



Bianca D'Arc

Border Lair

Dragon Knights Book 2

SAMHAIN Publishing, Ltd.

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Dedication

To all the wonderful, supportive people on my discussion list, and especially Megan, Serena, Tam, Diana and Jess. Thanks for believing in dragons and believing in me.

Prologue

The feminine moan of pleasure was music to Lord Darian’s ears as he brought Varla to yet another peak with his tongue. She was greedy, but then, being the king of Skithdron’s current favorite had to leave her cold. The lecherous bastard had become king after killing his own father—or so Lord Darian suspected—and didn’t give a rat’s ass about anyone’s pleasure but his own.

“Are you ready for me now, Varla?” Darian looked down on the woman with little feeling as he rammed his cock into her.

“More than ready, my lord!”

The bitch was panting and practically tearing his skin off with those long red painted claws of hers. He moved her hands, grasping them tightly and holding them forcibly above her head, away from his skin. He'd be damned if he would wear her bloody marks after this bout. He was here for one reason alone.

Well, maybe two reasons, he admitted with a mental shrug. Getting his rocks off was part of the deal and a good reason to bed a willing wench, but the more important reason was this particular wench could grant him access to places in the palace he otherwise would not have. If he were seen coming from her chambers, so close to the king's own apartments, it would be more natural if he was her fuck for the night. If not for her, the guards would question his presence in the palace. If not for her, Lord Venerai would have him run out of the palace completely, denying him his right as a noble of Skithdron to serve at court.

Venerai was a viper. Climbing to the top of the pile of Lucan's sycophants by any means necessary, Venerai wanted all possible competition for the King's favor out of his way. That included Darian, though he had been more in favor with Lucan's father, King Goran, than with the current king.

But Darian was of royal blood, a distant fifth in line for the throne, and Venerai saw him as a threat. He went so far as to have Darian followed by an inept spy or two—spies he liked to send on wild goose chases, much to Venerai's disgust.

Darian would tire Varla out then go on his real mission of the night. He suspected some awful things were about to transpire but he had to have proof before he gave up his birthright. If he were going to forsake his country, his lands, his title, and risk his very life, he had to be damned sure of his information.

He rammed the wench harder as determination fed his strength. This final round ought to do her in, and then he could go on his little reconnaissance mission. First he had to fuck her into oblivion though and that was proving harder than he'd thought. Not only was she insatiable, but he just wasn't interested enough in her to make it really worth his while. Oh, she was a sweet release to his aching balls, but she failed to meet the strange yearning that had been building inside him for years now.

He really didn't know what he was looking for, but all the women in his life to this point were definitely not it. There was not one he would regret leaving behind if it did become necessary to leave his homeland. Not one he would consider asking to go with him. Not one he could love.

That was just a shame. How did a man pass thirty-seven winters without finding one single woman he could care for at least enough to make some small commitment? He didn't even have a steady mistress.

Was there something wrong with him? He was past the age where most men settled down with one woman and started reproducing, but he'd never found the woman he wanted to birth his heirs. Never found a woman he wanted so much he would pray to the gods his seed took root in her womb. He couldn't imagine ever finding such a woman among the many he'd tried on for size, but oh, how he had enjoyed the search.

Varla was a hot fuck and she writhed on his cock in a way that had him

fighting to control his release, but she was just a means to an end. She had already been claimed by the ruthless bastard who now sat on the stolen throne of Skithdron. Darian might enjoy the pleasure of her body, but he felt nothing for the cold woman inside.

And he knew she felt nothing for him. Even as she came for the seventh time that night under his pounding, he knew she cared more for the sexual release than for the man who gave it to her. After all, she had already sold her soul to the devil.

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After finally exhausting the voracious creature, Darian made his way to the king's study. Using all his stealth, he found the grim proof he had been searching for—and dreading—and his old adversary Lord Venerai was right in the thick of it. Darian's course now was clear.

In that moment, Lord Darian of Skithdron became a traitor. At least that's how King Lucan and his followers would see his actions. Still, Darian knew sitting by and doing nothing while a mad king herded deadly, venomous skiths toward innocent villagers would be a crime he could not live with on his soul. What the king had planned next was even worse, and his ultimate goal was completely insane.

But King Lucan was so far gone in his madness his plan just might work. Someone had to warn Draconia. The peaceful land had been a good neighbor to Skithdron for many generations, but it was all coming to ruin now with one crazy tyrant. Darian now knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, Lucan sought power through demented magics that drove him closer and closer to the edge.

Lucan had to be stopped and Darian was the only one to do it. For one thing, Darian had no immediate family against whom Lucan could retaliate. For another, as the former ambassador to Draconia, he had contacts in high places. If he could just get across the border and then across the lines to the Draconian side, he might have a shot at getting his message through to the people—and dragons—who needed most to know.

Chapter One

Adora opened her eyes slowly, her head tilted to the side as she lay on her stomach. She could just make out the huge form of Sir Jared, hovering over her, as he had for the past few days. His ruggedly handsome face carried a stark, broad scar down one cheek and onto his neck. The ragged mark of his warrior profession disappeared below the neckline of his shirt, making her curious to see just how far down it went on his broad, muscular chest.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was husky with disuse and she guessed it was late in the night.

“Jared, you should really seek your own bed. Sitting up with me does neither of us any good.”

The knight favored her with a small smile as he poured a cup of water from the pitcher on the bedside table. Hearing the splash of water suddenly made her thirsty as her tongue moved around in a cottony mouth.

“Humor me, Adora. Besides, Kelzy wouldn’t let me leave, even if I wanted to try.” His gaze shifted to the wide archway, neatly blocked by the blue-green dragon’s great head. Kelzy blinked at him sleepily—even the huge dragon showed weariness in the vigil she’d kept at Adora’s side for the past few days.

Jared sat on the side of the bed with a gentleness she found astounding in such a powerful warrior knight. He was so big and muscular, so able to fight and destroy, but she had learned over the past days his magnificent warrior’s body housed a gentle soul.

Because of the deep, slashing wounds that reached around from her back to one side, she had to lie on her stomach or the uninjured side and found it difficult to use one of her arms. Levering herself off the bed even to drink a glass of water was almost impossible to accomplish alone. Jared lent her his great strength every time she needed to rise and use the bathroom or as now, take a drink of water.

He slipped one hand under her torso from the uninjured side, his forearm settling intimately between her breasts as he spread his hand against the opposite shoulder. This odd position allowed her to use her one good arm to push herself upward while he held her securely, in case her strength gave out. As it was, her arm trembled as he held the cup of water to her parched lips. She wasn’t entirely sure whether her weakness was from the injury or the mere proximity of the dashing knight.

It had been years since she’d been touched so closely by a man, and never by a man such as this. Jared took her breath away. A warm gust of air settled over her from the direction of the dragon in the doorway. Adora swiveled her head to look at Kelzy, but the motion caused her healing wounds to pull and she gasped. Jared reacted instantly, sliding both hands up her torso, supporting her, guiding her gently back to lie on her stomach.

“Easy now.” Jared’s voice was so warm and soft. It made Adora feel safe and protected. She tried not to think about the hand resting between her breasts as he lowered her slowly to the bed, nor the way he slid his rough hand out from between the sheets and her body, his strong fingers grazing the swollen sides of her breasts.

“Can you help me turn to lie on my side? My neck hurts a bit from sleeping in this position.”

“So you admit you do need me here after all?” He chuckled and it warmed her heart.

Jared was always so serious that it was good to hear him laugh as he put his big hands on her once more. He handled her as if she were a priceless treasure but with a strength that would not be denied. Never had such a masterful man been so intimate with her body. Her long-dead husband’s touch had been quite different. Jared was strong and sure, yet showed

obvious care in the way he used his strength.

Adora liked the way he touched her. She liked him, if she was being honest with herself. Jared was a man among men, otherwise the dragon who had been like her surrogate mother would never have chosen him as her partner. Not only the dragoness, Kelzy, but King Roland himself entrusted a great deal to this man, for Adora had learned Jared was a general in the king's fighting forces. Jared and Kelzy were the leaders of this new Lair filled with dozens of knights and fighting dragons.

"I admit nothing." She enjoyed challenging him and smiled as Jared paused, his hands around her, his face very near.

"Adora..."

She felt his grip tighten on her and saw his face lower. She hadn't been kissed in far too many years, but still remembered the signs. She knew she could turn away—his approach was slow enough to give her time to call a halt if she wished—but she wanted his kiss. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more desperately in the world.

The moment his lips touched hers she knew why. His kiss was everything. Soft and gentle at first, firming to hard, demanding, male. Oh, so male, and so missed. She had missed this in her many years of widowhood. She had missed a man's strong hands molding her body while his lips and tongue plundered her mouth.

After the first few blissful moments, Jared's kiss turned molten and hungry. Powered by a lust that fired through his veins, he seemed to ignite as their lips came together for the very first time.

"Adora." He broke off the kiss but buried his hungry lips in her throat, nibbling at her soft skin.

"Jared," she whispered. His nipping teeth were just powerful enough that she knew he would leave a mark on her tender skin. The thought excited her. Never had a man been so hot for her, or she for him.

Interesting as this development is, Kelzy's dryly amused voice sounded through both of their minds, bringing them back to earth with a thud, Adora's still hurt, Jared. Leave off before one of her wounds reopens.

"Sweet Mother of All." Jared released her slowly. His blue eyes smoldered with something like shock laced with a bit of anger and frustration as he looked down at her. "Did I hurt you, Adora?"

She shook her head slightly, but his hand traced down her throat to the tender spot he had bitten, and their eyes locked and held. She suspected he had bruised her on purpose and she would wear his mark for a few days.

"Nothing significant." She tried to put his mind at ease about the love bite, but his expression went cold, and she realized her words might have sounded different than she meant them. She tried to find words to fix her error, but Jared was already on his way out the door. He was gone before she could speak and she found herself lying on her side, staring at the dragon in her doorway with mixed feelings. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

I know, my dear child. Jared is a hard man. His emotions are held close inside. In fact, I'm amazed he even let go enough to kiss you. He's not a knight to court the ladies. Let him be for a while. He has much in his past that he needs to come to terms with if he is to ever reclaim that portion of his

life.

After long moments thinking on the dragon's words and that startling kiss, Adora finally slept.

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The next day Adora woke to an empty chamber for the first time since she'd been hurt. Her back was on fire with pain as she slowly remembered the events that had confined her to the bed for the past few days. She'd come under attack by huge venom-spitting skiths while walking back to her forest home. Her little house in the woods was destroyed now, infested and torn apart by the giant snake-like creatures their Skithdronian enemies drove across the border.

Adora had only escaped them and their snapping jaws by climbing the tallest tree she could find. She'd known she was going to die, clinging to the top of a tree, her specially treated leather clothing smoking from the spray of skith venom that had hit her from the waist down.

A scream had sounded through her mind as she prayed to the Mother of All that her end would be fast and as painless as possible. Then Adora had sought the mind of the dragoness who had practically raised her. Her mind had sent out a call—much stronger than she realized—to Lady Kelzy and miraculously, the dragon had heard. Kelzy had summoned her knight, Sir Jared, and two other fighting dragons and knights and raced to her rescue. It was Kelzy who had plucked her out of the tree with wickedly sharp claws.

And for that brave action, Kelzy was in torment now, Adora knew. The dragoness blamed herself for the scratches she had unwillingly inflicted on Adora's back with the razor sharp talons. Adora also knew the daring mid-air grab was the only way she could have been rescued from that tree without putting all of them in even more danger from the multitude of crazed skiths twining around its base.

Skiths were afraid of dragon fire, but had their own weapons and could fell a dragon with alarming ease. Lady Rohtina, the young golden dragon, had in fact been mortally wounded while providing cover for Kelzy's daring swoop. Thank the Mother, Rohtina had been healed of her grave wounds. She had managed to limp back to the Lair, at which point Adora's daughter, Belora, had been able to heal her. It had been a very close call though. One that drove home to all that war with Skithdron was coming fast, and this sudden invasion by venomous skiths was only the first wave.

Adora shrank back with a sigh as the cuts on her back protested. They had scabbed over for the most part but were still very painful. Kelzy's apologetic and remorseful clucking almost made it hurt more. Adora told the dragon over and over that she was not to blame but Kelzy would hear none of it. She was wracked with guilt over hurting her "baby" even if it had been the only way to save her life.

Kelzy's knight partner kept careful watch over her too. Sir Jared had barely left her alone, forever checking her wounds or seeking to make her more comfortable. Jared wasn't a chatty sort of man, but his steady, unsmiling presence had been oddly comforting. He was so solid and had such

a pure heart. He had been hurt deeply—Adora knew with a certainty stemming from her own healing gift and intuitive nature—but he was a good honest man, though one who did not make friends easily.

He was also more ruggedly handsome than any man Adora had ever seen. Appearing only slightly older than she, he had short dark brown hair gone silver at his temples and striking deep ocean blue eyes. He kept himself neat at all times and commanded great respect from all the other knights as well as the dragons who lived in this new Lair.

Adora knew his bond with Kelzy kept Jared from aging as a normal man would. When dragons bonded with their knights, and by extension with their knights' chosen mate, the dragon magic worked to slow the humans' aging process considerably. Jared had partnered with Kelzy more than a decade ago and he probably hadn't aged much since, though his penetrating gaze reflected the wisdom of his years.

Adora dozed through most of the day, only waking when Jared came to bring her meals. He was distant today after their passionate encounter and made no reference to it, only staring long and hard at the purple love bite on her neck when he'd first seen her. Other than the leap of fire in his eyes when he saw his mark upon her skin, he had shown no emotion at all. Adora quickly gave up on the idea of trying to explain her hasty words of the night before. She was too tired anyway and in too much pain to sort it out now. She fell into a deep sleep that night without further complications from Jared.

Chapter Two

The black dragon winged in under cover of darkness. No one saw him land except the few sentries posted to stand guard and lend assistance to any who should need it. Black dragons were rare. In fact, only the royal line could boast the starkly gleaming tar-colored scales that characterized this dragon, so it was understandable word of his presence in the Lair spread quickly.

The tall man who emerged from the shadows a few moments later—dressed all in black, with the same gleaming dark light in his hazel eyes as that of the dragon—strode forward confidently though he'd never visited this Lair before. The sentries bowed to him, as was his due, and received a regal nod in return.

He was not the king, but he was damn close. Prince Nico preferred to leave the political intrigues to his older brother while he pursued more...stealthy pursuits. As spymaster for the king, he was aptly suited to the task at hand. Nico had not arrived at this new Border Lair by accident. No, he was on a mission of the highest importance to the royal family. His mission would either bring rare royal blood back into the fold or expose an imposter.

The Prince of Spies. That's what the dragons laughingly called him and it was an apt title. He prided himself on his ability to get in and out of places with none the wiser to his presence, but the trip to this out-of-the-way Lair was official business.

Greetings, Lady Kelzy. What news do you have for me? Nico sent the message to the mind of the blue-green dragon whose glistening body was spread out in the wallow before him. He'd known the layout of the new Lair even before he left the palace and had made it his business to know where the leaders of this particular Lair lived. Kelzy's head rose up in surprise, swiveling on the long, sinuous neck to face him. Her aquamarine eyes glinted with happiness.

Nico! You're here already. I should have known you'd hear about the events of the last few days before we could send official word.

Prince Nico loved the easy manner of this particular dragon. She had taught him a great deal as a youngster and guarded him when he was still too young to protect himself. In a way, she had been like a second mother to him and his brothers, though she was just one of many dragons who served the royal family directly.

Her knight partner, though, was one of Nico's favorite people in the world. Sir Jared had taught him to fight and how to protect himself. He had also trained the young prince in the arts that helped him become not only a spy and reluctant politician, but a true diplomat when it was needed.

Prior to the tragedy that had taken his wife and child from him, Sir Jared Armand had been one of the old king's most trusted counselors. That one horrible event had taken the spark from Jared's eyes and sent him into self-imposed exile in the mountains. It was there Kelzy found him and finally claimed the man as her knight partner. The soul-deep bond between dragon and knight gave Jared renewed purpose, though he was still alone and would probably never marry again. The first time had undoubtedly been much too painful to bear.

Nico bowed in respect to the motherly dragon and smiled as she moved closer to him.

It's true then, what I've heard? You've found a mother and daughter who display the royal gifts?

Kelzy's great head bobbed in eagerness. Both Adora and her daughter, Belora, are true healers. Belora healed a mortal wound to Rohtina, the dragon partner of Lars, one of Belora's mates.

How did Rohtina come by her injuries?

You mean you don't already know? Kelzy's eyes snapped in humor at the Prince of Spies.

Actually, I can guess. Skiths? He fairly spit the name of the huge snake-like creatures that gave the neighboring kingdom its name. The king of Skithdron was using the skiths on the border—herding them and coaxing them across the border to destroy villages and towns in preparation for a large-scale invasion. The man was mad, Nico suspected. It was said King Lucan had spent too much time tampering with magics better left alone. Rumor had it dark magics had changed him and warped his mind.

Skiths were killing machines that slaughtered everything in their path.

The only thing they were even remotely afraid of was fire and luckily the dragons had that in quantity.

The skiths attacked Adora. Jared and I had to snatch her from a tree. Rohtina and my son, Kelvan, engaged the skiths below. That's how Rohtina was so badly injured. She got too close to the skiths and nearly paid with her life.

Where is the woman now?

Kelzy's great head rotated to the doorway where she had been resting when he came in. The suite was arranged, like most sets of rooms in any Lair, around the central, heated oval sand pit that was the dragon's wallow. All the rooms flowed around the wallow with archways large enough for the dragons to lay their heads in if they so desired. In this way, the dragons and their human families could be together in all things.

She lives with you?

She is my daughter. When my last knight died, I went into the forest to recover. I met little Adora there. She was only a toddler when she first found my cave. I returned her to her family, but they couldn't hear me.

But she could?

Kelzy nodded slowly. They both knew the ability to hear dragons was passed from generation to generation. If the people who claimed to be Adora's parents could not hear the dragon as the child could, they were not her birth parents.

She spent most of her time with me until she was just coming into her teen years. That's when your parents were killed and your brother, Roland, took the throne. I moved back to the palace then to aid Roland in his new duties, but it became clear to me over time, that he needed wise counsel. When things had settled and Roland was steadier in his role as king, I set off on my quest, in search of Jared, I remembered him from when he'd served your father. He'd always impressed me as a strong warrior and never failed to give your father good counsel. I hoped he could be convinced to do the same for your brother. It took a while to find him, but when I did...

You chose him as your new knight partner. Nico finished her sentence with a respectful nod.

Kelzy's eyes dimmed with remembered sadness. I lost track of Adora, I'm ashamed to say. I went back to look for her years later, but she was long gone. Her family had moved and no one knew where they went.

And you just found her again, after all these years?

Actually, my son, Kelvan, found her daughter. The girl was poaching in the forest and they argued over a stag. When she met my son's partner, Gareth, he knew he'd found his mate. We celebrated their joining shortly after. When my son met Adora that first day, she talked of the dragon she knew in her youth and he knew she was talking about me. He convinced her to come here for a visit and we were reunited. The dragon's jeweled eyes sparkled with remembered happiness. But Adora is a dedicated healer and wanted to return to her hut in the forest so she could tend her patients in the nearby village. When the skiths overran the village, they nearly got her too.

You said she climbed a tree to get away from them? She sounds like a brave woman.

Brave and ingenious! Jared gave her some treated leather before we left her in the forest and she fashioned it into the most remarkable garments. I asked Jared to give her some of my shed scales and she sewed them between layers of leather in her boots and in strategic spots on her clothes. She got sprayed pretty badly with skith venom, but not a scratch on her.

Then why is she recuperating? How did she get hurt?

That was my doing. I had to snatch her out of the tree and I clipped her with my talons. Kelzy seemed very upset by the incident. I hurt my own girl! How could I have been so clumsy?

It happens to the best of us, Lady Kelz. It's hard to be perfectly accurate all the time, much less under combat conditions, with such wickedly sharp talons. Don't be so hard on yourself.

You're a good boy, Nico.

The prince laughed outright. Only you would have the nerve to call me that, Lady Kelz.

At that moment, Jared emerged from the doorway Kelzy had indicated was Adora's room, surprising Nico. The older knight looked worn and tired, but there was a light in his eyes that had been missing for many, many years.

"Nico, my boy! When did you get here?"

A smile split the older man's face as he moved forward to catch Nico in a fierce hug. Jared was one of the few people in the world who would dare approach Nico and his siblings with such familiarity, but he was also one of the few people in the world who Nico actually loved as if he were part of his own family. Jared had been there for him after his parents' deaths, and for that he would forever love the slightly older, wiser man.

"I just got here a few minutes ago. Kelzy was filling me in on the history of your guest."

"Adora." The way Jared spoke the woman's name sent up warning signals in Nico's mind. There was something between them, he realized with a start, though he never thought Jared would heal enough to let another woman into his life, even just a little.

"You think she's of royal blood?"

Jared nodded. "I can't see any other explanation for what's happened. Her daughter definitely has the wizard gift. She healed a dragon's mortal wounds in front of half the Lair. They're all treading on eggshells around her now from what I hear." Jared chuckled, offering Nico a draught of mulled wine from the small kitchen area. "You'll stay with us, won't you?"

Nico took the goblet and smiled. "I'd enjoy that. If I'm here long enough."

Adora stirs. Kelzy sent her thoughts to both men. Jared instantly moved to the archway, a look of touching concern on his weathered face. Nico suspected the older knight was already half in love with the mysterious woman who could very well be a lost member of the royal family.

"Perhaps I can help?"

Nico didn't make the offer lightly. The royal line was said to be among the last of the wizard blood in this realm, and each of them had some healing talent. Nico didn't use his often, but it was there. He could do small healings, but his true magic was something far different. Still, if he could help this woman who clearly meant so much to two beings he valued so highly, he

would do what he could.

Kelzy's glowing eyes pinned him. Would you? Oh, Nico, I'd be forever grateful! We don't have another true healer in this Lair. Her daughter's gift only works on dragons, not humans.

Nico knew the dragon didn't bother stating the obvious—that Kelzy's own magical healing ability, known as the Dragon's Breath, could not heal wounds made by dragons or that Adora's own healing skills were useless on her own wounds. It was a quirk of magic that healers generally couldn't heal themselves.

The prince followed Jared into the small guest room, noting instantly the unusual tenderness with which the older knight stilled the thrashing body of a small woman mostly hidden under the covers. Nico moved closer to stand on the other side of the bed as Kelzy's head filled the doorway, watching all closely. The dragon hovered over the woman as if she was truly her own dragonet, and Nico had to hide a smile at Kelzy's completely un-dragonish behavior. That was one of the many things he loved about this particular dragon. She never let anyone—be they dragon or human, prince or pauper—dictate her actions. Kelzy was her own dragon, through and through.

Nico could see the woman more clearly now and she was definitely a beauty. Only a little older than him, she looked somewhere near thirty winters or so. Though if she had a grown daughter, she must be a bit older than that. Still, she was a beauty. Her flowing hair was auburn in the dim light of the room and her features could almost be described as fragile though what he could see of her bare arms were lithely muscled and firm. Judging by the muscle, she had not lived a life of leisure, but she looked every inch the fair damsel. And she was most definitely in distress.

Jared soothed the woman and drew her onto her stomach, pulling the blanket away from her loose bandages. Three angry red, parallel furrows were partially covered by light swaths of linen across her back.

"Adora, wake up." Jared spoke softly near her ear and her head shifted sideways toward the knight.

Nico saw her eyes open and was stunned by the deep green reflected there. Most of the royal line had green eyes. His own hazel color was the exception rather than the rule.

"Adora, we have a guest. He has a bit of healing skill and is willing to try and help you." She looked as if she would have objected, but Jared placed a finger over her pouty lips, stilling her words. "Just lie still and let us do this for you. You haven't slept well and it pains Kelzy to see you hurting. Think of her before you object."

Nico sensed the resignation in the woman as she turned her tired green eyes to the doorway.

For you, Mama Kelzy.

Nico was amazed by the mental communication all three of them heard in their minds. Unskilled, but powerful, this small woman showed yet another of the gifts of the royal line. While knights could certainly communicate with dragons in such a way, it was a rare female human who could even hear dragons, much less send their own thoughts. All royals could do it, of course, but such a gift was rarer than diamonds among regular folk.

The woman settled down with a sigh, her magnificent green eyes closing as she trusted the men to do what they would. It was clear she had no doubts that Kelzy and Jared would protect her. She trusted them, which was undoubtedly why she didn't question his presence. That and her own pain and fatigue conspired to make his job easier. Willing patients were always preferable to those who were in too much pain to lie quietly. Nico's healing talent was small when compared to some of his kin, so it was important he be able to focus without too much distraction.

Jared stripped away the bandages with a gentle hand, and Nico was surprised by just how badly this little woman was injured. She had borne her injuries without much complaint from what he'd just seen and that was remarkable in his experience. He'd seen these kinds of wounds before and they weren't pleasant. The gouges were deep. Neat and clean, but very deep. Without help, they would take weeks to heal and scar badly, but he thought he could at least speed up the process, to help limit the scarring and take away the worst of the pain.

Focusing his energies, Nico reached out and touched the woman with just his fingertips. Then the strangest thing happened. A flare of light filled the small chamber as his energies met and reacted to hers. There was a moment of resistance, then a moment of pure bliss as the woman's magic welcomed his, aiding him in the healing and directing his meager skill with all the knowledge and power of a highly skilled healer.

Nico found himself wielding the strong healing power with ease. The serious wounds were no challenge to the incredible energy that echoed through him. When he sat back after a few minutes, all of them were smiling and Adora's back was whole and unblemished.

"Merciful Mother." Nico stared at her back in amazement. "That's never happened before."

Your energies recognized each other. They meshed so you could work together. Kelzy spoke softly to all of them. This cements it then. Adora has royal blood. This just proved it.

Adora shifted in the bed, clutching the blanket to her nakedness as she looked at strange man at her side.

"Who are you?"

The rogue smiled and bowed, winking at her. "My name is Nico."

The Prince of Spies, Kelzy supplied with a dragonish cough of laughter. We'll have to track down exactly where you come from, Adora, but this boy is probably a distant cousin of yours. Don't let the fact that he's a prince stop you from boxing his ears if he gets too fresh.

"Prince Nicolas?" Adora's eyes widened even more as she realized the prince had just healed her and was even now watching her lounge, half-naked, in bed. Could this day get any stranger?

"I'll leave you to dress, milady. We have much to discuss as soon as you're ready."

The prince winked at her again and walked easily out the door, past Kelzy's bulky head, leaving Adora alone once again with Jared. She looked up at him, seeking answers.

“Did the prince just heal my back?”

Jared chuckled but nodded solemnly, his eyes twinkling. “Nico is an old friend, Adora. I’ve known him since he was just a boy. He’s still a bit of a rascal, but a good lad. He came to see if you were what you claim to be.”

“I don’t claim to be anything!”

Jared shook his head. “That was a bad choice of words on my part. I should have said what you appear to be.”

“Why?” A knot of fear settled in her stomach and unreasonable anger battled with panic just below the surface. “Just what do I appear to be?”

Jared eyed her bare shoulders, making her all too aware she was naked under the blanket. He stepped back and seemed to force his gaze to meet hers.

“Royalty, milady.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

He twisted his lips wryly. “Afraid not. Your daughter healed Rohtina’s mortal wounds with nary a thought. Healing dragons—now that’s a gift reserved to those of royal blood alone, Adora, and you bespeak dragons as easily as a knight. Kelzy heard you call her when you were hiding in that tree. Even I couldn’t reach her over such a distance and we’re bonded.”

“It was an emergency. Sometimes people can do amazing things when faced with a life or death situation.”

“That may be the case for others, Adora, but I believe you’ll find no ready explanation for the way your magic sparked off the prince’s just now. I think the magics recognized each other and that allowed him to use your knowledge and his gift to do a more thorough healing than that lad has ever been able to do before. He’s not a strong healer. The most I expected was for him to be able to speed your healing a bit and maybe take some of the pain. Kelzy will back me on this.”

Adora shot her gaze to the dragon whose head still filled her doorway. What Jared says is true. Nico has never been a strong healer. His talents lie elsewhere.

She stared at them both, speechless for a moment. Flopping her hands down on the blanket, she shook her head.

“I can’t deal with this right now. I’ve got to get dressed. There’s a prince waiting out there for me to make my royal appearance, for heavens’ sake! Go away, Jared, and let me dress. I’ll deal with all of this once I have some clothes on.”

Jared moved toward the archway. “Your leggings were ruined but I found a few things that might fit and put them in the wardrobe for you.”

“Thank you, Jared.” Her voice went soft as emotion threatened to overwhelm her. “Once again, your thoughtfulness amazes me.”

He just shrugged and left, but Kelzy stayed in the doorway as Adora stood. She examined her back as best she could in the polished metal mirror along one wall by the wardrobe. Her skin looked healthy and pink, without a scar in sight. Amazing.

Adora pulled on her own soft leather shirt, needing something familiar to help her deal with the upheaval in her life. She had to search in the wardrobe for leggings that would fit. There was a selection of both skirts and pants in

the small cupboard.

Jared must have scrounged clothing from some of the younger boys who lived in the Lair to find leggings that would fit her small frame, and it was these she took from the closet. Adora was used to the feel of soft leather against her skin after having worn the unconventional outfit she'd made for a few weeks.

She needed comfort now. She couldn't worry about style. The reassuring feel of Kelzy's shed scales sewn into the layers of her tight-fitting top made her feel good. Adora only hoped her odd clothing wouldn't offend the prince. He was royalty after all.

More importantly, what would Jared think of the form fitting outfit? He'd given her the costly leather in the first place, way back when she'd stubbornly refused to leave her home in the woods. That such a gruff man would think of her comfort and safety still touched her deep inside. He'd surprised her with the gift, and the precious dragon scales that rightly should've been for his use as Kelzy's partner. Adora felt bad the outfit she'd spent so much time and effort to make was half destroyed now, but the leather top and matching leggings had undoubtedly saved her life when the skiths attacked. Only the specially treated leather and the few precious dragon scales had stood between her and their poisonous venom. She'd felt special wearing those clothes, because the leather and the scales had been a gift from the complex man who waited even now outside her door.

Would he be shocked by her appearance? Would he think her beautiful? It had been so long since Adora had cared what a man thought of her looks. The very idea of it made her heart speed and her palms sweat like a young, untried girl.

You're beautiful, Adora. You were always a pretty child but you've grown into a gorgeous woman, no matter what you're wearing.

"So now you're a mind reader?" Adora raised one eyebrow, turning toward the dragon hovering in her doorway.

We females always tend to worry about how we look to an attractive male.

"Kelzy! The prince is young enough to be my son."

Is not. Besides, who said I was talking about the prince? It's Jared I had in mind. And so did you.

Adora plucked up her courage and strode into the main room, finding the men at the edge of the dragon's wallow. Jared had installed a soft couch and chairs for human visitors' comfort. Being the one in charge of the Lair, Jared probably entertained knights who had to speak to him in privacy about one thing or another, she reasoned. Kelzy had told her all about Jared, and she knew the crafty dragon was doing all she could to promote a match between her and the slightly older knight.

For her part, Adora thought Jared was an amazing man, but wasn't quite sure she could handle any man in her life. Though if she had to choose just one, it would probably be Jared. Still, she knew he'd been hurt badly by the death of his wife and child. It was Jared who always backed off when they seemed to be getting close and she respected his right to do so. She wouldn't force herself on any man, even if they did live together at this point because of their close—but separate—ties to Kelzy. Kelzy wanted them both living with

her and it was usually unwise not to give a dragoness what she wanted.

Adora squared her shoulders and strode with a confidence she didn't feel to where the men sat. Both had goblets of mulled wine in their hands and were talking easily. Her soft footsteps went unheard as Kelzy moved her great body in the sands, so both men started when she appeared before them. With a lithe grace, she curtsied deeply to the prince in the formal manner.

"Your majesty," she spoke demurely, "I humbly thank you for your healing skill."

The prince surprised her, standing to take her hand in his. He raised her easily to stand beside him.

"Then you feel better?"

"Much better, your majesty."

The prince sighed theatrically. "If you insist on calling me 'your majesty' then I'll have to call you 'milady' and we'll waste all our time on extra words that mean nothing in the grand scheme of things. It's all so tiresome." He sniffed with regal disdain, making Jared laugh out loud. "Please, call me Nico and I'll call you Adora, all right? After all, we're kin."

She gasped. "You can't know that for certain."

"Oh, I think it's safe to say that you have the blood of Draneth the Wise in your veins somewhere. Our magics would not have meshed in such an agreeable way had you not."

Adora swayed on her feet and Nico's strong arm steadied her, guiding her to sit on the couch. Settling her there, he pressed a full goblet into her trembling hand.

"It's impossible."

"No, I'm afraid it's not. I did some research before I left the castle, and it seems there are quite a few members of the various royal lines unaccounted for through the years. The most likely scenario is that you are the Princess Amelia Jane, who was stolen from her home the same night the rest of her family was killed. The baby princess was never found, though the rest of her family was left where they were slain."

Adora found herself reaching out for Jared, needing his strength as the prince relayed the sad facts.

"There was some talk at the time about a maidservant who'd gone missing as well, and many of the chroniclers believed the maid took the baby to safety, but she was never seen again." Nico sat next to them on the long couch, taking her other hand in his. "You would be about the right age to be little Amelia Jane, I think, though you look much younger than your thirty-eight winters."

Adora gasped. "How did you know my age?" Her eyes sought his, her confusion plain, then understanding dawned. "Oh, sweet Mother! The princess you mentioned. She would be thirty-eight?"

Nico nodded. "This year."

Adora felt a tear slide down her cheek, followed by another and another. Kelzy growled, crooning in her dragonish way as she had when Adora had been just a child, but it was Jared who pulled her close against his broad chest, comforting her with his warm strength.

"Do you have anything from your childhood, Adora? Anything that might

tie you to your past?"

She sniffled, cuddling against Jared as if she belonged there. Turning slightly, she looked up at the handsome prince.

"Only one thing. It's not much." With shaking fingers, she reached into the front of her shirt, separating the seams she'd sewn between the layers, reaching for something only she knew was there, just under her heart. "I didn't even realize what it was until recently when Kelzy gave me her shed scales." She pulled out a gleaming black panel that was wafer thin and resilient as only true dragon scale could be. Nico went silent as she handed the evidence of her heritage to him. "But I've never seen a black dragon scale before."

Jared's arms tightened around her. Adora's breath caught in her throat as the prince turned the gleaming black scale over in his hands, studying it with an odd sort of knowledge. Kelzy's head loomed up over his shoulder, then suddenly, Nico spun to hold the deep black scale up to the dragon.

"Anybody you know?" Nico held up the scale like an offering as Kelzy reached out her long tongue, licking the black scale delicately with just the tip.

Not your direct line. Kelzy was more serious than Adora had ever seen her. I think it likely to be from the line of Kent, but we need a dragon who knew one of them personally. I think Sandor served Prince Fileas when he was just a dragonet. He arrived at this Lair recently. I'll call him.

While they waited for one of the older male dragons to make his way to them, Adora moved away from Jared's tempting strength. She sat up straight on the couch and tried to gather her scattered emotions. She felt shaky, but she knew Jared was there should she need him. It was a reassuring feeling.

"I never would have guessed you were over thirty, Adora." She felt Jared's hand stroking her hair softly and turned to look into his amazingly gentle eyes.

"I have a grown daughter, Jared. And I had twins before her."

"You must have been a child bride." Jared's teasing lightened her heart.

"Twins?" The prince turned back to her. "Where are they now?"

"I don't know. They were stolen from me when they were just little girls."

After the revelations of the last moments, it was devastating to think about the little girls she'd lost so cruelly. Adora gripped the cushions of the couch until her knuckles turned white. Jared must have seen her distress. He pried one hand up from its death grip on the couch and grasped it firmly between his own rough fingers. His silent encouragement meant the world to her in that moment.

"Girls?" The prince ran a rough hand through his hair. "Merciful Mother."

"What?" Adora's gaze went from the prince to Jared to Kelzy.

It was Jared who finally answered. "Royals, probably because of the wizard blood, have more twin sets than is usual. Twin girls are a rarity though. Few girl children are born to any of the royal lines, and only very rarely in pairs."

Sandor approaches.

A large, battle-scarred dragon with coppery brown coloring entered the archway leading to Kelzy's suite. He started in surprise when he saw the

prince and bowed his great head in respect.

How can I serve you, my prince? The newcomer's voice boomed with resonance through the minds of all present.

Nico walked up to the huge copper dragon and held out the black scale. "Do you recognize this? Can you tell us who it may have belonged to?"

This new dragon repeated Kelzy's odd licking gesture and then his garnet eyes opened wide. Fileas! This scale belonged to Prince Fileas.

Adora was confused. "Fileas was a dragon?"

Nico turned back to her, his hazel eyes shining. "Yes, he was. As am I."

Jared stood at Adora's back, his presence reassuring as a black mist began to form in front of their eyes. Between one moment and the next the prince was gone and a sleek black dragon stood in his place. He was somewhat smaller than the other dragons, but obviously built for speed. He also had sparkling tourmaline eyes—eerily like the hazel gaze of Prince Nico.

The only black dragons are of the royal line. We alone have the ability to shift our shape from human to dragon, and it is that dual nature that solidifies this land's ties with dragons and humans alike.

"Prince Nico?"

"It's him, Adora," Jared assured her. She walked up to the prince and reached out hesitantly, but the black dragon moved forward into her touch with his sleek black-scaled head.

"Incredible." Her voice was a breath of a whisper. "You're dragon and human? Half and half?"

The dragon lifted one shoulder as if to shrug. That's one way of looking at it. But Adora, if you are the daughter of Fileas as we believe, then half of you is dragon too.

"Don't be ridiculous."

Kelzy claimed her attention. Think about it, child. Why did you seek me out when you were just a baby? How did you even know where to find me? My lair was well hidden. None of the humans in the area knew I was even there until you toddled off to find me.

"I can't shift into dragon form and fly away with you, Mama Kelzy." Her sarcastic tone was laced with shock and a bit of fear.

The very idea of Prince Nico being able to shift into dragon form tantalized her, though Adora knew in her heart it was impossible for her. Surely if that kind of power existed inside her, it would have made itself known long before now. Sure, she had a little healing talent, but most of the healing she did relied on skills learned through hard work and trial and error, not dragon magic. Or any other kind of magic at all, for that matter.

The black dragon moved closer. Royal females generally can't shift, but they are usually healers of great skill and ability. Their dragon magic manifests itself in the healing arts—the Dragon's Breath made human, if you will. I understand your daughter is a dragon healer.

The prince stepped back from her and the black mist swirled, leaving him human again, clothed all in black leather, before her. That was some powerful magic indeed.

"Sweet Mother! Belora." Adora's legs gave out and she found herself hoisted back onto the couch, wrapped securely in Jared's strong arms.

“She healed Rohtina,” he reminded her gently.

At this point, the huge copper dragon craned his neck forward to lay his great head at Adora’s feet. A rare tear sparkled in his deep garnet eyes. His tongue flicked out to touch the back of her hand and she started.

You are Fileas’ daughter. You’re little Amelia Jane. Thank the Mother that you’ve finally found your way home to us. The tear leaked out of his eye and tumbled onto her hand, a sparkling magical gem showing the great extent of emotion he was feeling. I served your father when I was just a youngster. I was away when the attack came, on a quest issued by your sire, but if I’d been there, I would have given my life for his. He was a great man. You have his eyes, though you have your mother’s smile and her beautiful hair. I stand by my pledge to your sire and I will serve you and your line all my days, if you will have me.

Adora was moved to tears by the dragon’s solemn pledge. She reached forward and touched his long snout, rubbing gently and feeling the magic inside her tingle in a way it never had before.

You’re hurt, she thought, surprised when the dragon answered her.

An old wound, my princess. Nothing to worry over.

Wait. Adora felt the healing energy gather and suddenly overflow from her into the dragon, shining light all around them as her energy came alive as never before. She looked at the dragon’s left foreleg and the awkward angle at which it was held. It had been broken sometime in the recent past and set badly.

He hid it well, but Sandor was in a great deal of pain that communicated itself to her when she touched him. Sometimes it was like that for her with human patients, but never had Adora felt such a response with a dragon. Then again, the only dragon she’d ever known before now was Kelzy and she’d always been quite healthy.

As they all watched, the magic flowed, and Sandor’s leg straightened out, the lines of pain just visible around the dragon’s eyes easing. Adora pulled away and felt the residual high of the magic already beginning to fade in her body. It felt much like it did when she did a complex human healing, but with so much more energy. It was very nearly overwhelming.

Adora sank back and Jared was there for her.

“Do you really have any more doubts about who you are, Adora? You’re my cousin,” the prince said, kneeling at her side. “You’re Princess Amelia Jane of the House of Kent.”

“That’s not my name.”

“It was.” Nico shook his head. “But you never knew it, did you? You’ll be Princess Adora from now on, of the House of Kent. Welcome back to the family, cousin.”

Adora tried to focus but was fast losing energy. It was a phenomenon she knew well. She had overextended herself in healing Sandor, but it was worth it to know he was whole again and no longer in pain. She just needed sleep to recover.

Thank you, my princess, Sandor said gravely in her mind. I’m only sorry you tired yourself so on my behalf.

“I’m fine. I just need sleep.”

Jared lifted her into his arms as she leaned back against him, cuddling close to his warmth. He felt so good. It was heaven to rely on his strength for just this short moment.

I'll seek you out when you wake, princess. I have no knight partner at present, but I would be your guardian as I was your father's before you.

"That's nice," she mumbled. "You're such a pretty copper color."

The dragon's voice rumbled comfortingly through her mind as she drifted into unconsciousness. I match the lights in your hair, as I matched your mother's.

Jared found himself again tucking Adora into the bed in the guest chamber that was now hers. Kelzy wanted her adopted human daughter close and Jared found himself wanting to keep Adora close for entirely different reasons. If he wasn't very careful, he could easily lose his heart to such an amazing woman. But his heart was too badly damaged to take such a chance again.

He realized, despite his best intentions, he had spent a great deal of time in Adora's room in the past few days, tucking the covers around this small, puzzling woman. No, he thought ruefully, make that this small, puzzling princess.

He could still hardly believe Adora was lost royalty. True, she was not in direct line for the throne. In fact, her family line was quite remote from the ruling line—only very distant cousins at best—but the fact they had bred true and the males of the House of Kent could shift to dragon form made them all princes and princesses of the realm. It was a closely guarded secret—and something of a legend now to the people of this land—that their kings were descended from dragons.

Few now knew how true the legend really was. Not only were they part dragon, but the males actually could become dragons when they chose. It was a very useful ability and one that allowed them to rule wisely over both human and dragon kind, giving them personal insight into both races.

Jared had been a knight for quite a few years, but before that had served in old King Jon's household. He knew the royal secret and had seen them shift back and forth from human to dragon many times. Each time though, it was still a bit of a shock. He could only imagine what Adora must have thought seeing the roguish Prince Nico shift not five feet from her.

Of the brothers, Nico was Jared's favorite, though he'd be damned if he'd ever let that scamp know it. Nico had been the wild child—the one who constantly needed supervision—and more often than not, it fell to Jared to get the young prince out of whatever scrape he found himself in at the time. Over the years, Nico had come to respect Jared's advice almost as a son would—or younger brother at least. Jared looked at Nico now and thought sadly of what might have been had his family not been torn apart by tragedy.

For years it had been hard to be in Nico's presence, but now after time and distance from the horrific deaths of his family, Jared found he missed Nico's peculiar brand of devilry. He thought of the prince as he had thought of his son, with an almost fatherly regard and a fondness deeper than most.

"She's quite a woman." Nico's voice drifted quietly from the archway as

Jared straightened up and moved out of the small room.

"You haven't met her daughter yet. She's just like her mother, only younger."

"Too bad she's already mated." Nico's eyes flashed with humor.

"You've got to be kidding me, Nico. You, interested in a woman of substance? What? Have you gone through all the whores in the kingdom already?"

Nico laughed, but Jared noted the slight echo of hurt in his eyes with some amazement. Could it be the rascal really was starting to think about settling down?

They went back to the sitting area and saw that Sandor had not left. The big copper dragon sat quietly with Kelzy, apparently deep in conversation, all but ignoring the humans. Jared was taken aback by how cozy the two dragons looked together, sharing the comparatively small wallow. It drove home the fact that Kelzy had lived a long and full life before choosing him as her knight partner. He'd never asked her about her past though, having been too wrapped up in his own misery in those days just after they bonded. Afterwards, he'd been too busy working towards the safety of the kingdom with war clearly on the way. Jared made a mental note to talk more to his dragon partner about her own life, just as soon as he found the time.

It was important to him that he give as well as take from this relationship and it suddenly struck him that Kelzy had been giving and giving to him for years. As far as he was concerned, she was the only reason he wasn't already dead. Since she'd come into his life, bonding with him on a soul deep level, he had a reason to live. Before that, in the dark times when his family was ripped from him, he had wanted nothing more than to join them in death. It was Kelzy who had given him a reason to go on. Kelzy had given him hope, companionship and a kind of love he hadn't ever expected.

"I won't dignify that little dig with a reply," Nico laughed, bringing him back to the conversation at hand with a jolt.

The prince was pouring more wine. He drank too much, Jared thought, but he knew that was just a symptom of unhappiness. Nico needed a wife.

"Nevertheless, I want to meet my younger cousin at the first opportunity." Nico turned to the dragons, lounging in the warm sands of Kelzy's wallow. "Lady Kelzy, on the way in I saw your son and a very pretty gold taking off for the moon. Do you think they're back by now?" His snicker was echoed by dragonish coughs of smoky laughter from the occupants of the wallow.

Are you asking if the human part of the family is recovered enough to speak with you? If so, I would say yes. They've been mated for a while now and are beginning to slow down and savor their moments a bit more.

"Good. I'm going to pay them a call."

I'll warn them so they at least have a chance to dress. Kelzy sent after the prince who was already on his way out.

Aw, Lady Kelz, you take the fun out of everything.

Jared went to check on Adora and found her tossing restlessly. She looked so fragile, so small, and so alone in the big bed. His heart went out to her as she moved in troubled sleep and he found his feet taking him closer,

despite his intentions to stay away from her. Sitting on the side of the bed, Jared took her restless hands in his own, speaking softly.

“Hush now, Adora. Everything is fine. You are warm and safe, as is your daughter. I won’t let anything happen to you. Be at peace.”

Kelzy puffed warm air over them from the doorway, offering her own sort of comfort to the girl she had practically raised. He smiled over at the dragon. Her head lay in the archway, her neck stretching out from the heated sand pit that was her favorite place to rest. From that central wallow, she could crane her neck to reach just about any room in the roughly circular suite, ensuring that she was part of every facet of her chosen humans’ lives.

Rather than intrusive, Jared had always found Kelzy’s interest in his doings comforting. She was a friend, a companion, and a sounding board who lived, breathed, and cared deeply for him. He didn’t question the bond between them. It was deep and it was real. It had formed that fateful day when Kelzy had found him.

Jared had been on the raw edge of despair for a long time after the loss of his wife and young son. The pain of losing them had almost driven him mad, but Kelzy’s magical appearance in his life somehow made it just a bit easier to go on. Kelzy had found him deep in the mountains, hiding away from people and dragons alike.

Jared discovered only later that Kelzy had gone deliberately looking for him. Returning from a time of self-imposed exile while she mourned the loss of her previous knight, Kelzy had come back only after the old king and his wife were slain. Answering the call of her kind, Kelzy went back to the palace to find the king and queen dead and the youngster Roland being crowned king—without the benefit of one of the crown’s top advisors. Kelzy had been one of the top-ranking dragons, well acquainted with the palace, the royal family and their advisors. She and Jared had always had a friendly relationship, if a bit distant in times past. But when she found him years later, so near the end of his sanity, only her claiming of him gave him reason to go on.

It was Kelzy who had broken the terrible news of the king and queen’s deaths. It was Kelzy who had talked Jared into returning to the palace, assuring him that young Roland would need him, that his country needed him, that she needed him.

There was no greater guilt a man could feel than failing to protect his family, failing to be there when they needed him. Failing to help the young king—a young man he had known all his life—was something Jared could not allow on top of all the other tragedies in his life.

Kelzy had given Jared reason to live back then and he never regretted her interference. He loved her. But she was the last being he would love, he vowed. Loving came with too high a cost and he refused to hurt that way ever again.

So he couldn’t love Adora, no matter how much he might crave her. She was light in the darkness, a gentle balm to his injured soul. Just having her in his home made him happy, but he refused to allow her into his heart. He refused to let the gentle feelings welling up inside him show. He couldn’t give her the false hope that somehow they could be together. It would not be fair to

her, and he didn't want to leave himself open for that kind of pain ever again.

For she would leave him eventually. It would hurt bad enough as it was, without letting the bond between them get any deeper. Still, he couldn't help but savor these few moments he had with her. He would not let himself love her, but he couldn't help caring deeply for the lost little woman who had shown him her bravery, her courage, her care for his best friend Kelzy and all the dragons he held dear, and her very human vulnerability. She was a rare treasure and he could appreciate her beauty—both inner and outer—from a safe distance. He hoped.

"Jared?" Her voice touched him as she blinked her wide green eyes sleepily. He turned from his contemplations to the woman whose hands he still held lightly within his own.

"I didn't mean to wake you, Adora." He tried to keep his voice low. "You were restless and I came in to make sure you were all right."

"I was dreaming. It was a nightmare." Her sleepy eyes grew frightened and huge as she remembered the vision that had disturbed her slumber. "You were falling. Jared, you were falling off Kelzy's back and you had an arrow through your chest. There was a lot of blood and you were so high." Her voice broke as real fear shivered through her small body.

He had no choice then but to pull her into his arms and comfort the trembling woman. She was so beautiful and so vulnerable in that moment. He couldn't bear to see this strong woman so afraid. Especially on his behalf. Especially when it wasn't even real.

"Ssh, Adora. It was only a dream. I'm here and I'm fine. Kelzy would never drop me. You know that." He rocked her as she clung to him, his voice crooning to her as if she were a babe.

"It seemed so real. Jared, what if it's an omen? What if—?" She broke off on a sob and clung to him.

He rubbed her back with one hand, his frozen heart cracking open at her distress. Without thought, he brought his head down to rest against her, cuddling into her warm neck, inhaling her delicious scent. He kissed her, placing soft little nibbles on her neck, just under her jaw and near the delicate shell of her ear. The shivers of fright changed to something more enticing. Biting gently on her earlobe, Jared felt her soft sexy sigh as she relaxed into his embrace.

"Don't be afraid, Adora." His whisper sent warm, moist air into her ear and she gasped. "It's only a dream."

"Jared."

Her gasping moan brought him closer to her lips, his arms shifting, drawing her nearer to his hard body. He wanted her desperately.

Giving in to desire, he brought his mouth to hers, sipping at her sweetness, drowning in her enticing flavor. This was what he wanted. This! He wanted her.

Aligning their bodies, he laid her back down on the bed, tearing away the covers that tried to get between them. He lowered his weight onto her carefully, his mouth following hers, surprised a little by her passion, but meeting it with an equal fervor. She was with him every step of the way, her little hands clawing at his shirt with a strength and enthusiasm he had not

expected. It was devastating.

Impatiently, he ripped at the ties of his shirt, breaking their kiss only to tug the garment off over his head and throw it across the room. It landed somewhere near Kelzy's head. Jared looked up enough to see the jeweled dragon eyes blink open with surprise, then narrow in seeming satisfaction as Kelzy noted what the humans were up to. Jared was too far gone to care what conclusions his dragon partner jumped to though, turning back to whip off Adora's thin nightgown.

When she was bare, he moved back only a moment to enjoy the sight of her generous breasts, her soft skin, and her womanly form. Something was driving him to take her and make her his own. No matter how he fought it, the drive was there, pushing him beyond control.

"Adora," he gasped as she raised her little hand and caressed his muscular chest, following the line of his scar.

It flowed down from his face, over his pectoral muscle and past one hard male nipple, down onto his washboard stomach and lower, beneath the waistline of his leggings. He stopped her when she would have delved beneath and brought her soft hand to his lips, holding her gaze with his own.

"You are so beautiful." He put her hand on his shoulder, then pulled her soft body against his, meeting her halfway to the mattress. She was wonderfully warm beneath him, so enchanting. She was not shy, nor hesitant, but he could tell she hadn't done this in a very long time. Just the idea was entrancing.

Slowly, he rubbed his chest against her breasts, enjoying the way her eyes lit up and her body twitched in passion. He did it again, liking the drag of her hard nipples over his. Lightly, she traced the muscles on his arms and he felt himself weaken. She could easily turn him into her slave with just her touch alone.

He brought his hands to her breasts, pulling back only slightly to fondle and stroke her taut peaks. Her little gasps fired his blood and when he took her in his mouth and sucked, she bucked and moaned. He suckled her strongly, gauging her reaction by the way she moved in his arms. It had been so long since he'd had a soft woman writhing in pleasure beneath him. So long since he even cared who the woman pleasuring him was.

But he cared about Adora. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop himself from caring at least a little. It was dangerous, he knew, but it couldn't be helped.

Firmly, he moved back from her, enjoying the view of her rosy nipples, still wet from his tongue and one of them holding the faint imprint of his teeth. He liked that.

Perhaps a bit too much. Alarms went up through his brain.

When she reached for him, he pulled back, but saw the need in her beautiful eyes and knew he couldn't leave her like this.

Gently, Jared pushed her back on the bed, lowering himself between her soft thighs. He wouldn't go any further than this, but he owed her something. He wouldn't leave her unfulfilled and needy. He would bring her pleasure and lull her back to sleep, then seek his solitary bedchamber. Even if it killed him.

And it probably would.

Sighing, knowing this was the one time he would allow himself to feel her feminine response, Jared lowered his head to her slightly rounded stomach, biting gently. Adora giggled and he pushed lower. The giggle turned to a gasp and then a moan as Jared brought his fingers and tongue to her secret folds. Gently, he probed, learning her body. He'd never wanted so badly to bring his partner pleasure before, never cared more for the woman's response than at this very moment. Adora was special.

Too special for the likes of him.

Jared parted her nether lips, blowing a current of air over her distended little clit. She sighed as her body trembled, hips moving in an uncontrollable rhythm. Covering her clit with his lips, Jared tongued her lightly at first, then more steadily as her temperature rose.

She moaned, her body thrumming against his lips as he took her higher. She tasted of warm honey and sweet woman, creaming over and over for him. Delving inside with his fingers, Jared curled just the tips, looking for that magical spot that would take her over the edge.

Adora cried out when she came, a sob of relief offered up to the night as he rode her through a glorious climax. Clenching around his fingers, Jared nearly died at the thought of how she would feel clenching just the same way around his cock. How he wanted to experience that! How he wanted to take her and make her his own!

But he couldn't. It wouldn't be right.

Adora deserved a whole man—one who could love her with a whole and unscarred heart. She didn't deserve a broken down, second-hand knight with ice in his veins instead of blood. He would not let her make such a sacrifice, but he would enjoy the few stolen moments this night gave him. Jared licked her widely with his tongue, lapping up every last bit of her excitement and taking it within himself.

He would never taste such ambrosia again.

After a while, she settled down and he found the strength to move away from her tempting thighs. He kissed his way up her soft body, pausing for a long tender time at her full breasts. Then he found her lips with his own and kissed her delicately as if he never would taste her again.

And he never would. He kept that thought foremost in his mind. Adora deserved better than the likes of him. Kissing her long and sweet, Jared cuddled her close as her sleepy eyes closed and her breathing returned to normal.

"Go to sleep, Adora."

"But what about—?" Her voice was already dreamy with satisfaction and the sound of it sent tingles down his spine, straight to his hard cock. But he wouldn't trespass further. She was too good for him.

He stroked her hair tenderly. "It was just a dream, Adora. Sleep now and have no fear."

As he smoothed his hands over her soft body and shining auburn hair, he could feel her drifting closer to the edge of peaceful oblivion. He felt good that he'd been able to soothe her, but knew she would be hurt when he turned cold on her in the morning light. Still, it had to be done.

Rising regretfully, Jared watched her sleep for a moment before finally

steeling himself enough to leave her side. Kelzy was there, of course, partially blocking the door, staring at him with her wise blue topaz eyes.

It's for the best, he said, knowing she would understand.

I disagree, but you must be the judge of your readiness to commit to a woman, not I.

You're damn right about that, Kelz. The dragon sounded like she was humoring him, but he couldn't be sure. He was frustrated and angry that things couldn't be different. But they just couldn't.

Jared stalked past the dragon and made his way to the bathing chamber. Kelzy followed, watching as he tore off his pants, releasing his straining erection.

Adora would have welcomed that, she said, flicking out her long, thin tongue toward his cock, but not touching. She hasn't had a man between her legs since her husband died. I think she's lonely.

Lonely is no reason to climb in bed with me. She deserves better.

Kelzy shot a lick of flame toward the stone basin that was filling with water to heat it for him.

Again, I disagree. You're just what she needs, Jared. A man who will put her needs above his own, but I won't nag you.

Could've fooled me. He laughed without humor. Now, can I have a little privacy to bathe?

And jerk off? Certainly. The dragon left him with a broad-eyed wink.

Chapter Three

Young Belora stretched, luxuriating in the feel of two strong male bodies, one on either side of her in the warm bed. She would never take for granted the love she had found with her two mates, Lars and Gareth. Nor would she ever take for granted the pleasure bond each of her knights shared with her when their dragon partners soared to the stars in a mating flight. When the dragons mated, the residual energy washed over their human counterparts in a wave of pleasure unlike anything she had ever known before.

Gareth was Kelvan's knight and Lars was partnered with the dragon's mate, Rohtina. She was wife to both men in the tradition of the Lair, since there were so few females able to live and communicate with dragons. That Belora was also able to heal dragons was a relatively new discovery and one that still had her puzzled.

The knights insisted she must be of royal blood but she had been raised simply in the forest. Belora had never been rich, but had always been happy with her mother and the simple life they led. Her mother, Adora, was a powerful healer and they made their living off the land and from the herbal

remedies they traded to the people in the small village near their home. The place was overrun now by the first wave of the enemy invasion. Venomous skiths had decimated the village and destroyed the women's tiny house in the forest.

But her mates had saved her and rescued her mother from the skiths. For that she would be forever grateful. When the dragon, Rohtina, was mortally wounded, Belora's own latent healing ability seemed to come to life. Never before had she tried to heal a dragon and suddenly all the power she had ever wanted was hers to command. She'd used the magic to heal the beautiful golden Rohtina and discovered she was pregnant with a dragonet at the same time. It was a double miracle as far as Belora was concerned. She was so happy. Life couldn't get much better.

Uh, sorry to wake you all. Kelvan's voice sounded through all three human minds with some degree of urgency. But you'll very shortly have a visitor.

"Tell them to go away." Gareth threw a pillow out of the bedchamber toward the general direction of the dragons' wallow.

I can't. Kelvan sounded rather pained this time. You have to get up and get dressed.

"Who is it?" Lars asked, raising up on one elbow and scratching at his muscular chest.

"And what's the bloody rush? It's not even dawn," Gareth grumbled while Belora giggled.

She climbed over Lars, pausing to kiss him good morning before she headed first for the wardrobe and then small bathroom next to their bedchamber. She was just too happy to be grumpy in the morning. Her mates had made her the happiest woman in the world—repeatedly—last night. Humming a light tune, she dressed and moved into the small kitchen area to heat water for the tea she liked to drink in the morning.

The small fire she used for heating water had gone out, but with a quick look at the dragons, she got their help in lighting it once more. They were handy to have around, she thought with a grin, when one needed a light. She was still chuckling when Gareth came into the room, stretching and yawning. He grabbed her in a fierce hug, kissing the breath out of her as was his custom first thing in the morning.

Lars was just a bit more conservative. He stumbled in—still a little bleary eyed but his usual calm, quiet self. She knew well by now that still waters ran very deep indeed when it came to Lars. His steadiness warmed her as she set mugs of the strong tea she blended especially for them in front of her mates.

Belora noticed some activity out near the entrance to their suite and saw the dragons bowing their heads to a newcomer dressed all in black leather. He was a striking man, and more than a little scary. He moved with such self-possession, as did all the knights, but this was something more. This man prowled. It was as if there was a caged beast inside him, just waiting to be let out. She shook her head, smiling at her fanciful imagination as she nodded to Lars and Gareth.

"Looks like our guest is here. Do you know him?"

Both men turned and their eyes widened before they stood hastily. They

bowed in respect as the man approached and he took it as his due while Belora stood dumbfounded.

“Your majesty.” Gareth spoke for them all. “Welcome to our home.”

“What do you know? Gareth and Lars, together again, I see. The Mother must have been sleeping on the job to allow this sort of pairing.” The man’s hazel eyes flashed, obviously teasing, and the knights relaxed in his presence.

Belora was intrigued.

“Congratulations on your wedding.” The black clad man stepped forward, offering his hand in the knightly fashion, indicating he thought of her men more as contemporaries than underlings.

She liked that and found herself liking the tall man with the dancing hazel eyes almost immediately.

Both of her knights shook the man’s hand with broad smiles, thanking him for his good wishes. They turned to her. Her mouth went dry for no reason she could discern. Again, Gareth spoke for them all.

“This is our mate, Belora. Sweetheart, this is Prince Nico.”

Belatedly, she remembered to curtsy, but the prince’s next words nearly threw her off balance.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, cousin.”

“Cousin?” Lars was startled into speaking, his turquoise eyes wide with the shock they all felt.

Nico nodded. “Shall we sit? I have much to say and I’d like a chance to get to know your mate a bit better as well.”

“By all means.” Gareth gave the prince his own chair, pulling over another for himself and one for Belora. She brought the teapot and another cup, setting it before the prince, all the while marveling that a prince should be sitting to morning tea with her, of all things.

“I met your mother just a short while ago,” the prince began. “I’m convinced that she is the daughter of Prince Fileas of Kent who was killed along with his entire family by our enemies many years ago. The only survivor of the massacre was his youngest daughter, the Princess Amelia Jane, who disappeared that day and was never seen again. Until now.”

“Bright stars!” Belora’s whisper reached the men, making them smile.

“I believe your mother is Princess Amelia Jane, though she will be known now as Princess Adora of Kent. That makes you Princess Belora of Kent and distant cousin to the royal line.” The prince leaned back, apparently enjoying the stunned stares of the people around him. “And that makes you two...” He eyed the knights. “Prince Consorts.”

“Holy shit.” Lars and Gareth spoke at the same moment, clearly stunned.

Belora was overwhelmed. Her mind seized and her stomach revolted. Jumping up so quickly her chair crashed to the floor behind her, she ran for the bathroom.

She had never been so sick in her life, grasping the seat of the commode for dear life as her stomach emptied itself over and over. Dimly, she realized the bathroom was crowded with her mates and—horrors—the prince. Gareth wiped her brow with a cool wet cloth, which felt very good, while Lars held her, tying her hair back with a stray piece of leather. That done, he rubbed her spine gently. The prince watched with a pitying look, but there was a light

in his off-green eyes that was more than calculating. He made her feel a little uncomfortable as he moved forward to squat down next to her.

“May I?” he asked both her and her mates as he stretched his hand near to her forehead. She nodded hesitantly, uncertain of what he intended, but one didn’t say no to a prince, after all.

He touched her head and suddenly the knots in her stomach eased. She realized he was using his own healing energy to still her rebellious stomach. His touch soothed and within moments she felt much better, though still a bit too shaky to stand on her own. Lars helped her up, holding her against his chest as she faced the smiling prince. He had the most luminous look in his hazel eyes as he regarded her.

“Congratulations, cousin.” His words were low, filled with emotion. “You carry twin boys and they will both be black dragons.”

“Praise the Mother,” Gareth whispered. He swayed for just a moment, seeking the stone wall for support.

Kelvan and Rohtina raised their heads in the archway and trumpeted their joy, nearly deafening all the humans present. Lars squeezed her close, his face buried in her neck as he kissed her.

“I don’t understand.” Belora looked up at the prince from within Lars’ strong hold.

The prince laughed gently. “I know. Forgive me, cousin. This is just such a momentous thing. There are so few of us left. Every birth is a miracle to our line. Black dragons even more so.”

“I still don’t get it. Why are you calling them black dragons? I know that’s the symbol of the king, but what has it to do with my...oh, sweet Mother, did you say I was pregnant?” Nico nodded and she felt tears gather in her eyes. “You felt them? Twins?”

“Yes, cousin. Two strong, healthy boys. One from each of your mates.”

“Sweet Mother of All!” She turned in Lars’ arms and hugged him hard, then reached for Gareth who still appeared stunned by the news. She embraced them both and her smile stretched from ear to ear.

“I take it the news is both happy and unexpected.” The prince spoke once their rejoicing had died down a bit.

“Rohtina’s pregnant too,” Belora said, tears of joy nearly overcoming her.

“Then double congratulations are in order.” The prince turned to the dragons and placed one hand as if in benediction on the young female dragon’s head.

“Thank you for telling me! And for making me feel better too. My own small healing gift never works on myself.”

The prince shook his head with a smile. “Such is the pity for most healers. But I understand your power is better suited to dragons anyway, which is a wonderful thing.”

“Yes.” She moved out of her mates’ arms to face the strange prince. “We discovered it only a few days ago.”

“So your mother told me.”

“Oh! Mama’s going to be so happy! And Kelzy!”

“All the dragons in this Lair will undoubtedly be happy to hear the news that your sons will soon be joining them.”

Belora was puzzled by his wording. "Joining the dragons?"

"It's a gift of the royal blood we share, Belora. We are both human and dragon. That's why the females of our line can heal dragons when few other human healers can do so effectively. The males of our line take that one step further."

"How?" She was afraid to breathe.

The prince stepped back from her toward the dragons. Kelvan and Rohtina welcomed him with respect and a kind of deference she had never seen them display before.

"We are dragons."

So saying, the prince faded for a moment, a thick black mist swirling around his body. Belora recognized the tug of powerful magic on her senses. A moment later, a compact but still huge black dragon stood outside the archway between the other two dragons. The prince was nowhere to be seen. Or rather, he was there—incredibly—but in dragon form.

"Sweet Mother of All!" Belora strode forward, entranced by the gleaming black dragon. He was somewhat smaller than the other dragons, but he looked just as lethal, just as beautiful. She reached out to him and he craned his neck forward into her touch, allowing her to feel the shiny black scale of his neck and face.

Do you understand now, cousin?

Belora gasped as she felt the presence of the prince within the striking black dragon with the tourmaline eyes. No, that wasn't quite right. The prince wasn't inside the dragon, the prince was the dragon, and the dragon was the prince. It was simply amazing.

"My babies—?"

Your sons will be as I am, able to shift from human to dragon at will. I show you this so you will be prepared when they are ready. They'll probably begin to shift shortly after they learn to walk. They'll start flying around the same time Rohtina's dragonet will, I think, so they can all learn together. The Mother certainly knows what She's doing, doesn't She?

"I can't believe it."

Believe it. Your sons will bring hope to the dragons here in this Lair, which will shortly become key in our battle with Skithdron if I'm not mistaken. Just their presence will bring renewed hope for our land to the dragon population and the knights as well. I tell you this from my own experience. I've felt the power and the responsibility that comes with being of two worlds.

"Is it hard? I mean, it's such a responsibility. I was raised simply. You can call me a princess all you want, but I'm still just a peasant really. I always will be."

Then you might understand what it's like to live in two worlds as well, for you are a princess and apparently a peasant too. And to answer your question, no, it's not hard at all. It's the most amazing blessing of my life and I thank the Mother every day for allowing me such gifts. She was wise when She allowed the last of the wizards to form the pact between the dragons of our land and our ancestor, Draneth the Wise. He was the first black dragon, forged by magic and his own wizard blood, but each of us since has been truly of both races. It's how we can understand the needs of both humans and

dragons and continue to guide both races in harmony and cooperation. It's a gift, Belora, a precious one.

His words touched her so deeply she felt a tear trickle down her cheek. The prince moved back and the black mist swirled once more, leaving him clad in black leather, human once again.

"Whatever doubt remained is now gone. You carry royal black dragons in your womb. There can be no doubt you are of the royal line." The prince moved forward, kissing her on both cheeks. "Welcome back, cousin, to our family. It's a happy day to have found you and your mother once again."

This time, she did cry—her emotions all over the place with the shocking news of her bloodlines and her pregnancy. Gareth and Lars came up behind her, their supportive arms around her, there for her.

"There's one other thing I have to discuss with you, Belora, if you think you're up to it." The prince looked uncertain for a moment in the face of her turbulent emotions and she smiled to reassure him.

"Anything, Prince Nico. You've given me such happy news."

They walked back toward the kitchen area and sat down once more. Nico reached out a finger to each cold cup of tea and warmed them with his inner fire. Apparently he didn't have to be in dragon form to call on his fire. She would have to remember that for when her boys started to experiment with their own abilities.

"I don't mean to bring up bad memories, but I need to know everything you can remember about your sisters."

Belora gasped at the sudden change of topic. She had not expected it but realized it made sense that the prince would want to account for all the members of her line. The kidnapping of her sisters suddenly took on an even more sinister light in her mind. Had the kidnappers known their true identities? Is that why they had been targeted? She shivered and Lars and Gareth were there, putting one arm each around her at shoulders and waist, silent and supportive. Stars! How she loved them.

"As I told my mates, all I remember is that we were in a big town, at a market. My mother could tell you where exactly. A bunch of men rushed us. Big men. I remember one had a jagged scar on his face and was missing the two little fingers on his left hand. He hit my mother and the others grabbed my sisters. They were very strong and no one would help us. The scarred man tried to grab me but my mother held me tight and started running. She ran and ran. They pursued us but didn't catch her." Gareth and Lars moved their chairs closer. "My mother and I went back later and tried to find my sisters, but they were long gone. We left that day and never went back. We walked and walked, through forest mostly, and when we came upon the cottage, we watched it for a few days before my mother would approach."

"Sounds like your mother was taking wise precautions." The prince's voice held respect and admiration, which warmed Belora's heart.

"We didn't have any money or much to trade except my mother's healing skills. No one claimed ownership of the cottage when my mother asked in the village and they welcomed the idea of having a healer move in closer to them. Some of them helped Mama in the early days, bringing her food and household items to trade for her herbal remedies. That's how we've lived for

the past decade and more.”

“How old were your sisters when they were taken?”

“I was about five, so I guess they were about seven or eight.”

“Then they’d be in their early twenties now.”

“Yes, I think so.”

The prince stood. “Thank you, cousin. I want you to know that I’ll do everything in my power to find your sisters.”

Nico went back to speak at length with Adora while Belora and her new family celebrated the two pregnancies—both human and dragon. Adora, after she woke, was able to fill in the blank spaces in what Belora had told him about the day her sisters were snatched from them.

It was a cold trail, over ten years old, but Nico was a man who prided himself on his ability to learn things that others could not discern. He had a place to start at least, knowing the town from which the children had been snatched. He would start there.

The black dragon winged away from the new Lair under cover of darkness, off on his quest.

Z Z Z

Everything was not as it seemed in the royal palace of Skithdron. While on the outside, things looked much as they had during old King Gorin’s time, on the inside, an evil pestilence roamed freely through the new king’s chambers. Lord Venerai knew his friend and sometime lover, King Lucan, dabbled in magics not of this land—perhaps not of this world—and paid a high price for such power, but Venerai understood. He too, would do anything for power.

When Venerai received the royal summons to present himself in the king’s private bed chamber, he prepared himself for a night of serving the young king’s rather rapacious desires. But he found quite a different evening awaited upon entering the king’s chambers. For one thing, Lucan was not as he had seen him last. Lucan greeted Venerai with inhuman, slitted eyes that reminded him of the almost reptilian gaze of a skith. Then, as Lucan shrugged off his robe, Venerai saw the changes that had been made to Lucan’s once soft and pampered skin. Gone was the almost boyish pudginess, replaced by a sleek, scaled, lithe musculature that was startling to say the least.

Lucan’s skin had an earthy cast and it rippled with scales in the candlelight. Venerai didn’t know what to make of it and for once in his life of political intrigues and power struggles was at a total loss for words. The young king noted all with his new eyes and laughed, but Venerai didn’t care. Lucan was dangerous now. Let him laugh. As long as King Lucan wasn’t ordering his death, Venerai was pleased to serve as the king’s fool.

As Lucan approached him, appearing to slither more than walk, Venerai held himself still. He started to notice changes in the room since last he had been summoned to pleasure the king. Desperately trying to hide his reactions, Venerai knew one misstep here could easily get him killed.

A ragged girl cowered near the foot of Lucan’s bed, bound to its ornate

golden post with a golden chain. She was dressed scantily, but dressed nonetheless, which indicated to Venerai that she was not there for the king's pleasure, but for some other purpose he could only guess at. The girl watched Lucan's back with hate-filled, startlingly green eyes.

Venerai also noted the large trapdoor that had been installed near the ornamental golden fountain at one end of the grand room. It opened and Venerai tried to hold his reaction back as three giant skiths slithered into the room, making their way to Lucan's side as if seeking their master.

Skiths were native to Skithdron, and gave the land its name. They lived in the rock formations that littered the land, menacing all living creatures. Most active at night, skiths would eat anything that moved and seemed to rejoice in ripping people's heads from their bodies. Skiths were truly evil creatures, with acid venom that could burn through just about anything. Only the stone walls that surrounded every village kept the people of Skithdron safe from the predatory creatures.

They slithered like snakes and had slitted eyes, but they were as large as dragons, though of course they couldn't fly, or even climb very well. Solitary creatures, Venerai knew Lucan had found a way to herd them before his armies. Just how he'd learned to control the creatures was a subject of much conjecture and Venerai almost feared he was about to find out the secret of Lucan's power.

The power itself was tantalizing to Venerai. The hideous creatures were not.

Lucan welcomed the deadly skiths with outstretched arms as they twined around him like puppy dogs. Venerai had never seen the like. It was a moment before Lucan turned back to him, his pet skiths standing tall, extending upward from the floor on their sinuous bodies, backing Lucan with their immense size and fearsome presence.

"You have pleased us greatly, Lord Venerai. You have always been a faithful servant."

Venerai bowed low, nearly scraping the floor, and dropped his gaze as the king demanded of his subjects. "Thank you, your highness."

"In recognition of your service to us, we have decided to raise you higher yet."

Venerai's heart stilled with a mixture of fear and anticipation. Power was what he wanted, but what price was too high?

"Come forward, Lord Venerai, and join with us. We promise it won't hurt...much."

Venerai stumbled forward as the king laughed.

Chapter Four

War came on a quiet day. The wild skith raids on border villages had diminished in the days just before Skithdron launched the entirety of their first wave. Venomous skiths were herded before the army, bringing utter destruction to anything in their path. Somehow the generals were able to direct the creatures, bringing their army up behind. They destroyed three villages completely before enough dragons raced to the incursion to put up a decent defense against the unprecedented swarm of skiths.

Flames flew everywhere as Jared arrived on the scene, swooping in on Kelzy's back to lead the dragons and knights in their forays against the lethal creatures. But the skiths weren't the only thing to worry about—as if they weren't bad enough by themselves. The army of men and horses just behind the skiths was armed with crossbows that could shoot small but dangerous arrows at the dragons. A lucky hit to the eye or some of the rare sensitive places on a dragon's body could do enough damage to take them out of the fighting. The knights, too, were vulnerable to the arrows so the danger was real, as all the knights knew full well.

They flew higher to avoid arrows as best they could, but in order to effectively fight, they had to make low flame runs. Though he hated to give the order, Jared knew the dragons' flame would be effective against the bowmen as well. Jared watched grimly as the new assault started to have some effect.

Suddenly Jared sighted a familiar banner as it dipped and rose once more with an additional white flag of surrender on its pinnacle. The lone rider made a break for the Draconian side, across the field of devastation, riding for the nearest dragon and knight—Kelvan and Gareth.

Kelzy, can you see? Is that—? Sweet Mother! Is that Lord Darian?

It is. The crazy loon. He doesn't see the skiths turning to chomp on him.

We have to do something. He's flying a white flag.

I see it, Jared. Kelzy made a swooping dive toward the man on horseback, who was almost entirely surrounded by venomous skiths, but another dragon got there before her. This copper dragon had no rider on his back and was acrobatic enough to scoop the man right off his horse a moment before the skiths reached it. The skiths feasted on the poor beast, rending the horse limb from limb with their razor sharp fangs.

Sandor! Good flying. Jared heard his dragon partner call to her friend. Will you take him to the Lair while we finish here? Don't let him out of your sight.

The copper dragon gave a smoky snort that clearly said he would never do such a ridiculous thing and turned for the Lair, the man clasped tight in his sharp claws. All in all, Jared was glad the other dragon had made the save. He knew Kelzy might have balked at snatching up a human since the last time she had done it—the guilt of inadvertently hurting Adora had bothered her for days and days. He didn't want to live through that again right now, though he was planning some drills with inanimate objects to sharpen her skills and build her confidence in snatching and grabbing targets as soon as they had a free moment. A fighting dragon needed to train constantly and keep all their skills as sharp as their talons.

When Jared and Kelzy landed at the Lair, they found a scene of chaos. Several knights shoved the Skithdronian man around, sneering and shouting angrily at him, though he did little to defend himself from them. Jared called for order and the knights grudgingly moved away, staring down the stranger with hatred in their eyes.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Acting like a bunch of children in a schoolyard!” Jared admonished the knights, most of who were on the young side, he realized looking at them. Few had seen real fighting before. “This man came to us under a flag of surrender. You young hotheads should at least wait to hear what he risked his life and forfeited his country to tell us!” He noted a few eyes clouding with chagrin, but some were still defiantly angry.

“It’s probably a trap, General,” one of the younger knights yelled from the other side of the crowd now gathered on the wide landing ledge. “How do we know he’s not some kind of spy sent to mislead us?”

“I know because I know this man. I’ve known him for years and have called him friend for just as long.” Jared moved to stand beside the Skithdronian lord. Darian was a little worse for wear after the way he’d been greeted by the knights, and Jared was disgusted. Knights were supposed to behave better than this. “I lead this Lair until the king says otherwise and I trust this man. So you all had better just calm yourselves.”

A dead silence fell then as the younger knights simmered. They didn’t have to like his orders. They just had to follow them. He was the leader here and their job was to follow. Simple as that.

“Now, if you’ll all get back to your duties, I’ll talk to our guest and learn what news he gave up his home, his lands, and his title to bring us.”

There was muttering and shuffling of feet but the knights dispersed, leaving a few curious dragons who were being tended by their knights for less serious wounds sustained fighting the skiths. Many were being doused with water to remove small spots of the venomous skith spray from their tough hides. It was best to do that here on the ledge where provisions had been made to remove the contaminated water safely, before the dragons moved around into other parts of the Lair and spread the noxious stuff around too much.

Jared turned to the man at his side, looking him up and down before reaching out a hand in welcome. Absently, he noticed Adora hovering near one of the injured dragons some yards distant, a strange look on her face as she watched them. She’d avoided him since that night he’d brought her to climax with his mouth and fingers, just as he had avoided her.

“I’m sorry for their behavior, Lord Darian. They’re young and inexperienced with real war.”

The other man sighed as they shook hands. “Would that I were the same, but I’ve seen too much in my years, Jared. I don’t blame them.”

Jared growled. “I do. I command here and their ill behavior reflects poorly on my leadership. I apologize.”

“No problem. I didn’t expect to be welcomed with open arms, but I had to come. I thank the gods that I got through and that you’re here, of all people, to hear what I have to say.”

Both men's expressions grew grim. Jared realized many ears were craning to hear what they would say to each other.

"Come with me where we can talk privately. I'll also ask our healer if she will see to your wounds, if you like." He looked over at Adora and with a slight motion of his head asked her help. She waved a hand and nodded in agreement, and he knew without words that she would join them as soon as she finished her work with the badly injured dragon. He could count on the fact that she was a truly dedicated healer to bridge the icy gap that had grown between them since the night he had lost control of his senses.

Jared winced as he watched his old friend limp down the corridor with him. Kelzy followed behind with Sandor. The break from his own people, the skith attack, being snatched up by Sandor and flown here in the dragon's fist, and the beating from the young knights had left Darian with a pronounced limp and assorted cuts and bruises. But true to his character, he didn't complain. Jared respected the man. Always had. Of all the Skithdronians he had met as counselor to the old king, this was the man he'd dealt with the most, and the most successfully.

Darian winced with every step but couldn't complain. He was alive and luckier than he had a right to be. He'd hoped to get to someone in power who might believe him and take his message higher, but he never expected to see his old friend, Lord Jared, riding atop a dragon. When Darian had lived near the palace, serving as the newly appointed ambassador from Skithdron to the old king's court, he and Jared had formed a close friendship. As a bachelor, he was often invited to spend holidays with Jared and his family.

Darian knew the new Skithdronian king had been behind the attack on Jared's family but didn't know how in the world he would ever break such news to his old friend. Besides, that was in the past and Lucan had gotten his wish—Lord Jared, the keenest of the old king's advisors had been a broken man after the deaths of his young wife and child. He had left the old King's service and retreated into obscurity for a long time. In fact, Darian would bet none in Skithdron yet realized just who commanded the dragons on this part of the border.

Jared led him to a large chamber that had at its center a massive oval pit filled with sand. The dragons who followed close behind made for the sand pit and sank in with what Darian would have sworn were dragonish sighs. They rolled slightly in the abrasive sand, which seemed to brighten their iridescent scales to a glossy shine even as he watched.

"Be welcome in our home, Lord Darian. As you can see, everything is designed around Lady Kelzy's comfort here." The other man gestured toward the beautiful blue-green dragon he had been riding.

Darian knew enough about dragons to make as deep a bow as he could manage toward the large heads that watched him carefully.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Lady Kelzy." He turned to the copper dragon then. "And thank you, sir, for your timely rescue."

You're welcome. Though I've yet to decide if you were worth risking my neck for.

Darian's eyes widened as he heard the booming voice echo through his

mind. It could only belong to the huge copper dragon whose garnet eyes twinkled down on him with a sly sort of merriment. Tentatively, Darian sought the way to the dragon's mind with his own thoughts.

I can only hope that after you hear what I have to say, you'll be convinced.

The dragon gave a smoky chuckle and turned back to the sand and his grooming. Apparently neither Jared nor the female dragon was aware of the silent communication that had just taken place between Darian and the big copper.

"Sir Sandor," Jared spoke again as he led Darian to a long couch, "is an old friend of Kelzy's. He's newly arrived to our Lair and without a knight at present." Darian sat with only a small grunt of pain but Jared grimaced when he looked at him. "Our most gifted healer will see to your wounds as soon as possible."

"Don't worry about me, Lord Jared. There are things I need to tell you. Things you need to hear—"

At that moment, he broke off speaking as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen walked through the main archway. She spared a smile for the dragons and it lit her entire face. Even from a distance he could see the glint of deep green in her wide eyes and it drew him in. She was a goddess come to earth and he would gladly worship at her feet, if she would but let him.

The very idea of it shocked Darian right down to his toes. He'd long ago given up on finding a woman to share his life. No woman had ever evoked such a violent or immediate response in him. Darian knew deep inside, just from looking at her, this was a woman he could spend the rest of his life with.

As simple and startling as that, Darian knew he was looking at his destiny. Never one for overly romantic thoughts, Darian was laid low by the seductive sway of the woman's hips, the gentle glide of her dainty feet across the stone walkway.

The woman turned her head, spotting them, and it was as if his prayers had been answered when she made her way directly to the couch where he sat. As she drew closer, he could see she was no young maiden, yet there was a freshness about her that made her appear much more innocent and younger than the wisdom in her startlingly beautiful eyes betrayed.

Jared stood stiffly and Darian noted the longing that entered the other man's eyes as he gazed on the beauty who approached. Darian realized Jared was not unaffected by the woman's grace. The knight wanted her, it was plain to see, but Darian questioned whether Jared—after the devastating losses in his life—would ever act on it. Darian's eyes were drawn back to the stunning woman and he noted more than a flicker of interest as she looked at him. But the dewy admiration in her eyes was for Jared alone as she passed him.

There was something there, on both sides, but he knew Jared was probably too wounded emotionally to be a good match for this delicate flower. If Darian could, he would have her—take her and cherish her in the way she deserved to be cherished. He knew in his heart he would be better for her than pining away after Jared—a man who might never be heart-whole again. Darian would make her forget the impossible longing for Jared that showed in her every movement. Darian would teach her the delights she'd find in his arms and the love he would give freely, if she would but accept it.

“Princess Adora of the House of Kent.” Jared made formal introductions, but Darian could see from the woman’s start of surprise that she wasn’t comfortable about something. “May I present Lord Darian Vordekrais of Skithdron, former ambassador to our land during old King Jon's reign.”

The woman stopped in front of him and smiled, nearly taking his breath away.

“I’m not big on formality, milord. I’m a healer and would help you if I could. May I?”

“Princess Adora, you may do whatever you wish with me. I’m yours to command.”

The woman blushed so prettily at his daring words he almost wished he could spend the rest of the day making her smile, but he had come here for a reason. He had to get his message out and Jared was just the man to use his information.

She directed him to lie back on the couch, pulling a wicked looking knife from her waist and setting to work cutting her way through the ruined leather boot and leggings that contained and constricted his swollen foot, ankle, and leg. She was efficient and so gentle he felt little pain.

Darian shook himself, focusing on his task. No matter the distraction of the woman tending his wounds, Darian knew he had to deliver his message. He’d given up his home and country to deliver his warnings, and they had to be heard as soon as possible.

“Jared, you’ve got to get word to your king. Lucan has gone completely ‘round the bend.”

The knight dragged a chair closer and sat, leaning forward to catch every word. Darian also noted the dragons had craned their necks over near them and listened intently as well.

“I’ve heard rumors about him, Darian, but nothing concrete.”

“Jared.” He grabbed the man’s wrist, trying desperately to make his old friend understand the urgency of his news. “I’ve seen it now with my own eyes. Lucan has sunken into dark magics that have twisted him into something not quite human. He keeps skiths as pets and trains them. They are far smarter than I ever gave them credit for being. Jared, the ones he trains go out and teach the others. They’re learning to hunt in packs, in orderly groups, to work together. What you’ve seen so far on this side of the border is nothing. Lucan had them test and train on some of our own villages. Every human and animal for leagues around the villages of Vorkrais, Hemdan, Pennrin and Sokolaff are now gone. Skith food.”

The woman gasped, drawing his eyes. She was white with fear and Darian regretted immediately putting such a look on her lovely face. He let go of Jared’s wrist and—almost without realizing he was doing it—moved to cup her cheek, offering what comfort he could from such dire news.

“I’m sorry, Princess, to have distressed you. I should have waited to speak.”

“No.” She surprised him by reaching up and taking his hand in her own. He felt a spark between them and his gaze was glued to hers as she spoke. “Jared needs to hear what you have to say. I thank you for your selfless act in coming here, breaking with your people and subjecting yourself to the Lair’s

questionable hospitality.” She made a face at his swollen and bruised leg. “It’s just that I was chased by skiths not too long ago and almost didn’t make it.”

His hand tightened on hers. “Thank the gods you got away. I would hate to think of what could have happened.” Darian fought back the amazing attraction that flowed between him and this woman. He had a mission to complete. He had to impart his information. Only then could he concentrate on the gorgeous woman who ministered so tenderly to his wounds. “Jared, Lucan has found a way to communicate with the skiths and I believe he’s made some kind of bargain with them.”

“Sweet Mother of All!” Jared rocked back in his chair.

“As you probably know, wild skiths are solitary creatures. They hunt and live alone, usually in wilderness areas. They aren’t much trouble unless you blunder into their territory or they try to take up residence near a village or something. But Lucan, he’s organized them! They’re working together, fighting together, living and hunting together. I’ve never seen the like. He’s formed an army of the creatures, and they’re coming this way. They will kill every man, woman, and child in Draconia, sweeping through your lands with the help of the human army Lucan has at his command, until they take it all.” His voice rose with the passion of his words. “Jared, Lucan doesn’t want to just conquer your land, he wants to destroy it utterly. He plans to kill every last human and dragon and allow the skiths to breed and multiply to numbers we have never before seen.”

“That’s insane.” Adora's shocked whisper brought his eyes back to hers.

“Sadly, you’re right. Lucan has gotten involved in sinister magics that have warped his mind. It is said he drinks skith venom and bathes in blood. He’s consulted a foreign witch who some say managed somehow to allow him to communicate with the skiths. They say that’s how he’s been able to convince them to do things they never have before. He can control them.”

Jared’s scarred face was very grim. “I can’t thank you enough for risking your life to come here and tell me this. You have my guarantee of sanctuary and a place in my House for as long as you need it.”

Darian realized it was a generous offer and more than he had expected when he set out on his dangerous quest. To have the protection of Lord Jared’s ancient and distinguished House meant quite a bit in this land or any, for that matter.

“I am deeply honored, Lord Jared, and thank you.”

He hissed then, involuntarily, when the woman shifted his injured leg. All eyes moved down to appraise the damage she had revealed by removing the boot and cutting his legging up to mid-thigh.

“You won’t be running anytime soon, but slow walking with a stick to help support you is allowable. I’ll do what I can with poultices and what healing energy I can spare.” She shook her head sadly. “I’m sorry to tell you I must save most of my energy for the dragons.”

He was shocked. “You heal dragons?”

The princess nodded, her gentle hands already ministering to his painful leg. He waited patiently, amazed at the tingle of her healing gift when she put out a tiny bit of energy to mend his abused muscles. With that little head start, he knew his healing time would decrease significantly.

She swayed just a bit when she stood and it was Jared who caught her, betraying his concern over the small woman. He steered her to a chamber in the suite, disappearing inside with her for a few minutes while Darian fought off sleep. There was more he had to tell Jared, but he hadn't the heart to speak the worst of his news before the tender creature who had done her best to heal him.

When Jared returned, his expression was thoughtful.

"Tell me the rest."

Darian chuckled wryly. "You know me too well, old friend." He settled back against the arm of the couch. "Lucan has been sending envoys to that heathen Salomar in the north. They are working together to develop weapons that will take down dragons. I saw some drawings of one briefly but it was too fast for me to get much detail. What I did see, though, gave me nightmares." He sat up, his eyes narrowed. "I've since learned that Lucan is sending massive shipments of diamond blades from the mines in the south to Salomar. I fear the worst."

Both men knew that a diamond blade was just about the only thing that could slice through dragon scale as if it were butter. Jared sat heavily in the chair at his friend's side.

"This is bad, Darian. Very bad."

"I know. It's why I came. You have to warn your dragons, Jared. I believe the human army will try to use their new weapons to drop the dragons from the sky and let the skiths do the rest. I wouldn't wish that sort of death on even my worst enemy, and I've never considered the dragons of your land or any of your people to be my enemies or the enemies of Skithdron. It's Lucan who's started this war and as far as I'm concerned he is the real enemy here."

Jared stayed by Darian's side, talking quietly and thinking through the dire news until the other man fell into a restless sleep. Adora had been more worn out than he liked her to be in healing the dragons who had come under attack that day. She had dropped off into an exhausted sleep moments after he'd put her to bed and would sleep for many hours yet.

He covered Darian with a blanket where he lay on the couch. He didn't have the heart to wake the injured man just to move him to a bedroom. Tomorrow was soon enough.

Jared wanted to seek his own bed, but he feared sleep would not come so easily to him. Not after what he had just learned. He stood, stretched, and walked over to the edge of the dragon's wallow. Kelzy and Sandor lay side by side in the large tub of heated sand, each looking at him with troubled jewel eyes.

You heard?

We did. It was Kelzy who answered into the minds of all three.

We must send word to the king right away, but we need more information if we're to train against this new threat.

Sandor elevated his head so that he was on a level with Jared's eyes. Though I have no knight partner at present, I wish to stay in this Lair and train with your ranks, Sir Jared. Kelzy and I have worked well together in the past. I would do so again, if you agree.

You're most welcome to stay, Sir Sandor. Right now, I think we need all the help we can get. Thank you for volunteering.

Sandor settled back down beside Kelzy as if he meant to stay right there in her wallow with her, but Jared didn't question it. His mind was too preoccupied with more desperate concerns than where a new dragon chose to sleep. If Kelzy didn't throw him out then who was Jared to say anything?

On his way to his own chamber, he stopped to look in on Adora. He almost wished he could talk to her about these troubling developments, to share his burden with her in some small way. Such thoughts were dangerous and skated too close to intimacy for his comfort, but they would not be denied. Adora was a bright, intelligent woman and he valued her insight. That's all these strange feelings were about, wasn't it?

He shook his head in disgust at himself as he walked silently away from her doorway. He was a damned fool. Already half in love with the woman and unable to work up the courage to do anything about it. Too afraid of being hurt again to even try.

Z Z Z

"How are you feeling, Lord Darian?"

Adora sat beside the man's bed the next day, as soon as she finished checking on the dragons who had been hurt the day before. Jared had given him a room on the other side of the suite from hers that was similar in design and layout. There were several of these guest chambers in the large suite since Kelzy and Jared were the leaders of this Lair and often entertained guests and visitors.

"Much better today. Thank you, Princess."

"Please, call me Adora. I didn't grow up as a princess and I don't think I'll ever get used to the idea."

His blue eyes twinkled as he smiled at her. "Far be it from me to argue with royalty. I will gladly call you Adora if you will call me Darian, or Dar if you prefer."

She couldn't help but smile. This man was charming, that was certain, and so handsome he was almost hard to look at. Straight white teeth shone in contrast to his tanned skin. He had hair black as a raven's wing and startling, almost ghostly, blue eyes that smiled easily and sincerely at her, though he was still in a bit of pain, she well knew.

She busied herself looking over his leg injury. It was still swollen, but healing nicely now that he was off his feet. "Well then, Darian, how are you feeling?"

"Much better now that you're here."

She laughed. "Much friskier too, I see. Were you born a flirt or did you perfect the art over time?"

"Actually..." His eyes grew serious. "I've been a confirmed bachelor all my life but I think that's about to change."

"What makes you say that?" She dared not look up to meet his gaze as she changed the dressing on his leg wound.

It had been so long since a handsome man had flirted with her, Adora

couldn't be certain she wasn't reading something in to Darian's words that wasn't truly there. Certainly Jared had paid quite a bit of attention to her—and reminded her what pleasure truly felt like—but it felt almost as if it were against his will, or his better judgment at least. By contrast, Darian was very honest about his desire to make her smile. In short, he was a flirt and she almost didn't remember how to deal with a man on that level. Still, it was exciting to try.

Darian's hand covered hers, forcing her gaze up to his. Even the air stilled, waiting as their eyes met.

"You, Adora. You're the reason." There was no easy smile now, no sign of amusement. No, this was a man puzzled by his own reactions but willing to risk...to trust. What she saw in his earnest face nearly stopped her heart for a moment.

"I don't understand it, but I think I'm falling in love with you, Adora. It's like my heart was waiting for you all this time, and now it sees what it's wanted all along." She was at a loss for words but he wouldn't release her hands. His eyes implored hers. "Say something, sweetheart. Let me know if I at least have a chance."

"A chance?" she repeated, stunned witless.

"A chance to win your love. I want you, Adora. My life is a mess right now. I have little to offer, I know, but my heart is pure and it's yours if you want it."

"Darian, I've been alone a long time."

"Don't say no only because you're frightened. I'll do all in my power to alleviate your fears. Just say you'll give me the chance to try to win your heart. Give me hope, Adora. I beg you."

Her eyes grew moist as he held her gaze, tenderly stroking her hands. She realized in that moment, regardless of her growing feelings for Jared, this man was open in a way Jared could probably never be again. This man, brave enough to leave his life behind for the good of her people, was offering his heart on a platter—and it touched her in ways she didn't quite understand. She barely knew him but she knew his nobility—his courage and his honor—and admired him greatly for it.

Could she know his love as well? She wasn't sure, but a part of her really wanted the chance to try. Another part of her longed for this kind of offer from Jared, but sadly knew it might never come. Should she turn down her chance with Darian because of the attraction she felt for Jared that might never be realized? Or should she take the chance of getting to know this sweet, noble, handsome man who seemed so ready and open to her?

Something about him had fascinated her from the start. He was good looking, yes, but there was also something in his make-up that spoke to her on a much deeper level. He had an energy about him that drew her in and she was powerless to pull away.

"I'm not saying no, Darian. I'm saying...maybe, I guess." She smiled crookedly. "I was married young and lost my husband young as well. I raised my daughter alone, on the run. I haven't had a man in my life, or in my bed, for a very long time." She blushed a little at her own boldness but she wanted to be frank with the man. She owed him her honesty at least, as he was

taking the risk she would refuse him outright. "I honestly don't know if I'm ready for that again. My children are grown and I'm at a crossroads in my life. But I like you, Darian, and I'm willing to call you friend. Perhaps lover, but friend for now. Is that all right?"

He beamed at her as he brought her hands to his lips, kissing them soundly.

"It's wonderful, Adora. For your sake, I'll try to control myself, but you're damn near irresistible. You're a special woman and I'll do everything in my power to remind you of that every day."

She felt her cheeks heat with a blush at his impassioned words while his gentle smile warmed her heart.

Z Z Z

That night, after all were abed, Adora went to check on her new patient. Darian was restless, his swollen leg healing well, but still a bit uncomfortable at just about any angle. She caught him trying to reposition it on a little mound of pillows with a frustrated expression on his face.

"Can't sleep?"

She advanced into the room, her voice calm as she moved to his leg and gave just a touch of her healing power to ease the ache.

"You shouldn't spend your energy on me, milady."

She sat on the side of his bed. "It's nothing to me if it will help you rest, Darian. I meant to do a more thorough job of your healing before, but I was too tired that first night because of all the energy it took to deal with the dragons. Let me do what I can for you now, all right?"

Darian lay back, watching her every move as she placed her hands on his leg. The warmth of her power swept through her fingers and into his injury, mending the strained muscles and tendons, coaxing the fluid swelling the area to recede. It would take a while to do so, but she knew he would be out of pain now, and probably good as new by morning.

She smiled as she lifted her hands away. It hadn't taken all that much energy after all, and he would be fine now. She was glad of that.

Darian reached up and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "You're a compassionate woman, Adora, and a beautiful soul." His gaze searched hers. "Why did you come here, to me? Couldn't you sleep either?"

This was it. This was her moment of truth.

"No, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about what you said about...us." She sought reassurance from his almost ethereal, sky blue gaze. "You got me thinking, Darian, wanting things I haven't wanted in a very long time."

His hand turned to cup her cheek, then moved down her neck to her shoulder. He sought permission before moving further.

"Do you want me, my love?"

"I want—" She sighed as his hand moved lower, parting her robe. She was bare beneath it. Her voice trembled as she forced the words out. "I want you, Darian. I want to be a woman again."

"You've always been that, Adora. You are a desirable, beautiful, brave woman."

He sat up to meet her as she sat on the side of his large bed. With gentle hands, he pushed her robe from her shoulders and moved to meet her lips with his own, taking her in a tender kiss that spoke of desire, passion, and respect. He deepened the kiss and she went with him, following him back down to the bed, her robe hanging open so that she was bare to his roaming, worshiping hands.

Darian kissed her, steadily increasing the pressure on her lips, delving his tongue into her sweet mouth to catch her breathless sighs as his hands caressed her breasts, tweaking the hard nipples, luxuriating in the softness that was Adora. He moved one hand lower, up over her back under the satiny robe and down to her taut butt. She had a muscular body from living off the land and working hard all her life, but she was supple in the places that really counted. Womanly soft and womanly warm, Darian thought, and more welcoming to his lonely soul than any woman had ever been.

She sighed as he rolled her gently on the large bed, pinning her beneath him, the pain in his leg forgotten in her enticing arms. He tugged the robe down over her shoulders, trapping her arms in the thin fabric.

“Say you want me, my love, my beautiful Adora.”

“I..” Her breathy voice trailed off as her luminous eyes met his. He watched carefully for any sign of fear, but found only an almost maidenly hesitation that soon disappeared as she made her decision. “I want you, Darian. Make love to me.”

He smiled at the soft look in her eyes. She was such a wonder to him, reaching out for what she wanted, what she needed.

“I need you so much.” Darian’s voice whispered through the dim chamber.

He nibbled on her neck, kissing his way across her body, down to the sweet valley of her thighs. He lingered there, spreading her legs, licking at her tender folds, noting every reaction and cataloging every shiver of delight he brought her. It made him feel so good to see her writhing in passion beneath his hands and mouth. He paused only to pull the long, borrowed sleep shirt over his head and toss it across the chamber, reclaiming his place between her legs with a barely repressed growl of need.

Biting gently, he focused his tender assault on her clit until she came apart under his mouth. She gasped as her body shook through a long, powerful orgasm. This little woman was so needy. He loved the idea that he was one of very few men to bring her such joy—for he could tell this beautiful, shy woman was not too free with her charms—and vowed in his heart this would not be the last night he would pleasure her. He would have her in his bed come morning and every day thereafter, as soon as he could convince her to tie her life to his. She deserved better, it was true, but he was just selfish enough to take her and claim her and spend the rest of his life dedicated to her happiness. He knew he could bring her that at least, if with nothing else but his body, his hands, and his clever tongue.

Darian had never fallen in love before—never felt such immediate, stirring desire for a woman in his life before—but he knew this was the real thing. With a conviction in his heart, he made plans to make her his own. He knew

he could no longer be complete without Adora, and only Adora. No other would do ever again.

He moved back up her trembling body, plying her with kisses as he went, bringing her back up to an even higher peak of desire before claiming her mouth and rolling so she was on top of him. He positioned her beautiful, slender but muscular legs on either side of his hips, encouraging her to cocoon his aching cock in her tender folds. Her eyes met his as she gasped and pulled slightly away.

He dragged the satiny robe down her back, throwing it across the chamber to join his sleep shirt. She was beautiful in the dim light of the chamber, gorgeous to him in all her feminine glory.

“Take me this first time, my sweet Adora.” He cradled her head in his hands, stroking her hair as he looked deep into her mesmerizing green eyes. “I know it’s been a long time for you. Take me at your own pace.”

She smiled down at him, repositioning herself with slow movements that drove him wild. She was so soft and wet for him. He wanted her badly, but didn’t want to hurt her with his eagerness, so this was the only solution for this first time. Later he would take her the way he needed to, claiming her and pounding into her without mercy, without restraint.

She moved on his cock so tentatively it was killing him, but this time was for her. She would be tight and tender from so many years of denial. It was like taking her virginity, in a way, and he felt like a king that she would give such a gift to him.

Adora rose up and positioned him with her small, trembling hands, nearly making him come right there, but Darian held on, gritting his teeth as he watched them join for the first time. Adora sank down on him by slow degrees, taking him a little way, then bouncing back up, only to go a little lower the next time. Within a few agonizing strokes, she was seated fully upon him and Darian was well on his way to heaven.

He placed his hands on her hips, stroking upward to pull at her hard little nipples. She shivered in response, her wet pussy tightening on his cock and driving him higher. He pinched her nipples harder and was rewarded with another little spasm of her inner muscles around him.

“Do you like it a little rough, Adora?” His eyes dared her to tell the truth he could read from her responses.

“I don’t know.” Her eyes were wide with surprise, and he tugged again, just a little more harshly this time on her nipples, testing.

“I do.” His grin widened as he brought one hand down to slap her ass. She jumped, yelping breathlessly as her pussy spasmed and creamed around him. “You’ve got an adventurous soul, my little love.”

She sighed and shivered as she began to move on his hard cock. “I never did before.” She gasped as he used his hands to pinch her bottom. “It must be the company.”

“Are you saying I’m a bad influence on you?” His hands encouraged her to speed her pace with gentle slaps to the fleshy part of her ass. He knew she liked it from the way she smiled and squirmed in delight on his cock, sending him higher as well. “If so, I’ll have to remember to influence you more often.” Darian emphasized his statement with a gentle but firm slap right over her

straining clit and she took off for the stars, coming around him and gripping his cock so tight with her inner muscles he thought he would go off with her.

But he had bigger plans for his adventurous little love. As she came down from her peak, he rolled her beneath him again, never leaving her body for one moment. He couldn't bear to part from her even for a second.

"Are you back with me, sweetheart?"

"I'm with you, Dar." Her voice was breathy and divine. It fired his senses.

He dipped down to capture her smiling lips with his own. He had plans to tire her out and ride her until she couldn't walk straight tomorrow, but he wouldn't take her any further if she had gone as far as she could go. He measured her response to his kiss, the tightening around his still hard cock and slippery wetness told him she was ready for more.

"Hang on," he warned, bringing his hips down forcefully into the warm cradle of her thighs. Her eyes jolted open, but her sexy lips curled with delight, reassuring him it wasn't too rough. He would rather die than hurt her.

Darian kept careful track of Adora's responses and pounded more heavily into her tight sheath, reveling in her closeness, her warm body, and her heavenly scent. She was all woman and all his. He loosed the need raging within him and brought himself hard into her again and again, feeling at last her pulsing pleasure as he too was overcome. That final blast of pleasure just went on and on and on.

Darian stiffened above her, tensing in every muscle as his cum shot deep within the only woman he would ever love. The idea was startling, but oddly comfortable. She felt so right in his arms, in his heart. He loved her truly and deeply, he knew in that moment. And he would never love another.

When it was over and he could move once more, Darian kissed her thankfully as she began to relax into a boneless, trusting, exhausted sleep beneath him. He rolled off her, tucking her close to his side as he lovingly arranged the blanket over her luscious, bare body.

A movement near the door caught his eye and Darian looked up only to find Jared staring back at him. The devastation in Jared's lonely gaze chilled Darian to his core. He opened his mouth to speak but Jared was gone before he could find the right words.

Darian looked back at the bed and realized Adora was fast asleep. She didn't know Jared had seen them together. She didn't realize how deeply they had hurt him. Perhaps that was for the best. Darian would find the right thing to say to Jared tomorrow. He hoped.

Chapter Five

The next morning Adora was up and out of bed before Darian even woke. He dressed and stepped out of the small chamber, leaning just a bit on the walking stick Adora had left for him, in search of breakfast. He found Jared sipping strong dark tea, standing over the cook fire in the small kitchen area.

Jared eyed him hostilely, but said nothing. Still, the tension was thick between the two men as Darian poured out a mug of tea for himself and found an apple to munch.

“Jared.” Darian tried to find the words to broach the subject that was clearly standing between them. “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, but I couldn’t help myself. When I first saw Adora I realized very quickly that she’s different from any woman I’ve ever met before.”

“You’re damn right she’s different.” Jared was going to be belligerent about this, he realized. “She’s royalty, Dar.”

“She’s also a warm, mature woman with a woman’s needs. She needs love, Jared.” Darian tried to speak gently, not wanting to rile his old friend.

“Love? Is that what you call it? Because all I saw last night was you nailing a willing wench.” He shot Darian a look of disgust. “How could you?” Jared’s deep voice was hoarse with emotion, accusatory and gruff as he glared at Darian. If looks could kill, he’d surely be dead.

“Look Jared, don’t jump all over me for this. If you wanted the woman, you’ve more than had your chance. She cares for you. Don’t you think I saw that right away? But I also saw you, in denial, ignoring her. You were hurting her with your indifference, man. Don’t fault me for stepping in and making her happy where you’ve only made her miserable, longing for things you won’t give her. She needs someone to care for her and make her feel wanted, cherished, and loved. She’s lost her home, Jared.” He shook his head. “That’s something I have a little experience with as it happens. She needs someone to hold her and make her feel safe and needed.”

Jared rocked back on his heels, deflated. “Damn it all to hell and back again.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair and sat hard on the sofa. “You’re right, Darian. I’m an ass.”

Darian sat down in the nearby chair, watching his old friend closely. Jared sighed hard and shut his eyes tight for a quick moment, the pain of the past hours clear on his face. Darian sensed a break in the wall surrounding his old friend and took the chance to get everything out in the open.

As gently as possible, Darian spoke into the heavy silence. “Ana and James are gone, Jared.”

Jared sucked in a sharp breath as every muscle in his body tensed. Darian’s heart went out to the man, but this needed to be said. Jared was living in a world of hurt, much different from the carefree, jovial man Darian had once known. He owed Jared his support and help in becoming that man once again. No one should live with the kind of burden Jared kept firmly planted on his shoulders.

“I know that, Dar. I don’t need to be reminded. I live with the guilt of their deaths every day of my life.”

“Guilt?” Darian was truly puzzled. Jared opened his eyes and ran a hand over his rough face.

“I should have been with them, Dar. I should have protected them.

Instead I was off serving my king while they were murdered in their beds by greedy thieves in the night.”

Darian was silent a long moment. Could that be what Jared really believed about the attack on his family? How could the man not know the truth of those dreadful days? No wonder he was so changed. Jared blamed himself for something over which he'd had no control or responsibility.

Darian knew he could relieve some of that guilt and perhaps focus the anger of this brave man on something more productive than wallowing in his imagined sins of the past. Darian weighed his words carefully, then finally spoke, albeit a bit hesitantly.

“Those were no simple thieves, Jared.” He leaned forward as Jared listened intently. “I found out not long ago that your family was targeted by Lucan. Even back then, he had designs on the throne of Skithdron and worked to throw your country into chaos. You were too close to King Jon and his sons. Too protective. Too smart. Lucan needed you out of the way. He succeeded when he ordered his assassins to kill your family. You left the king's service and his way was clear.”

Jared was as near to tears as he'd come since that day he had learned his wife and young son were dead. To learn finally who was responsible was both a terrible shock and, oddly, a relief. Jared felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. It focused him. As did his anger.

Jared's anger was slow to build, slow to burn, but once it got going, it was an unstoppable inferno. He felt the fire rising in his veins, but he needed to have all the facts before he would decide on a course of action. The wisdom of his years had taught him to think before losing the rage within him. While it was still possible to reason somewhat clearly, he needed to hear everything Darian knew.

“Are you sure? The Lucan I met years ago was a sweet child.”

Darian scoffed, “He's a maniac, Jared. I believe he killed his own father. Do you think ordering the deaths of an innocent woman and child would bother such a demon?”

“Sweet Mother of All.”

Jared staggered to his feet, emotion overwhelming him. He fought down the sizzling anger, but it bubbled up from within, threatening to break him into a million pieces, never to be reassembled. All the years he'd wasted, blaming himself for something perpetrated by an enemy.

Certainly, he still felt remorse over not being there to defend his family when Lucan's assassins came to call, but knowing their deaths hadn't been random violence somehow made it easier to bear his own guilt. The assassins would have waited until he was gone from home to hit their targets, no matter if he were down the road or in another country. When Skithdronian assassins targeted a person, they didn't miss.

Now Jared knew where to place the blame for his family's demise, the anger and shock of it boiled through his veins like acid. Lucan had won. He'd succeeded in taking Jared from the work he loved for his king and his land, and nearly succeeded in taking Jared's life too. If not for Kelzy, he would have killed himself in his grief long ago. Only the dragon had saved him, bringing

him a new purpose.

But Jared's family wasn't the only one to pay the price for Lucan's political designs. No, the old king and his wife had been murdered too. Soon after Jared left the court because of the tragedy in his life, King Jon and his Queen had been killed, forcing young Roland to assume the throne long before his time.

Like patterns in the sand, the lines of deceit were becoming clear. Jared's mind spun as he realized the depths of Lucan's treachery. His family's destruction was just the beginning of the devastation Lucan had visited upon the people of Draconia. Jared had felt terrible guilt at the deaths of the king and queen, thinking if he'd only stayed at court, he might somehow have prevented their murders.

But Jared had been in too much pain at the time. He'd carried his grief with him every day—for his wife and son—but also for the king he had served and loved as a brother. So much death. So much treachery!

Jared's hands balled into fists, his thoughts boiling up until he thought he might explode. Blindly, he moved toward the door. He didn't know where he was going, but he had to do something. He had to loose the anger, grief, sorrow and overwhelming pain in his soul for all that had been lost. So damn much destroyed! So much pain. So much waste.

Suddenly, Kelzy was there, her warm breath bathing him in comfort as the years of sorrow engulfed him. He reached out to the one living being he'd allowed himself to care for and wrapped his arms around her neck. Jared buried his face against her gleaming hide as the emotion welled up and over, pouring out of him with the tears he'd never allowed himself to shed before. He cried for the family he'd lost. For the king. For the years of desolation and pain.

Darian came up behind him and put a strong arm around his shoulders as Jared wept for the first time in many, many years. Jared barely registered his old friend's presence, but he felt the warm support of Kelzy and Darian, needing it as never before.

Adora found them like that when she walked into the suite a few minutes later. Darian caught her eye and motioned her over, his expression solemn as he supported his old friend with a brotherly arm around his wide shoulders. She looked up into Kelzy's aquamarine eyes and the dragon explained what had happened in her silent way.

Adora felt tears well in her own eyes as she thought of how badly this news had affected the strong man who held a piece of her heart. She reached out, coming up on his other side to offer what comfort she could. Her healing gift reached out to his pain as she put her arm around his waist and snuggled into his side.

A moment later, she was whirled around and grasped tightly in his embrace as he let go of Kelzy, only to cling to her instead. She was shocked, surprised, and so touched she gave freely of her healing energy, wishing only that she could heal his shattered heart. She looked up into Darian's sad eyes as Jared choked out broken, nearly silent sobs, his face hidden in her neck as his strong arms engulfed her. She saw sorrow, love, and approval in the eyes

of her new lover as she held the other man. It was confusing, but it felt right.

It's as it should be, daughter. Kelzy's voice was gentle in her mind as her breath puffed over them with comforting heat. Do not fear your feelings for either of these men. They are your destiny.

Both of them? But how?

The idea of her daughter having two knights as husbands was still uncomfortable, but she sort of understood the necessity with the way the men were bonded to mated dragons. This, however, was something else altogether. Only Jared was bonded to a dragon and Kelzy was unmated. If Adora was mated to Jared, she would eventually be expected to take the knight of Kelzy's dragon mate as her second husband, if such a thing ever occurred.

Because of the bond dragon and knight shared, when dragons mated, their human partners were inevitably caught up in the sensual frenzy. It was a sacred rule that fighting dragons never mated while their knight partners had no mate. The frenzy as the dragons joined would drive an unmated knight insane and a casual sex partner just would not do. The depth of feeling—the love—had to be there for the mating frenzy to be sated, for it was deeply emotional as well as intensely physical for both the dragons and the humans involved.

Don't ask how, child, Kelzy counseled her, still sending warm breaths of cinnamon-scented air over them to offer what comfort she could to her heartbroken knight. Just accept it will be so. The Mother and we will make it so. We see the way both these men feel about you and how you feel about them. This is the turning point, I think.

Who's 'we'? She had a sneaking suspicion, but the idea was too wild to even contemplate.

Leave that to us, child. See to Jared now. This storm was a long time in coming and he will feel shame for his actions if you give him half a chance. Best to take him to your bed now and take his mind beyond the grief of the moment. Give him something much more pleasant to focus on.

You want me to sleep with him?

Isn't that what you've wanted for weeks now? Kelzy's voice was sly with the knowledge only another female could understand.

Well...yes, I suppose so. But he doesn't want me. Not really.

Nonsense! The man loves you.

Adora gasped. Are you sure?

I know my knight. He's stubborn, but he loves deeply and true. He has a good heart that has been badly hurt and he takes too much responsibility on his solitary shoulders. He needs you, Adora. He needs your strength and your love.

But what about Darian?

Child, the Mother of All knows what She is about. Look at Darian. I think he understands. He knows how much Jared loves you and needs you. He loves Jared like a brother and hates to see him hurt like this. I think he'll understand. He will help, I think. Take him with you and see where it leads.

But he's not a knight. He doesn't expect to have to share a woman with another knight.

He's a man, child. I don't know of too many human males who would turn

down a threesome when offered the chance.

Adora smiled just slightly, shyly, as she met Darian's eyes over Jared's broad shoulder.

She saw warmth there—the warmth of care and love, but also the warmth of desire. Darian had shown her just last night she was not as dead sexually or emotionally as she'd thought. He had given her a boost of confidence along with his tender and commanding loving. She knew he cared for her and was fast falling in love with him as well, but her heart also wanted Jared. Adora had wanted him almost from the first moment she'd seen him.

Jared needed her so badly, she knew it in her heart, and this breakdown only proved it further. He needed love and support. He needed to let people close to him, not just dragons. For the past years, only Kelzy had managed to breach the defenses around his heart. But those walls crumbled and crashed as she and Darian supported him in his soul-deep grief.

Darian moved slowly, coming around her, holding her gaze as long as he could until he was behind her. Sandwiched between two hard male bodies, Adora swept her hands down Jared's back as his weeping began to ease. He was so silent, so needy, but so resolute. Jared straightened by degrees, his warm lips nuzzling into her neck as he moved, perhaps unable to meet her eyes while his own were red from grief too long denied. Or perhaps because he was finally giving into the attraction between them.

As he moved, so did Darian, reaching to clasp her waist, moving his already hard erection against the soft globes of her ass. So Kelzy had been right. Apparently getting Darian to share wouldn't be such a hard thing after all. Or rather, there was a hard thing involved, but it was a good, hard thing she would see was put to good, hard use. She could hardly wait.

Smiling to herself, Adora tugged at Jared's leather shirt, pulling at the laces as he worked at hers. Darian was already stripping down her leggings and baring her legs. Kelzy watched all with apparent approval, puffing her sweet breaths over them to keep them warm as they bared themselves and each other.

Adora couldn't believe she was acting so wanton. Her only lover before last night had been her husband. They had been married young, just teenagers fumbling in the dark until they got the hang of meshing their bodies together, but this was something else entirely. Darian had shown her things the night before that she never would have imagined and she sensed she was in for another breathtaking lesson here.

Jared seized her mouth with his own, his lips demanding as never before. Her clothing was gone and she pulled at Jared's with his enthusiastic help. Soon he was bare too, but she didn't get the chance to step back and enjoy the view of his masculine body. No, he was too eager. He kept her close, kept his lips fused to hers as his hands roamed, learning and claiming first her breasts then the smooth expanse of her abdomen and lower, to cup the wetness between her squirming legs.

Darian was busy too, ridding himself of his clothing and dropping to his knees behind her. His lips left a trail of kisses all the way down her back and up her thighs until he reached his goal, between the soft cheeks of her ass. He gripped her cheeks and squeezed, apparently enjoying the soft flesh, leaning

forward to nip and suck, leaving his mark on her and licking the momentary, exciting pain away with his clever tongue.

It was Darian who eased her to the floor, his strong arms taking her weight as Jared refused to let her go. Having two sets of masculine hands caressing her body was an enticing, exciting, amazing experience. The approval she read in both their faces when Jared briefly let her up for air gave her the confidence to reach up and run her hands over Jared's chest and down to his straining cock. He was so hard, so ready, and she knew this first time would be fast.

That was fine with her. She would do anything for him. She realized in that moment that she loved him—truly, deeply and without reservations.

“Come to me now, Jared. Make love to me.”

He growled as he bore down on her. Thankfully Darian had made a bed of sorts out of the pile of their discarded clothing. Kelzy helped by scooping a mound of warm sand from her wallow. Darian had covered the sand with clothing until Adora lay on a squishy sort of bed that was much more comfortable than she would have expected.

Jared looked down at the woman waiting for him—her soft thighs spread, her beautiful green eyes wide with acceptance of whatever he might do...and love. He could see the love shining in her eyes and knew he felt the same. He could no longer deny his need for her and her beautiful, open, healing heart.

He settled between her legs, unable to help himself. He kissed her tenderly, then pulled back for one last moment of sanity to look down into her beloved face.

“I don't want to hurt you.”

“You won't.” Her simple acceptance of him and all he was humbled him.

“I love you, Adora.” He held his breath. Leaving his heart out in the open like that was a risk.

She touched his rough cheek, her smile generous. “I love you too, Jared.”

Her words touched a place deep in his heart he'd thought was gone forever. But suddenly she was there, in his heart, and he knew she would never be removed. Kissing her sweet lips reverently, the heat between them rose once more to a fever pitch.

“I need you now, Adora. I'm sorry, I can't be gentle.”

“I don't want you to be gentle. I want you, Jared.” She emphasized her demand with an erotic pulse of her hips that brought his hard cock within the hot warmth of her waiting sheath. And he could wait no more.

With a groan, he buried himself inside her, glorying in her heat, her warmth, her wetness, and her love. He was so far gone in his desire he barely heard her answering sighs of pleasure as he pumped hard and fast into her, straining against the force that pushed him onward, holding out to make this first time last as long as he could, but it was a losing battle. He had waited too long to accept the reality that she was his, and all too soon he felt his balls clench and his entire body tense as he erupted within her, showering her with his tribute, bathing her womb in his essence, making her truly his.

Jared collapsed on top of her, eyes opening slowly to stare down into hers. He kissed her then with a gentleness that had been near impossible only

moments ago. Adora sighed into his mouth, her hips quaking in the last rolls of orgasm. Jared felt a sense of relief that he'd somehow managed, even in his blind desire, to bring her pleasure.

He kissed her neck, her shoulders, working his way down to the tips of her breasts and she sighed. A rustle of leather off to his side registered just barely in his preoccupied mind and Jared looked up.

There was Darian, trying to squeeze a painfully hard erection back into his leggings.

"Where do you think you're going like that?" Jared was sated enough to have regained a bit of his usual good humor.

Darian started, his eyes meeting Jared's with regret. "Look, you two obviously need some time alone—"

Not alone! Kelzy insisted. He's part of this, Jared. Make him see.

Jared looked up at the dragon who had witnessed all and a rueful smile twisted his lips.

"As my dragon partner reminds me, Darian, you're responsible for this. I know you love her too." Jared finally found the strength to lever himself off her luscious body. Caressing her as he got to his knees, Jared removed himself gently from between her slippery legs. How he hated to be apart from her! But things had to be settled between all three of them. He had to make Darian understand the complex feelings he himself couldn't quite figure out, but accepted nonetheless.

"I was jealous as hell when I saw you with her last night, but I know what I saw. There was love there, in every moment. On both sides." He leaned down to kiss her flushed face.

"You saw?" She flushed red with embarrassment.

He winked at her. "I saw all right. Didn't sleep at all for thinking of how he must feel, locked deep inside your beautiful body." Jared kissed her softly. "Now I know." Their eyes held for a moment, her blush fading as her breathing sped up again. "And I also know he's part of this, Adora, in your heart." His gaze shifted to Darian, still standing in indecision, his clothes clutched in his hands.

He saw how Darian watched Adora and how she returned his loving gaze. There was love there, without doubt. Adora would not give herself without it.

Darian shook his head and resumed dressing as Adora sat up on the makeshift bed. "I should go."

"No. You shouldn't." Jared's voice was firm but held more than a hint of frustration. How could he explain something he didn't understand himself? "Look, Dar. It's the way of things for knights to share. If there's love, then there's nothing wrong with us both being with Adora, as long as she wants it." He looked over at the startled but smiling woman. "And I think she wants it." He nudged her knee with his own. "Am I right, darling?"

Adora was confused, but her heart knew what it wanted. Her heart wanted both of them, with her, forever. Her pussy wanted both of them too. It was a scandalous, exciting thought.

"I..." She searched for the right words. "I don't understand it, but...I want you both. You're both in my heart." They stood and Adora went first to Jared

and then to Darian, taking each of them by one hand. "I need you both." Blushing uncontrollably, she kissed Jared, then Darian, leaning into Darian a bit longer, convincing him with her mouth, her naked warmth, and her soft sighs that she didn't want him to leave.

When he released her, there was a tentative smile in Darian's sparkling, light blue eyes.

"Are you certain, Adora?"

She laughed. "I'm shocked by my own behavior, but I know I want and need you both. As crazy as it sounds, I love you both. Please don't make me choose between you. It would shatter my heart." Her eyes grew serious. "Unless the thought of, um...sharing...hurts you. I wouldn't want to cause either of you pain."

Jared smiled broadly at her. "I didn't ever expect to have a woman to love in my life again. You're a miracle to me, and as a leader of knights, I'm used to three-partnered relationships. I see everyday how well they work out. Darian and I have known each other for a very long time. We respect each other as warriors and statesmen, but more so as friends. You'll get no complaint from me."

Darian's head tilted as he seemed to think carefully about his answer. Adora held her breath and waited to see what he would say. He was from another land, after all, where traditions were probably much different. The Mother only knew what he had been raised to expect... Adora realized in that one tense moment she would never be truly happy unless she could have them both. It was that simple and that amazing. She had never thought to have even one man in her life again and now she felt incomplete without two. She was getting greedy in her old age, she thought with an inner chuckle.

"I don't understand this at all, but I need to be with you, Adora. More than I need to breathe." Darian moved a step closer and caressed her cheek with the back of one big hand. "Jared and I have been good friends for a very long time. He's like a brother to me, and if I had to share with anyone, it would be him. I don't pretend to understand how these three-partnered relationships work, but I'm willing to try, if you truly want this."

She took his hand and turned it to press a tender kiss to his palm. Their eyes locked and held as she smiled.

"I truly do. I want to try." Joyous tears slipped down her face as she looked up at him. "Darian, I love you."

"And I love you, Adora." A kiss sealed his words as he pulled her body into his embrace. Adora pushed at his hastily donned leggings until he was naked once more.

"Let's move this into the bedroom," Jared suggested. "I believe we have some unfinished business to attend to."

Tugging on Darian's hand and catching Jared's in her other hand, she led them both toward the largest bed in the big suite. It happened to be in Jared's chamber. Jared winked at her as he caught her up in his arms, strode through the archway and deposited her on his wide bed.

"As my lady wishes, of course."

Darian knew he couldn't go slowly this time. He needed her too badly.

Watching Adora make love with Jared, instead of defusing his desire, had only made it rise impossibly higher. A look of understanding passed between the men as Jared stepped back, motioning Darian to take the lead this time. With a nod of thanks, Darian knelt down on the bed beside Adora. She was eager for them both and her responsive little body only made his passion climb higher than it had ever been before.

“How do you want it, sweetheart? Slow, fast, gentle, rough?” Darian whispered as he nipped her tender throat on the way to her sensitive breasts.

“I want what you want,” she answered with little guile.

He loved that about her. She was fully a woman, yet so innocent. He would bet her husband, gods rest his departed soul, hadn't taken her beyond basic lovemaking. Darian relished the thought that he could teach her a thing or two about giving and receiving pleasure. There was so much he wanted to experience with her, so much he wanted for her to experience.

“Then hang on for a wild ride, my lovely.”

He bit softly at her slight belly, winking up at her as he licked down lower, over her distended clit. A second little nip there as he tested her readiness had him smiling. She was gushing and so responsive to his every move. She was more than ready for him.

Moving with some urgency, yet caressing her skin at every turn, Darian positioned himself under her. He had something in mind and, glancing over at Jared, was pleased to note the fire in the other man's eyes as he watched Adora. It boded well for Darian's plans. Catching Jared's attention with a patting motion on her beautiful fleshy ass, Darian raised one eyebrow at the knight. Understanding flared as Jared licked his lips, seemingly mesmerized by the sight of Adora's womanly body swaying seductively with her passionate motions.

“How about we all do this together?” Darian made sure his voice was pitched loud enough so that Jared would hear his question to their woman.

“Is that possible?” Adora sat back, looking down at him with questions in her lovely green eyes.

He chuckled. “You're a healer, woman. You should know there's more than one place a man can pleasure himself and his woman.”

She blushed so prettily he reached up and kissed her, the muscles in his abdomen rippling and contracting as he sat up under her slight weight. Pulling back, Darian watched her eyes carefully for any sign of fear, but there was none. No, his little adventuress was curious and more than a little excited if he read her right.

He looked over at Jared and caught the other man's eye once more. “What do you say?”

Jared's cock was hard as stone watching Adora climb all over Darian's firm body. The other man was damned near perfect. No huge, ugly scar marred his skin and Jared remembered how his handsome face and perfect teeth had been sighed over by the ladies of the court. He could understand why Adora might fancy Darian, but he couldn't fathom why in the world the woman would want him as well.

He was scarred badly, his face nothing to write home about. His body

was rough, hair flying whichever way no matter what he did to tame it and starting to go grey now just at the temples. He was no longer the handsome lord he'd once pretended to be. He was a rough warrior now, through and through. Yet, the magical light of passion tempered Adora's sultry green gaze when she looked at him.

Apparently love truly did make one blind, for she looked at him with the eyes of love—the same way she looked at Darian's perfect features. How had he gotten so lucky? Why had the Mother blessed him so well? Jared would never know, but he would spend every moment proving to Adora that her love was not misplaced, demonstrating over and over how much he loved and cherished her in return.

When Darian's raised eyebrow challenged him, Jared was more than up for it. He searched around the sparse room, knowing he would need something to ease his way inside Adora's unused channel. The curiosity in her eyes told him she had never done this before—never taken a man's cock up her pretty ass—but he knew she was game to try. He didn't want to hurt her, so he'd make sure she was well prepared. The only problem was, Jared was totally unprepared. He had nothing to use as a lubricant to help ease his way past her tight muscles.

Look in the top drawer of the table at the side of your bed.

Kelzy's voice came to him seemingly out of the blue. Turning, Jared spied Kelzy's large head watching all from the archway. He should have known his dragon partner would be watching over him and the small human woman she thought of as her daughter.

Jared moved to the nightstand and opened the drawer. Inside was a large tub of a pleasant smelling herbal concoction tucked neatly into the top that he'd never seen before.

He looked back at Kelzy suspiciously. Where did this come from?

I asked Belora to put it there.

You were awfully sure about this then, huh?

I hoped, Kelzy clarified. I prayed to the Mother that you three would come to your senses and see what was right in front of you all the time.

Without comment, Jared scooped out a bit of the salve and went back to the lovers entwined on his bed. Adora was impaled on Darian's cock, riding sinuously while Darian held her to a slow pace. The other man knew what was coming and he was coaching her into the experience, thoughtful and tender as Jared looked on approvingly.

Jared caught Darian's eye as he positioned himself. Nodding to each other over Adora's shoulder, Darian reached down and pulled her luscious cheeks apart, helping Jared in his quest to teach her this new pleasure.

He slathered her little hole with the herbal mixture, probing gently at first, then more insistently as she responded with soft sighs and hungry moans to his moves. He sank two fingers into her, stretching gently, urging her to relax as he worked his way inside. A third finger slipped in and after a bit of stroking in and out, he figured she was as ready as he could make her.

As gently as he could, he positioned himself at her opening, pressing steadily inside. She accepted him with surprisingly little fuss, her body shivering just a bit as she was stretched in this new way for the first time.

“Is it all right?” Jared asked, bending to nip the lobe of her ear.

Adora moaned. “It feels so strange! So good. Oh, Jared!”

He smiled and sank completely inside her. Once there, he just waited a moment, both to let her adjust and to savor the feeling. Jared could feel the ridge of Darian’s cock through the tissues separating them. Jared knew the other man felt her pussy tighten impossibly around his own straining member, just as he felt the flexing inside her ass. He caught Darian’s eye and they began to move in her. This was a true partnership—the goal of their work to make the woman between them experience the ultimate in pleasure.

They were both dedicated to their work.

While Adora whimpered in mounting pleasure, they each worked their cocks in and out of her, in rhythm. She strained between them, coming to peak after peak as they rode her through the pleasure right into another wave of ecstasy.

“Are you with us, love?” he heard Darian ask her. She moaned in reply as both men chuckled, but the time was drawing near.

Jared sped up, knowing Darian would feel and understand the need for urgency. Together they rode her higher and higher. Jared loved the way her fingers clutched at his hands and arms and her mouth sought purchase on Darian’s sweat-slicked skin. She was close to total meltdown and together, they were going to take her there.

“Now, Adora! Now!” Jared called out as he bucked into her, ramming high and tight. He felt Darian do the same as her body convulsed around them in the biggest explosion yet. Adora screamed as she came, over and over, hard and fast, and Jared finally gave himself permission to let go.

He pulsed into her ass, filling her with his cum, knowing that at the same time, Darian was filling her womb with his own tribute. It was an amazing feeling and one he never thought he would know. To love and be loved and know that should he falter, there was a partner there, ready and willing to help him, even as he would do the same. Together they would cherish and love this little woman who gave so much of herself to them both, and she would never be in any danger as long as one of them lived.

Pulling from her as gently as he could, Jared took only a moment to clean up before returning to the big bed, claiming one side of her luscious, sated body for himself and falling into a deep dreamless slumber. The crisis was past. There was only the future to look forward to now and it looked bright indeed.

Chapter Six

Before the others rose the next morning, Darian walked through the halls

of the Border Lair, needing to exercise his healing leg. The Lair was a truly magnificent feat of architecture and magic, combined to form a place that was hospitable for man and dragon alike. There were few women and children about, but there were some. Most smiled and nodded as he passed, friendly but reserved. It was, after all, quite early in the morning, so everyone kept their voices down to avoid waking those who needed more sleep.

Darian followed most of the early risers in the general direction of the great hall. There, he found quite a few people gathered, eating breakfast. Some knights were clearly just coming off duty, dressed still in their leathers, and some were freshly shaven, in a rush to get out on their own patrols.

All of them eyed him suspiciously, though none bothered him as he ate a small bowl of porridge one of the smiling women had spooned up for him. There were those who didn't view him as the enemy, but they appeared to be few and far between. The disgruntled looks shot at him from all around the hall made Darian feel rather conspicuous. Rather than tempt fate—and the angry knights eyeing him hostilely—he finished his meal, then stacked his used bowl and spoon in the area set aside and walked quietly out into the hall.

That should've been the extent of the excitement, but Darian didn't count on the foolishness of youth. A few of the younger knights followed him, walking beside and behind him in the wide hallway as he headed for the landing ledge. It was on the way back to Jared's suite and Darian had wanted to get a bit of fresh air before returning, but the younger knights changed his plans.

They followed on his heels, slowing their pace to match his as they neared the wide landing area. All his instincts went on alert. These knights apparently had some kind of problem with him and they undoubtedly wanted to be heard—or worse.

Normally Darian was light on his feet and good with his fists, but the recently healed injury put a little cramp in his style. Even so, five against one weren't the greatest odds—even for him. And to top it off, Darian didn't really want to fight with these lads. He hadn't the heart for it. The Draconian knights had every reason to despise Skithdron after the unprovoked attacks on the border. Skithdron was in the wrong here and these young hotheads saw him as the enemy, no matter that he'd sacrificed all he owned and all he was to come here and warn the Draconian side of worse things yet to come.

To them he was simply an enemy.

Darian sighed as he stepped out into the open landing area. They would act now, if at all, he knew. They didn't disappoint him.

“We don't want you here, Skithdronian scum.”

Darian turned to face the speaker, his back to the wide expanse of the landing ledge. There were seven of them now. Apparently two more had just flown in from patrol and joined with their fellows against the enemy in their midst. Darian had to forcibly hold back a sigh.

“I have no quarrel with you, sir knight.” Darian did his best to keep his tone civil, but firm.

“What if we have a quarrel with you? Skith bastard.” Another of the young fools found the nerve to speak, buoyed by his compatriots.

“Go back where you came from,” yet another of them sneered.

Darian didn't want this to turn into a fight. These men were all younger than he was, big and battle-trained. But Darian had skills that—even with his slightly swollen leg—assured him he could at the very least hold his own. Still, he didn't want to harm any of these youngsters. He thought it wouldn't be a good idea to repay Jared's welcome by disabling five or six of his knights on his first full day in the Lair.

“Look,” Darian held up his hands, palms outward in a gesture for calm, “I don't want any trouble.”

“Then leave,” came the quick reply.

Darian was at a loss as to how to defuse this situation. The young knights were attracting attention and others were coming over, some to join and some to simply observe. He became aware of dragons too, pausing to see what their human counterparts were doing, and one dragon in particular, came up behind him, settling at his back.

Almost dreading what he'd find, Darian craned his head around to find the huge blue-green dragon, shockingly, standing behind him. It was Kelzy, and she clearly showed her support for Darian, eyeing the knights arrayed against him—no, them, now—with a baleful glare.

He hadn't dared expect any assistance from the huge dragon, though he thought she was coming to like him a bit better as she got to know him. Still, this sort of show of support was completely unexpected and oddly humbling. Darian didn't know Kelzy well, but knew in his heart she had to be a special dragon indeed to gain the trust of Jared, a man he'd known as wise and honorable to the core.

The young knights didn't back down, but they stopped threatening Darian physically, and before he knew it a full-fledged confrontation was in the works. He cursed himself for going out into the public areas of the Lair alone as other dragons came over to see what Kelzy was doing. Suddenly his morning walk had become an international incident.

“Oh, great,” Darian mumbled to himself when a slightly ruffled Adora and Jared elbowed their way through the massive group now gathered around him and Kelzy. He should've realized the dragon would call her partner.

Darian would rather not have forced Jared's hand this way, especially not after the momentous events of the day, and night, before. He had no idea if Jared would be welcoming or wounded this morning. The chances were good either way after the emotional upheavals of the night.

“What's going on here?” Jared demanded of his knights while Adora stood back, watching with wide, nervous eyes.

One of the ringleaders stood forward from the sizable throng that faced him now.

“We want him gone, Jared. He's Skithdronian scum and probably a spy.”

Jared stared at his knights in deep disappointment. He thought he knew these men. He thought he knew their hearts, but apparently he'd been wrong. They didn't know him well enough to trust his judgment and really, when had he ever opened up to them? It was his own fault.

Sadly, he shook his head. There was nothing he could say. Leaders led by

example, not by making speeches. Jared took the time to look each and every one of his knights in the eye. He noted the ones who stood against him directly in defiance of his leadership and those who merely watched from the sidelines. Gareth and Lars were nowhere to be seen, though he would have hoped those two, at least, would have stood with him and trusted his judgment.

Saying not a word, Jared turned his back on the doubters and strode forcefully to Darian's side. Clapping him on the back, Jared demonstrated his support of the Skithdronian lord who had become more than a brother to him, more than just a friend. This man was part of his family now. No matter what complications might arise from it, he would be there for Darian.

Kelzy moved away, surprising Jared, but it didn't change his mind. He would stand with Darian against all comers. Alone if need be.

But they weren't alone.

A moment later, another dragon loomed behind them. It wasn't Kelzy and for just a second Jared feared some new form of attack, but when he looked up, his mind spun as his thoughts sped. The looming presence could only mean one thing. He just hoped his old friend was ready for what was to come. Oh, the Mother was having a grand joke on all of them today. Her influence was clear in this new development. Jared just hoped Darian would understand what Fate had in store.

The huge copper dragon loomed over Darian's shoulder, a solid presence, somehow even more comforting than Kelzy had been. Sandor's voice boomed through Darian's head as it had only once before. But this time, he felt a thickening of the connection, an opening of the pathway that led from the dragon's mind to his own.

I claim you as my knight partner, Sir Darian, former Lord of Skithdron. You have proven yourself worthy and if you will have me, I will be your companion and partner for the rest of your days.

"Merciful gods! What are you talking about?"

"You heard him?" Jared asked loudly. Darian was puzzled. Why would Jared ask such a thing? It was plain they'd all heard the dragon speak.

"Of course I heard him."

Lord Darian has always had the ability to hear me It was just untapped. I have spoken to him before.

"Is this true?" Jared wanted public confirmation for some reason.

Darian nodded. "He spoke to me once before."

"Then it's his right to choose you as knight partner. Our law says any male who has the ability to communicate with dragonkind may be claimed if he is deemed worthy by the dragon who wishes to partner with him."

"What are you talking about?" Darian looked from the astonished knights, to the huge copper dragon, to Jared and back again. Something cold and nervous settled in the pit of his stomach, while at the same time, something eager and joyous wanted to shout from his heart. Could this huge dragon really want him? Could this ancient and wise creature really see anything of value within a man who'd turned traitor to his own country?

I do claim you, Darian. If you will have me, I'll be your dragon partner for

the rest of your days and you will be my knight.

“Me? A knight of Draconia?” Darian could hardly believe it, though something deep in his soul wanted desperately for it to be true.

You have already proven yourself willing to put your life on the line to warn the humans and dragons of this land of grave and serious danger. You are a brave and honorable man. There are few knights here who are your equal, Lord Darian. Accept me as your partner and we will continue to do good work for the humans and dragons of this land.

Darian considered the copper dragon’s words for a long silent moment. The boy who never aged within his heart was jumping up and down in excitement. Sandor was such a noble being and it was such a rare and splendid thing to even hear a dragon speak, much less want to be your partner for life. Darian knew he’d be a fool to pass up this magical opportunity. If he didn’t accept the dragon now, he’d live with regret for the rest of his life.

Still, agreeing to be a dragon’s knight partner wasn’t something to be undertaken lightly. Darian ran through the various possibilities in his mind but there was really only one answer for the dragon’s request.

“All right.” Darian breathed deeply, his chest expanding with excitement and joy. “I accept. And I’ll do all in my power to live up to your high opinion of me, Sir Sandor. I only hope you know what you’re doing.”

The dragon chuckled smokily. Trust me, my friend. Let it be your first act of faith in our new partnership. To make this official, you must accept me like this, Darian, mind to mind. Follow the path I have forged between us.

With the bright wonder in his heart spilling over into joy, Darian followed the path in his mind used only once before. It was wider now, more direct and easier to access. It felt as if the connection had always been a part of him and it gave him just a bit of insight into the soul of the incredible, magical creature who had just managed to alter the course of his life forever.

I accept, Sir Sandor. I will be your knight partner for the rest of my days.

Sandor turned and trumpeted his joy skyward, a noble acknowledgment of the newly made knight. All the other dragons followed suit, welcoming the new knight with a huge crescendo of sound that shook the very mountain itself.

Adora wept openly as she watched it all. First Jared had made her proud, his noble heart beating true as he stood up for his friend against the younger knights. She knew Jared’s honor demanded he stand for what was right rather than bend to pressure and she loved him deeply for his nobility and honor.

Then Sandor arrived, making such a public display of claiming Darian for his knight partner it took her breath away. Adora suddenly realized exactly who Kelzy’s co-conspirator had been all along. All they needed now was for Kelzy and Sandor to declare themselves mated and it would all be tied up with a nice, neat bow.

Adora was about to confront Kelzy with her surmise when Gareth and Lars strode in, having learned from their dragons what had just transpired. Without a word, they went to stand firmly at Darian and Jared’s sides. Even

their dragon partners, Kelvan and Rohtina, lumbered over to stand with Sandor. Kelzy moved to stand beside her son, Kelvan, and Adora finally saw the resemblance that had escaped her before.

Kelzy, is Sandor Kelvan's father? She sent the question privately, amusement lacing her tone.

It took you long enough to figure it out. And here I thought you were such a bright child.

Sandor is your mate, then? That's what you were talking about when you said the Mother of All knew what She was doing, wasn't it?

Sandor came to the Lair to meet Kelvan's new family, but when he first saw Darian, he knew he had found his next knight partner. Kelzy bowed her great head in acknowledgment and Adora suddenly knew what she had to do. Moving to stand before the two men she loved, Adora reached up and kissed them both, deeply, in front of the entire Lair.

"Do you trust me?" she asked both of them as quietly as she could.

Both men nodded.

"Do you love me?"

Again, they nodded and their eyes were filled with the flames of their love as they looked at her. Adora offered up a silent prayer to the Mother of All, then turned to face the doubters who still stood against them.

"I am Princess Adora of the House of Kent." There were a few surprised looks from those who hadn't ever heard public acknowledgment of her royal status. "I claim these two brave men, these knights, as my mates and Prince-Consorts. They deserve your respect, and if you don't like it, you may take it up with my cousin, the king."

So saying, Adora linked her arms through both of her men's and walked regally through the throng, which parted as if by magic in front of them. The dragons followed behind as they promenaded out of the area, leaving stunned silence behind.

When they reached their suite, both men turned on her.

"What did you just do, Adora?" Darian eyed her with suspicion, then turned his gaze up to the copper dragon who stood next to Kelzy trying to look innocent. "And you! What was that all about, Sandor? I'm no knight. I'm not even Draconian."

I beg to differ. Every action you have taken since I've known you has been more than worthy of a knight. You are an honorable man and one who puts the good of others above his own. Those youngsters could learn a few things from you, Sir Darian.

"I agree with Sandor," Adora said with some conviction as she moved to stand with the copper dragon. "He is after all, Kelvan's father." She looked accusingly up at the dragon, but her smile softened the teasing. "And Kelzy's mate."

"Sweet Mother!" Jared sat heavily on the sofa. "You two were planning this all along."

"Planning what?" Darian wanted to know.

"Last night, and now Sandor claiming you...it's all so they can be together."

At this the dragons appeared to take offense, rearing their great heads.

So you three can be together, you ungrateful swine, Kelzy berated her knight. We saw right away that you three belonged together. You need each other. You were made for each other. Sandor and I have been mates for many years, it's true, but we will outlive you all many times over. How could we sit by and watch you waste even one more of your precious years when love was looking you in the face and you were turning away? Ungrateful—

Now, Kelzy, he's just young. He'll learn. Sandor's deep voice sounded amused to all three humans.

"Young?" Jared was clearly upset. "I've already lost a wife and son." His voice broke on the words as his emotions threatened to overtake him. "Or did you forget?"

No, we can never forget them. Nor will you. Kelzy had calmed in the face of Jared's sorrow.

Adora went to him and took him in her arms. "Nor should you, Jared," she said. He held her fiercely.

"I don't deserve you, Adora."

Now that's the first sensible thing you've said since we got here. Kelzy's tone was teasing in all of their minds.

Jared kissed Adora deeply then, as if he needed to feel her in his arms, grounding him in the changing situation.

"We have little choice, I'm afraid. We've been outmaneuvered by generals greater than ourselves." Jared smiled briefly up at the dragons.

Darian gave Jared and Adora a lopsided grin, his eyes somewhat uncomfortable. "I can hear them in my head."

Adora chuckled and reached out, pulling Darian into the embrace as Jared shifted her around in his arms.

"And so you should, Sir Darian." She kissed him soundly. "Sandor couldn't have chosen a knight who couldn't hear him speak, now could he?"

Darian shook his head, smiling faintly. "I guess not. I still don't quite believe it. Or understand it."

All you need to know for now, Darian, is that by choosing you, I've fulfilled the Mother's design for us all. It was fated that you three join and that by doing so, reunite me and my mate. Sandor's deep voice was wise and gentle. The rest will come to you in the fullness of time, my friend. I believe you still have a role to play in protecting our world from King Lucan. He threatens to upset the balance of Nature with his evil plans and the Mother of All must have some purpose for you left to fulfill. Believe in that, believe in yourself, and believe in me. You will never be alone again, Darian, as long as any of us five here now, live. We are a family.

Z Z Z

There was a mating feast, of sorts, held that night in the great hall of the Lair. Many were still injured from the battle and many others were on patrol. The merriment was low-key, but the congratulations were heart-felt from most of the revelers. Some still eyed Darian with suspicion, but most of the younger dragons had been trained by Sandor or Kelzy, or both, and trusted in their judgment. With encouragement from the dragons, most of the younger

knights were willing to give Darian the benefit of the doubt.

Surprisingly, Darian was familiar with the traditional mating feast dances from his years spent as ambassador to Draconia and was able to dance easily with Adora and Jared. It was Adora who had a tough time keeping up with her newly claimed men. Certainly, she had seen her daughter learn the steps to the odd three-partnered dances favored between the mated sets of knights and their ladies, but she had never performed the steps herself.

At the beginning of the dancing, when the patterns called for her knowledge and input, she stumbled, but either Jared or Darian was always there to catch her. As the night wore on though, the dancing got hotter and the men did most of the work. By the time they got around to the traditional mating dance, she had little to do—and little to wear—as the men tossed her around between them, holding her close, kissing her deeply, and fondling her nearly naked body.

She was all too ready to leave for their suite when the dragons took to the sky in their first mating flight in years. She knew Kelzy and Sandor were eager to renew their relationship and her men were even hotter than they'd been the first time the three of them had joined in passion. That first time had been a catharsis for Jared and even for Adora in a way. They'd worked through all their old pains and offered them up on the altar of passion, wiping away past hurts and forging new ties that were stronger and deeper than anything any of them had known before.

This time the joining would be joyous. This would be a mating, a claiming, a joining of pure hearts and souls. There would also be the frenzy of the dragons, influencing the men and probably Adora as well, as closely bonded as she was with Kelzy, not to mention the unpredictable influence of her own royal blood.

The closer they danced, the higher their passions rose, and when Kelzy and Sandor trumpeted as they took to the sky, Jared picked Adora up bodily and made straight for their bedchamber, Darian following close behind. Other mated pairs and threesomes headed out of the main area as well and Adora had only a glimpse of her daughter and her two mates leaving before she was out of the great hall.

Jared was kissing her even before he placed her in the center of the large bed in their suite. Darian undressed her and himself in between biting kisses to her backside and her hips. For her part, Adora pulled at what remained of Jared's clothing, removing the loincloth with eager hands as she began to feel the echoes of the dragons' passion through the bond she'd formed at a young age with Kelzy and the bonds that were even now strengthening between herself and her chosen mates.

Darian was nearly beside himself and she knew he would find this night the hardest to deal with of the three of them. He had only bonded to Sandor hours before and hadn't had any time to get used to the dragon who now shared a connection to his soul. Jared had been partnered with Kelzy for years now, but had never felt the intense mating heat two grown dragons could create. He would have a little more chance of tempering it, but Adora knew she was in for a wild ride that night.

She wouldn't have it any other way.

Darian looked at his new lover and realized she was his home. Adora was comfortable in a way he had never before experienced. The moment she touched him, he'd known that she was the last woman he would ever desire and the only woman he would ever love. It was that sudden, that harsh, and that true.

It's like that for knights, Sandor had told him earlier that day when his thoughts turned once again to Adora. Lest you doubt you are truly a knight, you should know most knights recognize their mate the moment they lay eyes on her. It's part of being a knight and joining with my kind. We too know our mate the moment we see her and for us, there is usually only one mate for all our many years.

Sandor's words came back to Darian as he looked at Adora now. She was it for him. He was certain of that as he had never been certain of anything in his life before. This was love—plain and oh, so simple. There would never be another woman for him. Only Adora.

He couldn't get enough of her. He couldn't get close enough and couldn't seem to control himself when he touched her. He felt her fire, her steam, her desire as if it was his own, but then perhaps it was the dragons' fire he was feeling. Darian shook his head to try to regain some sense of normalcy, but it would not come.

He was linked to the soaring dragons as they circled and dived, climbing higher in their joy before joining and taking that dangerous plummet to earth as they pleased each other only to separate at the last possible moment of freefall. To do it all over again.

Adora was on the bed now. All three of them were naked and wanting. Darian tried to cool his ardor to give his beloved Adora a chance to catch her breath. Struggling for control, he sat back, but she would have none of it. Adora rocketed up, grabbing him by the ears so that he had no choice but to follow where she led.

"Come into me now, Dar. I need you and Jared both."

"I don't want to hurt you. I'm just barely in control here." The admission was ripped from his soul, but her smile made everything all right.

"I don't need your control tonight, Darian. I need you. I need your passion, your lust, your cock. And your love."

Freed by her harsh gasp of excitement, Darian watched as Jared pulled her back on the bed, mounting her swiftly. He moved in time with the dragons Darian could feel in the back of his mind.

Jared's hard cock slid home as he rolled beneath her, pulling her ass cheeks apart, making room for his partner in this strange marriage. Darian prepared her, entering slowly but steadily, using the special ointment Adora had placed on the nightstand before they even left for the feast. She'd apparently known what to expect from this night and she was getting it in spades, he realized as he slid home within her.

When they were both seated fully, Darian met Jared's eyes over Adora's shoulder pressing deep within her. With a nod, they began to move, slow at first, then getting longer and stronger as the frenzy grew within them all. Dimly, he heard Adora's panting cries of ecstasy as she came to peak after

peak between them. Darian felt the powerful contractions of her orgasms around his hard cock, but he couldn't come until the dragons did.

Higher they flew, the dragons and the humans locked in coital bliss. As the dragons began their freefall, so too did their human counterparts, both knights spurting their cum deep into the woman they both loved, adored and cherished with all their hearts. She was claimed—filled and marked for all time by the hard, merciless loving. As she smiled lazily at them, Darian knew she loved every minute of it.

The dragons rose again, only an hour later, searching for the stars as their bodies joined, beating wings into the night. First though, the men treated Adora to a long soak in the heated tub where they teased her mercilessly. They lifted her out, stepping free of the huge tub and drying her inch by precious, tantalizing inch, licking her flame higher.

Darian caught Jared's eye as they brought Adora back to the bed. Both men could feel the dragons taking off for the stars and they knew their time of rest was almost at an end.

"Are you up for something a little different, my love?" Darian whispered in her ear as he ushered her toward the bed, his legs right behind hers. He rubbed his chest against her back, his arms caging her breasts as she giggled like a young girl.

She turned in his arms to place a teasing kiss on his lips. "Anything you wish, Master."

Darian growled. "Mmm, I like it when you call me that." He nodded to Jared as the other man finally noticed the cords Darian had left out before joining them in the bath. "Have you ever been tied, Adora? Will you trust us to see to your pleasure completely? Will you let yourself be helpless in our arms?"

She looked uncertain at first as her gaze moved between the two men, but then she smiled and the twinkle in her eyes brightened his soul.

"I trust you."

Darian kissed her deeply, backing her onto the wide bed as Jared prepared the soft ropes Darian had scrounged earlier from elsewhere in the large suite. While Darian held her arms up, Jared tied them tightly together above her head, using one rope to secure her to one corner of the large bed.

Darian lifted his head to survey the work and nodded with a broad grin. Jared had done this before, he could tell. It amazed him that they were alike in this way, but he didn't question his good fortune. He had work to do before the dragons took him beyond reason and into their own brand of wild lust.

Adora lay diagonally across the wide bed, hands bound together, then secured to one corner. They could maneuver her easily into just about any position either of them could dream up.

Darian flipped her over onto her knees and elbows, positioning her just so as he surveyed the enticing sight her spread, wet pussy made against the bedclothes. Jared slid beneath her upper body, seating himself within easy reach of her mouth. Darian realized Jared was letting him have her pussy for this round and thanked the other man with a sly grin as he slid his fingers into her slick well.

The dragons rose now, their passions echoing through the knights as both his and Jared's rods stiffened beyond bearing. The level of arousal he felt was inhuman. It was but an echo of the immense desire filling the dragons and influencing their bonded knights to be more than men in those moments. It was humbling and invigorating at the same time. Darian saw the incredible need he felt reflected in Jared's expression and knew they were both caught up in their dragon partners' lust.

"Suck him, Adora. Take Jared in your mouth and swallow him down."

That she complied so eagerly pleased him. He liked directing her actions in this way and would heartily enjoy it when Jared and he reversed their roles, he knew.

He lay down on the bed and pulled her down slightly so that her pussy rested over his mouth. He used his tongue to sink deep within her tight hole, licking upward, spreading their combined moisture and making little circles around her sensitive clit. He felt her tremble against his mouth and he knew she was close.

So was he for that matter. The dragons neared their zenith and he just had to be inside his mate before the passion overtook him completely and drove him mad. With a growl, he lifted her hips, rose up, turned and sank home within her in one smooth but forceful motion. If she could have screamed with her mouth stuffed fully with Jared's cock, he knew she would have in that moment. As it was, she made a sound deep in her throat that both knights enjoyed.

Darian knew from Jared's gasp and the way he clenched his fist in Adora's auburn tresses that her vocalization had reverberated through his shaft. For his part, Darian just enjoyed hearing the proof of her enjoyment as they both possessed her.

He began shafting in and out, his rod harder and stiffer than it had ever been before. Darian began to realize just how fully the dragons affected both he and Jared in ways he never would have imagined, allowing them both to bring Adora to peak after peak before coming themselves.

But this wasn't one of those times. This time was hard and fast, harsh and earthy. Darian plowed into her, slapping her ass just once as she tightened on him, coming for him nicely before he totally lost control as the dragons did. After that, he lost all rational thought, driving home within his new mate the only goal.

"Adora!" he shouted as all of them neared the stars with the dragons.

Darian's eyes shut hard and every muscle in his body tensed as he joined with Sandor in a hard, long release inside the warm welcoming depths of his mate. He felt what the dragon felt in that moment, sharing in the glory that was the physical expression of love no matter the species. He felt the pleasure multiplied through him and Sandor and through Sandor to Kelzy and to Jared, magnified and sent back to him. It was a true sharing, a completion and a new start for them all.

Darian realized in the aftermath that he was linked with Jared through the dragons, but Adora had a direct link to him as well, somehow. It was a phenomenon he vowed to explore further now that he'd decided to make his home in this land and among these people.

This was his home now. Wherever Adora, Jared, Kelzy and Sandor were. Without all four of them, he would no longer be content or complete. They were his family.

As he came down from the fast, hard high, he realized the dragons were plummeting to earth in the freefall of their spent passion, their wings outstretched at the last moment to prolong the pleasure and allow them to glide on the wings of love for a long, satisfying moment. They were basking, as he was too, in the glory that was his mate and his new family.

Chapter Seven

As leaders of the Lair during a time of war, there was no long honeymoon for Darian, Jared, and Adora—or the dragons. They were back to work the next day, yawning a little, but with wide, satisfied grins as they went about their business.

As a previously mated pair, Kelzy and Sandor were better able to manage their frequent urges to couple, though they did catch their human partners off-guard a time or two over the next few days. Each time though, the men raced to their suite, throwing off clothing as they ran, only to find Adora waiting for them already naked on the bed. She welcomed them both with open arms...and legs. They varied their positions, but the love between them never varied, never altered, never changed, except to grow deeper and surer with each passing day.

Darian was a novice when it came to fighting from atop a dragon but proved himself an able student and an innovative strategist as he trained with Sandor each day. His added insights into the workings of the Skithdronian army were invaluable as they prepared their defenses. Darian had spent most of his younger days as a warrior before becoming an ambassador, so fighting and training was nothing new to him. Nothing, that is, except flying on the back of a huge dragon. Now that was new and absolutely thrilling.

Sandor was a great teacher and Darian learned as much and more from just watching the way Jared and Kelzy worked together. The four of them were a fighting team now, since the dragons were mates, and would fight side by side. They trained together, lived in the same suite, and shared the same wife. It wasn't as Darian had always expected his life to work out. It was much better than that, actually. Though he still believed in the gods of his culture, he had to admit this 'Mother of All' his new family believed in certainly did know what She was doing when She brought them all together.

Still, Darian felt his years when he returned to the suite late at night after a full day of riding patrol and drilling with Sandor, Kelzy and Jared. Jared just laughed at him and shook his head but Adora was more

sympathetic. She went to him while he soaked in a hot tub of water in the bathing chamber. She had an herbal mixture for his bath and later gave him a rubdown with a warm, fragrant massage oil she'd prepared to relax his overstressed muscles.

After such delicious treatment, he was ready for the dragons to take off for the moon and drive him and his mate to a frenzy of pleasure. Darian positioned himself under Adora this time, where he wouldn't have to put any extra stress on his already abused muscles, but when she took Jared and him both into her beautiful body, he forgot all about his aches and pains. The only ache he felt was one at the center of his heart for this lovely, giving woman who had become the center of his universe.

Z Z Z

The skirmishes continued over the next few days but the reconnaissance reports indicated the Skithdronian army was massing just over the border. They were waiting to start the second wave of attack, Darian surmised, for something...or someone.

The answer came the next day when their patrols reported movement on the border. Skiths slithered across the already destroyed fields and farms, heading for the few villages that remained populated after the first round of attacks. Jared was a sight to behold as he decisively took charge of the Lair's fighting forces, marshalling the knights and dragons to mount an effective defense against the renewed attack.

When the first dragon fell, all trumpeted in horror and sadness. It was a youngster named Jizra with an equally young knight named Bennu who fell first to the new, deadly weapons Skithdron had unleashed. Diamond tipped bolts took him down, and the deadly, horrifyingly organized skiths did the rest. Both knight and rider were lost in a matter of moments.

Jared called a retreat to reorganize and Kelzy sent out the message through the dragons. They fell back to a rocky outcropping, Darian silent as he thought through what he'd seen of the Skithdronian lines carefully before voicing his observations.

"I think they were waiting for the weapons to arrive before they launched the second wave. We have to assume there are more of those catapults and diamond bladed bolts. I also have a suspicion about who now leads this army."

"Who?" Jared's voice was grim as he looked over the stunned knights who were finding places to rest a moment until the order came to regroup.

"Venerai. An old enemy of mine. His symbol is a white skith on a field of blood red. I think I caught a glimpse of his banner toward the back ranks. He's one of Lucan's pets." He practically sneered the word. "Jared, if he's here, we also have to look at the skiths. I don't think these are wild skiths. These are the trained ones. Did you see the way they went after poor Bennu and Jizra? They're organized, working together."

"So we'll have to expect some kind of coordinated attack from them as well, I gather."

Darian nodded grimly. "I want Venerai. If we take him out, there's a good

chance the skiths will lose their cohesion. From what I was able to learn before leaving the palace, the trained creatures only respond to certain favorites of Lucan's." Darian felt the anger burn through him for the evil Lucan had loosed. "I want to try for Venerai."

Jared nodded. "Then I'm with you."

Kelzy, tell Kelvan and Rohtina to take point with the majority of our forces, Jared ordered.

Darian knew that meant Gareth and Lars would lead the attack with their dragon partners. They were all excellent warriors who worked so well as a team they were nearly unstoppable.

"I'm with you, Dar. If you say we can end this by getting this Venerai, I believe you."

Darian didn't know he'd been holding his breath until that moment. He was touched and gratified to know this man, this friend, this new brother trusted him enough to place his very life—and those of his people—on the line.

"Thanks, Jared." Darian nodded around the knot in his throat that threatened to choke him.

With a silent signal, Sandor and Kelzy took Darian and Jared into the sky. Using the other dragons for cover, they worked their way higher and higher until few on the ground could see even the dragons' large bulk against the bright sun. Coming out of the sun, they used it to their advantage to drop down steeply behind the enemy army. Darian guided Sandor to the disguised command tent he knew would house the opposing general.

With a rending tear, Sandor burst through the thick canvas of the huge canopy followed closely by Kelzy, both spewing flame as they went. Darian dropped to the ground, clutching his sword, still better suited to fighting on the ground than on dragonback. Besides, he was looking for someone.

While the dragons created a ring of fire around them, Darian sought and found his target. He bounded over to stop Venerai from slithering away.

"Stand and face me, Venerai!"

The bold shout brought the man's head whipping around and Darian couldn't suppress the gasp of surprise that sounded from his throat.

"Darian? You dare come here?" The words hissed through the altered face, no longer quite human. Darian could see the slitted eyes that looked like a wild skith's, the dark mottling of the man's once golden skin. He almost looked...scaled.

"I've come to kill you, Venerai, as I should have long ago." Darian felt a presence at his side and knew without looking that it was Jared, come to back him up if need be.

"And who's this? Is that the old troublemaker Jared of Armand?" Darian was surprised Venerai would recognize Jared. He didn't think Venerai had ever been dispatched to Draconia, but then Venerai had worked behind the scenes for Lucan for years.

Venerai sneered at Jared as he drew his sword. "I thought I'd done away with you when I killed your wife and that pathetic whelp of yours."

Darian had to hold Jared back, so great was the anger coming off his fighting partner.

Don't let him rile you. This man is evil straight through. Kelzy cautioned them both. Sandor and I will hold the ring around you as long as we can. None will be able to see or interfere with what transpires within.

I suggest you kill him quick, though, Sandor put in. They're bringing up reinforcements and we won't be able to hold them off forever.

"Fight me like a man, Venerai. Or maybe you're no longer a man, are you? You look like a fucking skith." Darian grimaced as he stalked Venerai, sword drawn and ready. "What the hell happened to you? Or is it your true nature finally coming out after all these years?"

Darian circled the other man, noting Jared coming up behind to block and guard. They already fought well together, like brothers. He knew he could trust Jared to kill Venerai, should he fail, and take care of Adora. It was a secure feeling, though he vowed to himself not to fail. He had waited too long for this.

"No, Darian, this is how Lucan rewards loyalty." He raised his arm, allowing the wide sleeve of his shirt to fall back and reveal deep acid burns in his skin, scaled over with reptilian looking skin. It was disgusting and downright scary. "I am one with the skith and they are one with me."

He lowered his arm and suddenly there were skiths attacking the dragons from all sides. Sandor bellowed in pain as some of their venom singed one wing, but he flamed even higher, crisping the skiths that dared to answer their new master's call. Kelzy fought on the other side of the ring, and though they drew in toward each other, lessening the space they must keep aflame, they held off the skiths and roasted every last one.

"Your pets can't seem to overcome our partners, Venerai. Or were they your cousins? No matter, they're dead now."

Venerai's eyes narrowed as he charged with his deadly sharp blade, his animal rage momentarily overcoming his human intelligence. Good, Darian thought, that's just the reaction he wanted, but Venerai had the strength of ten men and the sinuous motion of a skith. It was difficult to anticipate his moves and Darian paid the price a few times in shallow cuts to his exposed body. The areas where Adora had incorporated dragon scale into his leathers were holding firm, protecting him, but there were too few precious dragon scales and too much of his large body left vulnerable to this almost inhuman attack.

Jared jumped between Darian and Venerai and took some of the blows, allowing Darian just a moment to regroup. Jared had a fire in his eyes that Darian well knew was the light of revenge. His new fighting partner finally faced the man who claimed to have killed his family and he wanted justice. Darian vowed he would get it this day, no matter the cost.

With renewed effort, Darian rejoined the fight. Whatever had been done to Venerai, it made him stronger than either Darian or Jared and it took both men to fight this one deranged, half-skith-looking monstrosity. They managed to push him back, but only just barely, each knight suffering shallow wounds that hurt fiercely and bled enough to be downright annoying.

You must end this now, boys, Sandor advised them, before they get those giant crossbows into position. They're setting up the machines too far away for us to flame before we take to the sky.

We hear and obey, Darian sent with just a touch of wry humor to his new dragon partner, but this son of a skith has changed since I knew him and not for the better. I should have killed him years ago.

The Mother of All knows that's true. Sandor continued to flame all who dared come near the wall of fire he and his mate kept going around them. Get your asses in gear, knights! We must end this with haste.

Jared saw his opportunity a moment later. The grotesque creature before them was starting to weaken as his eyes showed pain. He didn't understand where the pain came from since neither of the knights had managed to score any major hits on the bastard, but Jared knew that look could not be manufactured. He was trying too hard to hide it.

With a flourish, Jared moved in and struck at the joint where Venerai's arm met his body, double striking to the knee with the same complex, arcing sweep. Venerai went down hard on one knee. Darian came up behind and ran his sword through the vulnerable part of Venerai's plate armor, near the waist, putting the enemy general in the perfect position for Jared's next powerful swing.

"This is for Ana and James," he whispered, one final time recalling the happy young boy and laughing woman who had shared his life and died by this enemy's hand. With one final motion, he separated Venerai's head from his body, killing the bastard who had killed his family. Justice had finally been served.

Both knights panted, their breathing harsh, as Darian searched the enemy general's pockets for any bit of intelligence that might be helpful to their side. Jared slung the evil bastard's head into a sack. He would take it and burn it to be certain no sort of evil magic could ever bring this bastard back to life. Jared never would have believed such a thing before, but then he had never seen the kind of magic that would turn a normal human man into the grotesque monster they had just faced. Lucan had access to powerful, demented magics, and Jared wasn't taking any chances.

Darian scanned the area, taking anything that might be of some kind of use to the Draconian cause, then ran for Sandor's side. He saw Jared do the same, tying something to the pack around Kelzy's neck that they used sometimes during battle. Within moments they launched skyward, the dragon wings beating with all their might for the high ground that would mean their safety from those dragon-killing weapons below.

They were almost out of range when a simple arrow screamed out of the sky from below, jamming itself through Jared's chest. The shock of it sent him scrambling for a hold, but he tumbled off Kelzy's back and went plummeting toward the ground at an alarming speed.

Jared! Kelzy's distress trumpeted over the field of battle.

Without pause Darian and Sandor, both of one mind, turned and dove, positioning themselves beneath the tumbling warrior. Darian reached upward, his own position increasingly precarious as he caught Jared and settled him onto Sandor's broad back, holding him tight.

We've got him! Kelzy, we've got him! Darian's thoughts were stronger each

day he worked and trained with both dragons and he knew Jared's partner would hear him.

Flying as fast as he could, Sandor raced for the Lair, his mate at his side. We'll save him, my love. He's a strong human, in the prime of his life. Adora will not let him die.

Z Z Z

Adora was beside herself when Sandor landed at the Lair. Jared had lost a lot of blood and she feared the arrow might have pierced his heart.

"Thank the Mother!" she cried as she realized the arrow had not hit either his heart or his lung. It had gone through the muscle near the shoulder joint and it looked a lot worse than it really was. She sobbed as Darian helped her break off the arrow and pull it through cleanly, then got herself together enough to continue his treatment.

Jared stopped her with a hand over hers when she would have healed him as fully as she could, draining herself in the process.

"Don't you dare, my love. I need you beside me, talking to me, caring for me. Not unconscious from exhaustion that could put you in danger."

She smiled at him and it was a watery smile. "Let me just do a little, Jared. Just start the process. We can do it a little at a time over several days. That way I won't be drained and you won't lose any of your ability to use your shoulder fully."

"You drive a hard bargain, my love, but I agree as long as it puts you in no jeopardy."

She kissed his cheek, his lips, and his brow. "None at all. I promise. Jared, it hurts me to see you injured. Let me do this for you."

He pulled her head down with his good hand, kissing her soundly. "All right," he whispered as he released her. "Do your worst."

She laughed as she knew he had intended and let the healing energy flow through her fingers and into his shoulder. She concentrated on knitting the tears and rejoining the muscle and blood vessels that had been disrupted by the arrow. Once this part of the healing was accomplished, she knew he would rest easier and there would be little lasting injury from the wound. Adora sighed as she felt the first ebb of her power. It was enough for now. She'd promised him not to tire herself too much and she knew he'd be watching closely for any sign of fatigue, chastising her lovingly if he suspected she was the least bit tired.

Adora pulled back and Jared sat up, gingerly at first. Then a broad smile crossed his face and he tumbled her into his embrace, kissing her soundly. After a long, joyous moment, he moved back, keeping her on his lap while he searched around them.

"Darian! Thank you, brother, for the good catch, and you, Sandor. I can never repay either of you for saving my life."

"Think nothing of it." Darian winked at his fighting partner. "I expect you'll do the same for me someday."

Jared laughed shortly, then his eyes sharpened. "How goes the battle?"

Darian's broad smile was answer enough, but he stepped back to let

Gareth and Lars move closer. Both younger men were flushed with excitement, fresh from the battle and high with their victory. Gareth stepped forward, the usual spokesman for the duo.

“Whatever you two did, it did the trick. Just before Sandor and Kelzy burst into the sky, the ranks of skiths lost focus and started to scramble. They turned on the Skithdronian army and started fighting them as they fled across the border for their home rocks. Their forces, both skith and human, are in retreat, running for the border as fast as they can.”

A cheer went up from the knights surrounding them now and all were smiling. Adora put her hand over Jared’s shoulder when he tried to stand, she and Darian supporting him as he faced his warriors.

“You’ve done well this day, my lads!” Again they cheered as he buoyed their spirits. “Send out patrols to watch the retreat and make certain no stragglers remain on our side of the border. Gareth and Lars, you’re in charge of the patrols for now. I have some recuperating to do with my family.”

Many of the knights stepped forward to pat him on his good shoulder as he passed. Adora noted that just as many offered congratulations and a respectful hand on the shoulder to Darian. All of them talked about the brave and magnificent save Darian and Sandor had performed by plucking Jared out of freefall and flying hell bent for leather back to the Lair. They’d saved Jared’s life and unwittingly earned the respect of many a knight that day.

When they reached their private suite, Darian and Adora helped Jared to bed. Adora undressed him, surprised to find his cock hard and wanting as she uncovered it.

“What’s this?” she teased, dipping her head to kiss the tip of his erection.

“It’s what always happens when you touch me, my love.” He reached for her hand, pulling her onto the bed. “Dar, she’s wearing too many clothes. Can’t you do something about that?” Jared’s deep blue eyes twinkled up at her as the knights amused themselves with a lighthearted seduction.

“Are you sure you’re up to it, Jared? You just almost died.”

He dragged her down for a deep kiss. “No better time to reaffirm life than when you’ve almost lost it, Adora. The question is, are you up to it? You expended a lot of energy healing me. Do you need to rest, or can I make love to you first?”

“As long as I can sleep sometime tonight, I’ll be just fine.” She tugged his head down to hers. “Make love to me, Jared. I’m so grateful you’re alive.” She kissed him deeply, cooperating with Darian as he moved around them to remove her clothing. When she was bare, Darian turned to leave. Adora stopped him with an outstretched hand.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jared asked, his voice rough with desire and strong with the vitality of returning health.

“You should celebrate together.”

“Not without you,” Adora said softly.

“I thought we’d settled this already.” Jared sighed loudly, clearly exasperated. “She’s right, Dar. You’re part of this family. This is for the three of us to share together.”

The other man looked truly touched as he stood silent for a moment, clearly caught off guard. Adora tugged him closer so that he stood between

her legs as she sat on the edge of the bed. With slow, deliberate hands, she undressed him, easing his leather leggings off and sucking him deep when she uncovered his hard cock. Darian's head dropped back, his beautiful eyes closing as her lips closed around him.

Jared knew the ecstasy Darian felt. He didn't envy his new brother the love of their mate—instead he reveled in it. Adora was theirs to pleasure, theirs to protect, and she in turn would pleasure them and give them all the love they needed. It was a rare gift and one he would never deny again.

"Enough, wench!" Darian called out with a laugh when she would have sucked him to release. Stepping back, he dove for the other side of the bed, careful not to jostle Jared's injured shoulder, but eager now for more loveplay.

Jared caught Adora gently by the neck and turned her to face him. "Give me some of what you just gave him, little one."

Her eyes flamed brightly as he pushed her head down near his straining erection. Without hesitation she took him deep and wide, her eyes holding his as she positioned herself to take all of him—all the way to the back of her throat. Adora was truly talented that way, Jared knew, thinking again what a lucky son of a bitch he was.

"She really likes sucking cock," Darian observed from beside him, leaning negligently against the headboard as he fingered his long, stiff rod. "She's got a talent for it, I think."

Jared couldn't answer around the rumble of pleasure rising from his throat as she swallowed around the tip of him. With a groan, he brought her off his dick and urged her face up to his.

"Ride me, little love. Ride me hard and fast."

She did just that as Darian moved to the side watching her ass jiggle up and down on Jared's thick cock. When she slowed, Darian slapped her butt cheeks, making her yelp and clench around Jared. When Darian inserted his wet finger into the tight spot between her cheeks, she nearly shot off the bed.

"Do you want him in you too?" Jared asked as she writhed on him. "Do you want him up your ass while I'm in your pussy?"

"Yes!" The scream was torn from her throat as she came hard over him.

Jared nodded and jerked his chin over at Darian. The other man wasted no time positioning his quickly lubed cock at her rear entrance. He eased in, not wanting to hurt her, but they both knew by now she liked the little edge of pain this position put her in. They wanted to bring her as high as they could, to show her how much they both loved her. They were of one mind in that moment, with their willing mate writhing between them. No words needed to be spoken, they simply were connected, hearts and souls.

When Adora came again, she brought both her mates with her in a glorious fireball of ecstasy that had all three of them gasping and collapsing into a dreamless sated sleep, side by side by side in the huge bed.

Chapter Eight

The next morning the dragons woke them. Kelzy nudged the huge bed with her chin, her long tongue reaching out to playfully tease her humans awake while Sandor watched and laughed in his dragonish way, smoking up the vented dome above their sandpit.

“Go away, Kelz, can’t you see I’m injured here?” Jared grouched as a ticklish tongue prodded his foot.

The children are coming to visit. They have news you will be happy to learn and can’t hide it any longer. Do you want them to find you lounging in bed, naked as the day you were born?

“What children?” Darian asked sleepily as Adora slid over him, pausing only to kiss him good morning on her way to the bathing chamber.

“I think she means my daughter, Belora, and her mates.”

And our son, Kelvan, and his mate, Rohtina, Sandor added with just a hint of fatherly pride.

“They’re all coming here?” Jared finally sat up and scratched at his chest. “What for? Is there a problem?”

Not a problem, worrywart, Kelzy laughed at her knight. Get dressed and you’ll find out shortly.

Darian decided to stop trying to fight the inevitable. He stood and joined Adora in the bathing chamber, cleansing himself before dressing for the day, stopping a few times to tickle and fondle her because he just couldn’t help himself. She was so sweet, so womanly, so much of everything he had always wanted in his life. He only wished he had found her sooner, but Fate apparently had other ideas.

He realized by joining with Adora, he had also inherited an extended family in her daughter, Belora’s mates, and their dragon partners. He’d gone from being all alone in the world to having a large, loving family almost overnight. The gods must be smiling down on him, indeed. Darian didn’t know what he’d done right, but it must have been something big for them to grant him such happiness.

After they were all dressed and Adora had the morning tea going, the promised guests arrived with a spring in their steps and sparkles in all of their eyes. Belora rushed over to hug her mother, her face sporting a wide grin.

“What is it, baby?” Adora asked her youngest child.

“Make that babies, plural,” Gareth joked, reaching out to clasp hands with Jared, then Darian as Lars did the same.

Adora’s eyes drew together in suspicious delight. “Are you?”

“Mama, I’m pregnant!”

Adora shrieked and hugged her baby girl close. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, the prince told me.”

“Nico?” Jared asked quickly, a grin splitting his face as well. “Was he here again?”

“No, he told me days ago but things were too hectic, and then I didn’t want my news to overshadow your wedding. I had morning sickness and the

prince calmed my stomach with his healing gift. Then he told me..." Her eyes grew wide with tears of joy as Lars pulled her back against his broad frame in comfort. "He told me I was going to have twin boys. One from each of my mates. And they were both going to be black dragons."

Jared sat heavily, his knees seeming to crumble at the startling news, but Darian and Adora were both puzzled.

"Black dragons, praise the Mother!" Jared spoke softly from his chair.

"What?" Adora pounced on him for answers, her eyes bright with suspicion, her mood happy but uncertain. Darian felt the same uncertainty reflected in her beautiful eyes. He sought Jared's gaze for answers, reassured by the happy expression he found there.

"Dar, since you're part of the family now, I guess you're allowed in on the secret." Jared looked over at the dragons for confirmation and both Kelzy and Sandor's heads went up and down in oversized nods of agreement. "Well, the royal lines of Draconia are descended from Draneth the Wise."

"What's ancient history got to do with my grandbabies?" Adora wanted to know. Jared took her hand and pulled her onto his lap with a smile.

"Patience, my love." He kissed her cheek before continuing. "Draneth the Wise was the last of the wizards. He made a deal with the dragons who allowed he and his heirs to live peacefully with the dragons forever after, by becoming one of them."

"One of what?" Darian cocked his head, trying to follow.

"Draneth became part dragon. As are all his heirs. You, my dear," he squeezed Adora, "and your lovely daughter, are descended of Draneth. Your sons will have his gifts as your daughters will most likely have the gift of healing dragons."

"What were Draneth's gifts?" Darian was intrigued now.

Jared smiled broadly. "Draneth was the first black dragon. Only the males of royal blood have the ability to change form from human to dragon and back again. Only they are black of all the dragons in our world."

"My grandbabies will be dragons?" Adora's eyes shot to her daughter excitedly.

Belora came over and grasped her mother's hand. "Dragons and human, just like us, only they'll be able to change back and forth, like Prince Nico. He said he showed you, Mama, like he showed me. Isn't it great?"

"It's amazing." Adora's voice trembled, her expression stunned.

"By the gods!" Darian was shocked but it was more than just hearing about the impending arrival of grandchildren. Learning the secret of the royals of Draconia suddenly made it all clear to him what Lucan was trying to do. He looked over at his new fighting partner. "Jared, this is what Lucan is driving at."

"You mean like what we saw in that tent with Venerai? You think that was the result of him trying to emulate Draneth the Wise?"

Darian nodded grimly. "In his twisted mind he probably figures he can be just as great as Draneth, can conquer the entire world, if only he has the power of the skiths on his side."

"That's insane!" Gareth stepped forward, taking Belora protectively in his arms. Lars stood beside them, a united front.

Darian nodded at the younger warriors. "Lucan is insane. Last year he brought in a witch from the north and closeted himself with her for over a month. We all thought he was just screwing her brains out but when she emerged, she was no worse for wear and he's notoriously hard on his bed partners. Then he started canceling audiences and has since gone into semi-seclusion within the palace. Only his favorites are allowed in to see him and they ferry messages and orders back and forth. He appears in public only rarely, and only when he can wear ceremonial robes that hide most of his body, come to think of it."

"You think he's like Venerai?" Jared asked shrewdly.

"Probably worse. Venerai was normal the last time I saw him at the palace, only two months ago. What we saw had to have been done to him in the last weeks. Lucan was with the witch over eight months ago. I hate to think what he might look like now."

"Who is Venerai?" Gareth wanted to know.

Jared shook his head. "He was the leader of the enemy army. We killed him when we went behind their lines. His skin was...changed somehow. Like scales. And his eyes weren't human. They were slitted like a skith's."

"Lady Kelzy, did you destroy the head yet?" Darian turned to ask the dragon.

It is over there. She pointed with one wing to the bloody sack in a far corner.

"Keep the ladies here." Darian nodded and went over to the corner, taking Lars with him. He handed the grisly burden to the other knight with grave eyes. "We need to show this to the king. I want you to keep it safe for now. Devise a case out of treated leather for it that will keep it from harming anyone. Don't touch the blood. It's probably as venomous as skith blood. When you've got it in a case, have your dragon partner burn this sack and anything else that could be contaminated. I don't want a single trace of this left anywhere in this Lair, do you understand?"

Lars nodded solemnly as he took the gruesome burden and walked briskly out of the suite, followed by his dragon partner, Rohtina. Darian shook off his fears for the future as he made his way back to the small gathering.

"I'm sorry to ruin your announcement, Belora. Your news is amazing. I can't say I ever thought I'd have littles in the family to spoil and play with."

Belora shocked him by hugging him tightly. "They're your grandchildren, Darian. I expect you and Jared to spoil them rotten."

"Grandchildren?" Darian shook his head, pleasantly stunned. The women of his new family had a way of doing that to him, no matter what their age, he realized.

Belora laughed up at him. "And Mama's not too old to have more children of her own, you know. She had my sisters and me when she was just a child herself."

Now he was completely speechless as he looked over at his blushing bride. The thought of her growing round with his child completely floored him, but that was in the hands of the gods. He would never pressure her to have a baby if it weren't what she wished also.

"Belora, have some pity on the poor man!" Gareth chided his mate as he

drew her back into his arms. Gareth looked over at him with a smile. "She's a whirlwind at times, Darian. You just have to learn how to put up with it."

All of them laughed then as Belora squirmed happily in her mate's arms, showing a bit of her feisty spirit.

They left shortly after and Adora put Jared back in bed, despite his protests. She used her healing gift to treat his shoulder once more, tiring herself a bit more than she wanted, so she lay down on the sofa outside in the main chamber. Darian joined her, stroking her hair as they shared a quiet moment.

"Did your daughter say you had other children besides her?"

Adora yawned daintily and pillowed her head on his thigh. Her eyes stared straight ahead at the huge wallow where Sandor and Kelzy rested after returning from their hunting trip.

"I had twin girls who were stolen from me when they were ten winters old. After that, Belora and I hid in the forest. I had three girls, Dar. Only one was mine to raise past her tenth birthday."

"I'm so sorry, my love." He stroked her soft hair, lulling her to calmness as she recalled the sad memories. "I want you to know that I would never pressure you to have more children."

She sat up then on the wide couch and faced him. "What if I wanted more children?"

He frowned. "Do you?"

"Honestly, I don't know." She settled into his arms, snuggling close. "As a healer I know how to prevent pregnancy, of course, but since I had no bed partners until you and Jared, I haven't been doing anything to prevent it. I could be pregnant, I suppose, but it's harder to conceive for older women." She craned her head up to look into his eyes. "Would you want a child, Darian?"

He hugged her close. "What kind of question is that? I would welcome any child of yours into my heart, Adora. I would love it and teach it, be a good father to it, regardless of whether it was my seed or Jared's that did the job." He squeezed her once in reassurance. "I love you, Adora. I love everything about you. I would love your child as well. Simply because it's a part of you."

Kelzy lifted her big head and stretched lazily over to them. "You're wrong about one thing, child."

Adora lifted her head from Darian's chest to regard the dragon. "Oh, yeah? What's that?"

You are not too old to conceive easily. By bonding with our kind, your knights will reap the benefit of a long, extended life. You're a descendant of Draneth the Wise, as well as having mother-bonded with me when you were just a toddler. You will live three or perhaps four normal human lifetimes, as will your mates. You could have many children in that time, if you choose to do so.

"Sweet Mother of All! Mama Kelzy, I had no idea."

The dragon quaked with smoky laughter. I thought as much.

Sandor raised his head and moved over to face them in his gentle way. Princess, this land once teemed with black dragons. It's been many years

since even one black dragon was born and my kind was beginning to despair. Now, with Belora's news, we have new hope for your race as well as our own. Any child of yours would be a blessing to our world, Adora. I hope you'll consider having at least one set of babies for your new mates. I think it would make them both happy as well.

"Sets of babies?" Darian's voice rose in question.

Kelzy swiveled her head to look at him. Royal blood often inspires twin births, as does mating with two knights. The Mother has a hand in all, Darian. She often blesses knights with twin sets—one from each knight. Perhaps it's Her way of equalizing things so that one mate or the other doesn't feel left out.

"I had twins before Belora." Again sadness nearly overwhelmed her. "Ariki and Alania, we named them."

Princess, Sandor intoned comfortingly, the search for them is already underway. Every knight and fighting dragon in the land has been told to watch for them. We'll find them. I know we will. Have faith that the Mother will bring your children back to you.

"You're a kind being, Sir Sandor. Thank you for trying to comfort me. I'll keep your words close to my heart."

Jared walked out to the sofa, scratching around his healing wound, careful not to get too close to the sore skin around the arrow hole. He sensed the tension in the air as he drew closer to Darian and their mate. He still couldn't believe Adora was his...well, theirs. All in all, he didn't mind sharing her love with Darian. He felt good knowing Darian would be there for her if the Mother of All should decide it was time for him to leave this world.

He had come awfully close when that arrow hit him. A few inches to the side and it would have pierced his heart. Regardless, if Darian and Sandor hadn't caught him, the fall would have killed him with certainty. He had been spared that day, and he could only guess as to the reason. Apparently the Mother still had work for him to do here.

The first order of business was to cheer up his partner and their mate.

"Why so solemn?" He sat down on the couch, pulling Adora's lithe, muscular legs across his lap.

"I was just telling Darian about my twin daughters." She wiped at the wetness that leaked from her eye with a flustered smile.

"And learning that we'll have three or four lifetimes to enjoy each other."

Jared laughed. "I guess that came as a bit of a shock to you, Dar. I forgot you wouldn't necessarily know about that aspect of partnering with a dragon." He nodded over at Sandor. "Hundreds of years to drive each other crazy. Can't wait." He chuckled dryly as his shoulder itched.

"And time to have more children," Adora said quietly, shocking his eyes back to her. "If you want them."

"Sweet Mother!"

"Now who's caught off guard?" Darian teased him. "Or didn't you think about the fact that Adora could bear our children. She could already be pregnant."

Jared felt the blood drain from his face. He'd lost his son and it had

nearly killed him. He didn't think he could face such devastation again.

Darian clapped a hand on his shoulder. "There are two of us now to protect her, Jared. Two fierce dragons and two warriors, not to mention her daughter's mates and dragon partners. Nothing will happen to Adora or any children we might be blessed to have."

Jared took Darian's words to heart. Relief worked its way through his system, a huge weight lifting off his shoulders that he had not even been aware was there. Adora crawled across the couch into his arms and held him as tightly as his wound would allow.

"Nothing will happen to me, Jared. I'm afraid you're stuck with me." She chuckled and he leaned down to kiss her luscious lips.

Jared sensed Darian moving around them, making a place for them all on the wide couch. They were out in the open, in the middle of the public area of their suite, but he figured it was relatively private as long as uninvited guests didn't come barging in unannounced.

He pulled back from her mouth, helping Darian undress her. Adora's leggings were already gone as Jared pulled off her top. She had her hands in his leggings and before he knew it, his cock was hard in her mouth.

"Suck me, baby." Jared's eyes closed as his head tilted back to rest on the padded back of the couch. "Oh, yes."

Adora went down on him with relish as Darian feasted on her dripping pussy. Jared opened his eyes wide enough to watch Darian's tongue delve between her legs and Jared reached out with one hand to squeeze her swinging breast. She whimpered around his cock as he pinched her nipple. Her eyes shot up to his with a devilish sparkle as she sucked harder, using her tongue in a way that threatened to unman him right then and there.

She was shoved forward a bit as Darian rose over her bent bottom, sheathing his hard cock inside her with a deep groan of pleasure. The pistoning motions in and out of her sweet pussy moved her mouth on Jared's most sensitive flesh making him even hotter.

Darian sped up as they neared completion, driving all of them forward. With a grin for his fighting partner, he slapped Adora's ass playfully. Both of them enjoyed it when she yelped and clenched on them, so he did it again with Jared's nodding encouragement. They were close to the edge now and with a final whack to her taut ass, she climaxed hard around them both, Jared coming hard in her hungry mouth while Darian spurting deep inside her womb.

All three were speechless for long moments, but finally Darian drew himself out of her tight depths as she licked Jared's cock completely clean. Adora rested her head in Jared's lap as Darian lowered her hips to the couch, taking only a moment to seat himself under her lean, gorgeously naked body.

Both men closed their eyes as they caught their breath, leaning their heads on the back of the padded couch.

"I've been thinking," Darian said after a long while.

"You can still think after that? You're a better man than I." Jared chuckled as he stroked Adora's silky hair while she dozed lightly in his lap.

"Lucan keeps a woman chained to his bed but she isn't his fuck toy." He kept his voice low so as not to wake the sated woman in their laps. "It's

rumored she's a healer."

Jared's eyes popped open and he looked over at his fighting partner. "A healer?"

"I've seen the girl, Jared. Just once. She was skinny and dirty, but she had the most luminous green eyes I'd ever seen...until I met Adora." He looked pointedly at the woman sleeping softly over them both.

"Sweet Mother! Do you think—?"

Darian nodded grimly. "That poor creature could be one of our lady's lost twins."

Bianca D'Arc

A life-long martial arts enthusiast, Bianca enjoys a number of hobbies and interests that keep her busy and entertained such as playing the guitar, shopping, painting, shopping, skiing, shopping, road trips, and did we say... um... shopping? A bargain hunter through and through, Bianca loves the thrill of the hunt for that excellent price on quality items, though she's hardly a fashionista. She likes nothing better than curling up by the fire with a good book, or better yet, by the computer, writing a good book.

Bianca loves to hear from readers and can be reached through her Yahoo group or through the various links on her website.

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