



Dragon Trust

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I always hesitated before knocking on the door to The Commander's office.

I've been working at high command for three years but I still get nervous every time I have to come face to face with him. It doesn't help that he's drop dead gorgeous with long black hair and a body that seems to be made entirely out of muscles, but he sets my heart fluttering and my insides trembling whenever he so much as smiles at me.

Commander Kolrynn singled me out a year ago when Yanis came crashing down onto the landing field. He was thrashing around in pain and I was the only one who could get close enough to help. For some reason Kolrynn seemed to think that merited promotion and his personal attention, I was only doing what anyone would have done, but he'd insisted that I had a rare gift. So now I can't hide and watch him from afar, I have to meet with him at least once a week.

I took a few more deep breaths, trying to psych myself as best as I could. I can do this, I can get through this meeting without behaving like an infatuated schoolgirl, honest I can but it doesn't help that he keeps flirting with me. One day, I swear I'm going to let my guard down and leap on top of him and I'm not sure that's acceptable behaviour – even for dragons!

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Yes dragons! It's still difficult to believe it, but four years ago a portal opened in Ireland belching acid clouds from who knows where. There was nothing we could do to stop them until the dragons came streaming out of their hibernation cave under Alderney Edge to burn the acid with their bright fire and it changed everything!

I love being close to the dragons but I'm terrified that they'll find out my secret. For my whole life

I have been dreaming that I am a dragon flying alone in the night.

Now, when I fly through the night sky I'm not on my own, I can see the other dragons up there with me and one of them comes to find me. He's big, he's black and he looks like Commander Kolrynn. I can't decide if I'm more scared to find out that it's only my imagination or to find out that it's true and that one day Kolrynn will find out it's me

that he comes to see.

I raised my hand to knock on his door but I could hear voices inside and I stopped to listen, because I didn't want to interrupt if it was something important.

“Kol, if we can't close the portal soon the shadow dragons will cross.”

“I know that Thann,” Kolrynn snapped, “it's the same every cycle. But until we can find the anchor you know we can't close

the portal.”

“What if we kill Shyamal?”

“Oh why didn’t we think of that before?” Kolrynn’s voice dripped sarcasm, “I’m just as fed up as you are, but you know we can’t! He won’t leave the portal and we can’t get in. We’ve been trapped by this curse for thousands of years and it’s the same thing over and over again. Shyamal opens the portal, we try and stop the acid from destroying everything then, eventually, we

find the anchor, destroy it and the portal shuts down. But there is never any sign of the queen so Shyamal won't come out to face us and it's back to hibernation until the next time."

"What if there is another way?"

"Well there hasn't been so far! You know what happened when Zerrynn tried to go into the portal and our scientists haven't made much progress since."

"So we just have to go through the motions and hope one of us

finds the queen this time?”

“What else can we do?” The Commander asked wearily, “Tekrynn delayed destroying the anchor last cycle and, if that portal hadn’t been on the steppes, the whole world could have been destroyed.”

“I know Kol, but he thought he’d found the queen and when she disappeared it drove him insane.”

“If we could have proved he’d fathered a child it would have be

different.”

“Yea, but no one could find the woman so you had no choice. You had to depose him and destroy the anchor.”

“Thanks Thann, but that doesn’t make me feel any better about it. The humans kept looking for the woman and her descendants while we slept and there was no sign of anyone. So let’s just enjoy the wind under our wings and help these people while we can.”

I could almost see Thann stomping around the office before he finally admitted defeat, “I just wish there was something else we could do.” he grumbled.

“I know Thann. I agree, I really do.”

I quickly knocked on the door to hide the fact I’d listened for longer than was strictly necessary.

“Well it’s my turn to hunt for her at the party tonight.” Than

grumbled nearly running me over when he stormed out of the door. His piercing blue eyes, a perfect match for his dragon's scales, glared at me as though it were my fault and a small puff of smoke came out of his mouth. I don't think he was angry with me, but he was certainly angry.

“Hi Alexa, what's the situation in the infirmary?” Commander Kolrynn was trying his best to be cheerful but I could tell he was still mulling over his

conversation with Thann because his gaze followed him down the corridor.

I sat in the chair on the other side of the big glass desk, “All good. Laeg was discharged last night, but you still need to keep him out of combat for a day or so.” I paused, “I just wish dragon blood wasn’t so corrosive, we have another two healers out with mild burns. Even the new gloves your techs sent over didn’t hold up.”

“How did you calm Laeg down? He was in so much pain that I could feel it from the summit in Zurich. I was hurrying back, but you’d healed him by the time I got here.”

He was looking me intently up and down as though, if he only looked hard enough, he could read the answer in my soul.

God he was handsome! I felt an almost overwhelming urge to smile and to flirt with him. I clamped down on it and tried to

hide my attraction behind my professional manner, but it's so difficult when he smiles at me. Something inside quivered under his gaze and I was glad I was sitting down or my legs might wobble. Dragons are like that, they're supposed to be irresistible to human women, but either he hasn't seriously tried or I've managed to resist — so far!

“I must just have the knack.” I replied dismissively. I couldn't have him pry too closely into my

knack, because I'd asked my dream dragon to read Laeg's body language and tell me what to do to calm him. "Once you get that healing gel onto the bit that hurts they calm down instantly."

"I'm amazed you can reach the parts that hurt."

"Well a cherry picker would help. We tried scaffolding, but no one was obliging enough to land next to it."

Although Kolrynn chuckled briefly he asked, "What's a

cherry picker?”

He has been hibernating for about two hundred years, the internet and modern technology is all new to him. Dragons have their own technology but our words and inventions must still be strange to him because the last time he was out of hibernation steam power had only just been invented. Even so he only rarely misses a reference, “A moveable platform on an extensible arm,” I explained, “we would have tried

it earlier but I'm worried they aren't going to stand up to thrashing tails and wings.”

“Why don't we test it with an uninjured dragon?”

“Because they're always off ‘partying’” I shot back sarcastically.

To be honest, all of us in the medical wing gossiped that the dragons were either playboys or that they needed ‘virgin sacrifices’ because they spent so much of their time picking up

women. It's only those of us who are on base that seem to be off limits to them.

I frowned inwardly, that snippet of overheard conversation suggested there might be something more to the partying than just the hot and cold running sex. But before I could think too deeply, Kolrynn replied with a practised seductive smile, “Can we help it if human women find us irresistible?”

I knew he was only teasing, but I still felt my stomach flip flop and my breath caught because all the air seemed to leave the room. I was acutely aware of my body's response but I forced myself to meet his eyes and reply "Can't think why, you're just a bunch of overgrown lizards!"

I don't think I'd ever heard him laugh before and it lightened his whole face. For a brief moment, the stern Commander was gone and a younger, carefree Kolrynn

took his place. His laugh was deep and rich like his personality but it seemed to reach into me and awaken something inside. Instantly my heart lifted and I smiled back.

For a moment I saw his eyes narrow, he looked intently at me and he scented the air, suddenly intrigued by something.

I didn't find out what it was, because the door was thrown open and Thann raced in yelling. "Kol! Kol! Asha's down! He can't

make it back!”

I got up to leave but Kolrynn waved me back to the chair, “Where is he?”

“He’s still in Ireland. There was no sign of the shadow dragons when they started the last sweep, but there was an unexpected acid storm. They were looking for the anchor but they were too close to the portal and Oran reported that the acid clouds came out too quickly.”
the words were tumbling over

themselves in Thann's haste to give his report.

“Asha was closest, he tried to roll away but the acid caught one wing and he fell. He landed on the other wing Kol!” Thann's distress was filling the air, “It's broken so there's no way he can fly and he can't change back. They couldn't even go back and check on him because a shadow dragon arrived.”

My professional instincts surged to the fore. “What happens if

you splint it? Will it support his wing after he changes?”

“No Alexa, once we change form we leave everything behind.” the Commander explained, “Though if he shifts we can carry him back here and he can try to change back to heal, but he’ll never be able to concentrate on the shift when he’s in that much pain.”

“So if we can splint it well enough to kill the pain he could shift?”

Kolrynn and Thann nodded.

“Then you need to get me over there.”

Kolrynn looked at me as though I'd grown three heads, “He's in Ireland close to the portal and the first of the shadow dragons have come through. I can fight them but I can't do that if I'm carrying you. So we'd have to land near the coast and walk in. It's going to be hard marching and we could get hit by acid or a shadow dragon could find us.

It's almost certain suicide.”

“When do we start?” I didn't know Asha very well, but something inside me rebelled at the idea of leaving a dragon to die in agony.

“Are you mad?” Thann asked, “Didn't you hear Kol say it was suicide?”

“I can't leave him to die in pain.” I said simply.

Kolrynn buried his head in his hands, “She's right Thann, we

can't leave him and the only other option is one of us burning him to put him out of his pain and we can't afford to lose any more of us."

"Then send in a whole squadron, at least give yourselves a chance." Thann said desperately.

"If we send in a squadron it will advertise our presence you know that." The Commander replied patiently, "We'd never make it, we'd just be swamped by acid clouds. You said the

shadow dragons have arrived so you know the clouds will be more organised. Besides, even if we made it through all of that, Asha would be a sitting duck.”

“Then let me go instead.” Thann was pleading with him.

“Thann you know it has to be me, I’m big enough to carry two and Asha’s your age so I’m the only one who can command him.”

Thann looked defiant but it was true, only an elder could

command a pain maddened dragon. Kolrynn looked at Thann for long moments until eventually he nodded, accepting defeat.

The Commander turned to me and said brusquely, “You’ve got 20 mins to get everything you need into a pack and I’ll meet you at the landing field.”

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I nodded to him and headed back to the infirmary. When I was half way there I came to a

crashing halt in the middle of the corridor and I had to grab hold of the wall. The sudden panic when I realised what I'd done had made my knees go weak.

I had just signed up for three days alone in The Commander's company. What had I done? What if he finds out?

I have spent my whole life hiding my dreams. When we thought dragons were a myth I hid them because I didn't want

to be labelled crazy. When they returned, anyone who had an affinity for dragons was taken away and they never came back.

That's why I've never dared to so much as flirt with them, the sex was supposed to be out of this world but the gossip columns never said what happened to the women afterwards. All I can be sure of is that none of the dragons were settling down and playing happy families at the base.

Shit! I'd taken far too long panicking, I'd never be ready in time. I ran the rest of the way to the infirmary and began scattering assistants and healers everywhere while I stuffed healing gel and collapsible splints into a pack. Angela shoved food and water at me and Kevin fussed around like a mother hen but he made me pack a sleeping bag and a change of clothes. I don't know where they got the flying jacket from but I was probably going to need it. They even made me change

out of my bright pink scrubs.
Then they shoved me toward the
landing field with barely a
minute to spare.

Kolrynn was already there with
Thann who was still grumbling.

“I don’t like it Kol!”

“You don’t have to like it,” he
snapped back, “but there are too
few of us left to risk losing
another. So you’re in charge
until I return.”

Thann nodded accepting defeat.

Kolrynn nodded brusquely then he spotted me trotting across the grassy field and he broke into a wide grin. The pack was heavy, but I didn't want to look like a liability so I struggled as best as I could trying to avoid toppling over and landing flat on my face.

“Alexa, I wasn't expecting you for at least ten more minutes.”
The Commander said smiling.

“Well if there's something you need to finish I'll wait here.”

“No, I’m just pleasantly surprised. By the way can you ride?”

“I rode a horse when I was a kid.”

“Good I’m told that being carried isn’t very comfortable, it’s going to be easier if you ride. Just climb up my leg to the base of my neck and stay out of the way of the wings.” I must’ve looked a little scared because he looked at me kindly and said, “Don’t worry, it’s going to feel as

though they'll hit you but they won't." He lent closer still, holding me with his eyes; I could feel my breath stop and I suddenly longed for him to kiss me. "I will not let you fall!" he breathed.

I've never felt dragon pheromones at this intensity before and I was fighting the urge to throw myself at him. I didn't trust myself to say anything so I forced myself to nod. Thann eventually nudged me, breaking me out of my

paralysis, “Put your pack into this net so it’ll be easier for Kol to get a grip.”

By the time I’d done that, Kolrynn had changed and I was standing next to the biggest dragon I’ve ever seen. I’d never been close to him in this form and he was massive; he was far bigger than any of the other dragons, even his head was larger than me. If I hadn’t spent the last two years working with dragons I might have run away he was so awe inspiring.

He was beautiful in his dragon form and I couldn't help admiring him. I spend most of my working life up close and personal with dragons but none of them have affected me like he did. I was drawn to his scales and I had to fight the urge to stroke him. I'd been expecting him to be a pure matt black but his scales reflected all the colours of the rainbow like an iridescent oil spill. I smiled up at him, he really was beautiful and just being close to him was filling me with a sense of

euphoria. If I didn't know better I'd swear he could tell what I was thinking and he felt like he was smiling too.

He was holding out his leg so I gingerly began climbing. Even though I'd climbed injured dragons hundreds of times before, that was in the heat of the moment and this was so much more nerve wracking with Thann looking on critically. I was afraid I would do something silly and slip, or worse, that I might accidentally damage The

Commander, but I made it safely and as soon as I was settled on his back we were airborne.

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Flying was as magnificent as it was in my dreams. His huge wings beat the air either side of my head and he was right, I would have been frightened of getting hit if he hadn't warned me. It would have been all the more terrifying because I know how much damage a thrashing

wing can do, there have been scores of healers sent to the infirmary by flailing dragon wings. However, I trusted The Commander and he'd promised he wouldn't hurt me. So I had a huge grin on my face and I had to force myself not to bounce up and down with joy.

I swear he could tell how I was feeling because he seemed to be laughing, but he made a huge circling loop letting me look down at our base. I'd seen the hills of mid Wales hundreds of

times in my dreams but I can't believe that looking down on them now was exactly the way I'd dreamed it would be. When he swooped down low coming within a few feet of the top of Plynylmon I shouted in pure joy.

“Wooo-hooo! Commander, that was awesome!” I yelled hoping he could hear me.

I'm not sure but he seemed to be showing off for my benefit. He turned his head to one side

and belched out a huge fireball, then he angled himself to fly through the edge so I could feel the heat.

I couldn't help crying out it was so magnificent. This literally was my dreams coming true, I just wished I could have used my own wings to fly alongside him. I stroked his scales softly, wondering if he could feel it. He'd just given me the best treat of my life and I wanted to let him know how much I appreciated it.

As soon as I touched his scales, I was drawn to the feel of them under my hand. Yes they were hard, they were his armour after all, but they had a silky satin feel to them as well and a thought popped into my head faster than I could stop it, *‘I wonder if that’s what his human skin feels like too?’* Desire pooled hard and fast in my belly and before I could think I was pressing myself against his neck. I couldn’t be sure, but I think he noticed, so I stilled quickly, trying to force

my mind away from the way his scales felt.

We'd been flying for an hour, straight and true over the Irish Sea when I caught my first glimpse of the dragons patrolling the coast. When they'd first arrived, the dragons had warned us that Ireland would have to be evacuated. They'd said they couldn't burn the creatures coming out of the portal and the acid they created without hurting the people on the ground.

As usual, the authorities were dubious until the news showed us the realities of a dragon battle. At first the army and the whole of NATO had tried to help but they had nothing hot enough to burn the acid and they were just getting in the way, so eventually they were called off and all our resources went into supporting the dragons.

There was now a permanent blockade around the coastline supported by warships of all

nationalities, making sure nothing could escape. Even so, before we found out how to configure our weather satellites and radar systems to detect the acid clouds some had escaped. Three years ago a huge cloud swarm had reached Paris and they were still working out how to repair the Eiffel Tower. Almost half of it had been dissolved before the dragons had managed to destroy the acid swarm. The news had shown parts of Paris still burning two days later and it was only luck

that had saved the Louvre and the Arc De Triomphe.

I remember being glued to the news because Kolrynn had been one of the dragons. They were darting and weaving through the sky in intricate formations, but I always knew which one was him. I could recognise his shape instantly and his flame had seemed to burn brighter than anyone else's. Who would have thought I'd get to experience it first hand.

I looked around the sky, it was lit up in shades of red and gold because all the dragons were flaming in recognition of each other and their Commander. It wasn't a language per se, it seemed to be more of an emotional expression with concepts conveyed faster than speech would allow.

They converged on us and they seemed to be questioning The Commander but more than anything they seemed surprised that he was carrying someone. I

was imagining the conversation in my head, first was the astonishment, then the attempts to change his mind, but The Commander was unflappable and refused to be dissuaded so then, much like Thann, they grudgingly accepted the necessity and we sailed past the patrols and headed around the coast to the south.

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I could feel Kolrynn getting tense when we neared the coast

and, unconsciously, I began stroking his scales again. He was intently focussed, scanning for shadow creatures and for acid clouds. As soon as we were over land he tilted to one side and we started losing altitude fast. I'd be thoroughly enjoying this if his wariness wasn't spilling over to me, so I stayed quiet and scanned the skies too.

We were skimming low over some mountains, flying along in a deep sided valley, I wanted to say *'may the force be with you'*

but I didn't think he'd get the reference. The vegetation all along the valley sides was patchy. Most of it was scorched and burned from the acid, with dark brown and black scars interrupting the green, but we were flying too fast for me to really get a good look. I was looking everywhere and trying to see what I could because this was my first time seeing shadow damage up close. The dragons had been really good at keeping it contained to Ireland so the whole war was a bit surreal at

times but seeing the devastation at first-hand was overwhelming.

Suddenly I saw a small acid cloud coming up behind us and I panicked. I've seen the damage the acid does to dragons so I hoped he had noticed it too or it would kill us. There was no way I could warn Kolrynn, we were flying so fast that even if I yelled he wouldn't hear me. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the cloud and I was fighting the scream that wanted to rise up inside me. We were down in the

valley, it was gaining on us and, if it caught us, there was nowhere for us to go, it would rain its acid down on us and we wouldn't be able to stop it.

I sagged in relief when I felt him turning and gaining height to head back toward it. His huge wings were beating at the air as he climbed, the sound reverberating off the valley walls while he fought to get us high enough not to be trapped. Once we were in the open air again he could turn, I felt his chest

expand and he breathed the most intense flame I've ever seen. It was almost too bright to look at but he angled it carefully and precisely so that first the acid dripping from the cloud and then the cloud itself vaporised. He still took great care not to fly anywhere near the area, being caught by only one of the tiny acid droplets had caused dragons to end up in the infirmary before now.

After one last check, Kolrynn turned calmly back to our

original course and I was left breathless and in awe of his skill. I know it was born of long practice, but it was still impressive to see.

That had only been one small cloud, so it was no wonder my poor dragons came back scorched and maddened with pain when they had been fighting hundreds of them. While they concentrated on burning one, it would leave them open to attack by the others and I was filled with

admiration for their
determination and dedication.
But I think Kolrynn is trying to
tell me it's going to be alright,
protecting us is what they do.

His powerful wings were beating
hard again, we'd passed over the
mountains and he was coming
to land in the foothills on the
other side.

It was eerily silent when his
wings stopped beating. I
couldn't believe how softly he'd
landed, he simply hovered for a

moment before touching down then his massive legs absorbed all the shock. If it weren't for the fact he was folding his wings I wouldn't have realised he'd touched down at all.

I sighed, it had been a beautiful flight but the idyll was over and I could only hope that he hadn't found out about me.

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He was holding out his front leg, a clear signal that he wanted me to get down but there was

something so comforting about being close to him. I'd never had the chance to touch him before and I doubt I would ever get the chance again but, if I was being honest with myself, I was going to miss the feeling when it had gone.

I may as well have some fun while I can. I unhooked my leg from his neck and literally slid all the way down his foreleg. I swear he was laughing at me but to be honest I was having too much fun to care. I slid off his

claw and for once I landed gracefully on my feet. When I turned back to him I couldn't help myself I was as giddy as a child. Even though a part of me remembered that we were in danger, I just knew that at that moment I wanted to stay as close to him as I could and my face was hurting because I was smiling so much.

He was so big that I could only see one eye, but it was suddenly focussed on me and he was clearly considering something.

That brought me up sharply and I became my usual serious self wondering what he was thinking.

I couldn't ask him about it while he was in that form but he changed back and it seemed as if it was in response to my thought.

I forced my mouth to close. I'd never seen him naked before, every muscle was sharply defined and there seemed to be far more of them than usual. Ok

that's not possible, but his broad shoulders and strong pecs seemed more prominent than I've seen even on the dragons recuperating in the infirmary. I couldn't stop myself, my eyes were drawn downwards to his six pack and then I tried to pretend to myself it was only his strongly muscled legs that I was looking at.

My subconscious knew that I was lying and the butterflies in my stomach easily proved me wrong but I dragged my eyes

back to Kolrynn's face trying to ignore my dry mouth and inability to breathe.

His knowing smile made the colour surge in my cheeks, "You like what you see?"

"You wish!" It wasn't my best comeback but I was flustered, "I think you might have to manage without 'partying' until we get back."

"You can always change your mind." He snapped back, then he paused looking at me

seriously, “There’s something different about you. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were talking to me up there.”

I shook my head unwilling to go there because it was far too close to my dreams.

He wasn’t giving up on it though, “Seriously,” he said frowning at me as he pulled on his clothes, “I didn’t see that acid cloud.”

I was shocked, “You didn’t?”

“Nope,” he said picking up his pack and starting to walk away.

I grabbed mine and struggled to catch up, “So why did you turn around then?”

He looked over at me appraisingly “Because I could have sworn you warned me about it!”

I was so stunned that I couldn't say anything and my mind was reeling. I couldn't believe what he'd said; if I believed him it might just mean that my dreams

were real after all and I wasn't sure how to deal with that. So, I just looked down focussing on the path ahead, or on his arse, depending on whether or not it was my subconscious doing the looking.

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We walked in silence but I could tell that he was still thinking about whether he'd imagined it or whether I was hiding something. But he was striding ahead and I was stumbling and

trotting trying to keep up so I couldn't even spare a thought to find a way to keep him from discovering my secret.

I hoped it was simply a coincidence but he turned back just when I was thinking about how horrible he was and how he could at least look like he cared that I was being bent double under the weight of my pack when the super strong good looking dragon was just going for an afternoon stroll.

It didn't help that when he turned I did a particularly ungainly stumble and nearly ended up flat on my face. I could feel the laughter bubbling up inside him but at least he didn't let it show. "Let me have a look at that pack."

He took us into the lee of a hedge and began unpacking everything I'd brought. He transferred some of the heavier items like the healing gel and the splints into his own pack. The tent he threw away

completely.

“Hay, what am I going to sleep in if it rains?” I asked indignantly.

He laughed and again it unlocked something inside me. It sounds silly but when he does that, it’s as if my heart is open to the skies. He looked at me speculatively but all he said was “Wings remember, you’ll be toasty warm and dry.”

I grinned, “Who’d have thought you had so many uses.”

He finished packing my backpack, “Oh I have so many more uses than that.” he flashed back.

I tried not to notice his seductive smile, but he was looking at me so closely that I don't think he missed my instinctive reaction, so “Oh yea name one!” was all I managed to come back with.

I stood up, it was much better now that my pack was balanced, so I was about to move off when

he leaned forward and breathed, “You know at least one of my uses.”

“Yes you can light the camp fire!” I shot back trying to ignore the sudden sharp stab of desire.

He grinned at me, but he took my hand in his and started to walk. I could barely concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, all I could think about was his hand in mine.

“So does my skin feel like my scales?”

I dropped his hand as though I'd been scalded, "What?"

"I've been thinking over that flight." he said, watching me while he walked, "Wasn't that what you were thinking?"

I didn't know how to reply so I settled for a very unconvincing, "I don't know what you mean."

"Somehow I think you do." He deliberately walked up to me and sniffed my neck, "Hmmm you are a very intriguing woman Alexa Samuels. I know you

desire me.” I was about to protest, but he shushed me, “I have a very acute sense of smell and I’ve been smelling it for months now.” I couldn’t help my blush of mortification or my memory flashing back to him naked in front of me.

His wicked grin told me that he had probably listened in on that thought. There was no way I was on an even playing field in this conversation, but I didn’t want to open my thoughts up enough to listen to his or he would find

out the truth and I didn't want to be taken away to goodness knows where.

He was still walking around me appraisingly, even though I was marching as fast as I could hoping to put him off. "I know how much you desire me and yet you still resist," he mused, "No human woman has managed that for a very long time."

"Maybe you're getting old?" I said in an attempt to discourage

him.

He laughed, “I could try harder, but I’m more interested to know why you want to resist.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I said, “Dragons take women, use them once and then spit them out and move on to the next one. No matter how good you are in bed that’s not what I want.”

We crossed a deserted road, the acid burns on the tarmac making the whole conversation even more surreal. He fell silent

and I had the feeling that I'd touched a raw nerve. We walked on and he was slouching, head down, hands in his pockets, lost in his thoughts and not responding to anything.

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His silence gave me the chance to observe the extent of the destruction for myself. There were patches of acid burns and scars from dragon fire everywhere. Evacuating the country had indeed been the

most sensible option even though a lot of the people were still in refugee camps all over Europe. There was a village on our left and I could see where the acid had burned through several roofs and the church tower was in ruins. I shuddered. If it weren't for the dragons the whole world could look like this.

The Commander led the way onto the main road, it was quicker than walking through the rocky, grassy hills, but the ruined buildings all around us

reminded me what was at stake if the dragons failed.

Walking was easier on the road but we still had to slow down when we came to the holes the acid had made or the piles of rubble from damaged buildings.

The Commander hadn't said anything more and it had been nearly an hour. He would hold out his hand to help me around the more tricky obstacles but that was all.

I don't know if it was his

sadness or the devastation, but I was feeling as though there was a weight on my shoulders that wouldn't lift. I couldn't help myself, I reached out to touch his shoulder, "Commander Kolrynn, are you ok? I didn't mean to upset you..." I petered out unsure what to say to make it better.

He shook himself, "No it's ok, but stop with the 'Commander' can you at least use my name?"

"Ok, Kolrynn."

He smiled ruefully, “No my name is just Kol, rynn is just another way of saying Commander.”

“Oh so that’s why Thann calls you Kol?”

“Yea, he’s about the only one that does any more.”

“I get the impression you didn’t want to be the Commander.”

“No I didn’t, Tekrynn was my friend and a good Commander, I never expected to have to take

over.”

Kol was looking at me with a question in his eyes, I think he knew I'd been outside the office while he was talking so I decided to be honest and admit it, “I heard you talking this afternoon before I knocked, Thann said something about deposing him?”

“Yea...”

Kol broke off, his attention suddenly focussed on the sky. I followed his gaze and there was

a dark spot in the clouds. He pushed me to the side of the road and shoved me under a bush. Then he took his pack off quickly and started to undress. The acid cloud was clearly heading toward us, but Kol still hadn't changed form.

I looked at him wondering why and he answered my unspoken question, "If there is only one I can get rid of it but if there are too many and I try to fight some will get away. They will send reinforcements and I don't want

to end up in a big fight or run into a shadow dragon.”

He was still scanning the sky but that was the only acid cloud I could see.

“Stay hidden! Do not get close, they’re attracted to body heat,” he cautioned as he changed and launched himself into the air in one fluid movement.

Feeling the downdraught from his wings was a lot different like this, he was so powerful that the rushing air knocked me over

and I couldn't see for the dust and dirt that was kicked up. When the dust cleared, I could see that he was working hard, fighting to climb high enough, quickly enough to stop the cloud from getting above him to rain acid down.

I was holding my breath hoping he could get there in time. He still wasn't high enough but his fire lanced out vaporising the acid heading toward him. He circled away and the cloud followed, a trail of acid hitting

the ground in its wake. I could hear the vegetation sizzle and acrid smoke rose into the sky. I cowered under the bush hoping the acid wouldn't come this way because the bush wouldn't be able to protect me but it was the only cover I had.

Kol swept back, higher this time, and he came at the cloud from above. His flying was spectacular to watch and he looked so beautiful with the sun glinting off his scales. But beautiful though it was, it was a

deadly struggle and I just wanted him safe.

He was breathing his hot fire and vaporising the cloud when I saw something else in the sky heading toward him from behind; it looked like one of the acid clouds but it was in the shape of a dragon. I tried to warn Kol as I had earlier. This time I didn't care if he found out about me. I could feel how dangerous it was and he had to stay safe!

He wasn't turning and he obviously hadn't seen the shadow dragon so I tried harder, yelling in my mind with all my might.

He still hadn't turned but his wings beat hard so that he could gain speed and then he folded them diving toward the ground before snapping them open at the last minute and climbing high, taking the creature by surprise. He circled around behind it and swooped toward it.

All I could do was watch with my mouth open and my breath held. I'd never seen anything like this before. The creature was black, but not like Kol, it seemed to be made of shadow and smoke. This could only be the shadow dragon that Thann had talked about. I could almost see the sky through it in places and when Kol came down from above and ripped at it with his claws it seemed to drift apart like smoke on the wind. But the smoke didn't drift away it coalesced back together and its

teeth and claws reached out to Kol.

Kol's claws were ripping chunks out of it and at the same time he was flaming the drifting pieces. Over and over they rolled in the air fighting for supremacy, but Kol was winning. He kept clawing at it until the thing had been reduced to half its former size and then Kol let go of it only to flame the remainder into dust on the wind.

* * * *

When the fight was over, he did one last sweep of the area and came down to land next to me. Even before he landed I could tell he was in pain from where the dragon had caught him so I scrabbled in his pack for the healing gel. I was waiting for him by the time he came in to land, but this time I remembered to brace myself so that the downdraft didn't send me flying again.

He was smiling when he landed and he folded his wings looking

at me curiously. I waited for him to unfurl his wing but he didn't move he just kept looking at me with the same curious gaze.

“Kol, I need to see that injury!”

I wasn't going to leave him like that, even a small amount of acid can eat into a wing membrane so although he was being big and brave, I'd rather be sure he was ok. So I asked again, “Kol please, I need to be sure you're ok.”

He still didn't move and I was

getting impatient so I stamped my foot, before demanding, “Kol, your wing. Now!”

He was still acting like he was waiting for something but I didn't know what. I was too busy thinking that I needed to see that bit on the leading edge of his wing near the claw. The bit which the shadow dragon had bitten. I could see in my mind's eye the part I needed to see and as soon as I had pictured it, he opened his wing just enough so that it was

directly in front of me.

I know I said I didn't care if I was found out, but I did! All of a sudden I was terrified and I couldn't breathe. I had no idea what would happen to me when we got back to base, they would probably take me away to wherever they had taken the others but as I'd never managed to find out where that was, the thought still scared the heck out of me.

I was terrified and I wanted to

run, but there was nowhere to run to so, for now, I concentrated on being professional and applying the gel to his wound. It really was a small wound, only about the size of an egg, but I could tell it had hurt by the way he relaxed when I rubbed the gel into the wing membrane.

I jumped backward. Kol was making a sound I've never heard before, a low deep rumble like a cat's purr. As soon as my hands left his wing the purr stopped so

I tentatively went to touch him again.

He began to purr immediately I touched him. It was so beautiful that I didn't want it to stop so I kept massaging as much of him as I could reach. His purr grew louder and I wished I could climb on his wing to get as much of me in contact with him as I could. A wing is too fragile to risk standing on so I tried to hide my longing but he scooped his wing around me and pulled me against his side.

His whole body was rumbling with the force of his purring and I just wanted to plaster myself against him and feel the vibrations. I knew there was no sense in hiding it any more so I gave into the sensations and pressed myself as close to his body as I could.

It was the most amazing feeling, the vibrations filled me from my head to my feet and all I wanted was to be one with them. I don't know why but I was trying to reply. Every cell of my body

wanted to purr back to him but all that came out was a sort of breathy “hurrrrrrrr”

As soon as he heard it his head snaked around and pushed me against him and I felt the most complex emotions I have ever felt. I couldn't even separate them all, I know there was ‘wow!’, there was ‘at *last!*’, there was ‘*is it truly me?*’, there was ‘*I will protect you with my life!*’, and above all there was a bone deep sense of happiness.

I think we only stayed like that for a few seconds, but it felt like everything in my life changed in that one moment.

* * * *

He hadn't seemed to move but he changed back and he was holding me in his suddenly human arms. His mouth was on mine and he was kissing me with a hard and fiery passion. No wonder they say dragon sex is the best, he was literally taking my breath away but I was

mesmerised by his skin, it really did feel satiny like his scales.

I was getting lost in the sensations, I wanted to feel him touch me and I wanted to feel him inside me, then I felt his arousal hard and heavy pressing between us and it snapped me back to reality.

I jumped backwards gasping for breath.

He was coming toward me again and I wanted to give in, I really did, it was as if every cell in my

body was screaming for him, but I daren't. He must have found out that I could communicate with him, but that didn't change anything and I still don't know whether I will get sent away as soon as we're back at base.

I could feel his confusion, so I tried to put my thoughts into words, "Nothing's changed Kol, dragons have sex and then leave the humans."

"No, everything's changed. You aren't like the other humans."

he said desperately.

All of a sudden I was exhausted, the events of the day catching up with me with a vengeance, “There’s so much I don’t understand,” I paused, trying to be practical, I was pushing him away and it might be for good, but I don’t think I could survive loving him and having him leave. So I took refuge in professionalism. “but shouldn’t we be finding somewhere to camp for the night?”

He sighed, looking at me as though his heart was breaking, but he nodded, “You’re right and I should have been the one telling you that.” He pulled his clothes on as fast as he could. “We need to talk, but let’s find a camp site first.”

He took my hand and led me on down the road. I tried to pull away but this time he wouldn’t let me. I tried a little harder but he still wouldn’t let me pull away. “Alexa, I know you don’t understand and I know there are

things you've not been telling me, but can you believe me when I say that I need to keep touching you?"

Oh I could believe him alright, I'd felt as though I'd been dying when I pulled away from him. My whole body was screaming for me to touch as much of him as possible but holding his hand eased the feelings enough that I could breathe and think again. It wasn't helping me keep my distance, but he was right, I had to keep hold of his hand.

I squeezed his hand and I could see his body relax, “I don’t understand any of this Kol, but let’s find somewhere to stop and we’ll talk, OK?”

I hadn’t realised he’d been holding his breath until after he relaxed, “We do need to get away from here in case anyone saw me, but it’s been a long day so we shouldn’t go too far.”

“That suits me, I’m suddenly knackered.”

He grinned, “I don’t suppose

you get to do much walking, lots of climbing but not much walking.”

I grinned back, he was even easier to talk to now that there wasn't any point in trying to hide anything, “We do a fair bit of jumping about too.”

“What about foot stamping? Or is that something you reserve for me?”

I laughed all constraint forgotten, “Oh just you, none of the others are as stubborn.”

He looked slightly embarrassed, “I just wanted you to ask me properly.”

“Oh!” I said hanging my head when I realised what he’d meant.

He wasn’t upset or anything, but he was fitting pieces together in his mind, “So that explains how you managed to calm Laeg. He’d never have been able to argue with you in one of your moods.” He said smiling.

“I don’t have moods!”

“You do so have moods. Every time I flirt with you.”

“Oh well that’s different!” I grinned at him.

He grinned back, but then he suddenly pulled me behind him and he began growling loudly, I didn’t know dragons could growl like that when they were in human form, but he was radiating complete and utter protectiveness – of me!

I couldn’t tell what danger he had sensed, but he’d obviously

sensed something, so I let him take charge. He made sure I was safely behind him and he watched the hedge intently following something moving, ready to pounce on it in my defence.

I burst out laughing when a cat leaped out chasing some kind of rodent. He had the grace to look embarrassed, but it didn't stop him standing between me and the cat until he was sure it had left and he was still on the alert even after the cat had gone.

We were starting to come out of the foothills and into what was once lush farmland. Acid burns were scarring the landscape but I could see how the fields would once have been a luxurious deep green, it's no wonder Ireland was known for its 50 shades. But I didn't have time to marvel at the ravaged beauty, because I was being drawn onwards by Kol's hand in mine.

* * * *

We kept on walking until we

found a small stone outbuilding at the foot of the hills and Kol guided me inside. It had obviously been used for animals in the past and although it was old and falling down there were two walls and a good portion of the roof left so it would still hide us from the air. I went in gratefully and I was so exhausted that I could only collapse on the floor, too tired to move.

Kol didn't say anything he just sat next to me, making sure a

part of him was always touching me. I would have pulled away, but I couldn't bear to stop touching him either.

He rummaged around in his pack pulling out supplies; there was an awful lot of meat so I watched with detached professional interest while he prepared the meal. Dragons need a lot more protein than we do but they still need a balanced diet so I was relieved when he pulled out some carbohydrates and vegetables as well.

He'd obviously packed better than me, I'd just stuffed ration bars into my pack and I'd only remembered those because Angela had insisted. He put everything into a metal cup, added water and then he breathed on it.

“I didn't know you could breathe fire in that form.”

“We can't make it anything like as hot as usual so we don't normally bother, but you must have noticed Thann smoking

when he left my office.”

“Yea but I thought that was all you could do.”

He handed me my stew and started to make one with more meat for himself, “We’re already so different that we don’t want to frighten the humans any more than we have to, so we don’t advertise everything we can do.” he said with one of those winks that set my heart aflutter.

I tasted the stew, “Wow, it’s

delicious, maybe you really do have your uses.”

He grinned, “I would make the obvious comment,” he said with a flash of the smile that always made my stomach flutter, “but although I know you feel it too you won’t act on it and, right now, I’m more interested in finding out why.”

“Is it so difficult to believe that someone can resist you?” I asked sparring for time.

He’d already finished his stew

and I was still waiting for mine to cool. His arm slid around me and I almost relaxed into his embrace before I could stop myself.

“I know there is something you’re not telling me,” he said, “I wish there was a way I could convince you to trust me enough to tell me what it is. But know this, I will protect you with my life and I’m not going to go away.” He added reflectively, “I don’t think I could even if I wanted to.”

I could feel the sadness radiating off him and I wanted to open up to tell him everything but my mother had spent my whole life telling me how dangerous it was to admit my secret to anyone. She had been even more adamant since the dragons had returned. She kept checking up on me, insisting I should be more careful than usual especially with anyone who had anything to do with the dragons and Kol wasn't only the man I'd been secretly in love with for the last

year, he was their Commander. But I had already admitted enough to get sent away so I decided it was safe enough to ask him, “Kol, can you tell me what will happen when we get back, where will I be sent away to?”

“What? Who’s going to be sending you away?” I felt complete and utter bafflement coming from him, “I’ve been trying to tell you that I don’t think I can live without you. If anyone is going to be sending

you anywhere they'll have to go through me first!"

It was my turn to be baffled, he turned me to face him and I could see the sincerity in his eyes when he said, "I know there is something worrying you, but I can't help if you won't tell me."

I was still struggling with the idea of telling anyone, it went against everything I had been conditioned to do. I used to love talking about my dragon

dreams, but ever since my mother heard me telling my friends at school, she'd been impressing on me how dangerous it was to admit it.

I don't know how much of my internal monologue he picked up on but he gave me space to process everything. He was right we'd come too far so I decided to admit the truth. "Kol, when you first arrived you took everyone with an affinity for dragons. They were never heard from again and no one knows where

they went.” I looked him in the eyes, I needed to know the truth. “Are you going to do the same to me?”

I wasn't expecting him to burst out laughing.

My obvious puzzlement was what stopped him, “Oh Alex, I'm sorry, but I think I know what you mean and you're working with most of them.”

“What?”

“Alex, I organised it all! When

we came out of hibernation we didn't have any infrastructure set up so we asked for volunteers. We picked the ones that seemed to have an affinity for us and weren't scared when we transformed. They're all on the base, you can ask them when we get back. I think Angela was one of them and Kevin was too, you know full well where they are and what happened to them.”

“I don't understand. That's not what my mother said and I have

no idea why she'd lie." I was reeling, everything my mother had said for my whole life seemed to be wrong and I didn't know what to do.

"I don't know either, but please talk to me, tell me the truth so I can help. I know you can speak to me when I'm in dragon form so I'm sure there's something else you're not telling me."

I was still in shock. I'd believed my mother! She'd sworn it was the truth, she worked for the

police and said she'd had to help bring people in to be tested and she only drove a few of them back again. She swore they were taken against their will so I didn't know what to believe any more.

Kol could see I was struggling so he offered an olive branch "Look if I tell you about my secrets will you tell me about you?"

I nodded, he knew too much anyway and I could sense he was telling the truth. I had to

accept that my mother lied, I just don't know why.

“Let's get settled in for the night, it's a long story and I'll need to start from the beginning.”

I nodded and got up to go outside. I gasped in shock, it physically hurt to leave him and I turned back to realise that he was also in pain. He nodded in answer to my silent question, but something in the way he was stoically suffering spoke to

me, “Kol. I do trust you.” I blurted.

He leaped up and took me in his arms, his mouth swooped on mine and I felt him claim me with the intensity of his kiss. It was as though I’d come home, but my body wanted more, it wanted him and now that I’d tasted his kisses I didn’t think I could resist.

He was the one who pulled away though, “Come back quickly and I’ll set everything up here.”

I went to the nearest bush as quickly as I could, it was dark and getting very cold out there. When I got back Kol had already laid out the sleeping bag, I dived in but the bag was freezing and I couldn't stop myself shivering. Before I had a chance to think, Kol was beside me and, even in human form, his internal fires were generating enough heat to keep me warm.

He slid his arm under my head, but he'd taken his shirt off and I stiffened. I knew I trusted him, I

knew I wanted him, but I still wasn't prepared to be a one night stand.

“Kol!”

“It's OK!” He soothed, “I want to keep you warm but I also have to be ready to change. I know we still need to talk.”

I grumbled, “Well you do make a good hot water bottle.”

He laughed letting his internal fires rise a little higher, I was so cold that all I could do was press

myself against him and revel in the warmth. He urged me to turn over and reluctantly I complied, it would be easier to talk if I could see his face. He settled me against him so I could use his shoulder as a pillow and he began.

“I want you to know why you’re different, why I won’t love you and leave you but this is something that no human in all the long years of our curse has been told.”

“I’ll keep it a secret. I promise.”

* * * *

He settled back so that he could watch the sky in case we were attacked and I lay stiffly against him. He began speaking, his deep voice rumbling in his chest, “It began thousands of years ago, about the time humans first started to build their civilisations. That was when Shyamal took the dragon throne. He began his reign as one of our most powerful

leaders and an adept scientist. Like his father before him he was beloved of our people, but he fell in love with a dragoness called Deprani. However, Deprani chose his brother Kenmal.

“Shyamal repeatedly tried to persuade her to leave Kenmal but a true mating isn’t something you can put aside. Shyamal knew this but he became obsessed with her. It got to the point where Deprani didn’t dare to leave her rooms in

the palace because he would pursue her wherever she went. Kenmal and Deprani were eventually forced to go into hiding.

“They hid for many years but eventually Shyamal summoned Kenmal back to court. If he refused the King’s summons he could be declared an outlaw and he wouldn’t be able to protect Deprani so he had little choice. He had to go but Shyamal had people watching the skies and he found their hiding place.”

Kol's eyes were dreamy and unfocussed, as he relived the story. "Shyamal kidnapped Deprani and took her away, but it lost him the throne. Everyone sided with Kenmal because a mating is sacred amongst us. A mated dragon can never take another mate and if their mate dies they can sicken and die themselves. All dragons know this."

He shook his head as though he still couldn't believe it, "Shyamal must have already

been unhinged or he would have realised that he was condemning Deprani to death. We hunted all over the world for them but Shyamal eluded us for six long months and by the time we caught up with him at his fortress in the Pyrenees Deprani was dying.”

“You were there weren’t you?” I breathed, I’d known he was old but it was difficult to believe he was that old.

He nodded “We all were, it is

part of our curse.” He took a deep breath and continued his story, “By the time we found him, Shyamal had created a fortress high in the mountains, the only way to approach it was to fly, but that would make us an easy target for his fire. We were debating what to do but Shyamal had seen us coming and he brought Deprani out to the landing area so that he could gloat about his prize. He didn’t expect that Deprani would see that Kenmal was with us or that it would give her renewed

strength. She fought back against Shyamal, we could see her tussling with him but we couldn't get there fast enough to help. She managed to injure Shyamal and we could feel his anger from down in the valley.

“He really was completely unhinged. After all of that, he lashed out at her and killed her with one blow.” Kol said sadly, “Kenmal was barely holding it together as it was and he went mad with grief. He changed and launched himself at Shyamal

heedless of the consequences. Shyamal reacted just as quickly and burned him with his fire. We were still too far away to help and his position was too well defended for us to take him before he could destroy us. He came to the edge of his platform and dared us to rejoice at Kenmal's downfall. He taunted us and uttered the prophecy which is now our curse.”

I could feel how sad the story was making Kol so I pressed myself against his side wanting

to offer what comfort I could. He relaxed slightly, taking comfort in the contact and he lightly stroked my back, “Shyamal said that if he couldn’t have the woman he loved then none of us could. He said he had released a plague which would kill every female dragon in existence. He swore he would wipe all dragons from the face of the earth so that when the genes he had inserted into the human population came to fruition and a human female was born who was capable of turning into a

dragon he would be the only one for her to mate with and that would mean no one could ever steal her from him. Then he retreated through his portal where he created the acid clouds and the shadow dragons to wipe the rest of us out.”

Kol answered my unspoken question, “No. We don’t think he’s sane enough to care about the damage he’s doing or that he may accidentally wipe out the humans with the dragon genes.”

Kol continued, “We couldn’t reach him in the portal universe. Zerrynn tried but he was ripped to pieces, so we were forced to go back to our homes. That’s when we discovered he was right, he had indeed killed all our females. By the time I got back my sisters had already died and my mother barely managed to hang on until Father came home. It was the same everywhere, mothers sisters daughters, they were all killed, some died quickly others lingered on for a few weeks and

although the mated males tried to help us they all died too.” He finished quickly not wanting to dwell on that part.

I could feel how devastated he was even after all this time and involuntarily I made a soft “hurrrr”

His arms came around me and he buried his face in my neck, I have never seen him so vulnerable. I didn't even know that he could be vulnerable, but he was letting himself

remember how he had lost his whole family so I held him as hard as I could and for the first time I let my heart admit that I loved him.

I know he felt it and took comfort in it because he looked up. His eyes were glistening but he carried on, “We knew that Shyamal wouldn’t stay in his portal for ever so those of us that were left developed the hibernation technology so that we could be here to stop him devastating the whole world in

his hunt for someone to love.”

He smiled at me, “That’s why we party so much, we need to take the opportunity to try and find the one woman who can bring Shyamal out from his portal so we can end this. The one woman who can end our long lonely years of exile from the world. We look for people who have an affinity with dragons because they can help us fight, but we’re also monitoring the spread of that affinity. It has been getting more widespread with each

passing cycle so we have been hopeful that soon we would find her.

“You wanted to know why we love women and leave them, that’s why. When this started some of us had relationships with human women but it’s soul destroying to know that however much you care about someone, you will outlive them. If the cycle is a long one you may see them grow old and die, but if the cycle is a short one you may only have a few years

to enjoy their company. We became jaded, fed up of having our hearts broken, so we try not to get attached any more.

“Tekrynn swore that in the last cycle he had finally managed to impregnate a human woman and the knowledge that he had to go back into hibernation and leave her was more than he could bear.” Kol paused, “At least that’s what he said... when we checked there was no evidence of her at all. We couldn’t even find a woman

matching her description let alone a pregnant one. After that he was too heartbroken to go on.”

“That’s why you had to depose him isn’t it?”

Kol nodded, “It was near the end of the last cycle, so this is my first full cycle in charge. He’s still in hibernation, it doesn’t seem fair to make him suffer any more.”

He ran his thumb over my jaw, “But this cycle was different.

Ever since I've awoken, I've felt as though there was another dragon here, I've dreamed about her and I'm always looking for her. I swear that sometimes I see her flying near me, but whenever I look closely she's a figment of my imagination.

“Then there is you. You, of all the humans I've seen, you are the one that has made me think things could be different. From the first time I saw you, when you were facing down Yato, I wanted to be with you. You were

awakening feelings I thought had died long ago.”

He kissed me softly and I held him as tightly as I could, he was baring his soul to me and winning my trust, “Today you are making me believe that the white dragon of my dreams could be real. I know you can speak as a dragon, I know you feel for me, my body recognises you and wants to claim you as my life mate. That sound you heard was my mating purr. I never thought in all my days

that I would ever hear the sound again, never mind be lucky enough to hear you purr back to me.”

He held my head in both his hands, “I love you Alex.”

* * * *

I couldn't help it, his story had broken the walls around my heart, he had seen through to my deepest secrets and he still wanted me, he needed me and he had told me this whole tale to prove that he wasn't going to

use me and leave me.

I reached forward and kissed him as deeply and passionately as I knew how. I felt his hands slide around me and his groan went straight to my core, I wanted to give into him right now, but I needed to explain first.

“Oh Kol,” I breathed, “You knew all along.” I burrowed as close as I could get to him and for the first time since he had started talking I felt him smile.

“All my life I’ve dreamed I was a white dragon flying through the sky. I used to tell my friends about it and they thought I was making up fun stories but when I was at my seventh birthday party my mother heard me telling them about my dragon. As soon as they left she took me to my room and told me that I must never speak of dragons ever again. She made us move the following day. We went to the other end of the country. I had to go to a new school, get new friends and everything. It

was okay for the first couple of years then she heard me talking about dragons again.”

I sighed relaxing into his soft caresses, “I wasn’t even talking about me, it was a book everyone in school was reading but we moved the following week anyway. This time she told me that the women in my family could have dreams like mine and although we would grow out of it we had to keep it a secret and keep moving around so that the people who were hunting for

us wouldn't find us.

“When you arrived she impressed on me that the only thing more dangerous than the humans taking me away would be the dragons taking me. My great-grandmother had sworn her father was a dragon and she was eventually sent to an insane asylum because she kept insisting it was real. I always thought there was something more to that story, but my mother would never talk about it.

“I was still having the dreams, but I kept really quiet about them, I think she thought they were fading but they were actually getting more frequent. We were in London by then and although she didn't want to, she let me go to university. I was in my final year when the portal opened.”

I moaned softly, his caresses were intoxicating and I nearly forgot where I was in the story, “She wanted to take me away and run but I wanted to

graduate so I wouldn't go. That's when she told me that the dragons were looking for people like me and taking them away. She was one of the community police officers that rounded up the first batch so she swore that she knew what she was talking about."

I snuggled deeper against him, it was cathartic to finally admit to my white dragon and after what he'd said I believed with all my heart that he wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. "I

followed all the news stories about you all. I even skipped lectures to watch you in Paris. I knew it was you I'd seen in my dreams you see. I couldn't believe my luck when I graduated and I was offered the chance to come and work with you. My mother was still trying to get me to run but I lied to her and went to the interview anyway. I didn't dare tell the dragon who interviewed me about my dreams, because I thought my mother was right but I desperately wanted the

chance to see a real dragon up close and personal.”

I heard the thought that he wanted to show me a dragon up close and very personal. This time I didn't push him away, I just grinned and kissed him softly, he purred back at me but I needed to finish, “I loved the chance to be close to dragons and to help out, it wasn't even a struggle hiding everything until you saw me with Yato. That was the first time I'd realised that I could talk to dragons in real life,

at least enough to calm him, but it was developing more and more the longer I was around you all.” I hung my head embarrassed to say the next bit, “But to be honest I forgot all about it when you came up behind me. I was so distracted that it was all I could do to string a sentence together. Then you promoted me and I had to keep talking to you. You kept insisting on meetings and it was all I could do not to leap on you.”

“So I was right and you did want me.”

I had nothing to lose by admiring it now, “Oh you were so right, the only thing that was stopping me was that I didn’t think I could survive loving you and then having you leave. But if Thann hadn’t come back this afternoon...” I tailed off when he pressed against me, showing me clearly how much he wanted me too.

“Do you know why I asked you

for so many meetings?” He growled, “I couldn’t bear to go even a week without seeing you, I kept hoping that one day you’d admit you wanted me too. I dreamed of being with you and now I should be looking out for acid clouds but all I can think about is that I want to mate with you.”

* * * *

His mouth descended on mine and I stopped thinking about anything other than the way his

skin felt under my hands, the way his mouth was sending fiery currents through me and how empty I felt without him inside me.

I eventually broke the kiss but only so that I could whisper, “Your skin does feel like your scales...”

His answering groan took my breath away and I felt myself opening for him. I needed him so badly it hurt.

I didn't have to wait long, I

could feel him pressing against me and his hands were already sliding my clothes off. I wiggled to help him and soon I could feel his skin against mine, it was hot from where he'd been keeping me warm, but feeling his inner warmth against my bare skin lit an answering fire inside me.

I wasn't able to stop myself, I needed to feel as much of him as I could and my hands were running over every inch of him. He seemed to feel the same way,

and although his hands were impossibly warm when they slid over me, he seemed to be mirroring my every movement.

I pressed against him desperate for some relief for the fire that was growing inside me. He didn't press back, instead he opened his mind completely and I felt overwhelming emotions. It was as though he were showing me his soul, naked and desperate to be joined with mine he was offering himself as a gift. A gift which I was happy to

return in kind because I needed this as much as he did. It felt as if there was a void within me which only he could fill.

I needed him to fill me now, but gone was his famed dragon finesse, this was raw desperate need for the both of us. So I pressed against him loving the feel of him hot and hard between us. His answering moan made me melt and he thrust back groaning, needy and desperate.

When he slid inside me I cried out, he wasn't just filling me physically, this connection reached further, it woke the slumbering white dragon and opened a connection to my soul. Each hard deep thrust seemed to join us more closely and, when I cried out, my white dragon roared her approval. When Kol roared his own release, his seed seemed to forge a permanent connection between us.

I've never felt anything like it

and it frightened me a little, it was so intense. I could feel his thoughts much more easily now, I could feel his wonder, love and devotion and I had to hope that he could feel mine too.

I could never bear to leave him now.

“Good, because I couldn’t bear to leave you either.” He replied kissing me softly.

I was too overwhelmed by the intensity of the bond we’d forged to be able to process

everything, but it felt so right, so perfect. Kol too was quiet, deeply content, but he rolled over so that he could scan the sky again and so that I could use his shoulder for a pillow.

He pressed me against his side and I knew he was enjoying feeling me next to him and that he never wanted the feeling to stop and I was glad because I didn't want it to stop either.

It had been a long day and I couldn't stay awake for long but

the last thing I remember before sleep took me was feeling how much he loved me and realising I felt the same way.

* * * *

I dreamed of a huge black dragon, bigger even than Kol but he looked ill, some of the scales on his left side were pale grey, lifeless and rotting. He saw me and he lunged toward me but there was something about him that revolted me. I couldn't bear the thought of him touching me

so I screamed and ran but he took to the skies and pursued me.

“Dragon you are mine!”

“I will never be yours!”

“You were made for me. It is your destiny!”

“Never!” I yelled.

I woke up screaming but Kol wasn't there. I had expected to wake up in his arms but I was alone in the sleeping bag. I

thrashed around, panicking that he had left me.

Before the panic took me over completely I realised I was sleeping next to a very warm, very black wall of scales and his wing was covering me preventing the gently pattering rain from touching me – just as he'd promised he would.

I desperately hugged as much of him as I could reach, needing his touch to ease the terror of the dream. He must have sensed

it, because in seconds he had changed and, before I could think, he had picked me up sleeping bag and all and carried me under the remaining part of the roof.

“What happened?”

I held him as tightly as I could and forced myself to calm under the influence of his gently stroking hands. As soon as I could concentrate I formed a picture of the dragon I'd seen in my dream and showed it to Kol.

“Is that Shyamal?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“He’s what I dreamed about, he said he was coming for me.”

“Shhh Alex, I won’t let him take you.”

Kol held me closely to him his soft kisses working their magic on me, but although I could feel his arousal hard between us he said, “Much as I want to stay here with you and show you exactly how many uses I have, I

think we need to grab a quick breakfast and get moving.”

“He’s coming for me isn’t he?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “but I’m not going to let him take you.”

Kol handed me a ration bar so we could eat quickly and we were dressed and on our way within half an hour of my waking.

* * * *

The terrain was easier now that we were walking along gently rolling green farmland and I was half expecting normal country life but the acid scars and dragon burns gave away the true devastation.

It had stopped raining, though I still ended up getting soaked to the skin, there were two shadow dragons on the prowl and Kol kept pushing me to the ground or under bushes so they wouldn't be able to see us. After an hour of this I was soaked,

cold and downright miserable.

I couldn't even distract myself from how miserable I felt. I kept thinking about loving the beautiful dragon holding my hand, but thoughts of the scabrous rotting dragon who wanted to come between us kept intruding. Kol must have sensed my thoughts but he just slid his arm around me holding me close as we walked.

We were passing through a farmyard and I could feel that

Kol was sensing something wrong. He was picking up on a smell that shouldn't be there so he wanted us to pass through as quickly as we could. We were sneaking around the corner of a barn when he pushed me to one side and spun quickly. Before I'd realised what had happened he was growling steadily and he'd pinned an old man to the side of the barn using the man's own shotgun to hold him there.

“Now that's a grand way to greet someone in his own place.” the

thick Irish accent proclaimed him as a local and his work clothes said he was probably a farmer, but even so Kol was suspicious.

“Why are you here when everyone was evacuated?” Kol growled.

“Well ’tis my own farm and I don’t care what those flying things want. It’s my land and I’m going to be staying here.”

“They will kill you old man.”

“Well that’s the truth isn’t it. I’m an old man and I’m going to die sooner or later. But would you mind letting me go ’cos I don’t fancy doin’ it just yet!”

Kol stepped backwards, but he kept hold of the gun just in case.

“Now what might two bright young things like you be doing here?” he asked conversationally.

“Just passing through.” Kol replied non committally.

“Hmmm it wouldn’t have anything to do with that crash landing yesterday now would it? I was in my top field and I saw him drop in the long meadow. If it’s him you’ll be after, you’ll be going the wrong way for I have him in my barn here.”

Now it was Kol’s turn to say
“What?”

“To be sure I do, ’twas the only place big enough to keep him out of sight.”

“Then lead the way, I’ve come a

long way to find him.”

I could feel Kol seeking Asha out with his mind, but he couldn't feel anything and he was getting more and more cautious. I tried too but I could only feel something so faintly that I couldn't tell if it was Asha or not. It didn't take long for the man to reach the huge corrugated barn. He struggled briefly with the sliding door which was old and stiff, but the old man was obviously stronger than he looked because the door

eventually began to slide.

There was a large red lump in the middle of the empty barn. I tried to rush past Kol but he flung out an arm and stopped me.

“What have you done to him?” his voice was icy and menacing and it made me shiver even though the sun had come out.

“Ahh well,” he scratched his beard and looked at the floor, “I didn’t mean to do any harm like. He was thrashing around fit to

bust. So I thought that, like me cows it was safest to knock him out first. I only gave him a little bit, but he's been like this ever since. I had to get him out of sight so I dragged him up here behind me tractor.”

This time Kol let me in, I rushed over to him but Asha was barely breathing, anaesthetics don't work on dragons, they either have no effect or too much.

“What did you use, Ketamine?” I queried.

“Aye.”

Kol began growling but I ignored him, “Have you got the antidote?”

He nodded, “’tis in me house.”

He ambled off slowly with Kol following behind.

I knelt by Asha’s head stroking him softly trying to get through the drug induced haze, but I couldn’t get anywhere, dragons can’t metabolise ketamine and it just stays in their system until

they get the antidote.

Fortunately the old farmer had it, not many people do, but they were soon back with the syringe, Kol handed it to me and I stood up to administer it, I managed to get the needle between his scales and I injected the antidote before running to safety.

“So you run as well as climb” Kol said good humouredly.

“Yup, a quick sprint has saved many a healer.” I grinned back,

we were both relieved because we could feel Asha stirring. Within a few minutes he started to growl and thrash as he came around. By the time he was on his feet he was growling in earnest driven wild by hunger and pain. I pushed the old man out of the way when he released a fireball. To be fair to Asha he had to release it, lying on his side like that causes the gas to build up to explosive levels and at least he'd aimed for the door, but I don't think the farmer was expecting it.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” he cursed, “That only just missed me shed.”

“At least he didn’t aim for you” I grinned. Asha was on his feet so there was hope. Now we just had to get him calmed down so that we could treat him.

I walked forward to where Kol was trying to get through to the pain maddened dragon. He was projecting waves of calm and Asha seemed to be listening but then a fresh burst of pain would

start him growling and trampling at him. I'd got the green gel and the splints out by now so I joined Kol projecting calming thoughts. The thoughts coming from two directions at the same time when he could only see one dragon shocked Asha momentarily, but it was long enough for me to run up his back and start treating the acid burns with the green gel. Though his wing was still broken and dragging on the ground he calmed as soon as I had covered the acid spots.

I couldn't help giggling when he complained to Kol about the headache he had from the ketamine. But I slid down his leg thinking that Asha's scales didn't feel as satiny soft as his own.

Touching Asha didn't feel anything like touching Kol, although Asha was an impressive dragon he didn't make me want to keep touching him the way Kol did.

I broke off embarrassed because

the look on Kol's face said that I'd accidentally shared that thought too. I wasn't sure whether to be mortified that Asha was laughing at me or relieved that he was feeling well enough to laugh.

We still had his wing to deal with and I wasn't sure how we were going to do that because it was the longest heaviest bone, the one closest to his body that was broken. Back home it would take four healers to straighten the bone and one of them would

normally get injured in the process because resetting it was going to hurt Asha a lot.

“Can you do it?” I asked Kol.

“Can your claws straighten the break so I can put the splints on?”

“That’s a good idea.” He said starting to strip, “We’re going to have to do it outside though, there’s no room for both of us in here.”

I turned to the farmer, who was going purple in the face “Can

you not be keeping your clothes on?”

“Sorry, no” I said, stealing a look at Kol’s delicious body, “we’re going to need another dragon to set the broken bone. But that’s a problem because they wont both fit inside and Asha can’t get out.”

“Well I suppose you’ll have to be taking the side off.” He indicated the side he meant to Kol who looked at it appraisingly. He went outside and transformed

into his huge black dragon.

“Holy Mary Mother of God!”
The old man exclaimed “I
thought t’other one was a big
fella.”

It only took a few seconds, Asha
pushed the corrugated sheets
from the inside and Kol ripped
them down from the outside.
Asha turned sideways and Kol
moved toward him to straighten
the bone.

Asha’s bellow nearly brought
the rest of the barn down on our

heads. If he weren't used to taking orders from Kol he would have instinctively retaliated when Kol gripped his wing and pulled. As it was he nearly knocked the rest of the barn down with his wildly snaking head. But it was done and I ran quickly up Asha's leg so I could splint his wing before anything happened to move it.

The splints just clipped on, so it was over in a matter of moments and Asha was folding his wings neatly to his sides.

Now all we had to do was get him to change and we could head home.

For the first time since we'd reached the farm I had the time to look around, gone was the clear sky it looked like a huge thunderstorm was approaching. There was something about the clouds that didn't look normal and it didn't look like any thunderstorm I've ever seen before.

“Erm Kol,” I asked as I looked

more closely at it, “what’s that?”

He hadn’t changed back so he sent an urgent panicked explanation of a mass of acid clouds and shadow dragons.

Asha needed to change and he needed to do it now – but Kol was already ordering him to do so.

I turned to the old man, “Run now, run and hide in the safest place you can find. They’re coming for us.”

“Don’t you be worrying about me – I have me cellar.” he said taking off across the yard as fast as his legs would carry him.

* * * *

Asha and I climbed up onto Kol’s neck, Asha hadn’t had a chance to find clothes but I didn’t care that there was a naked man behind me, I only cared about the silky scales beneath me and the monstrous rotting dragon pursuing us.

I couldn’t even turn to Kol for

comfort because he was using all his strength to speed us away from the advancing shadow cloud. At the same time he was yelling with all his might to the other dragons, warning them of what was to come and organising his troops so they could defend the humans against the onrushing wave of grey.

Kol was flying as fast as he could but the wall of shadow and acid was gaining on us. Because he was carrying us he

couldn't even turn to fight so our only hope was outrunning the wall of devastation. I risked a glance back and it was complete and utter desolation, the acid clouds were so thick that everything on the ground was burned. No longer a patchwork of acid damage and normality, this was absolute destruction.

I hoped the old man really was safe in his cellar but there was nothing we could do about it. All we could do was hope that we

kept ahead of the advancing cloud until we could meet the dragons on the blockade who would put their lives on the line to cover our retreat. It was a sobering thought that these people had been helping to protect us from their insane former ruler, for thousands of years; loneliness and war were all they'd known but they never gave up.

Kol was using every ounce of his speed and strength to get us out of there but he was hampered by

his two passengers, so he couldn't do anything other than desperately try to outrun the advancing wall of acid. Kol was the biggest strongest dragon I'd ever seen but I didn't know if it was going to be enough. The wall of acid was gaining on us slowly but inexorably, if we didn't get help soon we weren't going to make it but Kol didn't falter, he used every last reserve of his strength to keep us safe. I could feel how tired he was and how his wings ached with the effort but on and on he flew.

At last we saw the blockade in the distance and Kol put on a final burst of speed. We slipped through; the dragons parted to let us past and then formed up again as soon as we had gone, ready to take on the wall of acid and shadow dragons.

At last Kol could relax and glide for a while, though we still needed to get Asha home as quickly as we could. I didn't dare talk to Kol, he was discussing strategy with Thann, debating whether the onslaught would

last long enough to need to rest the dragons and have them operate in shifts or whether to send as many as possible out in one go.

The first batch of reinforcements sped past us before we'd finished the sea crossing, barely acknowledging The Commander in their haste to reach the blockade.

When I caught sight of the coast it looked chaotic with dragons flying back from all over the

world to be ready for the final battle. The landing field was busy with dragons coming and going organising for the ultimate battle, some were in their scaled beast forms and some were in their naked human forms but the one thing that seemed to be missing was the healers. They should be easily visible on the landing field their pink scrubs were designed to stand out amongst the multicoloured dragons. Had no one thought to warn them what was coming?

Their planning seemed to be at an end so I broke in and asked Thann if anyone had prepared the healers. He didn't believe what he was hearing, so it was only when Kol repeated it that he broke out of his stupor and did as I asked.

* * * *

By the time we circled the base to land I could see a small knot of healers amongst the dragons. Kol spiralled down to land and we eased Asha from his back;

he'd been getting quieter as we flew and he seemed to be in shock, though I can't help thinking that it was partly the ketamine.

We were instantly surrounded by healers, pushing their way through the knot of dragons who had stopped to stare at the woman who could speak to them. Kevin and Angela were rushing to help Asha but I shoved them back, there were more urgent things to take care of.

“Kevin take Angela, get supplies organised and a rota set up, it’s all hands on deck this battle will be huge.”

“So it’s prepare for the worst then.”

“Yea – and then some.”

They sprinted back to the infirmary to prepare and the remaining healers took Asha away to transform. By the time I saw him again he was back in his dragon form but he was no longer a rich glowing red he was

more of an insipid pastel pink. It would take some time for him to heal but he would live. I turned my attention back to Kol and Thann, something had happened but I'd been so busy getting the healers ready that I'd missed it.

I was about to go and find my own scrubs so that I could work with the injured dragons that were going to arrive at any minute when Kol came slowly toward me. I stopped because I have never seen an expression

like the one he was wearing and, if I didn't know better, I'd say he was terrified.

“Shyamal has left the portal.” He said holding me close to him and seeming to gain strength from my presence.

“He's coming for me isn't he?” I asked, my knees suddenly weak, the thought of that monster wanting to be anywhere near me was truly revolting.

“Yes he is.” Kol kissed me hard and it sent electric currents

flowing through me even though I knew he was about to drop a bombshell. “He’s challenged me for the right to mate with you.”

I must have looked astounded because he continued, “It’s an archaic custom even for us, but to be honest we’ve been so busy fighting Shyamal that we haven’t paid much attention to the law books.”

“Well if we get through this, that’s the first thing that’s going

to have to change.”

He grinned, “No,” he said with a flash of his usual seductive smile, “the first thing that’s going to change is that I’m going to take you to a proper bed and make sure you are properly mated – to me.”

I kissed him hard, trying not to let my worry show, “You’d better!” I was going to think of a humorous threat, but he crushed me to him, kissing me as though his life depended on

it. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you down.” he whispered, but I’m not sure whether he was trying to convince me or himself.

“I know Kol,” I said needing to reassure him that I did indeed have complete faith in him, “but I want you to know that I was right, I don’t think I could bear to go on if anything happened to you, not now.”

He kissed me again and for a long electric moment I forgot everything but my growing

desire and the feel of his satiny skin under my hands. But reality came crashing down when I heard the faint sound of a bellow coming from over the sea.

Kol was suddenly all action, he thrust me at Thann and ran to the middle of the clearing where he transformed in mid stride. While everyone ran from the landing field Thann pulled me with him to the surrounding hills and all the circling dragons landed or ran to join us.

We weren't the only ones watching; practically the entire human staff had come up to the top of the buildings to watch, I think there was even a news crew. The bellowing was getting louder and Kol was all alone in the middle of the field facing the oncoming dragon.

I felt the collective gasps of shock as the dragons surrounding me got their first look at Shyamal. He looked even worse than he had in my dream. Many of his scales were no

longer black but a dead white, some were falling off and his front leg looked withered.

Whilst I could tell from the conversations around me that his injuries were what was capturing the dragons' attention, that wasn't what was capturing mine.

Kol was easily the biggest dragon I'd ever seen, his body was about the size of a really large lorry, but Shyamal was about twice that size. That's when it hit me that the dragons

we know must be so much younger than Shyamal. If all the mated dragons had died the ones we knew must have been too young to take mates.

“I hadn’t realised how young you all were.” I said to Thann.

He looked at me realising that Kol must have told me everything, “Only a few of us, Kol, Tek, Yato, Asha and I were old enough to have been at court when Shyamal went insane.”

“So what you’re saying is that

we've been protected by a bunch of teenagers?"

"Pretty much." he grinned, revealing a younger side even to his own character.

"No wonder you're always partying." I grinned back, then after another bellow from Shyamal, I froze, "Is he going to be ok?" I blurted.

Thann stiffened. "I don't know," he said quietly.



Kol took off, circling the area gaining height while Shyamal did the same. Their difference in size was even more apparent now that they were warily circling each other. Shyamal blew a blast of bright flame and Kol rolled almost leisurely out of the way but the battle was joined. All the dragons were watching with a keen interest knowing that one way or the other this would be the end of their struggles.

Again and again Shyamal

breathed flame and Kol rolled effortlessly away. All the while Kol was watching Shyamal closely looking for signs of weakness. Suddenly he directed a burst of flame toward Shyamal's paler left wing. Shyamal couldn't roll out of the way in time and we could all see the trailing edge of his wing sizzle, the withered scales burst into flame and he bellowed his pain for us all to hear.

I began to have hope that Kol could do this as easily as he

seemed to do everything else.

Shyamal may be certifiably insane, but he was an old and experienced fighter. He didn't let the pain faze him, he concentrated on circling and harassing Kol with his own flame. They traded fireballs ineffectually for a while, but eventually it was Shyamal's turn to score and he caught the tip of Kol's tail with his fireball. I felt his pain, but more than that, the tail is used to help with flying and it reduced Kol's

manoeuvrability, not by much but it might be enough.

I could feel Kol's determination as he fought back by channelling his flame toward the withered side of Shyamal's body. I saw several of the dead white scales burst into flame and many more fell off. There was now an opening in his defences, if only Kol could exploit it.

He turned with white hot fire pouring from his mouth, aiming for the newly bared flesh and he

hit home, but it brought him too close to Shyamal. So, although Shyamal bellowed in pain, he managed to seize the opportunity and he grabbed Kol with his claws.

Kol tried his hardest to break free but Shyamal's huge size and weight was too much for him. Kol was driven into the ground propelled by powerful beats of Shyamal's wings. I could see the earth plough up around him and he travelled nearly the whole length of the landing field

leaving behind a huge gash and mounds of disturbed earth.

For a moment all was still and the smell of damp earth filled the air. I was terrified that Kol had been killed but after a long moment his head snaked up from the earth. He twisted around and grabbed Shyamal's withered foot in his jaws. He clamped down on it breaking the skin, causing the caustic blood to leak out and hiss onto the ground.

Shyamal bellowed and leaped backward but it gave Kol time to get to his feet and shake the earth off his scales. He turned back to face Shyamal again but it was obvious, even from up here, that Kol was badly injured. I could feel the anxiety amongst the dragons when Kol staggered, but he hadn't given up yet.

Shyamal charged Kol, but he stepped to one side and aimed his jaws at the bigger dragon's neck. He managed to get a grip but Shyamal was too strong for

him and he had to use his claws to keep Shyamal from flinging him away which left Shyamal's head free to bite on the back of Kol's own neck.

Shyamal was a lot stronger than Kol but Kol was gradually making headway and he was sinking his teeth into Shyamal's neck. The pale scales seemed softer than normal dragon scale and that forced Shyamal to stop attacking Kol to concentrate on getting free before Kol managed to seriously injure him. Shyamal

shook and shook his neck but it was only when he used his legs to thrust him away that Kol was eventually dislodged.

I could see the damage to the scales on Kol's back from here and if Shyamal hadn't had to stop Kol from biting through his own softer scales he could easily have finished him off. It was already touch and go whether Kol would survive this, he was limping and bruised but he wasn't giving up. He saw an opening and he breathed fire at

the damaged area of Shyamal's side. I could smell the burning flesh and Shyamal bellowed his rage and his pain. His tail whipped around full force but Kol was too injured to get out of the way in time and he was sent sprawling into the ground at the bottom of the cliff I was standing on.

Kol didn't move.

I could barely feel him any more and already my heart was breaking.

Shyamal was moving slowly toward him, I could see his neck was bleeding badly and his front leg didn't move properly.

Shyamal was also badly injured but Kol couldn't defend himself.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, I was willing Kol to get up but he didn't move. He couldn't move.

Shyamal looked straight at me and said "I will have you now, nothing stands between us except this pathetic dragon at

my feet and I will soon kill him.”

I Yelled “NO” in human and in dragon and I threw myself toward the cliff path to reach Kol.

I felt Thann try to catch me but I'd slipped and was falling through the air. I don't know how it happened but I felt my wings snap open and I was landing on the ground between Kol and Shyamal.

I heard the gasp from all the dragons on the ridge as they

finally saw the white dragon Kol had told them about. I didn't care, I was hissing and shaking my wings, instinct had gripped me and, no matter what the cost, I would protect Kol from this horrible dragon.

“I decide who I will be with.” I yelled, “I choose Kol and not you!” I advanced toward Shyamal. “I would not choose you if you were the last dragon on the planet.”

His shock was palpable. I don't

think it had occurred to him in his long years of madness and isolation that the dragon he had designed wouldn't choose him.

I could see that he was weakening, the wounds Kol had dealt were slowly sapping his strength, but he rallied once more, "You are mine and I will have you."

"NO! I have the right to choose and I will choose death before I submit to you."

I charged at him and he was so

shocked that he took a step backward, falling over one of the ridges in the ground.

His injured side was exposed and I circled around, I could see clearly the damage Kol had done. He had opened Shyamal's defences. I knew that there would be an artery very close to the surface under the burned skin. It was my only chance so I darted in while Shyamal was down and tore at his flesh with my claws.

I hit the artery, it was more by luck than judgement, but the blood was fountaining out of the wound and I retreated to protect Kol with my wings.

Head down, wings outstretched I faced off against the much bigger dragon as he tried to get up. Then my heart lightened and I felt as though the sun had come out from behind dark clouds.

I could feel Kol moving.

He was still alive.

Shyamal had managed to make it to his feet and he was staggering toward us, I hissed again, but he only replied.

“You’re mine”

“Never!”

Then, as I watched him, between one step and the next, he faltered as the blood loss took its toll. He sank to his knees. “Mine.”

“Never!”

He couldn’t hold his head up

any more. “Mine.”

“Never!”

Then the light died in his eyes.

I could feel a warm head on my back as I folded my wings and when Kol staggered to his feet he stood next to me and wrapped his neck around mine

“Mine.” he said.

“Always!” I replied

Epilogue

Getting changed back was almost impossible, not only did I not have a clue how to do it but after the initial euphoria wore off I was panicking too much to listen to Kol. The only thought going around in my head was *'What will my mother*

say now?' This was going to be all over the news so I'd never be able to hide it and on top of that there was the embarrassment of having to be naked in front of everyone, the dragons didn't seem to care, but I did.

Luckily Kol realised and he pushed and prodded me until I managed to walk into one of the infirmary outbuildings. It's surprising how difficult coordinating four legs can be when you're not letting instinct take over. But even with his

injuries Kol was standing over me protectively, his wings spread wide and he hadn't let any of the other dragons come close.

I heard something, sounds sound different like this, but eventually I realised there was a chant rising outside "Kolmal! Kolmal!" and I realised that mal must be like rynn so if Kolrynn was the commander and Shyamal was the king that must mean Kolmal was...

Before I realised it I was standing on two legs and Kol's arms were around me, now that he was in his human form I could see the bruises and I suspected from his hiss when I held him that his ribs were broken, but he was smiling and I needed to be close to him to know that he really was still alive.

“Yes love, I'm ok and It's all going to be fine, thanks to you,” he said soothingly, “I love you in dragon form, but I think I'll

have to start teaching you dragon in case you get stuck again.”

I was too relieved that he really would be all right to think of an appropriate come-back so I kissed him with all my heart instead, allowing myself to be lost in the moment, and was only his hiss when he hurt his ribs that reminded us we were still on the landing field.

I pulled back and looked at him, I couldn't believe I could be this

happy and to know he shared it was more than I deserved, but that's when it hit me again. "My mother," I whispered, "how will I tell her?"

He couldn't help it, I could feel his pain, but he couldn't stop laughing. I could hear his thoughts dwelling on the news crew on the roof of the infirmary, he was right and she probably already knew, but his thoughts said that he would be with me no matter what.

Kevin slipped me a set of scrubs, so when I was decent again I turned back to Kol, “Is it really over?”

“We’ll need to clean up, there are bound to be some clouds left and we have to shut the portal,” he winced when he pulled on a shirt, “and I think I’ll need some time to heal, but yes, I think it is. Except for one thing.”

I looked at him not sure what he meant, but as always he answered my unspoken

question, taking my hand and leading me outside to the assembled dragons. The cries of “Kolmal!” rose again but he whispered, “There is going to be the party to end all parties when I introduce my mate to everyone.”

The End