?*

"How could they turn me down?"

"How indeed," I muttered. "So, this isn't about love. You don't love Tav. You enjoy the privilege, the lifestyle marrying him has afforded you."

She stepped up into my face and poked my shoulder painfully. "Don't try to make yourself feel better about whoring with my husband. You're no better, offering yourself to whichever lord who will knock you up. Yes, I heard about it. Tav had the decency to tell me about your scheme." 57

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So, Tav was the good man I believed him to be. "My scheme? If you're looking for someone to pin this on, you should look at the elders. They are the ones with the control. They are basically the rulers here, not the lords. I'm sure you enjoy the money lavished on you." I gestured to her outfit.

"The shopping you do must be a treat, but you are not faced with all your rights taken away from you. You wanted to come here. I didn't."

"Oh, boo-hoo!" She rolled her eyes. "The lords are so hot. I'd take them all on in a heartbeat. Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

I shook my head. "I can't believe Tav knows what kind of woman he was chosen as his wife. No wonder you two can't bond. You're a horrible person."

"Look in the mirror, honey."

"Lisa?"

She stiffened. We both turned to find Tav walking up to us. I glanced at his wife to find the woman's countenance changing. She went from grasping witch to docile wife in a blink. Her smile was all sweetness, so much so I felt the stirrings of bile rise inside me.

Lisa's eyes lit up like she was ecstatic to see her husband. She moved into his arms, and I had to turn away from seeing them kiss. From experience with one of the teachers I had worked with, I knew there was no sense telling Tav his wife was a fake. He would need to learn on his own. The last time I had tried interfering, it cost me a fingernail dragged down the side of my face. I still had a tiny scar near my right ear to 58

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remind me not to come between couples. The abuse wasn't worth it.

Tav looked from me to his wife. "What are you doing here?"

She gave a convincing quiver if ever I saw one. "You know I come out for an evening walk. I couldn't imagine running into Shannon while I was out here. It really is a shame what's happening to her. But I wouldn't dare interfere with men's business."

Now I really was going to be ill. Her performance was professional quality. Tav obviously believed every word, and how could he not swallow it with her pouty pink lips and wide, innocent eyes. I even had to hand it to her. She hadn't raised his suspicions by claiming I attacked her or verbally insulted her. The woman was too good.

Tav tucked her against his side and turned to me. "I'm sorry for all that is happening with you right now, Shannon. Trust me, I am talking with my brothers. The elders' plan is extreme. You should not be forced. All of the humans we have become involved with have volunteered, and what you signed on for is not what this has become." I chose not to remind him this was never a signing-on.

"Two of us have backed out of this scheme. Don't worry. I have no doubt the other three will see it our way before tomorrow."

I nodded. He and Lisa said their good nights to me and moved off. Only after they turned a corner at the end of the walk did I remember the note. Lisa had been consumed with thoughts of stopping me from messing up her good thing and 59

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made no mention of Ryuu, so it stood to reason she hadn't written the message. Who that left, I wasn't sure, but I hoped it was an ally with an idea to get me free.

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Chapter Eleven

The clock on my bedside table struck midnight. I couldn't sleep with the knowledge that in less than twenty-four hours, I might be at the mercy of three dragons. More than once I had closed my eyes, hoping to visit Ryuu to discover for myself if he really was on Earth, but I couldn't relax enough and my next treatment wasn't being administered until the

"party." I had requested a sleeping pill, but Orochi refused, confirming my suspicion that he wanted me to suffer. Finally, I tossed back my covers and sat up in my darkened room. I padded to the balcony and peered out. Up in the sky, dragons circled. If I did go that way, I'd be caught before I made it off the balcony. Hearing a sound behind me, I swung around to find the biggest serpent I had ever seen. A scream stuck in my throat. I stumbled back against the balcony doors and slid along it toward the corner. Not wanting to take my eyes off the creature, I tried to see a path to the door in my peripheral vision. A trunk of my personal belongings that I had begged for and received lay in the way. I would either leap over it or smash into it and be swallowed alive. I had to try.

I counted to three and ran, then leaped over the trunk, only nipping the baby toe of my left foot before I landed on my bed. I rolled and fell to the other side on the floor. On hands and knees, I scrambled to the door, all the time hearing that thing slithering at a leisurely pace like it was 61

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enjoying my terror. I managed to get a hand on the doorknob and turn it before I heard laughter behind me. When I glanced back, it was to find Tiam draped across my bed. My entire body shook with relief and then I was hyperventilating. She crossed to me to shove my head down between my legs. "Calm down and breathe deep. I was only having a little fun."

I gasped noisily. "I didn't know you could do that, turn into a snake."

She grumbled. "It's not a snake. It's just a form we can take where we draw up our legs and thin out our bodies. We don't allow our wings to come out. It's good for squeezing into tight spaces. She indicated the open grate in the corner of my room. "Best way to enter unseen, and it's not the prettiest form to take, so few know of it." I pulled myself to my feet and stumbled over to my bed to sit down. "I take it you were the one who slipped me the note about Ryuu?"

"Yes. Anyone who has been here for a day knows how the guards gossip like human women. I would assume you've heard of the black sheep of the lordly family." A vision of Ryuu's body atop mine materialized in my head.

"I've heard of him."

"Good, get dressed, because tonight I'm getting you out of here. I will track down Ryuu, and we'll see how it goes from there."

Tiam, the woman who had insulted me a short while ago, was now helping me. I wondered if it was a trap. "Why are 62

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you helping me? You made it clear how you feel about humans, especially the women."

She pulled me from the bed and pushed me toward my dresser. "That's still true. Don't think for a moment that I'm not serving my own needs by being here, because I am. You are a means to an end. I want to force the elders to consider finding a cure for the female Drelconians or at least opening communications with the silver dragons. With you out of the picture, they will have to realize their plan is a failure, because I doubt even your spineless leaders will allow them to snatch another woman."

I didn't dispute her about calling our present leaders spineless. I had to agree. And since I longed to see Ryuu in person, I took the chance that she was telling me the truth and wasn't planning to take me out in the desert to die. As I scrambled to pull on some clothes, she stood watching me. I tried hiding my more obvious flaws, knowing she was comparing her smooth skin to mine. She gave me instructions while I packed.

"I'm going to cause a distraction. When I do, you are to take the route I'm going to map out for you. Do not vary by a foot. You will travel southeast of here for one mile and then wait for me. I will pick you up and take you the rest of the way."

I dropped the tennis shoe I had been shuffling into. "A mile! In the desert, at night? Are you crazy? No, I can't do it. I'll get lost. You won't be able to find me."

"Oh, you'll do it all right." She snatched up my chin and squeezed painfully. I slapped her hand away. I was not going 63

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to be bullied by the likes of her. "You can either abide by my plan, or you can stay here and spread your legs for my lords." I crossed my arms over my chest. "You can either make a reasonable plan, one that a human can follow, or spend the rest of your life as a barren old maid!" Despite herself, she smiled. "You have the look of a pushover all that long, brown hair; those big brown eyes; the modest clothing. But you've got fire in there; I can tell. I have to give you credit for that." She stood staring off into the distance for a while, then snapped her fingers. "Okay, I will still cause the diversion. I have to do that, otherwise, the dragons will sniff us out right away. You will follow the path out of the compound. There's a delivery gate for which I have the key. Don't ask how I got it. You will wait for me on the outside of the gate. Can you do that, human?"

"Yes, I can do that."

"Good. Now hurry up. We don't have a lot of time. I considered using the blue gem to throw them off, but the disgusting thing still makes me sneeze. The guards would hear me and be on us in seconds. Now look here." She had drawn a crude map on a slip of paper. The path didn't seem to make too much sense to me, but I would not question her. I was sure she had her reasons. She handed me a key so huge that I had to hold it with both hands. The Drelconians were serious about security, like any human would dare try to steal from them. The thief would get his behind burned off.

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"Remember, wait for the explosion and follow my path exactly. The guards not on patrol in the sky will move counter to what I've mapped for you. Got it?"

"Yes, I get it. You don't have to go over it again," I grumbled.

She narrowed her eyes on me before she shifted to the snakelike beast and exited the way she had come in. I shivered and snatched up my shoes in a hurry to be ready to go. I prayed Tiam's plan would work. In a few hours, I might be in the arms of the man I could so easily fall for.

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Chapter Twelve

She didn't tell me she was going to set half the compound on fire or that I would have to fight so hard to use the key in the gate that I would almost caught. Even after I made it through in time, it took more strength than I had left to get the stupid gate locked again. While I fought with it, Tiam swooped down on me.

At first I didn't recognize her. I screamed, and she put out a clawed foot to cover my mouth. One claw was about as thick as my hand. I jumped back and fell down in the sand.

"It's me, stupid," she grumbled in a deep voice.

"Yes, well, I don't want to be decapitated tonight, thank you."

She flashed a look that seemed to say I was exaggerating and then turned to lock the gate with one flick of her claw. She yanked the key out, commanded me to put it in the pouch on her side, and then held up a foot so I could climb her body and lock myself into the holder there. My stomach dropped as we rose and then flew off into the darkness. The night was a moonless one, which was neither here nor there. Tiam saw easily with eyes that glowed, and had she not been able to, Drelconians could smell for miles. She pumped through the air hard and fast. She needed to get me long out of the area, she told me, before the elders knew I was missing or all our effort would be in vain. 66

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With a heavy wind beating my face from her speed, I tucked my head against her neck and hid behind her crown.

"So, where are we heading? Where is Ryuu?"

"I lied," she called to me. "I'm going to leave you in this desert to die."

"What!"

She laughed and then curbed it quickly when it caused her to shoot bursts of fire. "Kidding."

"You know you need to work on your sense of humor. It's not funny when it's at another person's expense."

"Don't be so sensitive." She bobbed her head. "Toward the south are mountains I think he would find refuge in. Most likely, when we find him, he won't stay there because the dragons will come after you, but for now, Ryuu would be safe because the elders want nothing to do with him."

"Why do they hate him so much?"

"You'll have to ask him that for yourself. Now, be quiet so I can concentrate."

I sighed. The woman's inability to have kids could not be the only reason she didn't have a mate. I settled in, resting against her while I thought of what my student Jake was doing. I hoped he had come through the trauma of nearly being burned to death. I longed to see him and my other kids again. Teaching them had been a pleasure, even when Jake was driving me up the wall.

At some point, I must have dosed off. Not until I felt Tiam's descent to the ground did I wake up and glance around. Darkness still hung heavily over the area I couldn't figure out if we'd come very far or were still in the desert.
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dragon helper touched on the ground, and I prepared to jump free of her.

"Stay put." I heard her sniff the air. "I picked up his scent about five miles ago, but now I'm not so sure."

"I thought you all had a perfect sense of smell. Are you slipping? Getting too old?" My words were an attempt to get back at her for scaring me twice, but they sounded lame to my own ears.

She grumbled but didn't address my insults. "Ryu is clever." I heard admiration in her voice. "For all I know, there is some new substance he uses that blocks my sense of smell. I'm not picking him up, but I feel like he's near." I pulled a small flashlight from my pocket, flicked it on, and slipped down to the ground, almost twisting my ankle on the loose rocks. My knees gave, and I scraped one. A tiny rip of material rent the quiet night. I winced. "Now you're telling me you're psychic?" My mood turned sour as I felt around my knee to find not only were my favorite slacks ruined, my knee had a small cut.

For an answer, Tiam walked a few steps away. Her tail nearly knocked me to the ground again after I had stood. She swung left and right, searching. At the foliage directly ahead of her, she blew out a fiery breath. The leaves burned away.

"Hey! That was unnecessary. There's not much greenery out here as it is, and you're burning it up." Before I could finish berating her, I noticed that she had uncovered a cave. My teeth clicked when I snapped them together. The dark mood melted.

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We entered the cave with me pressed close enough to her not to be separated from her and swallowed up in the darkness but not so close her rough scales would scratch my bare arms. My flashlight barely cut through the shadows. Deep into the cave, I saw a light coming from around a bend. Tiam and I picked up our pace. Rocks were still strewn on our path, so I had

to be extra careful. I longed to run to see if it was my lover, if everything I believed to be was true. Would he be as sexy in real life as in my dreams? Would he know me? My heart pounded in anticipation. Yet, I struggled to control myself in case I was doomed to disappointment. We reached the bend, and I nearly tumbled around it to land on my face. Tiam had mercy this time and put up a foot to catch me. There I hung from her sharp claws in the limited space. I strained to see past the blazing fire someone had lit in the opening ahead.

A man stood up—someone I didn't recognize. He was covered in mud from head to toe. Even his eyelids were coated. He stood naked with a big grin on his face. "Well, well. What have we here?"

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Chapter Thirteen

I would have slumped in disappointment except the moment he spoke, I knew his voice. *Ryuu!*

Tiam set me down and changed to human form. Scales conveniently covered her private areas. She clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head. "My lord."

"Hello, Tiam. It's been a long time." His voice held affection that made me jealous. "And what have you brought me?" He turned to me. I stood stock-still, unable to do much more than breathe. So, he didn't recognize me? My heart felt like it shattered in my chest.

"My lord, Ryuu, this is—"

"Shannon." His eyes glowed. He held out his arms to me, and I flew across the expanse between us to thump against his chest. His lips met mine in a kiss that should have been sweet but tasted of grit and salt.

I drew back. "What's that?"

He chuckled. "You insult me, my love. This is mud made from Shale."

I gasped. "Shale."

"Yes, it has none of the awful properties of the blue gem, but it does hide my scent without hurting the noses of my people." He glanced up at Tiam. "I was at first not wearing it, which is why you could track me. A half hour ago, I put it on. You lost my scent at that point, didn't you?" Tiam nodded, a look of shock on her face. "But, Ryuu, when did you meet Shannon? She hasn't been in our 70

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compound for very long, and she's human." The female dragon had trouble keeping her dislike of humans hidden. I wanted to slap her, but that would mean leaving Ryuu's arms, which I was not willing to do any time soon. He squeezed me tighter, getting mud on my clothes. I couldn't care less. "Shannon and I are bonded," he admitted, to my surprise. "We did so across space using her abilities. And now that I have her physically, I'm not letting go. I will gladly take you with us to Shale when I leave."

"To Shale?" Tiam was still out of it. What Ryuu told her probably seemed impossible to her mind. "The elders will be looking for her. I planned to go back for now, to see that they get on the right course again, looking for ways to heal the Drelconian females. Come with me, my lord, and show them how you've changed. The rumors are true, aren't they? You are healed of the plague?"

Ryuu's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'get the elders on the right course'? What course are they on? I would think they would have long since begun studies to find a cure for you. Although I don't put much trust in what they find." He lifted me off my feet and stepped to the side, to the log he'd been sitting on. I heard the shift in his skin as scales lined the back of his body. He sat and tugged me on his lap. For a few minutes, Tiam sat across from us, but her stance was like a skittish deer. She was ready to bolt. My guess was if the elders searched the entire compound and found her gone, they would know she helped me. The fact that they would never think one of the women would do such a thing was in her favor for the time being.

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"The elders have decided that since your brothers have not gotten their wives pregnant, they would bring in another human, one with psychic powers. They gave her injections of something that would enhance her abilities. Now that I think of it, that's probably how she was able to connect with you being so far away." She picked at a scale covering her hip.

"They will not be happy that Shannon bonded with you and not one of your brothers."

Big mouth! I shut my eyes, tensing and waiting for Ryuu's reaction. I didn't have long to wait. He surged to his feet, almost dropping me in the fire ahead of us. "What! Shannon, is this true? Did the elders recruit you to bond and sleep with my brothers?"

The accusation in his eyes was plain. I swallowed the anger rising at his distrust. "Not willingly. They stormed into my classroom and nearly burned one of my children alive. Instead, they burned me and then abducted me. Later, they threatened me with what amounts to starving my people if I didn't cooperate."

Ryuu dragged me back into his arms and kissed my lips. He kissed each eye and my cheeks, then he stroked my hair.

"If you hadn't visited me ... I cannot believe my brothers would agree to this."

I nodded. "They did. Well, in all fairness, they didn't know I was being forced. They thought I volunteered just like their wives. But when I didn't bond with Tav—"

"Tav!" Ryuu looked like he was about to go postal. Tiam and I both tried to calm him. After a while, he settled down and indicated for me to continue.

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"When I didn't bond with your next oldest brother, Orochi decided to take his cruelty one step farther. He convinced all your brothers, except two, to spend a night ... forcing me to either bond or just mate. It was to be tomorrow night, but Tiam helped me to escape."

I thought he might explode at this news, but he remained silent, staring into the fire. When he looked up, he met Tiam's eyes. "I am indebted to you, Tiam, for saving my mate." Tiam looked more sorrowful than anything at his words. I wasn't sure why. She stood and turned to walk back the way we came. At the bend, she stopped. "I can't win for losing. I hope that you will consider coming back for us all, my lord. We need you, and we need my lord, Draco. The elders have brainwashed your brothers, leaving the rest of us to deal with whatever they decide is right. I hope that you are different." With that, she disappeared around the bend. I swung to face Ryuu. "I can't leave now, with no solution for my people. If I'm gone, the elders will be free to hurt them." Tears filled my eyes and spilled down my cheeks.

"Ryuu, can't you just attack or something, take control of the compound?"

He took my hand and led me in another direction from the route Tiam had taken. Even in human form, he seemed able to see fine in the darkness. I clung to his side to keep from twisting my ankle on the rocks.

"It's not that simple. We may outnumber the golden dragons, but each dragon born after we were healed has grown up weaker than the golden dragons. The small clan we had with us from Drelcon are as big, but too few. I need a 73

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firm plan. What Tiam has told me confirms what I had been able to learn. The Drelconians remain loyal to the elders. Only a truth they can't deny will wake them up." I frowned. "What do you mean by 'a truth'?"

"Never mind. We'll talk about it later." His eyes glowed enough for me to see him wink in the darkness. "First a bath. There's a lake near here. Care to join me?" I should first be concerned about my people and even his. We should have been concentrating on finding a solution out of this trouble. The only thoughts filling my mind right then was discovering whether Ryuu was as sexy in real life as he was in my mind. Not trusting my voice, I nodded. He squeezed my hand once, and then we picked up the pace. Soon

we were outside the cave. Daylight inched over the horizon. Before us was the most beautiful sight, a lake shimmering in the waning moonlight. This was no alien world; this was home. Who knew how long it would be before I saw it again, if somehow I managed to go with Ryuu back to Shale. I took in the sight, hiding it in my heart. Someday when I was homesick, I would take it out again and dream of Earth.

We picked through loose gravel down to the shore where the ground was made of dirt, grass, and twigs. I bent to rub my aching ankles and heels. Ryuu scooped me up in his arms, then walked along a log that lay half-in and half-out of the water. I squirmed in his arms. "Hey, don't you throw me in fully dressed, Ryuu!"

He laughed. "Don't worry, darling." He set me down on the edge and removed my shoes and socks. He dipped his hands 74

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in the water and splashed some over my feet. The cold soothed me, but when he bent to kiss my ankles, my body heated in a real hurry.

"Ryuu..."

"Trust me, Shannon. I won't hurt you. My mouth will soothe your pains away." He planted a kiss on my toes. "My touch will satisfy your desires."

"You're very confident."

"I am confident in what you and I share. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

He sat up to tug my T-shirt over my head and unbutton my slacks. I struggled with my bra strap before I finally ripped the whole bra over my head and flung it away.

"Nothing at all."

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Chapter Fourteen

Ryuu and I stepped down into the water hand-in-hand. The early morning chill sent goose bumps racing over my skin. As soon as we were waist-deep, with me yelping all the way, we stopped and he twisted to face me. I had not seen him with anything in his hands, but he managed to produce a bar of soap.

Out of eagerness to finally see my lover in person, I took the initiative to grab the soap from him and began to lather my hands. I ran my hands up over his chest to his shoulders, then to his neck. I soaped his arms and face, his back and stomach.

"Rinse me, honey."

I cupped my hands and scooped water up to wash away the mud. I couldn't help myself; I leaned in to inhale his scent. With the tip of my tongue, I tasted his warm, smooth skin. Mine was chilled, but he had a fire to keep him warm. I snuggled closer.

"You're not finished, young lady." Meeting his gaze with half-closed eyes, I asked, "Hmm?" He winked. "My cock is quite dirty, and it really needs your attention."

"Oh," I chuckled. "Far be it from me to deny your cock." He ran a thumb across my lips before he pushed between them. I sucked lightly, dreaming of sucking his cock. I knew when he caused us to sway off balance that he was thinking the same.

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"Come!" He lifted me an inch or so off my feet and moved us closer to the shore, enough so that his erect shaft stuck out above water level. When he set me down, I sneezed.

"Sorry; I'm cold."

He rested his hands at my hips, and instantly heat radiated from his palms. Warmth shot through my entire body. The goose bumps eased, and my tremors stopped. "Better?" he inquired. I nodded.

Again, he produced the soap. I lathered up and placed one hand at the base of his mud-covered cock. A tremor hit me, but this time it wasn't cold. I worked the soap up his length, massaging and teasing. His head went back; his eyes closed. I circled the swollen head with the tip of my finger, then swirled soap and water around before I palmed him and gently squeezed. Precome coated my fingers.

"Shannon," he cried out. "If you don't stop doing that, I'm going to come."

"You're the one who insisted you were still dirty. Now stop with your complaints, or I won't suck you after you're clean." He growled, no doubt just the thought of me taking him into my mouth drove him to the brink. "Dip down," I commanded. He obeyed, and I waved the water over him so that it washed away the soap and mud. When he stood again, he was clean and still hard. I allowed my forehead to connect with his chest. I, too, was nearly out of control. The man's body sent me into orbit.

I bent down to take him in my mouth. I got only his delicious head in before I was almost knocked off balance. He pulled back. "Wait, let me wash you before we go any further. 77

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The water is too unstable. We'll take it to its conclusion on the grass." He indicated dry land, and I agreed. He began to clean my face and neck. I reveled in his touch, the way he caressed at every opportunity, stroking my

neck and shoulders. He kneaded my muscles, which eased away all tension until I stood relaxed before him, held up only by his one hand at my waist.

With too much of a straight face for my taste, he soaped my breasts, taking extra care to thumb my nipples. As if it didn't faze him at all, he ran a hand between my legs, washing my pussy and then on around to my ass. Like he couldn't do a good job unless he saw it, he spun me so that I faced away, and he washed my rear again, this time massaging my tight hole.

I shot up to my toes, poked out my butt, and shouted in delight. He slid a hand across my belly to brace me, and then he pushed harder with his thumb soaped. My bottom opened to him. "Ah, Ryuu!" I squeaked.

"Has anyone ever been back here, Shannon?"

"N-no." I was about to come. "Y-You said we would do it on shore."

"I couldn't help myself. I love making you scream for me."

"But your face is so straight like you don't enjoy touching me at all."

He pulled out and grasped me closer. "Never for one second think it doesn't give me intense pleasure to touch you, to make love to you. I can't wait to please you, Shannon." He kissed the tip of my ear, lingering there until I shook in his arms. "Tell me you crave me as much as I crave you." 78

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"Yes, I do. So much."

"Then let me not deny you a moment longer, my love." He lifted me in his arms and carried me toward the shore. He lay me down in the grass and joined me at my side.

"Are you sure we're safe here?"

"For now," he assured me. "We'll need to choose a new location soon. I'm sure you don't want to spend too much time covered in mud. I can smell the dragons coming, if that's what you're worried about. In plenty of time for us to get away."

"Ryu?"

"Yes."

"What happened on Shale ... that was real? I visited you there, and we really did make love?" I stroked his face, memorizing every feature. I was terrified of admitting to myself what was developing inside for this amazing man. He returned my caress, gently eased me to my back, and took in my naked body from head to toe. In the early morning light, I lay without a stitch of self-consciousness. I wanted him to know every part of me.

"Yes, it was real. And I meant what I said, Shannon. We are bonded."

"Orochi won't be happy."

He frowned. "I could not care less what he will be happy with. But that's neither here nor there. I want you, right here, right now."

I lifted my arms above my head and flashed a look of invitation. "Take me now, lover, because if you don't get 79

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started, I will have to take charge. I could ride that cock of yours all day long."

His eyes shifted, the pupils drawing long like slits slashing across the silver. "I'm going to require proof for that claim!"

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Chapter Fifteen

Ryuu kissed along my body until he hovered above my pussy. He swiped his tongue over my clit, making me jump.

"Look at this. A sweet little schoolteacher with a shaved pussy. You're very naughty, Shannon." I lifted my legs and stroked between them. "You like it." I dipped my fingers inside my moist center, pushing in and out.

"I need to come like yesterday."

"Hey! Get your fingers out of there." He pulled my hand away and licked my fingers. "That cream is for me to enjoy, and making you come is my job."

"Better hurry up or else."

He squeezed the back of my thighs and ran thumbs over my back opening. Memories of how it felt to have him pierce me in the water washed over my body, and I wanted to feel it again.

Ryuu anticipated my desires. He lowered his mouth onto my clit to suck, while coating one thumb in my juices. My back arched up off the ground when he sucked hard and pushed his thumb inside my hole. I rocked back and forth, gripped his head on both sides and ground my pussy up to his mouth. He licked and teased, bringing me to a roaring climax. When my juices coursed down to coat my ass, Ryuu took advantage. He swirled them around and then buried two fingers up my ass. I screamed. He gave me no mercy. His stroke was deep and fast, as far as his fore and middle finger 81

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could reach and then out again. I fought the intense pleasure, but he held me down with a hand pressed to my stomach.

"You like that, baby?"

"Yes! Ryuu, I'm not sure I can take it. It's so intense." He didn't lessen his pace. If anything, he increased it. "You will take it, my love—this and more. Come again for me. I long to eat more of your cream."

"I can't." I protested but surely my body was several feet above the ground with the explosions ripping through it. "Oh, too much. Too good."

His pace increased again. My ass heated; my cream flowed. I screamed as multiple orgasms took control. Ryuu didn't once slow down as he buried his face between my legs once again. He licked up every drop, and he sucked at the tops of my thighs, nipping the tender skin with his sharp teeth.

"Damn, you taste good, honey. Give me more." He stroked my belly, reached up to fondle my breasts and play with my nipples. His greedy mouth devoured every part of my pussy, even sucking on my nether lips. I screamed, coming hard. Finally, he crawled up higher and rested his cheek between my breasts. His breathing was labored; it warmed my skin with each pant.

"You're cruel," I told him. "You never stopped even when I told you it was too much. The pleasure almost made me faint. I can't believe how much better it was in person."

"Do you think we're done? I haven't had the pleasure of being inside you yet."

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I sucked my teeth. "Like I should let you have any more of my body after how you behaved." I flipped to my stomach, knocking his head off me in an effort to crawl away. He caught my ankle.

"Where are you going, miss? You think you can resist me?" He pulled me to a kneeling position and spooned me from behind. His cock tapped my exposed pussy, and I lost all will to resist him. "Shannon..."

He slipped a hand up over my breast and gave it a gentle squeeze, then he kissed me. Our tongues entwined together in a slow and sensual kiss. When he drew back, he rubbed his nose alongside mine.

"You know how I feel," he muttered.

"Tell me."

I knew nothing of their traditions, whether he was allowed or given to confessions of affection. I needed to hear it. In a situation I thought could not get any worse, one that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, here I found the man of my dreams—literally.

"I need to hear it, Ryuu."

"We've only just met and yet..."

"And yet?"

"Shannon, I love you. There's no denying it. I will do whatever I have to, to ensure you and I are together. I can't wait for you to live with me on Shale, or if after all this chaos with the golden dragons is over, and you prefer to live here, we will do that."

"I love you, too," I told him, nuzzling close. "And wherever you are, that's where I want to be. I don't care if it's here or 83

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there." An important thought occurred to me. "Can you have children, Ryuu?"

"Yes, of course."

I hesitated. "Do you want them?" He, too, seemed hesitant to answer. "Is four too many for you or maybe five or six?"

My eyes widened. I chuckled. "Let's talk about it later and about me possibly teaching the children in your clan?"

"Agreed. Now then, woman, there's the matter of satisfying this painful throbbing back here." He pressed his erection against my opening."

I grinned. "Can't have that." I kissed him and reached down in front of me to grab hold of his cock. The swollen rod fairly jumped into my palm. I guided the head into my hot passage while pushing backward. My pussy walls stretched; my muscles complained. But the pleasure made my head reel.

Once he filled me to the hilt, we moved into a well-oiled rhythm, our bodies meeting in a slow grind and then pulling apart, meeting again before drawing back. I groaned into Ryuu's mouth. He teased my tongue and sucked my lips. Before I knew it I had risen to the heights of passion, and my climax and my lover's collided. We toppled to the ground, crying out and clinging to one another. With my legs straightened, Ryuu was a tight fit. We rolled to our sides, him still behind me. He lifted my knees before me and pressed deeper. His strokes remained slow and steady, taking me up to another orgasm.

"Don't stop, Ryuu," I begged.

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His breathing was harsh in my ear. "I don't intend to, honey. I will use the rest of the day to prove to you just how much you mean to me."

"I'm ready," I murmured and lay trusting in his arms.

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Chapter Sixteen

Ryuu and I moved several times in the next few days to remain hidden from the Drelconians. After we had made love in every conceivable position and location, we were ready to face the reality of our situation.

"I cannot send you back to lay with my brothers," he insisted.

"I'm pretty sure Orochi knows you and I have been together all this time. He must know we've bonded. Surely, it will be clear when I get back."

"Shannon..."

I moved out of his arms and strolled over to the cliff's edge where we were camped out at the moment. "Don't argue with me, Ryuu. Until you come up with another solution, I am going back. My people's lives are at stake, my schoolchildren."

He crossed to where I stood and wrapped me in his arms with his chin resting on my shoulder. "I don't want to argue, but there needs to be a plan in place before your return. I don't want to depend on Orochi giving up after he finds you've bonded with me. Also, he may not take your word for it."

Night quickly replaced daylight. We stood silent for a long time, soaking up the last of our time in private. Whatever we decided, we would have to execute it soon. When the temperature dropped, I began to shiver. Ryuu pulled me back

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inside our cave and, with one burst of his breath, ignited the sticks he had piled.

I settled to the dirt floor to prepare our dinner of mostly fruits. At times, Ryuu would go out to hunt. I knew he couldn't exist long off this type of food. He needed meat. When I offered him a slightly warmed piece of fruit, he turned up his nose and sniffed the air.

"Hey, I have nothing else. You don't have to act like that!" I snapped.

He laughed. "Sorry, honey. It's not that. Someone is coming. I smell them." He sniffed again. "Definitely Drelconians. Tiam!" We waited a good hour before she arrived. He had an incredible sniffer.

Tiam strolled into the cave, shoulders stiff, a proud look in her eyes, but there was sadness there also. I wondered what she had dealt with when she returned. I assumed we would know soon enough. She bowed her head. "My lord." Ryuu acknowledged her greeting. "Any word, Tiam? What's happening at the compound?"

She hesitated, then cast a glance my way with an apology in her expression before she focused again on Ryuu. "The elders have cut the humans off in terms of the blue gem. No new shipments will be delivered until Shannon is returned to them. Already, water usage is being limited in every city. All electricity is to be turned off at sundown to conserve energy, not very comfortable for delicate humans in the summer." I opened my mouth to ask a question, but she continued, anticipating my thoughts.

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"Yes, I was caught when I got back. Orochi was not happy, and I've been watched every second of every day." Ryuu stood and strolled over toward the cave mouth, peering out. "Then how are you here now, Tiam? They allowed you to come here. Did you lead them to me?"

"No, my lord. I convinced them that I could bring Shannon back."

He spun around, anger in his eyes and a growl rumbling in his throat. I wondered if he would attack her, but he didn't move. His expression was enough to set Tiam to trembling.

"So, you were going to just turn her in, is that it? For the elders to hurt her, Tiam?" he growled. "You have no idea what she means to me."

Tiam looked miserable. "I think I do, my lord." I truly felt sorry Tiam and her female counterparts. Life wasn't fair for anyone, but the Drelconian women got the raw end of the deal. "There's got to be something we can do. Maybe I can go to my people and convince them to fight against the golden dragons. And, Ryuu, if you were to speak to your people here..."

"It wouldn't mean a thing." He sighed. "I tried many years ago, but as I said to you before, they won't listen. We can be set in our ways, and the elders have led my people for a long time. It would take a lot to make the others see the truth."

"What truth?"

He glanced at Tiam and then turned back to me. "Years ago, before I was banned, I found out that the elders were developing a way to make the dragons stronger, so that instead of two families, one weaker, one stronger, we would 88

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all be strong. But that plan backfired. The virus killed many of our people and made all of the women barren. No one knows except me, and now my brother and the other silver dragons, that it was their tampering with our DNA that caused this. When I would have told everyone, an elder attempted to kill me to keep their secret."

Tiam shook her head. "No, that can't be true. The *elders* ruined my life?"

"Yes. And I had to defend myself against the man who wanted to keep their secret. I killed him. For that I was banned. I fled with my small group, and you know the rest of our tainted history." He stared out toward the way Tiam must have traveled, from the north. "The only way my people here will see is if they have proof. Shannon, you said they used something on you, a shot to boost your psychic ability?" I nodded. "Yes, something the elders developed to bring out my natural abilities. D-Do you think it will alter me like it did your women, make me infertile?"

"No, of course not." He took me in his arms. "But I do need to locate their lab. I can't enter the compound. They'll be on the alert. Maybe we can get Ladon to find it. My brother, Draco, tells me Ladon was very loyal to him and helped his wife and her sister despite the laws."

"No, he won't help. I mean, I think he's a good person, but he made this big speech about the elders and how your people should be loyal to them because of all they had guided the Drelconians through over the years. He and Arnetta had a falling out over it."

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Ryuu considered my words as he tapped his chin. I studied him as varied emotions flitted over his countenance; all the while I prayed we could find a solution. We would need to cover all the bases, help the humans and the golden dragons. That was a tall order. Billions of people counted on us. My knees crumpled, but Ryuu held me up against his body. His gentle smile told me I could depend on him.

"I have to believe that Ladon wants to make an effort to help. Talk to him, both of you, get him to locate the formula, notes, anything that will prove what the elders did. Tell him he can reserve judgment until he sees it with his own eyes."

"What if the proof has already been destroyed?" Tiam wondered.

"No, it won't be. Trust me, the elders are proud of their research. They will be unable to part with at least the notes, if they did destroy the virus or leave it on Drelcon. Evidence is there. Ladon may have to do a little digging, because I can't imagine it's lying around in his little clinic." Ryuu stroked my hair and stared down into my eyes. "When Ladon has the evidence, you will contact me immediately, Shannon. I will come. Together we will present our evidence to my brothers. Unfortunately, it means my people will have to attack. There's no way we can go waltzing in there without the elders knowing. I will give you further instructions once I'm back on Earth."

I stared up at him like he'd lost his mind. "What do you mean contact you? What if it is during the day, or what if the elders don't give me any more shots? Is there some other way of getting word to Shale?"

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"No. Honey, I trust you can do it. You were contacting me long before the elders got their hands on you. Everything will be okay." He turned to Tiam. "I'm depending on you to keep her safe no matter what."

"I will give my life if it means saving hers, my lord." He dragged me into his arms, then hugged me so tight it hurt. "Then go." He kissed me several times before stepping back. "The sooner you return to the compound, the sooner you will return to my arms. I will wait for your call, Shannon." My heart pounded and there were tears in my eyes, but I spun away from him to follow Tiam out of the cave. There was no telling what lay ahead, but I promised myself Tiam wouldn't be the only one ready to give her life. I would be there, in the midst of that fight, making sure I did all I could do to keep Ryuu safe.

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Chapter Seventeen

"Are you sure about this?" Ladon demanded. I saw the disbelief in his eyes, but, surprisingly, there was also hope. I thought maybe he needed to grab hold of something concrete. He needed to give himself an excuse to let go of the old ways. The man had looked miserable when I first laid eyes on him, and so did Arnetta. From all appearances, the two hadn't made up. They spoke only infrequently as she still worked in the clinic with him.

"Yes, you can confirm with Tiam. Ryuu said that's why he got into the fight with the elder whom he killed. The man had been trying to kill him, to keep him quiet about their activities." I took hold of his arm. "Please, Ladon, you must help us. Ryuu loves your people and wants to do the right thing for mine. Can't you see that? What the elders are doing all over again, tampering with nature, destroying lives, is not right. At least if you are making an attempt at bringing peace, Arnetta will forgive you."

His countenance darkened. "I've done nothing wrong to make her angry with me."

"And yet you're still miserable, aren't you?" He sighed. "Fine. I will search, but while I believe my lord, Ryuu, he must be mistaken."

"Then prove him wrong. Find the private documents, assure Ryuu there was no manufactured virus, and then we can all move on. Agreed?"

His shoulders slumped. "Yes, agreed." 92

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Days passed quickly. Somehow I think that Orochi figured out that I could visit Ryuu in my sleep. He gave me shots, but he also forced me to take a sleeping potion every night. I would close my eyes at ten and wake up well-rested in the morning. My heart ached to connect with my lover. I missed

him more than I thought I could bear for long. To make matters worse, Tiam was kept well away from me. I knew the guard I saw walking with her most of the time was not just a companion. He was there to be sure she and I had no contact. I had my own guard dogging my steps at every turn. The situation seemed hopeless. My only reprieve came in the early evenings when Arnetta visited with me. She still came to watch over me and to brush my hair as if I were her living doll. I didn't mind. I had never had a sister, and if I did, I would hope she would be as kind as Arnetta—albeit not as stubborn.

"He's miserable, Arnetta. Can't you see that?" She shrugged. "I see it, and it serves him right. I'm not putting up with that kind of attitude. Ladon needs to wake up to the real world. The traditions of the Drelconians need to change if we're all going to live in peace."

"If there's no peace at home, it won't be found in the community or in society as a whole. We need to get along individually before we can collectively." She rolled her eyes. "You sound like one of the social workers who like visiting every few months—as if their words will change how it's done on either side."

"Exactly." I held her hand in place when she would have run the brush through my hair. "Arnetta, you're trying to 93

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force Ladon to be like you want him to be. He doesn't see things as you do. Can you imagine turning your back on your parents, causing a rift that might never heal? That's what's being asked of Ladon and those like him, who see that a change needs to come but have been ingrained with deep respect for their leaders. We're not talking thirty or forty years here, which actually still is a long time. We're talking centuries."

"It's to save lives!" she insisted.

"I know." Frustration made me want to slap her. If she and Ladon didn't work together, how were we going to pull this whole thing off? And he had been adamant about me not telling her what he was doing. The nut felt she should come back to him before she knew that he was willing to look for proof—on principle alone.

I chose my words carefully as I tried hard to keep my word to Ladon. "What if he is willing to face the truth about the elders if he had proof that they were doing things that would unwittingly hurt the dragons?"

She frowned. "What?"

This was harder than I thought. "Say the elders were ... experimenting, like with me. Say it wasn't the first time and that time things went horribly wrong. If Ladon were to learn about this, would you think differently about him?" Arnetta was a sweet woman, open and honest about everything. She was also incredibly beautiful. That's why it was sometimes hard for me to remember she was equally intelligent. No fluff resided under her soft blond hair. Understanding dawned in her eyes, and I knew I had blown it. 94

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"What's going on, Shannon? You've been closed-lipped about your time away, and I did hear guards whisper about Ryuu after you returned." She tossed the brush on the bed and swung around to stand in front of me with her hands on her hips. "I think you need to tell me what happened out there."

"I ... I..."

My door swung open without a knock. Arnetta and I both turned toward it. Orochi stood in the doorway, a cat-in-the-cream expression on his face. My heart pounded in terror. The man had said nothing since I returned, except he demanded me to give him an account of my activities. I had happily told him how I'd spread my legs many times for Ryuu and that we were bonded. The blood had rushed into his face so violently, I thought he was going to

hit me. He had simply walked away and given new commands that I was to lose all the pseudofreedom I had enjoyed previously. Now, he strolled into the room like he had solved world hunger. "Shannon, put your shoes on. You're coming with me."

"Where is she going?" Arnetta asked. He looked at her like she didn't have the right to breathe, let alone question him. I said nothing but swung my feet off the bed and slid my shoes on. Soon we were on the walk outside heading toward a building I knew to house one of the lords. Which one, I couldn't remember.

Orochi held up a small package with a symbol in the corner that I recognized as being from their clinic. Packages with the psychic drug inside them had that same sign, but this one 95

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was smaller, and I knew today wasn't the day for my normal dosage.

"This little miracle," he told me, "is what will enable you to produce my newest protégé in no time." My eyes widened so much they hurt. "Something to make me pregnant? But ... why not give it to one of the wives? Why me?"

He took hold of my arm to yank me roughly through the door a guard had pulled open for us. "Because you have been a pain in my neck for a while now. I can't wait for you to experience all the humiliation in store for you, and I can strike out at Ryuu at the same time. In fact, I might even take pictures of the event so he can treasure them always."

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Chapter Eighteen

Orochi slung me onto a bed covered in red silk sheets. Candles were lit and placed at various points around the room. While I scrambled to sit up, he slammed the door closed and locked it. No one else was in the room.

"W-where is the lord you're determined to force me with?" I glanced around for another door or a room where my forced mate would be waiting. The room was too small to hide anyone. There wasn't even a closet. The entire layout differed from what I was used to in the other buildings. I could only imagine what the elders had been up to here. My memory had been wrong. This building didn't belong to one of the Drelconian lords.

"A lord?" Orochi sucked his teeth. "No, they are too squeamish, which proved that I needed to build a new race of dragons who will not weaken to the pleas of humans or, for that matter, to morals. They will be perfect, and with your abilities, psychic." He crossed to the bed while he untied his robe.

I reared back on my heels with my hands at my sides, then backpedaled to the headboard. "You can't mean..."

"Oh, yes, Shannon. I will be the father of your babies." I slapped a hand across my mouth to keep from throwing up, not that Orochi wasn't as hot as all the other dragons. He was, even for a man of his advanced years. He didn't have a wrinkle or gray hair. To my sight, the only indicator that he was much older than the others was the paleness of his eyes, 97

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and the one time I had seen him in dragon form when his scales were less brilliant than any other dragon's.

"You cannot mean this, Orochi. The new dragons will be half-human."

He laughed. "Silly woman. You think I've been fiddling around all these years? I've perfected my procedures. All I needed was a Drelconian baby. I can extract most of your unwanted human DNA from the child while it's still in your womb, which leaves only the dragon and the psychic ability. Well, in theory. We'll have plenty of tries to get it right." Tears filled my eyes. "Please, don't do this. It's wrong. Let nature take its course. If you have a way to help the wives give their husbands babies, that's fine ... if it doesn't hurt them. But don't do this, Orochi." I spread my hands out to him in appeal. "You're not this horrible a person."

"Not *this* horrible a person? So, you consider me a monster?" Amusement lit his eyes. "You don't know the half of it, human." He took hold of one of my wrists and snatched me forward. His grip was so tight, I thought any second my bone would snap. I gritted my teeth to keep from crying out, which would give this bastard satisfaction. "The things I've done to reach my goals would give you nightmares, if you can believe it."

I figured we were discussing the near-genocide of the dragons, but I kept my mouth shut. He parted his robe with one hand as he held me close. I couldn't hold back this time as I saw his stiff cock. I screamed and scratched at him, then kicked as hard as I could. My foot connected with his erection, but he didn't even wince.

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As soon as he released my wrist, I made a bolt for the door, but he was on me too fast. With his cruel fingers wrapped around the back of my neck, he dragged me to the bed and shoved me face-down. I screamed and cried for help. No one heard or cared to come.

With a knee on each side of my hips, he forced one of my hands behind me. "Touch it, Shannon, feel what I have for you." He molded my fingers around it, and I vomited onto the bed. Soon after, I blacked out.

* * * *

Possibly sensing my presence, Ryuu turned to face me. I wasn't sure where we were, but it wasn't in the caves. Movement beneath my feet made me wonder if we were on his spaceship. At the sight of me, his eyes lit up.

"Honey, I've missed you." He held out his arms. "Let me hold you. You shouldn't have taken so long to come to me." I didn't move. "Ryuu ... he's raping me," I cried. For a second he didn't move like he didn't understand what I meant. In the next moment, he ran forward, took my hand, and pulled me along a corridor. He flung open a door, and there before us was space. Millions and millions of stars lay all around. I watched as he punched buttons on the console and shouted commands to an answering voice I assumed was a computerized navigational system. We were turning.

"I'll kill him!" he growled. "Which brother, Shannon? I will rip him to shreds!"

I shook so hard, Ryuu had to put me in one of two swiveling chairs facing the console. "N-not your brother. It's 99

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Orochi. I know it's not possible, but please stop him, Ryuu. I can't bear the thought of him having me. You are the man I love."

He took only a second to press his palms to my cheeks and kiss my lips. "Trust me, I will barrel through anyone who stands in my way to get to your body. Our plans are out the window, and we cannot wait for Ladon. I must attack now. I have two guards on board. They will help. It must be enough until reinforcements arrive."

I pulled my knees up to my chest and sat silently. At least I could be here with Ryuu the entire time and pretend this was reality for me. I hoped Orochi would not try to revive me so I could be awake for his cruelty.

Ryuu punched more buttons and threw a switch on the panel. "Draco, are you there?"

Dead air was his response before someone answered. The voice sounded almost exactly like Ryuu's. "Yes, brother. How soon will you be back? My spoiled son insists on waiting up for his favorite uncle." The amusement and affection in Draco's voice touched my heart despite the circumstances.

"Negative," Ryuu informed him. "We have an emergency. I have no choice. I have to attack the compound tonight. As soon as you can, please get every able-bodied man down to Earth. I will explain everything when I see you. That is, if I am still alive then."

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by Brenda Steele

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Chapter Nineteen

Ryuu didn't bother to land and then fly under dragon power to get to the compound. He flew straight over their air space and fired down on the ground, which sent small storage buildings up in flames.

"Ryuu!" I screamed. "You'll hurt someone."

"I'm showing them I mean business. Which building are you in?"

I pointed it out. The madman I was desperately in love with fired all around the perimeter. The door swung open, and Orochi appeared completely naked. Ryuu roared, which split my eardrums. With my hands over my ears, I stared in horror when his snout grew out and fire exploded from his lips.

"Get in back, Shannon!" he commanded. "To the room where you found me. You will stay there until I come get you."

I moved out of his sight, but now that I knew Orochi was not in the middle of the act, I determined to go back to my body. Ryuu was so enraged, he was liable to kill someone. As I hurried to get out of his sight, something hit the hull of the ship. The floor tilted beneath me. I tumbled to the floor and rolled along until I hit a wall. I heard growls and shouts behind a couple other doors. I assumed it was the guards. I closed my eyes and willed myself to return to the ground. With a ringing in my ears, I was back inside my body. I lay on my back, my clothes torn off. I was terrified of movement, in case I felt soreness between my legs. A stinging just above

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the bend in my elbow and the discarded package on the nightstand told me Orochi had given me the shot. If he had entered me, I was probably already pregnant, from what Arnetta had shared about Drelconian pregnancies.

"Please, no, please..."

I pushed myself to a sitting position. The stench of vomit assaulted my nose. I put a hand up to find it in my hair. The feeling washed over me a second time, but I tamped it down. With a deep breath, I stood. No soreness. I crumpled to the floor in relief. Maybe Orochi had had to wait for the shot to take effect before he went ahead with his plans. A blast shook the building and rattled the windows, followed by a scream of pain. I rushed to look out the window and saw a gaping hole in Orochi's side. But even as I watched, it began to heal. He struggled to stand. I examined my clothes. They were in no condition to cover me. As I tore the top sheet from the bed, I mumbled halfmad as Ryuu appeared to be about to do what I would do to Orochi if he was unfortunate enough to still be near when I got outside. The fitted sheet tied about me, exposing too much of one thigh, I wrenched open the door. Orochi stumbled away, holding his side. I tripped down the stairs and glanced around. Three large stones decorated an area of the garden to my left. I swiped one, with a slight wince at its weight, and charged after my attempted rapist. The dull thud made my stomach roil. Orochi hit the pavement. I would have smashed his head open like a pumpkin if a guard didn't knock me away and help him to his feet.

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"He deserves to die!" I screamed wildly. The guard's eyes were sympathetic, but he lifted Orochi to his back, shape-shifted, and flew away. I ran out into the courtyard to look up at the sky. Other ships, which I assumed belonged to the golden dragons, were up in the sky, all attacking Ryuu's ship.

"Ryuu!" I called, like he could hear me from down here.

"Don't do that. You'll only distract him and get him killed." I swung around to see Ladon hurrying toward me. He took my hand. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the lab. I've located it." He walked so quickly, I could barely keep up. "You can help me to search for the evidence."

"But wait, Ryuu needs help. They outnumber him. He needs help." I tugged on Ladon's arm. "Don't you have weapons anywhere? Something I can use to shoot down the ships?"

He stopped and turned. "We had no need of those types of weapons. I'm afraid my lord is on his own if he has no one to back him. I did see two dragons come from that ship at the last pass, but they are also outnumbered. The best we can do is to find the information on the virus. Maybe we can stop all of this."

For the first time, he noticed my attire. "What are you doing out here like that?"

"My clothes were torn to pieces after your precious elder decided he would be the one to get me pregnant." Ladon's eyes bugged. "Please, say that's not true." 103

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"Yes, and he fully intended to play God with my baby before it was born to take out its humanity." Ladon had a devastated look on his face, I thought, as if this had happened to Arnetta. I had pity on him. "Ryuu arrived in time to distract him before he could have success."

"Shannon, I'm so sorry. My eyes are most firmly opened. I will do all in my power to keep you safe." He jerked me forward, nearly ripping my arm off. "Come, we have to get Arnetta and do this fast."

We dodged balls of fire and falling debris from collapsing buildings as we rushed across the compound. We collected Arnetta, whose arms were filled with supplies and hurried toward a helipad I hadn't known existed. A small

building Ryuu hadn't yet blown up housed harnesses. My guess was that the lords occasionally rode their wives, for none liked to use vehicles unless it was necessary. I couldn't imagine having to travel that way all of the time. Arnetta held back. "Wait, Shannon, why are you dressed like that?" And then she paled and began to sway. She obviously had just remembered that Orochi dragged me off earlier. Tears raced down her cheeks. She turned back to Ladon. "We have to get her some clothes." He sighed. "Okay, you two wait in here while I go grab something. Don't leave."

When he was out of sight, I tugged Arnetta out of the building. "Ryuu was picking these little buildings off one by one. We crouched in nearby bushes until Ladon returned. I dressed behind his extended wing after he had transformed and we were off. I could only pray that we would return in 104

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time so that I wouldn't become a widow before I ever became a wife.

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Chapter Twenty

"Eureka!" I shouted. "Found it!" I waved the sheet of paper I had been searching through seemingly endless files to locate. Ladon and Arnetta rushed to my side. I handed the sheet over to him, and Arnetta and I peered around his arms to see. We had been searching the entire night until sun-up. Finally, we had hit pay dirt.

"Ka-d..." Arnetta began sounding out the Drelconian words.

"Sweetie, it's pronounced Ka-deauk-cha," Ladon gently reprimanded, "DNA."

She gasped. "Of course."

Sorrow clouded Ladon's face. "Well, if I had any other doubt, this dispels it. The elders knew all along where the virus started. They created it, with no thought as to its effect. Or maybe they did, now that we've learned what Orochi intended for Shannon. Come on, let's get back. This will stop this civil war."

Arnetta hesitated. "What's that sound?" We all paused to listen. A subtle beep came from somewhere near. Our eyes must have widened at the same time. We were too far from the door. Ladon transformed; his body sucked up all available room. His hide knocked out a wall in the mountaintop lab as he gathered Arnetta and I against his body and wrapped us in his wings. All light was snuffed out with his head tucked into the top of our organic capsule.

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Before he could do anything else, Arnetta and I were screaming in terror as the explosion went off, and the building must have left the cliff side, for I was sure we were hurtling down the side of the mountain. Ladon growled, but stifled his cry to keep from frying us. I could only imagine that his body must be taking a beating.

Sudden light blinded me. Ladon lost control. My body broke free of his hold, and I bumped along a not-too-steep outcropping. Before I could grab hold, I went over the side and plunged farther. Roots, rocks, and grass scraped my fingers, but I scrambled to find a hold. Something tore up the leg of my pants and ripped into my skin. My head began to spin, and dirt fell into my eyes, forcing me to close them. Now I was falling blind.

Somewhere nearby, I heard a crack and Arnetta screamed in anguish. Ladon roared. The roots dragged through my fingers. After what felt like years, I was able to hold onto a vine, and all went silent. I had stopped falling.

"Arnetta?" I called. No answer came. "Ladon? Help me, please. I can't hold on much longer." He didn't answer either. The thought that they might be dead sickened me. So little could permanently damage the dragons, but an explosion was much more powerful. The elders had been trying to cover their tracks. Maybe they knew Ladon had located the lab. Several years ago, I had developed carpal tunnel syndrome. I had had to have the surgery, but even with it, too much stress on my fingers was painful. They had never fully recovered even though the actual damage had been in my wrists. I suppose every part of the body depended on 107

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every other part. My fingers would not be able to hold my weight for long.

"Ryuu, I'm in trouble. Help me," I pleaded mentally. I knew he couldn't hear me. Not once had I visited him psychically while fully awake. Still, I tried. I called to him repeatedly and blinked my eyes in an attempt to get the dirt out. They felt raw and were probably red. I willed myself to cry, but nothing was working. I squeezed them tighter, ignoring the shocks of pain. I

strained as hard as I could, pushing against whatever barrier kept me trapped in a threedimensional world. The shift was immediate and scary. As if a lock popped, my mind broke free. I zoomed across space or some plane of existence and I knew without a doubt that, in my next breath, Ryuu would hear me.

"Ryuu, save me. I'm falling!" My entwined fingers inched apart. I sought a foothold but found nothing. Soon, I heard a flapping in the distance. I tried to hold out, but even as I willed it, my hands were done. The falling sensation was immediate. I plunged, having no idea how much farther down the ground was. I waited for death or a heart attack that would put me out of my misery. Something moved clumsily up beneath me, slamming into the wall of the cliff. I slumped forward and bumped my lip on the object. When I heard the groan and felt the rumble through his chest, I knew it was Ryuu. His scales scraped my face as my arms were too heavy to brace myself or hold onto him.

We were still falling. "Ryuu, what's wrong? Fly!" 108

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He didn't respond. I heard him bang and pictured his head or possibly his shoulder drumming every so often against the mountain. He had to be injured or he would fly.

"Ryuu!"

"Hold on." His voice came out ragged and exhausted. "I gave the last that I had getting here. We'll be okay. I'm sure I can take the fall." The words had barely left his lips before we hit the ground. He yelled. Heat battered the top of my head, and I rolled away thinking he would burn me. I landed at his side with what felt like a twisted wing in my back. Ryuu's breathing was so quiet, I thought he was dead. The tears came at last, and they washed most of the dirt from my eyes. I dragged myself up a long way onto Ryuu's chest. His eyes were closed, and his chest did not rise and fall. "Please, no."

"S-okay," he mumbled. "Need time to heal. Stay..." I stroked his rough scales. "Don't worry. I would never leave you."

"Need ... to ... protect ... you."

"Men!" I smiled despite the circumstances. "I'm fine. Looks like I will need to take care of you." I glanced around us. "I have to find Ladon and Arnetta to make sure they're okay. I promise, I'll be right back, honey."

We were on the valley floor. A narrow path ran around the base of this part of the mountain. I struggled to my feet and began walking left a short way. Although rocks and debris of varying sizes littered the ground from the explosion, I saw no evidence of my friends. After picking my way through for a 109

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quarter of a mile, I realized I had gone the wrong direction and turned back.

Ryuu lay where I left him, his eyes closed. I dropped down beside him and lay my face next to his. "Why don't you change, honey. Back to your human form."

"I heal faster like this." At least his voice was clearer.

"Stay by me, Shannon. I need to know you're safe."

"I can't. I have to find them." I kissed his cheek. "I will be back."

The way around Ryuu's massive body was a long route in and of itself. When I made it to the other side, I picked up the pace. For a small stretch, no debris covered the ground, which made me wonder if I could have missed them at the other side. Turned out, I didn't have to travel far. Around a bend, Ladon crouched over something on the ground, or I assumed it was him.

"Ladon?"

He didn't turn, but his head came up. "Go away!"

"Ladon, where's Arnetta? Is she okay?" I walked closer. He whirled on me. In that instant, I saw her broken and bruised body. Before his body blocked out my view, I saw her head was at an awkward angle. She was dead. I burst out crying and threw myself toward them. "No! Arnetta!" Ladon caught me and shoved me back so hard I hit the ground and tumbled. The snap I heard had to be my wrist breaking. I screamed. In another moment a roar rent the air, and Ryuubarreled into Ladon. He bit into Ladon's neck, but the guard got a foot between them to shove Ryuubarre away. 110

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by Brenda Steele

While they fought, I crawled to Arnetta. My tears fell on her cheeks. I wiped them away then gave her a kiss. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. You were my friend through this entire nightmare. I promise, one way or another we'll get these sons of bitches. We'll make them pay for hurting you." Suddenly, Arnetta's body was snatched away from me. I looked up to find her cradled against Ladon's chest, and I glanced around for Ryuubarre. He stood nearby huffing.

"I am sorry for your loss," he told Ladon. "For that I will forgive you, but if you ever hurt Shannon again, I will kill you."

The kindness and respect that had always been present in Ladon's eyes were gone. He spun away, stretched out his wings, and flew away without another word to us. Ryuubarre extended his own wings. His chest muscles tightened, and the last of his wounds disappeared while I watched. His claws tearing up the dirt as he walked, he moved over to me, took me gently in his arms, and he, too, took to the air. I had no idea where we were going or what we would do. The evidence had been destroyed. Once again, the elders were getting away with murder.

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Ryuu [Accidental Mates 2]

by Brenda Steele

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Chapter Twenty-One

I lay in Ryuu's bed on Shale. We had all arrived back late, dragging and exhausted from a battle we couldn't seem to win. Not only had the golden dragons defeated us, but now, from the information Ryuu's men had gathered, the elders had begun to take their frustrations out on the humans.

"What now, Ryuu?" I asked, sitting when he came back to the room after speaking with his brother. "The compound is all but destroyed. Do we know where the golden dragons have gone?"

He flipped his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor before he unbuttoned his pants. As I watched, I felt my pulse increase. Amid so much tragedy, I still longed to be in his arms. Yet I wondered if it was a good idea for the Drelconians to become involved with us humans. We were so fragile. That fact was sharply brought home seeing Arnetta at the base of the mountain.

He saw tears start in my eyes, so he darted across the room to sit on the bed and pull me onto his lap. "Don't worry. We'll figure this out. Draco is beside himself that we weren't able to locate Ladon. It's doubtful he moved with the golden dragons to the mountains, which is where I'm sure they've gone. I guarantee you they are so high a human would have great difficulty getting to them."

He spanned his hand over my belly to stroke gently. I lifted my chin for his kiss, and for a while, I forgot our 112

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by Brenda Steele

problems. The tips of our tongues touched with our lips. I sucked his thicker bottom lip between mine. He moaned. Ryuu drew back. "Where did you get that nightgown?"

"From Harmony. She's so heartbroken about her sister. They hadn't seen each other in so long." He agreed, sadness in his eyes.

"You know, when I came here the first time, I felt a pull at the house next door, but here the pull was stronger. I'm wondering if it's because he's your twin." He shrugged. "Maybe. Get your mind off my brother and on me." He grinned. "I want to make love to you tonight, Shannon. I want to forget how I've failed my people, if just for a little while."

I struggled in his arms and twisted around to face him.

"Don't you dare think that way, Ryuu. You have not failed them. All of the golden dragons are grown men and women. They have a choice of whether to blindly follow Orochi and the others. You have tried over and over to get them to see. Even Draco attempted while we were on Earth."

"Well, it doesn't look good when I begin attacking my own people, blowing up their buildings." He was determined to feel sorry for himself. I shoved him backward, and he allowed it, until he was lying flat on the bed. I straddled his hips and rested myself on his hard-on.

"Maybe you're right. I need to take your mind off your pain, if only for tonight." I stroked his chest while he stared into my eyes. "I never did get a taste of your cock. Would you like me to suck it for you, darling." 113

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by Brenda Steele

Just the suggestion made him shiver. I kissed my fingertips and pressed them to his lips. He lay still, giving himself over to what I was going to do. I curved fingers around his boxer shorts and yanked them downward. I nearly climaxed when his full length broke free; to steady myself, I sucked in a deep breath.

His last stitch of clothing tossed to the floor, I licked a wet trail down his chest, nipping here, kissing there. Ryuu groaned and gripped my hips. I shoved his hands away.

"Above your head, now!"

He obeyed.

I took him into my mouth, loving his flavor. I stuck my tongue in his slit, which made him jump. I gave him no mercy. I wanted him to explode in my mouth. I longed to drink his come and hear his cries of pleasure. The thought heightened my need. I sucked him deep and slid my fingers between my legs to stroke my wet pussy. I pinched my clit between my fingers and humped the air.

"Shannon, that feels incredible, honey." He put his hands down to touch me, then drew back only to do it again. "Ah, let me eat you, baby, while you suck me." I lifted my head. "No, this is for you. You're not touching me until you fill my mouth with your come. Ready?"

"Damn it, Shannon. I can't..."

"Stand being out of control?"

His head fell back, and he closed his eyes.

"Good boy."

He gave me an annoyed look, which I ignored. I took him fully into my mouth while I squeezed his balls. Dipping my 114

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fingers deeper into my wetness, I whimpered my release too soon. When the waves of pleasure calmed, I glanced up at him. "You know some men like a finger or two in their ass." My proud lover's eyes widened in shock, but that didn't mean he didn't want it. "I don't know about that."

"Afraid it will make you feel gay?" I teased him. He laughed. "I'm confident in my manhood, and how could I possibly doubt it when a beautiful woman like you is pleasuring me? I'm game."

The man didn't have to ask me twice. I coated my fingers with my come and then ran gooeey wetness over his rear opening. He twitched. I licked the underside of his cock, rained kisses on his tight balls, and then plunged my fingers inside his ass. He roared. Flames of fire scorched the ceiling. I was about to draw back, but he held my wrist and even pushed me deeper.

"T-that's amazing," he stuttered. "Wiggle your fingers, Shannon."

I did, and he roared again. This time I could easily tell he loved it. At first I kneeled at the side of the bed as I sucked him, then I began to crawl up beside him without pulling out. I stroked deep and then receded, deeper then receded.

"Does it still hurt?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Do you still like it?"

His eyes, that of a dragon's, narrowed on me. "What do you think?"

"I think I want you to eat me while I suck you until you come, but I don't want my pussy burned to a crisp." 115

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by Brenda Steele

He burst out laughing, although he still dragged in shuddering breaths. "Bring me that pussy, let me please it." We moved into a sixty-nine position, me fingering his ass while sucking his cock, and him teasing my clit until I couldn't take it anymore. Soon our lust rose to new levels. We cried out, barely able to concentrate. Twice Ryuu lost focus on my pussy when I took his balls between my lips. Before long he exploded in my mouth. As he did, he pumped so hard, I thought he might split my throat. But his thrusts were controlled just enough for his enjoyment without hurting me. My orgasm followed. I screamed his name and smashed my

pussy into his greedy mouth. He didn't stop licking up my cream until I had come twice more.

When we were both sated, Ryu pulled me up in his arms and carried me to the shower. He washed my body and his own since I could barely stand. He dried us afterward and carried me back into the bedroom. Both too exhausted to do anything other than sleep, we settled into each other's arms and let darkness take us.

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by Brenda Steele

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Chapter Twenty-Two

We sat in a large room Ryu called the meeting hall. Clearly, although he and Draco were of the same rank, because the dragons on Shale were silver, Ryu ruled them. Yet, he was not out of touch as his Earth-dwelling brothers were. He seemed to love them all, and they respected him.

"We have to go back. I want my brothers free. I want the people the elders are duping free." He looked at me. "And I want Shannon and Harmony's people not to have the constant threat of having no fuel."

The anguish Harmony was feeling was obvious, but I had learned quickly that she was as tough as Arnetta had told me she was. "We outnumber them. Why do we keep getting defeated? We have ships."

"They do also; remember?" Draco reminded her.

"We have more people. Throughout history, how many times have we seen the small, the weak overtake the strong?"

"It can be done. We have to keep hitting them and hit them hard!" She slammed a fist into her palm. "I want the sons of bitches who murdered my sister dead!"

"Honey," Draco warned.

She frowned. "Don't *honey* me." I hadn't spoken much to Draco, but from what I had been told, the man practically worshipped the ground his wife walked on. Ryu had said he was whipped. From the affection I saw in his eyes, I had to agree. Harmony wasn't beautiful, but they had made a very handsome son, Darke, together. 117

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by *Brenda Steele*

The boy was only about two years old, but he looked like an eleven-or twelve-year-old already. Dragon blood, I guessed. Darke had been allowed to attend the meeting. Some had objected to it, but the dragons were full age at one year. So far, he had been leaning toward his father's heritage, all except for the fact that he couldn't shape-shift. I thought that was the coolest thing about the Drelconians and felt sorry for him.

"Maybe we have been going about this all wrong," Darke suggested. "We've gone in there half-cocked, guns blazing. Even the planned attack near Crendon didn't work out because as I said then, we need more stealth. We need to hit them at their weakest point, from the inside." Draco rubbed his chin. "What are you thinking, Darke?" Before the boy could answer, another dragon, the one that had nearly fried my bacon when I first visited Ryuu's home, interrupted. "What does he know? He's just a pup, and half human at that!"

I was surprised to see both Draco and Ryuu stand, growls in their throats. Draco spoke first. "My friend, you disrespect me when you disrespect my son." The threat in his eyes had the man stumbling over an apology. "We didn't listen to Darke before, and all our actions have gotten us nowhere. It cannot hurt to hear him out."

"Agreed," Ryuu chimed in. "Go ahead, Darke." Ryuu's authoritative tone dared anyone to interrupt again. My heart warmed, but I also wondered if I was a strong-enough person, or even leader material, to stand by his side as he ruled his people.

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Ryuu [Accidental Mates 2]

by Brenda Steele

As I pondered that, it took my mind away from the conversation, and soon, I found myself thinking of my schoolchildren. Ryuu had said we could live on Earth or on Shale after this was over, and it would be my decision, but where did we belong? He needed to lead the silver dragons, and even if the clans were reunited, my thought was that it would take years to ease

hostilities between the two. The man who had spoken against Darke had been a prime example of how many of the silver dragons felt not only about the humans, but about the Earth-dwelling dragons. A new type of government would need to be developed, one that was conducive to peace and that all could benefit from. If nothing else, I was pretty sure "elders" would have minimum control and even the lords' privilege might be revoked. I glanced at Ryu and Draco. What if they were no longer considered royalty?

I had never been interested in politics, but these were important issues that would no doubt come up when all was said and done.

The meeting broke up within the hour. Ryu suggested the lake, and we were soon wading into the calm waters, soothing away worries. My lover leaned back to float, pulling me on top of his body. I rested my head on his chest with a sigh of contentment. "Ryu, what did the group decide? I admit I zoned out."

He chuckled. "Well, had I intended to take you into battle with me, I would change my mind if you can't stay focused, woman."

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by Brenda Steele

I tried to move off him, but he held on. "What do you mean had you intended for me to go? I'm going!"

"You're not."

"Ryu—"

"You can argue all you want. Tell me, are you strong enough to force your way past my guards to get on a ship?"

No? I didn't think so. I want you safe, and that settles it." I punched his chest, angry enough to cry, but I didn't.

"Sometimes you're so overbearing, so much a man. I have the right to fight like everyone else, Ryuu. Part of this is my fault, and I want to help free my people, too."

"Taking blame that's not yours is exactly what gets people in trouble. They make foolish decisions," he snapped. "You are only human. Do you want to end up like Arnetta? At least we Drelconians heal."

My eyes went wide, and my mouth dropped open. I could not believe he would stoop so low as to comment on my humanity as if it was some negative thing to be human. "I can't believe you said that," I whispered. "You sound like your men, the ones who barely think we humans are worth the time of day. I guess I see where they get that attitude." I broke free and turned back toward shore, but Ryuu was not like Ladon. He would not accept me walking out on him. He followed me, waiting until I was wiping myself dry before he yanked me into his arms. I fought him, but he was too strong. He crushed me against his chest, his hand pressing firmly but gently against my back.

He forced my head back so that my gaze met his. "You and I are one, Shannon. I love you more than any other 120

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person, even my own brother. I will not allow you to be destroyed because of some stupid decision I made to put you in danger. Or, for that matter, a stupid one you made. You will stay here, and you will be in my house when I get back. After this is resolved, we will be married."

"Do you think telling me what to do, forcing me is going to make this relationship work?" I shouted. "It won't. Just like I told Tav, we are human, whether you like it or not. We don't have a 'place,' and you would do well to remember that!" He kissed me to shut me up. I fought until his tongue entered my mouth, and I couldn't resist him for long. After an extended time of hearing only the sounds of the lapping water and birds overhead coupled with our sweet kisses, he drew back. "We're one, Shannon. Your people are

mine, and mine are yours. Give me the chance to help them. I promise you I will."

"Ryuu..."

"If this plan of Darke's doesn't work out, I will bring you to Earth to be our mouthpiece. I will get ten dragons to protect you along with myself. Deal?"

I gave in. "Okay. You'd better or else." Amusement lit his eyes. The confidence that rolled off his broad shoulders annoyed me. "I consider myself warned."

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by Brenda Steele

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Chapter Twenty-Three

"Three days!" I complained for the fifth time that hour.

"They've been gone three days, and I get to sit here and do nothing! Even Harmony convinced her husband to let her go, but I have to be humiliated staying here with the young children and the old dragons!"

I paced in Ryuu's gathering room in his house. The equivalent of a living room on Earth was built so large, I could stroll a good way in one direction. No matter how much fussing and cussing I did in the room, no one could hear me. Everyone else left in the village was content to go about as normal.

At the northern edge of the village was where the spacecraft were kept. Ryuu and the others had taken every one. I couldn't even sneak out to steal a vessel and join him. Finally through with being shut up in the house, I strolled down to the lake. At least I knew with Ryuu's command no one would bother me there.

I flopped down on the grass and closed my eyes.

"Here come the draaaggoonns." I jumped to my feet and spun around to search the area with my eyes. "Jake?" Nothing but the sounds of nature met my ears. A pain throbbed in my head. I rubbed at it, almost sure I heard my little student's voice reverberate across my skull.

"Ms. Dorsey, help me!"

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by Brenda Steele

This time, I was sure it was Jake. I didn't know how, but he was contacting me psychically. My best bet was to concentrate, to try to focus in on him. If I could connect with him, I might be able to learn his location and get Ryuu to go to the little boy.

I dropped down on the grass and closed my eyes. Unlike the last time, I needed no focusing whatsoever. My ability seemed to be amplified. I could zoom out to Jake wherever he was without effort. I saw him in an instant, his tiny wrists bound with rope and him sitting in a chair with Drelconian guards surrounding him. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Don't hurt him, please don't hurt him," I pleaded, although I could not be sure anyone heard me.

A voice spoke in my mind, one I recognized right away—

Orochi. *"Come to me, Shannon, and I won't hurt the boy. If you delay, he will be burned alive."* I cried out, horrified. *"How? All the ships are gone. I am on Shale. Please, Orochi, don't do this!"* Frustration colored his tone. After a short pause, he said,

"I'm sending a ship for you. Be ready and don't try anything foolish." The connection ended. I opened my eyes, stood, and glanced around as if I expected at any moment the hated elder would jump out at me. I don't know how Orochi could contact me in such a way or how he could make me hear Jake's call. My guess was the man had been doing more to my brain than he had let on, which wouldn't be a surprise, given his history. How I longed to put the man out of the world's misery. We would all be better off.

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by Brenda Steele

As I sneaked into the village, I was careful not to allow the others to spot me. I did not need questions or anyone trying to stop me. Ryuu's commands rang through my head, but I ignored them. This was a matter of life and

death. I remembered like it was yesterday how the dragons had nearly burned Jake. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Orochi wouldn't follow through with his threat. Killing a human would give him pleasure.

Hours later and still with no word from Ryuu, I ran across the rocky terrain to the west where I had been instructed to meet the ship. Behind me, I heard young dragon calls and bursts of fire. I could picture the grandmotherly women in the village trying to keep their charges from investigating the sounds of a spacecraft landing.

As soon as I broke through a group of trees, I saw it settling in an open area. The platform lowered, but no one stepped off. I suppose I couldn't expect common courtesy and hurried to get on board.

The platform closed, and the engines fired. Before I could find a place to settle down, we zipped toward the atmosphere. I bumbled around a while since this ship was larger than Ryuu's and laid out differently. I had to wander down several halls before finding the bridge, or what I assumed was the bridge, based on the shape of the hull: narrower at the front. The door leading into it was locked. I banged, feeling even more ticked off at the rudeness of whatever guard Orochi had sent to collect me. No one answered.

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"Open this door and explain to me how you can live with yourself!" I screamed through the panel. "Hello?" He still didn't answer. I gave up. I turned away to go in search of somewhere to sit down and wait it out. Earth was at least two hours away. I could only pray Orochi wouldn't get too antsy and hurt Jake while he waited.

I found a room furnished like a small social room. After I had located a cola, my stomach was too unsettled to drink, so I sat near a window shaped like that of an airplane to stare out at the stars. Common sense told me this

was a mistake, the very thing Ryuu was trying to keep from happening, but like the movies, the bad guy always got a hold of someone you had to attempt to rescue. Jake had driven me to the brink of ripping my hair from my scalp many times, but he was still a small child. He was an orphan, living with a great aunt who seemed more interested in her next boyfriend than in Jake. All this I had learned from the times I called his home to try to convince his guardian to talk to him and to help me with getting the boy to focus on his studies. That had been a nightmare and ultimately pointless.

Jake had no one but me, and I believed he was far more intelligent than he was given credit for. He deserved to have his chance in life, just like anyone else. While I was lost in thought, the ship jerked. I blinked to realize we had moved into Earth's orbit. Time had flown by. Soon we began to land, but I hadn't gotten around to a plan on how to get myself and Jake to safety. I closed my eyes to try to tune into Ryuu. Only silence met me. He had to be okay.

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by Brenda Steele

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. I glanced up to find video surveillance trained on me, just above the doorway. That must be how the pilot knew which room I was in, or maybe he asked that computer system I had heard Ryuu speaking with on his ship. The Drelconians were light-years ahead of us.

The panel to the hall slid back, and there stood Ladon in the opening.

"Ladon," I squealed excitedly. I rushed across to hug him, but he pushed me back, an angry expression on his face.

"Calm down! Try anything and I will snap your neck! We're going to meet Orochi."

For a few minutes after he had taken me in a hold so tight I thought blood vessels were popping in my arm, I couldn't say a word. This was the gentle dragon I had known all this time. Surely he hadn't been fooling us all. "I don't understand, Ladon. You have been my friend..." He sneered. "Friend? Not anymore. That was before you took away Arnetta."

"Me? Orochi did that! I didn't blow up that mountain. Why are you putting this on me?" I jerked back. "You're hurting my arm."

He stopped walking and shook me hard. My head snapped back and forth, and I bit my tongue. Just short of making me throw up, he stopped. "Get this straight. I hate you and every person involved with causing Arnetta's death. I'm only doing this for Orochi so I can bring you all together. When I do, you, every one of those elders, and those sniveling lords, will die a very painful death."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

We were in the most unlikely place. I felt like my life had come full circle. The golden dragons hadn't gone into the mountains to hide as Ryuu and the others suspected. They were right in the city, specifically in my old school. Ladon wrestled me down the hall, and I kicked, bit, and fussed all the way. Why hadn't I taken some form of selfdefense class? Not that it would have done any good with a dragon, but I could have put up more of a fight than to dangle from his muscled arm.

"Think about what you're doing, Ladon. You're not like the elders. You're a good—"

"Shannon, my mate. You're back." I turned from pleading with Ladon to find Orochi in one of the doorways. He nodded at Ladon, and he dropped me. I landed on my rear long enough to catch Orochi's smug look before I jumped to my feet and flew at him. "Where's Jake, you sick fuck!"

He tsked. "Such language, my love."

"Cut it! Where is my student? Don't play games with me. You and I know we are not mates. I am bonded to Ryuu." My words didn't faze him at all. He crossed his arms, gave a clipped command for Ladon to get out of his sight, and turned back to me. "Funny how I was able to connect with you all the way to Shale. Are you sure we didn't bond? After all, that time in the compound was really special." 128

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I gaped at him. No, he was trying to upset me. Nothing happened. "Where's Jake?"

He moved to allow me to see inside the classroom. Jake sat in the same position I had seen him in my vision. His little silver eyes were wide in fear.

A strip of tape covered his mouth and ropes bit into the skin at his wrists. The poor thing appeared out of place amid all the colors around the room, a colorful rug on the floor, pictures the children drew hanging on the wall and planetary mobiles dangling from the ceiling. I would have rushed past him except he blocked my path, took hold of my arm, and dragged me on down the hall. Behind us, someone inside the room shut the door. I looked ahead to find that Orochi was leading me to another room. He shoved me into the darkened room, following. In the middle of a school building, here was a room set up like a bedroom. "You never give up! Where are the children, the staff?"

"Don't you worry about that. I need to get you pregnant right now." He kicked out of his shoes and unbuckled his belt.

"Go to hell!" I rolled across the bed and landed on my feet on the other side. Fumbling with the window, I wondered if I could drop to the ground from the second story and land unhurt.

Orochi took hold of my hair and snatched me back. He forced me face-down onto the bed. The next thing I heard was my clothing being ripped off. He had transformed only his hand so his claws would be sharp enough to destroy the rough material of my jeans.

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Still he fought to remove all barriers between us, and ultimately, he landed on top of me. "The shot I gave you will pass through your body soon. I need to get my seed in you fast," he grumbled.

I fought harder as tears blurred my vision. In the dim light, I searched for a weapon, but the nightstand was out of my reach. My arms extended over the side of the bed, I felt around on the floor and hit a duffel bag down there. Orochi forced my legs apart and squeezed my rear. I screamed. My hands shook almost too much to operate the zipper on the bag, yet I delved

inside to find only clothes. Hope for a miracle kept me searching. At the bottom was a stone. I couldn't imagine why this insane man kept a stone in his bag, but I determined to do serious damage to his head with it. He positioned his disgusting cock at my opening, and I cried harder. With a resolve to hit him until he was a bloody mess on the bed, I yanked my hand out of the bag, clutching the stone tight enough to cut into my fingers. Before I could do another thing, I threw up. Not a little, but violently. My body convulsed, my stomach ached like someone had stabbed me, and I couldn't breathe.

Orochi stopped and rolled away with a sneeze. I dragged soiled covers over my body and held the stone out before me, then waited for him to attack again. Not once did I stop gagging now that my stomach was empty.

My attacker whooped like a child. "Yes! You're pregnant."

"W-What?"

He grinned. "Silly woman. You're holding the blue gem. The baby is reacting to it. We're allergic. Put it down." 130

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I shook my head. "No, you're not fooling me. When I—" An explosion rent the air and shook the room, followed by another and another. The door swung open and a guard stood in the opening. "Sir, the school is on fire! We must evacuate!"

"Get out!" the elder commanded. "We are not hurt by fire!" The disrespect in the man's expression was apparent even in low light. "No, we're not, but she and the boy are! Along with the others we have downstairs."

"Others," I interrupted. "What others? Where are they?"

Get them out of here. Let me get Jake, please!" At that moment, all hell broke loose. The guard in the door actually attacked Orochi. People ran

screaming in the halls, and fire licked the walls outside the window of the room I was in. Like the last time, I tore the bottom sheet from the bed and wrapped myself in it. Barefoot, I ran into the hall, almost tripped by the two men fighting.

The air grew thick with smoke. I fell down several times with my head spinning as I ran back toward the room I had seen Jake in. He and all the guards were gone. "No, please, no," I cried.

"Shannon?" Ryuu called from somewhere nearby. I stumbled back into the hall in time for him to scoop me up and rush to the stairs. All around, fire roared. Parts of the ceiling crumbled, making our path treacherous. Ryuu stomped through with determination.

I coughed so much, I thought I would spew out a lung.

"Ryuu, we have to find Jake. I won't leave without him." His hold tightened. I think he expected me to fight to get away. I had no more strength. "He's safe." 131

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"There are others, they said, in the basement."

"Also safe," he growled. "Had you trusted me, you would not find yourself in this position yet again."

"Had you trusted me, I wouldn't need to be." Draco appeared from nowhere. "I'm sure there's a more appropriate time for this argument. Let's go!" Ryuu and I fell silent as he sprinted toward the exit. The ceiling, stone and all, looked like it was coming down. Draco, ahead of us, shape-shifted in an instant. His hulking back wedged the ceiling in place long enough for us to get through. A few seconds later, fresh air rushed into my lungs, and I welcomed it with deep, greedy inhales.

I searched the people standing around with confused looks on their faces.

"Ms. Dorsey!" Jake rushed up, none the worse for the wear. I wiggled out of Ryuu's hold to take the boy in a bear hug, but he yanked himself away. "Ew, Ms. Dorsey, you reek!" He fanned his nose for good measure. I remembered the vomiting, sure my face had turned bright red in embarrassment.

"Thanks a lot, Jake. Well, at least you're safe," I told him, tousling his hair. He pressed himself to my side, and I held him as my heart broke. Brave little Jake had been as terrified as I was. I hoped that the danger was ending.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

I leaned over Jake's back to cut up his meat. "So, what's going to happen now? I mean, things are far from settled. Sure, a few of the golden dragons have opened their eyes to what's happening, but no one has seen four of your brothers." Ryuu chewed the food in his mouth then swallowed before speaking. "I don't feel it's a total loss. I have Tav with me. That's something. I am shocked at his wife, Lisa. Not that I knew her at all, but I would have thought Tav would have more sense than to marry such a person." His expression hardened. "She got what she deserved thinking she could strike some kind of deal with Orochi." I shivered in disgust, thinking about how close I had come to giving that man children instead of carrying my new husband's baby. Did the woman think Orochi would want her after she hadn't produced with Tav? The sick elder had ripped her apart, murdered her in cold blood. There had been too much death in the midst of all of this, including Jake's guardian. In Orochi's plan to kidnap the boy, he had killed his great-aunt. I think that was what opened some of the guards'

eyes—and certainly Tav's.

"Well, he's gone now. Where, I don't know, but I hope he never returns." I sighed. "I just wish I knew where Ladon went. I can't believe that he went with Orochi or your brothers, if they're all together out there in space." Ryuu didn't seem to care. "He started that fire in order to kill you and the others. I have no sympathy for him. Yes, it 133

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hurts to lose one you love, but that doesn't give you the right to kill others. We will have enough to deal with to make things right on Earth without concerning ourselves with men who let grief kill the good in their hearts."

"Ms. Dorsey, can I be excused?" Jake interrupted. I kissed him on the cheek a few times, to his disgust, and let him go. He had been desperate to get out among the dragons. A few of the young ones had promised him rides. I had been terrified to let him go, but Ryuu had insisted it would be okay. Still, my stomach turned at the thought. Having been his new guardian all of three days, I already had become motherly.

"Ryuu, are you sure you don't mind us raising Jake? He has no one else."

He set his fork down, pushed back his plate, and came around the table to pull me to my feet. "Woman, how can I convince you? I love children. And don't forget, you carry our second in you."

Second. My heart swelled. I became mushy. Ryuu considered Jake his first child. Before I could question him further, he covered my lips and pushed his tongue into my mouth. He lifted me off my feet and placed me on the table. I pulled back.

"Ryuu, not right here. Jake could come back." He laughed. "Trust me, we won't see him until we have to go out and drag him in by his ear. He'll fly with the dragons until he slumps over in exhaustion."

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Worry for his safety overtook me. Ryuu headed it off with fingers between my legs. "I see I'm going to have to force you to relax."

"I—Well, maybe just briefly." I laughed. He slid my panties down and then spread my legs. "Mmm, look at that." He kissed my pussy. "An hour or two at least." My protests died on my lips as his mouth closed over my clit. With both thumbs, he spread my folds wide to run his tongue from top to bottom. He flicked my erect button and sucked it into his mouth. I cried out, hooked my heels on the edge of the table, and pulled his head closer.

"Yes, Ryuu..."

I came hard and fast. My lover cocked his head to the side to lap up my juices. I rocked against his mouth, wanting his tongue to dig deeper. He obliged. "Mmm, you're delicious."

"Make me come again, Ryuu. I need it." He stood up, gave me a wink, and then climbed up on the table that was currently too long for such a small family as us. For now, the table was perfect for this purpose. Ryuu lay down flat on his back and indicated for me to come to him. I crawled until I was right alongside his shoulders. He helped me to flip a leg over him. Before I knew it, my pussy was resting against his mouth, and I was bracing myself on the table above his head. My fingers curved over the edge of the table while I gyrated my hips. He ate noisily, which drove my lust higher. I screamed and came as I rode his mouth. I leaned back. He rained kisses on my clit. "You want more, baby?"

"I need to please you."

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"That doesn't answer my question."

"Once more ... no, three more times before we get down and go upstairs."

"Your wish is my command."

The End

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About the Author

Brenda Steele loves all things out of the ordinary. She writes to gratify the cravings of her own sexual drive, and then for her dear readers. Hopefully, the two won't be far apart and all who read her work will come away satisfied. Look for her hot "My Lover" series and the continuation of her

"Accidental Mates" series.

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