

Dragon's Watch 2: Renegade

Shelby Morgen

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Prologue

2110: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Former member United North American States

As the helicopter took off, Pajja wrapped his wing around her. Omellain felt him sigh. She snorted softly, careful not to char anything. "Break your heart again, did she?"

Pajja turned to lay his muzzle along her cheek. "No, my dear. There is only one who could ever do that. But you're with me now, and nothing else matters. Come, my darling. The world is changing. Old races are reawakening. New ones are coming into their own. They will require our guidance. We have much work to do."

She knew better than to think he meant she was the one who could break his heart. Knew him way too well for that. Still... it had been far too long since she'd let him break hers. Omellain stretched carefully, testing her wings. Gods, she was stiff. "It's been a while, my friend. We're not in any hurry are we? Do you still maintain a corporate suite here in the city? I could use a nice hot bath and a good meal."

His chest vibrated with laughter as he leaned against her. "And some hot Dragon sex to loosen you up, my love?"

He knew her far too well. But what the hell. "I like the way you think, old friend. I do like the way you think." How long could she keep him this time? A year? Two? A hundred? This time, she'd get what she'd always wanted and never had time for. Never made time for.

She was going to hatch an egg.

Chapter One

2286: The North American Continent Area once known as Upstate New York

As the sun came up over the remains of the dead and dying, Esterion dragged her defeated body back up the slope to the keep's entrance. The smell of carnage overwhelmed her, and she stopped to retch.

Daylight showed hundreds of small green skinned bodies littering the barren slope before the keep. More hung in the razor wire that topped the fences. Even now, her soldiers were clearing the wire, dropping the enemy bodies back outside. But no matter how many they killed, there were always more. Eventually -- a few weeks from now, or maybe only days -- they'd be back. Always there were more.

Humanity was losing.

Did the mutants place no value on their own lives? For each of her Rangers who died, a hundred or more of their kind -- Kobolds, the Humans called them, from ancient literature -- hundreds of Kobolds fell. What, after all, was the worth of a life? Even a Kobold? So much less than the worth of the land they died on?

Too little. Not enough to justify this. Nothing could justify this...

The flash of sun on steel was all the warning she had. The Kobold rose from a pile of bodies to launch himself at her, machete raised, maniacal laughter splitting its sallow green face. With one swift move, Esterion unsheathed her double bladed war axe and buried it in the thing's forehead. He'd stay dead this time, by the gods.

The axe stuck, preferring to stay where it was. She bent double, hands on her knees, staring at it as she waited for her strength to return.

A large fuzzy flake settled on the short blade, its mysterious shape fascinating for a moment before it dissolved into nothingness. Her brain, like her body, was too tired to truly comprehend the marvel before it was gone.

Then another one fell. And another. Esterion dropped slowly to her knees, staring at the wonder before her. Her brain refused to wrap itself around the idea.

Fires raged across the barren slopes around her. The Humans were gathering the hideous corpses and tossing them on large funeral piers, fueled by anything they could find. This wasn't a world that could afford to take a chance with disease and pestilence. There were too few Humans left.

Could the small, fading flakes be ash, from the battlefield?

No. No flake of ash dropped from the sky only to lose its form and dissolve before her eyes. Some lingering enemy pelting them -- her -- with... something as soft and delicate as the petal of a tiny flower? Surely this was of some significance. She must tell...

"Esterion!"

Uh-oh. "I'm here, Mother."

"Where are you hit? How badly are you hurt? Where are the damned medics?" Mother attacked her blood stained armor with a wet rag, her voice turning shrill. Medic!"

Esterion shook off the anxious, prodding hands, regaining her feet. "I'm all right, Mother."

"What do you mean you're all right? Look at you! You're... you're..."

Filthy? Covered in blood? Exhausted? Esterion took the wet cloth and wiped off as much of the grime as she could. "A Ranger."

"Don't give me that 'I'm a Ranger' bullshit. I'm your mother. I..."

"Look." Pointing with a small thrust of her chin, Esterion indicated the blade of her axe. "They fall, like ash, then disappear. What is it, Mother? Is this... magic?"

"Magic?" Omellain stared at the blade, a look of sheer amazement on her face. "Magic? Baby, that's snow."

Esterion blinked twice, feeling decidedly out of her depth. "Snow?"

"Snow. Frozen rain. It used to happen all the time. Before..."

Before. Before the change. Before the Earth had stopped giving the gift of Her bounty to Her children. Before the mutant things had swarmed, tearing a hole in the failing heart of Humanity. "Do you think..." Esterion had to lick her lips before she could find voice for the thought bubbling up in her head. "Do you think this means something? Do you think this means She has forgiven us?"

"Forgiven us? I'm sorry, daughter, but there's no forgiveness in this. This is snow. *Snow*. Something this Earth hasn't seen in close to two centuries. No matter how you look at it, snow can only mean one thing. We're in deep shit."

Esterion felt the bubble of hope burst within her, dying as surely as the abomination whose forehead the long blade of her axe was still buried in. It was just a flake... a soft, insubstantial thing that broke with the touch of her breath.

Of course after five straight hours of intense night fighting, some pretty substantial things might have shriveled with the touch of her breath. However... first things first. She was a Ranger -- trained by Von herself, founder of the New Order. Esterion climbed stiffly to her feet, yanking the axe from its temporary home, and wiping its blade on the trampled grass. Assess the threat. Regroup. Protect her patrol.

But first... "Snow. Tell me about the snow, Mother. I need to understand. Why have I never seen snow before?"

Mother shook her head. "Because snow comes in winter, when Earth rests. But there's been no winter, now, for more than two centuries. Humans polluted the waters and the soil and tampered with the genetic structure of plants and animals and even themselves until Earth could no longer sustain her children. Earth died, and with her winter died, too. The polar ice caps melted and the oceans rose. These things you know. We don't have what it takes for Earth to make snow. The only way there can be snow is if something else happened. Something strong enough, powerful enough, to reverse the damage Mankind did. Some bigger disaster..."

Bigger disaster? Bigger than poisoning Earth? "Deep, deep shit," Esterion agreed. "We need recon. We need to know what's happened and why, and how far-reaching the effects will be, so we can shepherd the tribes into safety. We need --"

A screech broke the oppressive stillness that always hung over a battlefield after the last blade had fallen. Esterion looked up, toward the sound, to see the sun disappear, blotted out by huge wings, large enough to span a city block.

Were there any blocks left. Or cities, for that matter.

The sun winked on again, then off, as he circled, spiraling down toward them. She stared, unable to help herself. Sure, he was showing off, but who wouldn't. He was truly magnificent.

Esterion felt Omellain's troubled gaze on her, willing her to her mother's side, as if Omellain meant to hide her. Esterion bristled in rebellion. She was no innocent child, to be protected. The string of bodies surrounding the keep should prove that. She'd killed because she had to, to protect the civilians here at the keep, not because she expected any glory or recognition, yet surely she'd proven herself. She was a woman, grown, not a fledgling any more. Her mother had no reason -- or right -- to hide her whenever another of their kind came around. Especially a magnificent Blue like this one. She would not go into hiding! She would not. She wanted -- needed -- to meet him. The pull was strong, too strong to ignore.

Mine.

The force of the emotion struck her with its unfamiliarity, the compelling urge to shift, to fly up to meet the circling Blue, nearly overwhelming her. Gone was the battle weary soldier who'd seen more than her share of the slaughter. Esterion stretched, reaching for the Blue, needing him to know she was here. He was the one. She was sure of it. Could feel his call with every fiber of her being. She stretched, twisted, attempting to spread her wings to the air, to transform. The Human was too small. Too frail. Too... fragile. She wanted, needed to shift. Needed to meet him Dragon to Dragon.

Esterion! No, my child. Not this one. Not him! He is not for you. Please, come to me. Come here. Now!

Mine, she repeated, knowing any Dragon in the area would be able to read the simple thought. *Mine!*

Cormamin lindua ele lle, a deep, melodic voice answered, echoing in her head.

Nae saian luume, Cerulean.

English! Esterion demanded.

Greetings, Lady Omellain, Mistress Esterion. Hail and well met.

Had this gorgeous Blue been one of Mother's pets? No! He couldn't be. He was hers! It was meant to be. She could feel it!

Fear not, M'Lady. 'Tis but a courtesy I pay your Lady Mother. I feel your claim on me as surely as you must feel my claim on you.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Esterion ground her teeth in suppressed anger. She was a female, born to rule. No one laid claim to her.

I do. I claim you, M'Lady.

A hush fell over the gathering of battle weary soldiers as the Blue swooped straight at them, pulling up at the last instant to glide in feet first. The air whooshed about them, sending her hair flying in all directions like a red firestorm as the giant Blue landed gracefully before them. As if she did not even exist, the Blue made a formal bow, or as much of one as a Dragon could make, before her mother. "*Amin naa tualle, Lady Omellain, High Queen of the exiles of Tir na nÓg. Elen sila lumenn omentilmo. I, Cerulean, come before you this day to claim the hand of your daughter, the Lady Esterion, as my mate.*"

What was he saying? Was any of it in English?

Esterion wanted to rage, or to laugh, as she was sure Mother would, but instead Omellain pulled on her dignity as another woman might have a house coat, becoming in an instant who this stranger claimed she was. The trappings of the mere mortal fell away, and she stood tall and regal, her essence so blinding soldiers dropped to their knees around them and held up a hand to shield their eyes, all the while peering around their fingers to behold her magnificent beauty.

Esterion refused to be awed by her mother's shimmering opulence. "Mate?" she demanded. "Do you not think it would be wise to consult with me on such a matter first?"

"Such is not our way." The Blue raised one scaled eye ridge in Mother's general direction. "Have you not taught her the old ways?"

Taught her... he dared to question her? *Her?* Again the urge to shift, to show him who and what she was, nearly overwhelmed her. Never had she wanted, needed, so desperately to shift. Still, she failed miserably. She pushed at it, trying with all her might, knowing she was turning as red as her hair. Embarrassment washed over her in a wave, followed quickly by anger. Damn the Blue to the nine hells for forcing her hand.

"You have my permission to court my Lady Daughter, Cerulean, but she's of her own mind. It will be up to you to win her heart," Mother advised.

"I am not ancient enough to know the old ways. I am Esterion, Ranger of the New Order, from here and now, and I have fought my way through a dozen Kobolds this day to *stay* here and now. I certainly don't intend to give myself over to some total stranger as his mate because *he* says it's our way. Go fuck yourself, you arrogant prick."

Cerulean tilted his head back and laughed, the sounds so deep it felt like a small quake shaking the foundations of the crumbling old institution's thick stone walls. "I'd rather fuck you," he assured her. With that, he swept her against his chest with a flick of his giant wing. Wrapping his small front arms around her, he jumped into the air.

"Put me down!" she shrieked. "Put me down this instant you -- you -- fossil!"

He chuckled. *As you wish, M'Lady.*

Esterion shrieked again as the ground -- which had somehow gotten *much* farther away than she'd realized -- came rushing back toward her at an alarming speed.

One beat. Two. Cerulean watched his mate-to-be falling, expecting her to unfurl her wings at any moment. Nothing. Shit. He dove at a crazy, reckless angle, swooping

down under her to catch her unceremoniously by the waistband of her leather breeches. "Naa dolle lost?" he hissed. "Ascarer! Why didn't you shift?"

"Who's Ascarer? And how the hell was I supposed to know you were going to drop me? What the hell were you trying to prove, besides the fact that you're an egotistical asshole?"

For a moment he contemplated releasing the woman from his tightly furled claws. But no. He'd searched for this one for decades now. Longer. He would not let her go, not even to teach her a well deserved lesson. "*Lle quena i'lambe tel' Eldalie?*"

Her lack of a response was answer enough -- she didn't speak their language. How could that be? "Ascarer is you, M'Lady. And unless you have some death wish, I suggest you answer my question. Why did you not fly?"

Silence. This was going well. Cerulean headed for a familiar spot -- a small, grassy flat close to the summit of a nearby mountain where he often camped. Setting down as gently as he could with a writhing woman in his claws, he gave her room to spread her wings and take off safely, if that was her intent. Instead she scrambled away as soon as he released her, nearly backing over the edge of the precipice in her determination to put fighting distance between them. Fortunately she'd not had time to grab up her war axe, but still, the dagger she drew could well have been lethal to a mortal.

She threatened him? With a weapon like that? Damn she was feisty. He grinned, careful not to set the grass on fire. "So. It appears we are at an impasse. You already know I will not allow you to come to harm, even at your own request. On the other hand, we have a problem. Apparently you can't fly."

"You dare to insult me? I am Esterion, the daughter of Omellain and Pajja, Patriarch of House Élanadhache of the *Tuatha Dé Danann!*"

He grinned again at the picture she made. Tall, broad shouldered, honed to fighting constitution, long red hair blazing about her, whipped by the wind and her fine, fiery temper. She'd be a challenge, for sure. But he'd not have it any other way. What man -- or Dragon -- wanted a mate who was not his equal?

I know who you are, Esterion. I know what you are. I know as well as you do we are meant for one another. I can read you as you can read me. I know you're afraid, and more afraid of being afraid. I can feel you. It's always this way when we find our true mates. Let me help you. Can you shift at all?

"Of course I can shift! And get out of my head!"

Then let me see you in your true form.

"I will not be bullied. If this is your idea of courting, you've got a lot to learn about how to attract a woman's interest. Take me home, at once!"

Her emotions were a riot of confusion. Anger and terror -- of what he wasn't sure -- and the same overwhelming chemical attraction he was feeling, and overlaying it all, embarrassment. She was right about one thing. He'd gone about this all wrong. He'd been so sure, once he felt her call to him... no matter. She was first and foremost a woman. And he'd forgotten the most important part of courtship -- seduction.

Chapter Two

Slowly, with the fluid grace of an athlete, the Dragon before her became a man. Oh my gods what a man. Tall, close to seven foot, with the build of a bowman, broad shoulders, narrow waist, legs built for strength and speed. His blue-black hair whipped free around his head like a storm. And his face -- he was quite possibly the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Still, it was not his face which called to her right at the moment.

"Let us start over. Good morning, Lady Esterion. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Cerulean, House of Khepreshakori."

She did her best to force her eyes up from the spot her gaze wanted most to visit. "Umm, hi. I'm Esterion."

Crap. He already knew that. And that delicious smile of his told her she'd been caught checking him out. She must be oozing lust all over the place. Well, damn it, that was a most impressive package. If he didn't want her to look he shouldn't have popped back to Human form so... so... *naked*. He could easily have conjured some sort of clothing, couldn't he? Weren't your clothes supposed to go with you when you shifted? Binding, Mother called it. Not that she'd paid much attention.

"Sorry, I must have been naked when I shifted. Didn't mean to offend you."

Offend her? He was hung like a -- well, like a Dragon. Damn. She wanted to eat him alive. "What's happening to me?" The whole hormone thing was taking over again, yanking her chain like a puppy on a leash. And why shouldn't she take what she wanted? Whether she could shift or not was immaterial. She was a Dragon. She wanted.

Esterion licked her lips. *Mine*.

On that, at least, we agree.

Damn it, he was laughing at her again. She lunged at him. The nerve of the...

Strong arms caught her, crushing her against firm, warm skin trapping his scalding hot cock between them, where it seemed to ignite a fire in her belly. Muscles bunched and played under her hands as she tried to touch him everywhere at once. *Oh yeah. Like that.*

The sexual energy she'd felt from the beginning ignited, her skin nearly bursting into flame as his lips grazed her shoulder, her neck, her -- oh gods -- he'd found her ear. There was no spot on her body more sensitive than the tip of her ear where his fingers stroked like the strings of a harp. Unless it was the tip of the other ear. Where his lips grazed and nuzzled.

I've waited so long for you, his deep voice rumbled in her mind. Made for me. Mine.

So fuck me already!

A low, deep chuckle shook him. *Your wish is my command, M'Lady.* But he didn't. Instead he pulled her to the soft grass with him, still suckling her ear, stroking its tip with his tongue, while he helped her out of her soft leather armor. Cool air hit her burning skin, like hands caressing her all over.

"By the gods that feels good."

Fortunately he didn't ask whether she meant the air on her fevered skin or his tongue on the curve of her ear. She wouldn't have known how to answer. All she was sure of was that she wanted, needed, had to have him. Now.

Esterion wrapped her hands around his cock, stroking, pulling, demanding, wanting him -- as desperate as she'd felt from the moment his shadow crossed her horizon. He didn't object as she settled herself over his cock, driving in to the hilt on the first thrust. Now was good. *Good.*

Good. He shuddered beneath her, shifting his attention from her ear to her naked, bouncing breasts as they rose toward his mouth. The feel of his tongue on her nipple nearly undid her. His hands grasped her hips, lifting her up, driving her down, setting a pace that was hot and fast and suited them both.

Searched for you... so long.

How long?

Too long. Since I was awakened.

Felt you. Needed you. So few of us left. Waited for you to find me.

He rolled with her in his arms, lifting her thighs over his arms, thrusting hard enough to fold her nearly in two.

Yes. Like that. Just like that.

Come for me!

Can't. Not yet. Not...

Now! He caught her breasts, squeezing, rolling the nipples, pinching as he drove her toward release. Sliding a hand between their wildly writhing bodies, he found her clit, stroking, rubbing, tweaking until she shattered like a fragile plate, convulsing around his hard, thick cock in waves of release that were too much, not enough, exactly what she craved.

Pushing back, she rolled him to his back, grasping his cock hard with her clenching pussy muscles, holding him while the waves of sensation washed over her. As she eased, she began the dance again, slowly this time, not pumping up and down, but rocking, slowly grinding against him.

She could feel the slow, steady pulse in his cock as it throbbed within her, growing harder with each small circular motion of her hips. He moaned softly, his eyes tightly closed. "I need..."

Dragging her breasts across his chest, she captured his lips, kissing, sucking, slowly plundering his mouth. She moved her hands to his ears, swirling her thumbs over the whorls that rose to form the fine bladed points.

Esterion. His breath came hard and heavy, his hips rising up off the soft grass as he sought to thrust into her.

She laughed, pleased with herself, as she stayed with him, continuing her slow, tantalizing grind. She leaned down to lick his hard, swollen nipples, riding the ripple of stimulation that shot through his body like a jolt of electricity.

Esterion!

Patience, lover.

I can't... I...

One circle. Two. Grinding her clit against his pelvic ridge -- three -- the brush of his coarse pubic hair as soft as the flutter of tiny fairy hands, teasing, stroking -- four -- and again, so close, so, "Ahhhhhhh!"

"Yes!" he shouted below her, thrusting up into her as she convulsed around him, her strong cunt muscles milking his cock as he came, demanding his seed in token for their powerful pull.

"Mine," she cried, her head thrown back, her wild red hair swirling about them like a storm.

"Yours," he acquiesced.

"Yours," she whispered, settling her hand on his chest as they clung together, gasping for breath.

"Yours and yours alone." She grasped at the words, holding them to her heart like the rare jewels they were. No Dragon had ever promised more.

* * *

Esterion?

Mmm? She snuggled closer, if that was possible, not wanting the drowsy, contented feeling to escape her.

His fingers played with a lock of her hair, holding it out as if to inspect it. *It's snowing.*

I know.

That's probably not a good thing.

Esterion sighed. The conversation was getting serious. That meant she was going to have to move. Her limbs -- her entire body -- objected. *So I gathered. Kinda freaked Mom out.*

She knows, then. I thought perhaps it was only here, in the mountains. A shift in the upper atmosphere...

She's afraid it's something bad. Something worse than global warming and the polar ice caps melting and the oceans consuming continents. I've never seen Mother afraid before. Not like

that. The Kobolds didn't frighten her, nor any of the other freakish twisted things that have spawned. But snow? The snow frightened her. It started as we killed the last of the Kobolds. I didn't know what it was. Had never seen snow before.

No? She felt the surprise ripple through him. "You're so young..."

"I'm one hundred and seventy-four. That's not so young, even for a Dragon."

"And you've never shifted?"

"Oh, I've shifted. More than once."

"Then..."

She swallowed hard. She might as well tell him now and get it over with. There was no way she could hide a failing like this from him for long. "It's *when* that's the problem. I can't seem to control it. I can't shift when I want to, just because I want to."

Not a muscle twitched. "Would you like me to teach you?"

Esterion sat up, blinking. "Teach me? You can do that? How? Why, when no one else could?"

He lay on his back in the soft grass, smiling up at her. "Did you try? Did you ever ask anyone for help?"

"I... no."

"You never asked for help because you didn't want anyone to know, did you? You hoped you could make it happen whenever you wanted to. And sometimes it worked. Whenever you were so angry you lost control."

She held her temper in check. "I couldn't ask anyone to help me. There wasn't anyone to ask. The only other Dragon around was my mother. She told me I'd learn, when the time was right. I didn't."

"That was why I couldn't find you. Omellain took you to live with the Humans. She was never content to watch. Always wanted to be involved with their lives."

"She and Pajja... disagreed. Often. She left him before I was born. Went back to the Human base camp. She says we were put here to do more than watch. We're supposed to protect them."

"If your mother is right -- about the snow -- there's a rift coming. The Dragons will split again, to those who only observe, and those like your mother who want to guide and instruct. It'll be like the split long ago, to the King's and Queen's courts."

"And where will you go, when the split comes?"

He smiled up at her. "*Amin khiluva lle a' gurtha ar' thar, a'maelamin.*"

"What does that mean?"

"I will go wherever you go."

Esterion closed her eyes, rocking slightly, more moved than she dared to let him know.

"Don't be afraid. What we feel, it's more than sex. More than any Dragon really ever expects to find. It's what we hope for, long for. Dream of. Most Dragons pair up, sometimes for years, sometimes for centuries. Like Pajja and Omellain, they may even hatch an egg. But rarely do we find our soulmates. I've known for more than a century you were out there, somewhere. I suspected I wouldn't be able to find you until you grew up, started trying to shift. Till you were ready for me."

"I'm not afraid," she lied. "I'm more than ready for you. I want you again. Now."

"Come here."

This time she didn't bristle at the tone of command in his voice. Not when it was accompanied with that smile, and the soft, hungry look that left those brilliant blue eyes hooded with desire. She reached out, stroking his cock with the tips of her fingers until it stood at full attention.

She'd always known power. She'd been a Warrior, a Ranger, commanded troops on the field and in shelters and ditches and bunkers. Today she had been given a new kind of power.

She rolled toward him, twisting until she lay at right angles to his body. Supporting herself on her elbows, she leaned in to kiss the tip of his cock.

His cock danced away, then immediately came back, seeking her touch. He shuddered. Not just his cock, but all over. Grinning, she kissed him again, this time sucking his cock into her mouth. He groaned. Encouraged, she ran her tongue around

the edge of the head, playing with the slightly flared ridge, then sucking him in fully with one long pull.

"Saints alive, woman."

Esterion chuckled, the vibrations playing over the long, silky smooth length of his cock where it filled her throat.

"Come here." This time the command was accompanied by a groan.

Instead she slid her mouth slowly up the length of his cock, then sucked him back in again with another long, hard pull. His hips rose to meet her, thrusting hard against her welcoming lips. She framed the base of his cock with her hands, pushing him down, encouraging him in long, slow thrusts as she licked and sucked his hot, hard length.

"Esterion," he whispered, pulling at her shoulders. "That's good, love, so good. But I want to be in you, feel you come for me, when I come."

With a parting kiss she rose to straddle his hips, sinking down slowly till the tip of his cock rode over her clit. Oh, that felt good. She slid up against his length a few times, teasing her clit, as if she wasn't wet enough looking at him to take him inside her.

Low. Lower. Touching. Stroking. There. Just... *there*. She plunged down onto him, driving her tight, wet, aching pussy as far down as it would go, stretching herself, filling her empty, hungry depths with hot, hard cock. Yes! She shivered with the fullness, the rightness of it. Made for her. He was... she was...

Made for me. Just for me.

Mine.

Mine!

He grasped her hips, holding her, helping her, pushing, riding, driving, up, deeper, harder. *Mine!*

The first orgasm washed over her, so hard, so fast, she barely had time to brace herself. Then he was on her, over her, rolling them together in the grass as he thrust, hard, deep, hot. *Feel me.*

Feel...

There. Subtle. Beginning with a thought, pure and simple. Not the way she'd done it. Not hard. Soft. Willing. Wanting. Reaching...

Claws pricked her shoulders, the pain rough, but not unpleasant. She was a Ranger. A Warrior. She welcomed pain. The cock within her swelled impossibly harder, longer, filling her with a need that drove her beyond all reason, thrusting heavily into her hot, greedy cunt. She gripped him with her hands, pulling at the blue scaled shoulders, rubbing against his hard armor plated chest, grinding against a pelvis that tilted just right, with ridges that fit so perfectly, so...

Esterion screamed as the orgasm hit, so powerful she felt as if she might burst with the pleasure of it, so strong she thought it might rip her asunder. So big, so friggin hot, pounding relentlessly, pushing her past her endurance, her will to resist, beyond where she remembered who she was, where she began, where they divided...

More...

There was no more.

More... give me... more.

Moaning, writhing in pleasure that was near pain, she twisted, trying to get closer, tighter, hold more of him, get away, before she lost herself. She froze as she felt the hard, sharp probe against her anus. No. He couldn't. He wouldn't. He...

"Ahhh!"

Moistened with the juices that ran down between them to coat her ass, the tip of his tail thrust into her, its hard length flexible and agile as another hand, probing until she writhed against him, thrusting up onto his cock, down onto his slick, unforgiving tail. In and out, back and forth, cock and tail, the rhythm took on the cadence of a dance, hard, harder, demanding. His Dragon's muzzle brushed her nipples, a tongue roughened like a cat's licking her nipples to fierce points of desire.

Shift for me.

She couldn't... She wanted to, but she couldn't. She understood now, saw the beauty and magic of it, but...

By the gods! She wasn't just coming, she was going to fly into pieces! She was...

Esterion screamed her release in a long, orgasmic howl that shattered the silence of the mountains, her body arched hard against him, strung so tight she thought she might shatter.

Come with me!

Can't hold on! Going to --

Shift!

-- pass out!

As the light from the sun dimmed and the world went silent, she felt his seed pour into her in waves, hot, hot, searing her flesh, breaking her mind, pushing her over a precipice she might never cross back again.

Chapter Three

We didn't get very far on the shifting lesson.

Laughter rumbled in his chest, like a fire in a cooking cauldron, without breaking to the surface. *Shall we try again?*

No. That will lead to more sex.

And that's bad because...

Because I want to shift. I want to make love as a Dragon.

You've never...

Never.

You weren't a virgin, were you? He sounded alarmed. Did I hurt you?

"No. I wasn't a virgin. You didn't hurt me. There was another male once, long ago, a Human, but he... he died."

"I'm sorry. Humans are so fragile..."

"Some of the Humans have changed, are more like us now. Von says she and Jackson are over three hundred years old. I think I believe her. Mine though... he didn't change. He was a sweet boy when I met him, but eventually I lost him."

"That was a long time ago?"

"I was barely one hundred when he died."

"So long..."

"Too long to be alone. Too long to be without you."

He held her wrapped in his wings as they lay side by side, stroking her skin, blanketing her body with his warmth. "I'm here now."

"I finally found you, and now it's too late. It's starting to snow. We'll have to take the Humans and go somewhere safe."

"And you think I'd let you do that alone?"

"You're a Dragon. You'll want a Dragon at your side. If I can't shift, you'll have to leave. Especially once the rift comes. Mother will stay, because of the Humans, like Von and Jackson, and because of me. The rest of you will fly off to Tir na nÓg."

"Is that what you're afraid of?"

"Pajja may be my father, but he's not Mother's mate. She lost him when she decided to side with the Humans. If Pajja calls Dragonkind back to Tir na nÓg, she won't go. We'll be renegades, Cerulean. Outcast from Dragonkind."

"And if you could shift, if you could fly off to Tir na nÓg, supposing Pajja could find the magic to reawaken that old myth of a place, would you go?"

"I..." Esterion thought of Jackson and Von's cubs, and all the others she'd helped to raise through the years. "The Humans need me. I don't think I could leave them. Not now. I'm a part of their lives, their Guardian. They're my responsibility."

"And you're mine. Wherever you are, I will be there with you."

"You'd turn renegade for me? You don't even know me."

"I know you better than I know myself. I feel you. In here." He thumped his massive chest plates with one short, deadly arm.

She didn't want to admit it, but Esterion knew what he meant. Could feel him in her heart like the missing piece.

"Besides, I don't believe we will be the only ones. More Dragons than you think will flock to the Queen's court. We're tired of being useless. Now that the Humans know about us again, we don't have to hide in the shadows and watch anymore. We want to be part of the world again. We need to be needed."

"Thank you," she whispered against his chest. "Thank you. You've given me something I've lived without for so long I'd forgotten what it feels like."

"Sex?" he beamed. "Your memory seems to have come back quickly."

"Hope, you dolt."

He snorted softly, a small puff of smoke melting the snow on the ground around his muzzle. "As long as Dragons survive, there is hope. The question is how we use our

gifts -- to aid Mankind, or to protect ourselves from our own childish ways. Earth needs us, Esterion, if she's to survive. It's time we took our place in the world again."

And it's time I took my place in Dragon Kind. Teach me to change, Dragon. Teach me to fly.

As you wish, M'Lady.

In the blink of an eye he shifted, and once more the distractingly handsome Human form wrapped around her. Turning her in his arms, as if to shield her from the chilled air with the warmth of his naked body, he enveloped her with his arms, his cheek resting against hers. Something opened, changed, deepened in their mind link. Something subtle, yet seductive. She felt herself slipping deeper into his mind, his body, feeling what he felt, seeing through his eyes.

The first thing she noticed was a deep seated lust, so powerful her cock wept at the nearness of the other her, the woman she held in her arms. The need to possess ruled her thoughts with a passion that was painful. She -- the other her -- twisted in his arms, though the coordination it took to do so, feeling two bodies at once, was damned confusing. Without further preliminaries she wrapped herself around him, sliding her willing cunt over his aching shaft.

Yes. Better. Need you.

Her thoughts, his, didn't matter. They were joined. One. As it should be.

Need more. Need...

Feel me.

Spiraling up into him again, she felt his cock throbbing within her cunt, beating with the pulse of his Dragon heart. Like a drum it echoed in her ears. *Ride the wave.*

I don't...

Shhh. Just feel.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Could you orgasm from the strumming of his pulse alone?

Thump, Thump. Thump. Something else there. Starting. Beginning above, following the path of his blood. A shift. A change. Subtle at first, no more than a thought.

Dragon.

It beat like the pulse of his cock, slow, sure, steady, growing.

Dragon. Dragon. Dragon.

The wings came first, lifting effortlessly from his back, where they'd really always been. Then his chest and legs expanded, and his tail unfurled, wrapping around her, heating her skin with its warmth.

Thump, thump, thump. The giant wings beat the air now, so that their scaled bodies pushed together, grinding ridge over ridge, twining tail over tail, claws buried in the soft grass as they stood, muzzle to muzzle, his cock crushed between them, searching for her armored Dragon's slit, their breath coming in hot, ragged pants that cleared all traces of snow from the air.

Power filled her, overwhelmed her, followed by need, stronger than anything she'd ever felt before. The need to fly, the need to join, the need to fuck. She'd make love to him later. Now was for hot, insatiable lust. Now was for Dragons.

Pulling away, she jumped, launching herself into the air currents, knowing he'd follow. Once, twice she beat her enormous red wings, laughing as she heard his screech of loss. She circled once to watch as he took off, his cock still magnificently aroused, his wings eating up the distance between them, his mind a mixture of lust and panic.

Esterion! Do not leave me!

You want me, Dragon? Catch me!

Joy pulsed back through the link they shared. *You think I will not?*

I don't think you can, Ancient One. I'm younger than you, and strong, and free! Watch me fly!

Young, and reckless, and about to be taught a lesson by your elder!

You think you can? Come and get me! She kicked one wing, hard, spiraling into a sleek, smooth dive toward the long, green valley below. When she could go no lower

without the waving grasses touching her belly, she shot up, up, rocketing into the wide open sky. This, this was what it was to be a Dragon. This was what she'd been missing! This --

"EEEEEEkkkkkk!"

"Told you I'd catch you."

"Didn't your mother teach you not to talk with your mouth full? Let go of me, you idiot! You're going to get us both killed!"

"Steady, steady, beat your wings in time with mine. Steady, feel the rhythm, like dancing. Down, two, three, down, two, three, yes, there, like that. Now glide on the air stream. Relax. Feel it. Just glide."

Yes! Free, glorious, like lying in the water, like hundreds of hands caressing her, supporting her with soft puffs of air. He flew so close she could feel the blistering length of his cock pressing against the base of her tail.

"Eeppp! Cerulean! What the hell are you doing, you idiot!"

"Stop thinking. Feel. Trust me. Like dancing. Let me lead. Fold your wings, and roll over."

"Roll over? You're going to get us killed, you moron!"

"Just glide. I'm bigger and stronger than you are, and my wings will support us both."

"You can't --" He twined their necks together, laying his muzzle side by side with hers, rubbing their heads together at the temples. "Oh, gods that feels good. But we can't -- ohhhhh!" Hot, molten steel found the opening to her slit as his tail wrapped around her, pulling her hard against his underbelly.

His whole body caressed her, Dragon style, the sharp upbraiding of his scales over her virgin underbelly creating a friction that intensified with every slight flutter of his wings as he steered their course. His cock pushed again at her entrance, rubbing the length of her protective scales, lubricating, pushing, pushing, the waves of lust coming hard and fast, making her want to reach down and tear away the thick protective barrier herself.

"Hold steady," he warned, circling with powerful thrusts of his amazingly strong wings to catch a new current, this one higher, faster. "It's not soft enough yet. Just a little more..."

Soft enough? What did he mean, soft enough? She was too embarrassed to ask. It didn't simply slide out of the way? What, she was going to lose her virginity all over again, as a Dragon this time? She bit her lip, then decided better of it, cause it hurt like hell. Note to self. Dragon teeth, sharp.

"Ahhhh!"

"Ayiiiiiiiiiiii!" she screeched as his cock forced the scale from its home, thrusting deep into her channel with one long plunge. "Fuck that hurt!"

"Wrap your wings around me."

She did, out of instinct as much as his command, needing something to grab on to. Doing so pulled him closer, impaled her completely on his thick Dragon cock. Damn he was huge! How had she ever fit that thing into her as a Human?

"It's magic."

"Shithead. You could have warned me."

"Warned you? How many Dragon virgins do you think I've deflowered?"

She'd have blushed, had she been able. "This isn't something you've had a lot of experience with?"

"Virgin Dragons? Not really."

"How many, then?"

"One."

"Including me."

"One."

"Oh. I... *ohhhhhhh*... gods that feels good."

"You feel good."

Before she could think of anything else to say, he dove, thrusting in again, hard and hot and fast as they spiraled down, the force of the blood rushing through her disorienting her. The beautiful blue sky -- hadn't it been snowing? -- darkened again.

But this time it wasn't from storm clouds. Her hearing dimmed and the sound of the ocean rushed in. Oh, not good. She gasped for breath, hoping she hadn't singed him. Not a good time to pass out. Her body convulsed, thrashing and thrusting against him, giving as hard as he gave, needing this release that promised to be more, more than anything she'd ever felt before.

If she could stay conscious long enough to take it in...

Chapter Four

They lay on the beach -- she'd ask him later where he'd found an inland ocean with a beach -- sprawled side by side, their wings spread out to dry in the cool afternoon breeze.

"That," Esterion croaked when she could finally get the words out -- "was fucking fantastic. Even if you did scare the shit out of me."

An elongated blue head snaked itself into her view, aiming one eye at her briefly. He drew in his breath delicately. For a Dragon. "You smell fine." The head sank out of view again, followed by a soft echoing plop.

They were both so exhausted she wasn't absolutely sure he was joking. However she didn't feel like explaining the less than literal fine points of English -- or humor -- to him.

"Auta miqula orqu."

Cerulean was laughing. At her, or with her, she wasn't sure. "What does that mean?"

"Go kiss an Orc."

Esterion lifted the tip of one wing to smack him soundly in -- some body part. It wasn't worth turning her head to see what she hit. "Where are we?"

"That's Lake Erie out there. We're in Ohio. Or what's left of it."

"The sky's blue again. But we weren't imagining what we saw. It did snow."

"It did." He stirred beside her, and she felt a wing flutter. "When we can move, we need to find out why. The prevailing wind has been from the west for days, so I'd say that's the direction we should explore."

The sandy beach didn't feel so comfortable any more. Esterion made her way to her feet, wishing she dared shift to her Human form. But if she shifted, would she be

able to shift back? As her energy returned, she found herself restless, sexual energy depleted for now, responsibility taking its place. This was not the place to be stranded, not hundreds of miles from those she was sworn to protect.

"Trust me. I would not leave you stranded here. My oath to you is as strong as your loyalty to your Humans."

"Your oath?"

"Amin khiluva lle a' gurtha ar' thar, a'maelamin. I will follow you to death and beyond, my beloved. It's sort of implied in there that I won't leave you stranded on the side of a lake if you can't fly home. I taught you to shift. If you need another lesson, I'm here."

He raised his head, propping himself up on one wing to look at her, then seemed to think better of it. "Just not... quite... yet."

"Men, Dragons, you're all the same. A little great sex, and all you want to do is sleep."

"Right."

"You're not even going to argue with me?"

"I would, but I really want to sleep a while longer."

"I'm hungry."

"There's a whole lake full of fish right there."

"Really? There are fish in there? Edible ones?"

He licked his broad Dragon lips with a tongue that gave her way too many vivid pictures for future reference. "Quite tasty, actually."

Esterion gave his sprawled form another look, debating which she wanted more -- more sex, responsibility, or food. Sex was pretty far down on the list at the moment, though he did look perfectly fuckable laying there on his back with his legs in the air like a lazy dog. So incredibly cute. And all hers. Still, fish sounded awfully good. She smiled as she waded into the cool water. Hmm. These big feet were good for something. They made tramping through lake vegetation pretty easy. When the water got to chest height, she took a deep breath and dove under.

Oh! She could see underwater. Her Dragon form had some protective eye thing going on. Like a transparent lid that snapped in place. Can we breathe under water?

Yes. But --

She shot to the surface, coughing and sputtering.

-- you have to use your gills. Breathe in through your mouth, not your nose. The gills will take care of the rest.

Now you tell me!

Sorry, my love. A thousand apologies.

Esterion blinked. He meant it. She could feel the care and concern in him. She waded back to shore, stopping at his side. "It's more than lust, isn't it? More than sex."

He smiled up at her, his Dragon face more expressive than she'd known they could be. "It's more than incredibly good, mind blowing, exhausting sex. We were meant for one another."

Esterion shifted as naturally as if she'd always known, and perhaps she had. Taking a step closer, she dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around the huge scaled neck, laying her head against his chest. Tears streamed from her Human eyes. "Thank you."

Human arms wrapped around her, and warm Human lips caressed her forehead. "I'm sorry I waited so long to find you. Forgive me."

"You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just happy."

"You don't lie very well."

"I haven't had much practice." She sniffed, laughing as she wiped away the tears. "It's just that I had given up on finding a lover. I'm not very lovable."

"You are to me."

"Thank you." She buried her face against his chest. "I know we just met, but I feel you as if you're a part of me that's been missing for so long. Like my Dragon form. You make me feel complete."

"Good!" He rolled to his feet, pulling her along with him. "You make me feel hot and horny and hungry, all at once. But one thing at a time. Let me show you how to fish."

Shifting back to Dragon form once again, he shot up into the air with one powerful beat of his wings, then dove headfirst into the water from a height of about twenty-five feet. She raced to follow, amazed at how effortlessly she shifted this time. Though her dive wasn't as graceful as his, she managed to tuck her wings and hit head on, her head cutting through the water like a torpedo.

Now open your mouth. Not a lot -- you don't want to strain your jaw muscles -- just enough to let in the fish. Use your teeth to strain the water.

Skeptically she opened her mouth, half expecting to find herself coughing and sputtering. The gills took over automatically, pumping oxygen to her lungs as if she'd done this for years.

Good! Now breathe out through your gills and let the fish slide down into your tummy.

Raw?

You're a Dragon. What do you care if they're cooked? We're kinda short on Purina Dragon Chow.

Well, he hadn't mentioned chewing them. Maybe if she swallowed them whole, so she didn't actually have to taste them... *We can digest them? Whole?*

Yup.

What about turtles?

He didn't seem surprised to see the giant snappers along the bottom of the lake. *Those you better crunch up, or the shells stick.*

Shells... stick. OK. She wasn't about to ask where... the visual was painful.

Just when she was thinking about turtle shells, and other very unromantic things, he swam up alongside her. She turned her head to catch him staring at her, a goofy expression on his face. *What?*

Nothing.

That didn't look like nothing.

I was thinking how lucky I am.

Lucky? You're eating raw turtles, on the half shell.

I'm here. With you.

Had she been a Human, she'd have blushed. But she was feeling less and less like a Human, and more and more like this was her natural form. She was Esterion, descendant of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. She was *Sidhe*, a being based in mythology. Faerie Folk -- and nobility, at that. And right now she was hungry, though not for raw turtles. *Come here, Dragon man.*

His dopey look turned into a grin. *Whatever you say, Princess.*

Come worship me.

That's easy. I do.

She tugged on his neck, pulling his head down for a long, wet Dragon kiss, cheek to cheek, muzzle to muzzle, necks intertwined. His tail wrapped around hers, as well, bringing them together, belly to belly. She could feel the heat of his cock straining to find her slit, anxious to fill her the way she wanted him to.

Esterion used her front claws to hook him, allowing her the leverage she needed to impale herself on his heavy, throbbing cock.

So much for foreplay, he laughed.

You want foreplay? Without moving, she squeezed him slowly, clenching and unclenching her heavily muscled cunt. Waves of sensation pulsed over them. Their bodies undulated in time to the beat.

He groaned, his brilliant blue eyes pressing shut.

Underwater, a groan sounded like a cascade of bubbles. Esterion giggled -- which sounded even stranger.

One Dragon eye opened to glare at her. *You torture me, and then you have the nerve to laugh?*

Yup. Whatcha gonna do about it?

He grinned. A Dragon grin, she decided, wasn't high on the list of things she'd want to observe in her Human form. But then, she wasn't a Human...

And neither was he. *My turn.*

Grinning Dragon teeth flashed. A long, very agile Dragon tongue stroked over her jaw, finding a sensitive spot at the base of her throat that had her curling her head back, shamelessly asking for more.

He gave her more, stroking in time to his thrusts, slow and torturous, then fast and hot, his tempo rising in time to her writhing body's single demand -- *more.*

In Dragon form his cock was as thick as her Human forearm, and equally as long, so that even when the water or their shifting grip on each other pulled them apart, they never lost contact. He felt rough, too -- she'd meant to take a closer look once they landed, but it seemed their foreplay was destined to be rather brief. Every thrust abraded her sensitive slit, evoking a response from her body that Human sex could never duplicate. Waves of pleasure wracked her, her whole body tensing with each thrust, till she was strung tight as a string on a guitar. She grasped and grappled and bit, matching him thrust for thrust, wanting, needing, demanding.

They twisted and rolled in the water, supported by their buoyancy, not needing to surface, though they did on occasion, heads and tails breaking the water, only to pull themselves back down into the cool, cool depths that did their best to contain the simmering heat of two needy Dragons.

When she thought she could take no more, the orgasms broke, rolling over her like waves of molten fire, pushing through her until the intensity of it made her scream, though the sound was lost in the depths of the water, and even the accompanying roll of flame had little effect down here.

Coming! he warned. *Coming, now!*

Her body gripped him hard, her orgasm milking that long, thick cock of every ounce of Dragon cum he had to offer. Instinctively she knew she could allow him to fertilize an egg with a thought. In time, she would. But now they had work to do.

Once she could breathe again. Once her body settled down from this wonderful haze of luscious, weightless afterglow.

Calm, now, though still locked in each other's embrace, they floated to the surface, too entangled to break free, too contented to care.

Cerulean chuckled softly.

"What are you thinking?"

"What we would look like to Humans who caught a glimpse of us frolicking in the water... We're the stuff legends are made of."

Lying with her cheek on his chest, their tails still tangled together, she had to agree. He was the stuff legends were made of. And the miracle of it was, he was hers.

"I should warn you..."

She raised up her head to see if he looked as guilty as his voice sounded. Uh-oh. This was going to be good.

"Turtles give me gas."

"Oh no. Now that is foul." She dove back under, trying to escape the deadly cloud.

Sorry.

You are a disgusting creature. Get away from me.

Oh, yeah? You just killed a whole school of fish.

That's your fault. You could have warned me about the turtles.

I did. I told you to chew them, didn't I?

Well, next time, let's cook them.

OK. I can do that.

She laughed at visions of turtle, slow roasted with Dragon breath.

* * *

"Careful. I smell something... I think we're close."

"Stinks like sulfur."

Cerulean laughed.

"What? Did you fart again?"

"No, but we produce sulfur -- that's how we breathe fire."

"Yeah, well, that doesn't mean I'm ever gonna love the smell of Dragon farts. Stay downwind of me."

"Whatever you say, lover. Look. There."

"*There*. Right. Like I can tell where there is."

"You want me to point? I think I'd crash. North, OK? And Esterion? Be careful, please. We're not impervious to everything. There wouldn't be any point in our breathing fire if we weren't just as combustible as we are in Human form."

"You sound like my mother."

"Good. She didn't get past four millennia without learning a thing or two."

"She told me not to trust you."

"Humph. Did not."

"Did to. I... I thought... the way you greeted her, when you first arrived, I wondered if you'd been lovers."

He disappeared from her field of vision -- he'd been flying point -- only to reappear beside her, as if he'd done a midair summersault. "Were you jealous, my love? Of me? I'm flattered."

"I shouldn't have been. I know how Dragons are. There are so few of us... It's just... my mother? That's sort of... icky."

"Esterion, my love, should I ever think to invite anyone else to our bed, and I have no plans to do so, I assure you, it would not be your mother. We've been friends, colleagues, members of the same order, but not that. Never lovers."

"Good." She circled to the left, riding the currents, following the scent of sulfur.

They'd been flying for hours, into the wind, following any hint of a change they could find on the air. The sky had grown progressively darker, more ominous, the occasional snow squalls more frequent. It was colder here, too, though there was no sign that the snow might come down in volumes heavy enough to lie on the Earth's surface, the way Cerulean said it had in ages past.

They were getting close to the source, of that she was sure. Which was good, because her newfound wings were about to fall off.

"Let's head for that mountain peak, over there -- to the north -- and see if there might be anything worth seeing. There's a lot of wind shear trying to take off from the summit, but the slopes on the west side are pretty safe."

"Where are we, anyway?"

"Wyoming. This area was once a huge National Park, known as Yellowstone. I used to love to come here and watch the geysers. Lot of geo-thermal activity. Seemed like a logical place to start."

Logical... if there was any logic left in the world. Pensive, Esterion followed him to the mountain he'd mentioned. The smell of sulfur was getting thicker. They circled the mountain to land on the west slope. Wind sliced across her wings like little knife blades. If this was better...

Landing with a distinctively uneven thud, she threw up a wing as a wave of ash enveloped her, tiny hints of spark evident everywhere.

No, no, no, come, we can't stay here, come!

I'm so tired...

That's the air. Not enough oxygen! Come! You must get up, must fly, now! Esterion!

Why he was still conscious, Cerulean didn't take too much time to consider. Maybe it was fear, or adrenaline. Both certainly kicked in as he swooped down over her, scooping up her half-unconscious form without actually landing. He'd never have been able to launch with her in his arms. As it was, his hold on her was a tad precarious. But if he could get her around the mountain, into some fresher air...

The wind currents were with them this time, the tail wind helping to push them along, but also bringing the cloud of foul sulfides chasing after them. Clearing the mountain wasn't enough. The air was better, but only marginally, and his visibility was limited. He rolled, getting a better grip on his cargo as she dropped tightly against his chest. There, that at least was one less thing to worry about. Now if he could avoid running into...

Shit!

With a mighty thrust of his overburdened wings, Cerulean shot straight up, narrowly avoiding a nasty outcropping of jagged rocks. A mountain goat bawled plaintively at him, looking lost and alone in the swirling mists of poisonous gas, but he had enough to carry. *Up!* he ordered the goat. *Up and over. Across the top.* He didn't know if the goat could actually understand him, but it turned, whether from direction or fear, and, blatting plaintively, disappeared up the almost sheer face of the mountain into the clouds.

Up and over, he told himself as well. The air would be thinner up above, but the hot, heavy gasses would sink. Wouldn't they? If he could clear the top of the mountain...

Thrum.

The first beat of her wings hit like music to his ears. A little laggy, and not quite timed perfectly to his, but a sure sign she was coming back around. Another, stronger this time as they entered the upper cloud cover. And another. *Yes.* Air. Real air, not noxious gasses. Soon her wings were beating in perfect time with his, lifting them up, up, and over, till they were gliding high and free, above the dark gray clouds that covered everything for miles. He had no idea what direction they were going -- not now -- but they were clear, and he wasn't about to drop back down to see where they were.

He wasn't about to let go of her. Nor did she seem anxious to try to break his hold. Instead she snuggled more tightly against him, her neck pressed against his, her head fanned out below his lower jaw. To an observer they might have appeared one giant two headed beast -- with four wings, one set behind the other, like a butterfly.

She was a soldier, a Ranger. She had to know she couldn't have put herself in a much more vulnerable -- or protected -- position. The enormity of her complete trust hit him harder than the first chemical recognition had. What they shared was more than chemical attraction and a finely honed lust. The fear he'd felt when she fell was more than an instinctive need to protect her.

Somewhere in the last three days he'd given her a part of himself he didn't want back. The thought set itself free before he could rein it back in. *I love you, Esterion.*

The beat of her wings stilled as they glided into a new slipstream. The silence hung between them for the space of his heartbeat. Her cheek pressed against his, and from the corner of his eye he saw the tears glittering in hers. *I didn't think anyone would ever love me again.*

I do.

You are more to me than the gifts you've given me -- you are my purpose, my world. I love you, too, Cerulean. You're all I want, all I need, till the end of time.

"Let's hope that doesn't get here too soon."

He felt her head jerk up, felt the shock hit her as she noticed the horizon. "What the fuck is that?"

"Looks like the end of time..."

Chapter Five

The towering cloud of molten fire shot high into the atmosphere, raining down ash and lava and clouds of billowing gas. Even this far out -- it had to be at least five miles off -- they could already feel the waves of heat undulating toward them.

"Looks like a volcano erupting," Cerulean observed dryly.

A tail slapped his ass. "Duh. What volcano? Where the hell are we? Are there supposed to be volcanoes here?"

He frowned. "Honestly, I don't know. I got disoriented back there. And the sun's pretty much right above us. That's no help."

"Then look at it from the other direction. We haven't flown far enough to have left the continent. What other volcanoes might have erupted?"

"There are volcanoes like Mt. St. Helens all along the West Coast, from Seattle on down all the way to Los Angeles, but the only other one I remember reading about anywhere near Yellowstone is called the Craters of the Moon, in Idaho. Due west of Yellowstone."

"So we're not lost. We're in Idaho."

He snorted. "Same difference."

She didn't laugh. "Let's keep flying west, Cerulean. I've got a bad feeling about this."

West... he caught the line of her thinking. She wanted to check out Mt. St. Helens. And if she was right, things were a whole lot worse than even he'd imagined.

* * *

The great Black Dragon screeched out a roar of rage, setting the dry grass ablaze. "Why did you wait so long to send for me? He has almost a week's head start on us now. They're Dragons. They could be almost anywhere in this length of time!"

"No, they couldn't. She can't shift!"

"She can't shift? And you want me to believe she's *my* daughter?"

"Oh, trust me. Her temper alone proves her lineage."

"Then why didn't you stop him from taking off with her? Surely you could have handled one pup of a Blue."

"At the time I rather thought it was a good idea! She's well past her Age of Majority. They linked telepathically before he even touched down."

"Then what is the problem?"

"The problem? The problem? Are you not listening to me? They didn't come back! Esterion would never have been gone this long if everything were all right. She knew the Kobolds would be coming back."

"Kobolds? Is that what you call them? Little green mutants, didn't quite make Orc stature? I had a couple for lunch on the way here. Quite tasty."

"Well, there are a few hundred more out there, ready to attack us. Why don't you go have a few more? And find our daughter while you're at it!"

Pajja raised a claw to pick a scrap of leather from between his teeth. "If you want the little things dead, all you had to do was say so." With one lunge he took off, his huge wingspan barely clearing the front gates. Ten minutes later he was back, a ring of charred bodies lighting the horizon in his wake. "Anything else I can do for you, my dear?"

She felt like shifting herself, so she could singe that stupid grin off his face. "Yes, you idiot! Our daughter?"

He looked affronted. "I did light a signal fire."

Before Omellain could think of more inventive names to call him, a Human ran up -- Amy, one of Esterion's Rangers -- waving frantically and pointing toward the skyline. "M'Lady!"

Omellain did shift then, the move so much a part of her nature it was practically effortless. With her superior Dragon vision, she could make out two forms, flying low and sluggish as they crested the mountain behind them.

"Dragons, M'Lady! Two more Dragons!"

Omellain closed her eyes and counted to three. It would not do to eat one of her Humans, no matter how annoying he was at the moment. "Thank you, Walter." She took another look at the approaching Dragons. Yes, there were two, a large Blue and a slightly smaller Red. Esterion had shifted! Her joy was tempered by the slow beat of their wings and their bedraggled appearance. "Medics! Get the medics!"

* * *

Steady now, steady... feet down, lean back...

I'm not going to crash land again. I've got it this time, honest.

I know you do. His mental voice projected confidence.

She could have loved him for that alone. Her landings were still a bit bumpy, but thanks to his patience, and more experience than she cared to think about, they were getting better.

Looks like we have a welcoming committee.

Oh, fuck. Is that who I think it is?

The Black?

That's Pajja, isn't it?

You've never met him?

She snorted, raising a small cone of fire. *He and Mom aren't exactly on speaking terms.*

Oh, wonderful. "Hello, your Majesty, I'm Cerulean -- you remember me, son of Gortáyrn. You remember Gortáyrn? You two fought over my mother and you banished them to live with the Humans. I've brought your daughter back, looking like road kill. Good to see you too, Sir."

Esterion broke into hiccupping laughter that produced a small rain of firestorms. "Don't... make... me... laugh! That landing in the Black Hills was a tad hard on the ribs."

"Yes, my love. I shall endeavor to be completely serious."

Which naturally started her laughing again, dooming any chance she had of a smooth landing. Or apparently landing at all. She rather tumbled out of the sky, feet first, indeed, but so overbalanced she wobbled once and fell on her back, gasping for breath, shooting off fire like a Dragon-sized sparkler, and holding her bruised ribs.

"Medic! I warned you, Cerulean! What have you done to her, you idiot? I'll steam your hide off! Medics! Get down here now!"

"Omellain."

"Shut up," Mother snapped.

Pajja snorted a tiny plume of fire. "Omellain, calm yourself. She's laughing. She may be hurt, but it can't be that bad if she's laughing."

Esterion reached out with a wingtip, drawing Cerulean to her side, grasping at the readily offered foreleg he held out for support as she tried to right herself. She couldn't. Instead she flopped back to the trampled grass, gasping for breath and laughing all the harder.

Pajja grinned down at her. "Point conceded. She's mine." Damn, but a Dragon grin was a tad scary. She'd have to remember that, lest she frighten a few Humans to death.

Omellain popped him with the flat of her furred wing. "I told you she was yours, asshole."

"Yes, you did, but since you were one hundred and seventy-five years late making that announcement, I wanted to see for myself." Pajja turned to Cerulean, ignoring Esterion's cackling attempts to regain her composure. "As for you -- Son of Gortáyrn, I believe?"

"Yes, Sir. Your Majesty."

"You may call me Pajja. How is your father?"

"Good, last I saw him. Living in Scotland. Started a colony there."

"Rugged country. Always liked it. Your father and I used to go fishing in the lochs." There was a fond remembrance in Pajja's voice. Then he turned serious. "From

the looks of you two, you've been up to more than making plans to hatch eggs. Let us take this inside. I believe we have need of a conference."

They shifted -- Dragon bodies would never fit through the door. Cerulean hung back waiting for the older couple to enter the keep first. "One hundred seventy-five?" he whispered. "I thought you told me you were one hundred and seventy-four. Lying about your age, dear?"

She rested her head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her waist. "I think he was adding in the incubation period. I mean Mom kinda had to know as soon as she laid the egg."

"Maybe she thought it was one of those odd sulfurous smells..."

"Odd sulfur... Cerulean, did you fart? Oh my gods, you smell like a Dragon. Stay away from me you foul beast!"

"You haven't fed me anything but raw fish for a week. What do you expect?"

"Fed you? Where in this contract I haven't signed does it say anything about me cooking? I can swing an axe, toss a javelin, bring a wild boar down at two hundred meters with a single shot from my bow, skin it, cut it up, and bring it home, but I'm sure as hell not going to cook it."

"Relax, darling. I can cook."

"Really?"

"I'll have you know I graduated from *Le Cordon Bleu International* top of my class. I know a dozen ways to cook wild boar."

Her stomach grumbled loudly. "Cooked any way would be good. Might have helped the turtles a lot, too."

"Taking the shells off would have helped, too..."

Epilogue

Pajja looked again at the crudely sketched map of the North American continent. Large Xs marked the approximate locations of active volcanoes across the western coast. Almost a third of the continent was affected. What was happening to the atmosphere... "Thoroughly and completely screwed," he agreed with his future son-in-law.

"I'd guess all of them were class one or two," Cerulean added. "They weren't super volcanoes, by any means, or we couldn't have gotten close enough to report on them without getting cooked. But there's a cloud of gas half a mile thick hanging everywhere. It must have started within the last few weeks, because the wildlife's still out there, trying to find a way to escape the fires. But we didn't find any Humans, anywhere."

"None?" Omellain gasped. "I know Von hadn't found any other camps searching with the helicopter before they ran out of fuel, but we always thought there had to be more, further west, or south... beyond her reach. She has a crew working with generators and ham radios back at Camp David... they made contact with settlements in France and Germany, but we never found but these two camps here. But then, we never made contact with Scotland, either, and you said your father was there, Cerulean. They may well not have radios. Or generators."

Pajja watched the younger man's face as Omellain's news hit him. Concern rippled across his features, to be instantly buried as he reached for Esterion's hand, comforting her with his touch. "No, they didn't have generators. They were fine last I saw them, about six months ago. Prosperous colony, doing well. But no ties to technology."

He'd do. He'd make a fine life mate for this shield-maiden daughter of his. And she... she was the one he'd looked for. Strong, and stubborn, but willing to lean on Cerulean, her resolve tempered by his patience. She was the one who would lead in his place one day.

Pajja straightened his shoulders, bothered once again by the reminders that he wasn't getting any younger. The centuries had added up... added up into millennia. In time he would retreat to Tir na nÓg, but not yet. Not now. Once again the world needed him and his kind. "Get word to Vanessa and Jackson -- Jackson is still with her?"

"Yes." It was Esterion who answered, calm in her assurance.

"Get word to the Rangers. They will have seen the snow. They will be ready to move out. Have them gather all the civilians and meet us at the coast. I know of at least three Merchant Marine sailing ships running the new trade routes. As few of the Humans as there are to move, two should be sufficient. Omellain, if you can show me to your ham radio base, we can save weeks of far less efficient communications."

He slipped an arm around her, and for the first time in over one hundred and seventy years, she didn't resist. Instead she leaned her head on his chest, contented for the moment to accept the comfort he offered.

"Thank you," she whispered, by way of a truce.

"I still care about the Humans, my love, even if I do fear they are doomed to repeat their own mistakes over and over again. This is not of their doing. Not directly. And it might be Earth's only salvation."

"Salvation? How do you figure?"

"If the cloud cover doesn't shut out the sun, and kill everything on the planet, it might reverse the melt off. The polar ice caps won't reform overnight, but where there's snow, there is hope for a world free of global warming. Maybe this is a new beginning for Earth."

"Maybe this is a new beginning for all of us." Esterion held out her hand. "Welcome to the side of the Renegades, Father."

Renegades? Was that what Omellain thought they were? Well, perhaps she was right. Pajja smiled. He'd always been a bit of a renegade himself. He'd certainly never chosen the easy path. "So be it," he agreed. "Let us leave this land to its own future. Ours is in Scotland." He lifted a mug of purified water in toast. "Renegades."

"Renegades," his family echoed around him. He smiled. Family. He liked the sound of that word, too.

The End

of this chapter...

Stay tuned. The adventure continues in

Dragon's Watch 3: Rangers

Translation Guide

Cormamin lindua ele lle -- My heart sings to see thee

Nae saian luume' -- It has been too long

Amin naa tualle -- I am your servant

Elen sila lumenn omentilmo -- A star shall shine on the hour of our meeting

Ascarer -- Impetuous one

Naa dolle lost? -- Is your head empty?

Lle quena i'lambe tel' Eldalie? -- Do you speak Elven?

Amin khiluva lle a' gurtha ar' thar, a'maelamin -- I will follow you to death and beyond, my beloved

Auta miqula orqu -- Go kiss an Orc

Shelby Morgen

Shelby Morgen must be insane. What else would have led her to start her own business -- as a growing online publishing company? Shelby shares her belief in electronic publishing with her long time friend and partner, Bill, her husband of 23 -- err, make that 24 -- years. Perhaps the insanity is contagious.

Shelby loves writing off-beat tales that defy as many rules as possible. She likes chocolate with her peanut butter, Suspense with her Romance, and kink with her sex. She's always had a hard time keeping Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Paranormal from mixing with her kink. Fortunately for Shelby, electronic publishing has opened many new doors for cross-genre authors and artists.

Visit Shelby's websites -- www.MargaretRiley.com to see what she's been up to as an editor, and www.ShelbyMorgen.com for her latest releases. For a heads up on new stuff, you're welcome to join her Yahell group -- <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ShelbyMorgen/join>.

When you can catch her awake and not buried up to her eyebrows in work, Shelby will assure you this is the best job in the world -- she's the keeper of dreams.