

Chapter One av Sparks Fly av Katie McAllister

“The lady is here to see you.”

Baltic turned at the voice, obviously startled to hear it since he had been alone in the upstairs corridor. “What foolishness is this?”

The heavily varnished wooden paneling that ran the length of the upper floor of the three-hundred year old pub melted into a dirt yard dotted with odd wooden figures.

Baltic glared first at the wooden figures, then at the man who approached him. “Ysolde! Why have you drawn me into one of your visions of the past? And why must you include that murderous bastard in it?”

“Don’t blame me, blame my inner dragon.” I sighed to myself and folded my arms over the couple of shirts I had been about to hang up in the wardrobe, which, like the corridor outside our bedroom, had faded into the scene before us. “Although I have to say, if it’s going to make me watch episodes from your past, you might as well be here, too. Who is that? Oh, Constantine. And look, it’s Baltic version 1.0, all sexy and shirtless and hacking away at something with a sword.”

“I have better things to do than relive unimportant events,” my Baltic, the Baltic of the present day growled, transferring his glare from Constantine, the former silver wyvern and once his friend, later his most hated enemy, to me. “Make the vision stop.”

“I would if I could, but they never do until they’re good and ready...hey, where are you going?”

Baltic, with a rude word, turned on his heel and marched away. “I have spent the last twelve days chasing Thala across all of Europe and half of Asia. I have work to do, Mate. You may indulge yourself with this vanity, but I will not.”

“Vanity! I like that! It’s not a vanity. And you can’t just leave my vision like that!” I yelled after him, watching with a growing sense of injustice as he disappeared around the side of a small hut. “They’re valuable sources of information! Kaawa says we’re supposed to learn from them, to glean facts about what is important to us now. Baltic? Well, dammit! He left! That rotter.”

I slapped my hands on my legs and spun around as the vision of Constantine approached the other man who stood in a cluster of quintains and man-sized targets.

“Well, I’m not going to be so obstinate that I don’t learn whatever it is my inner dragon is trying to tell me. Let’s see, what do we have here...obviously, we’re in some sort of a training yard, and since Baltic isn’t frothing at the mouth at the sight of Constantine, evidently this vision is from a time when they were still friends. Hello, my love. I don’t suppose you can hear me, let alone see me?”

The vision Baltic didn’t react, not that I expected him to. The people in the visions my inner dragon self, long dormant and only recently starting to wake up, had provided me were just that—visions of events in the past to which I could watch and listen, but not interact.

Constantine, clad in wool leggings and a tunic bearing a gold-embroidered dragon on a field of black, strode past the empty sword-fighting targets to the occupied one, his attitude cocky, while his face was arranged in an expression implying sympathy. “Did you hear me?” he asked as he stopped at the side of the man who was diligently hacking away at the straw and wood target with an extremely big sword.

“I heard. It is of no matter to me.”

I spent a few moments in admiration at the interplay of his muscles as Baltic continued to swing and thrust his sword into the target, his bare back shining with sweat.

“It always did make my knees weak to see you wield a sword,” I told the vision Baltic, moving around to see the front of him. His face was different, yet familiar to me, his hair dark ebony then, his chin more blunted. “I like your hair the dark chocolate color it is now. And

your chin, as well, although you certainly were incredibly sexy before Thala resurrected you. And your chest...oh, my.” I fanned myself with a bit of one of the shirts I was holding.

“Alexei says you have no choice. He says it is the command of your father.” Constantine cocked one eyebrow at Baltic, moving swiftly to the side when Baltic swung wide.

“You look the same,” I informed Constantine. “Evidently being brought back as a shade didn’t affect your appearance, whereas resurrection does. Interesting. I’ll have to talk to Kaawa about that the next time I see her. Still, you were handsome then, Constantine. But you didn’t hold a candle to Baltic.”

“My father does not control my life,” Baltic snapped, his breath ragged now as he continued to swing at the vaguely human-shaped target. “Nor does Alexei.”

I settled back against one of the targets, prepared to watch and learn what I could from the vision.

“He is our wyvern. You owe him your fealty,” Constantine said, stiffening. “You must do as he says. You must meet the lady.”

“Do not lecture me, Constantine,” Baltic snarled, turning on him. Sweat beaded on his brow, and matted the dark hair on his chest. Constantine took a step back when Baltic gestured toward him with the sword. “You are Alexei’s heir, not the wyvern himself, and I do not take well to being ordered about.”

“Pax!” Constantine said, throwing his hands up in the air in a gesture of defeat. “I did not come to argue with you, old friend. I wanted simply to warn you that the lady had arrived, and Alexei is expecting you to do your duty and claim her as mate.”

I had been idly wondering to myself when exactly this moment had taken place—judging by the comments, it predated not only my own birth, but even the time when Baltic had been wyvern of the Black dragon sept—but as the two men argued, I had a sudden insight.

“This is about the First Dragon’s demand I redeem you, isn’t it?” I asked the past Baltic.

“This has something to do with whatever it is I’m supposed to accomplish to erase the stain on your soul. But that was due to the death of the innocent, and this...a mate?”

It took a minute before Constantine’s words sank into my brain, but when they did, the hairs on the back of my neck rose. I stalked forward to the two men, glaring at the former image of the love of my life, uncaring that this was only a vision. “You were supposed to take someone else as a mate? Who?”

“I’ve told Alexei of my decision,” Baltic said, snatching up his discarded tunic, and wiping his face with it before sheathing his sword. “I have not changed my mind.”

He turned and started up the hill of what was obviously the outer bailey of an early stone castle, stopping when Constantine called after him, “And what of the First Dragon? Will you defy him, as well as Alexei? You are his only living son, Baltic.”

“I know what I am,” Baltic snarled and continued walking.

“The lady wants you. The First Dragon is reported to desire you to take her as mate. Alexei has commanded it in order to avoid a war. Do you really think you have a choice in the matter?”

The word that Baltic uttered was archaic, but quite, quite rude, and ironically, one his present-day self had spoken just a few minutes before. I watched his tall, handsome figure as he disappeared into crowds of dragons going about their daily business, my eyes narrowing as Constantine suddenly smiled.

“Why do I have the feeling that you know something?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer, of course. He just continued to smile for a few seconds, then he, too strolled off toward the upper bailey, leaving me alone in the practice yard.

“Who was she?” I bellowed after them, achieving nothing but the venting of my spleen. “Who the hell was she?”

No one answered me, of course. Drat them all.

“Well, I’m not going to stand for being left clueless about important episodes from the past yet again. I’ve had it! I’m going to find out what’s going on if it kills me. Again. Which it won’t. Oh, hell, now I’m talking to myself while in a vision. How pathetic is that?”

I looked around me again, trying to figure out where exactly I was. It was fall, judging by the color of the leaves on the trees in the little town that straggled down the hill below me. Behind was a large mound flattened at the top, bearing a circular stone and wood tower, all of which was surrounded by a tall wooden wall. “Motte and bailey castle,” I murmured, racking my frequently incomplete memory for a time period of such structures.

All I could remember was that they were popular well before the time I was born. I took a deep breath and I marched up the hill to the tower keep, automatically moving around people and objects that weren’t really there, all the while muttering to myself about dragons and their stubborn ways, with an emphasis on one ebony-eyed wyvern in particular.

The stone and wood keep wasn’t much to look at, not nearly so grand as my father’s had been. I paused before the door to the main tower where I knew the keep’s owner would reside, and considered who might live there. “Has to be the black dragons, since Constantine mentioned Alexei. And Baltic wasn’t yet the heir, which means he probably slept in the garrison with all the other soldiers and unmarried men.

When I girl, living with the humans I thought of as my family, my sister and I were strictly forbidden from ever stepping so much as one toe into the soldier’s barracks. Many were the times that we lay together in bed, speculating just what went on in the forbidden lower level of the keep, but a healthy respect for our mother kept us out of such a tantalizing spot.

Later, when Baltic and I finally found each other, and he had built Dauva (his stronghold in Latvia), I stayed out of the men’s quarters by habit. Although I could have claimed the right as Baltic’s mate to visit it, it had never occurred to me to break the rules and see just what went on in such a place. My upbringing was just too strong to overcome.

“We’ve come a long way, baby,” I paraphrased as I strode into the lower level of the keep, looking around with interest. There were pallets everywhere, stuffed with straw and strewn with items of clothing and armor. Some men were asleep on them, while others huddled in a circle dicing, and further into the smoky, ill-lit room, another group squatted next to braziers, clutching tankards and talking quietly to themselves. “This is somewhat disappointing,” I told the visions of dragons from the past. “Where are the racy sights of naked men doing terribly immoral things that my mother always swore was what went on down here? Where are the camp followers enticing men into lustful acts? Where are the orgies?”

“The human woman who raised you had no knowledge of dragonkin,” a voice said loudly behind me.

I spun around to see Baltic—my Baltic—in the doorway, his hands on his hips as he glanced around the room.

“Came back, did you? I knew you couldn’t stay away from the past.”

He rolled his eyes at the teasing note in my voice, striding over to me. “I returned for you when you did not come with me, as a proper mate should.”

“Uh huh. So, which pallet was yours?”

“Why do you care?”

I smiled up at his frown. “I want to see where you curled up at night.”

“Why?” he asked again.

“Because it’s something from your past, and kind of wicked, at least according to my mother. It’s where you were naked and slept and had naughty thoughts. And speaking of naughty thoughts, just who is this female you were supposed to take as a mate?”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me deeper into the room, where a jointed wooden screen marked a separate sleeping area, affording it with a goodly amount of privacy, even if it was not a closed room proper. “I did not sleep with the others. I was accorded a place here.”

“Because of your father, you mean?”

He nodded. I sat on the long, narrow bed and looked around the living quarters, bouncing slightly as I did so. “You had a real bed, one stuffed with feathers, although the ropes holding your mattress are kind of squeaky. Is that the same chest you had at Dauva?”

“Yes. Are you done? I wish to return to the pub. I have many things to do.”

I slid my hand down the bear fur covering of the bed, and leaned back on my elbows. “Did you entertain in this little private room, my love? Did you have girls here?”

He wanted to roll his eyes again, I could tell, but Baltic keeps a firm grip on how many times he gives in to that act, and instead beetled his brows at me. “Do you wish to know how many lovers I had before you?”

“No. I just want to know if any of them ever shared this little love nest.”

“No.”

“Ah. Good.” I smiled and kicked off my sandals, rubbing my legs and feet along the fur in what I hoped was a seductive manner. “Perhaps you’d like to change that?”

Interest kindled in his eyes even as his lips were about to chastise me for wasting his valuable time. “Are you sure you would not prefer to wait until such time as I was with a lover?” he asked me with a completely deadpan face. “I know how it inflames you to engage in lovemaking while others are present.”

“Oh!” I sat up and slapped my hand on the skin. “I do not have kinky sex fantasies! Just because I thought it was kind of fun for us to make love with our vision past selves doesn’t mean I am a swinger! I would never want to see you with another woman! Unless it was my past self...er...I wasn’t yet born at the time of this vision, was I?”

“No.”

“OK, then. It’s just you and me. In your old bed. With the guys in the garrison just beyond that screen.”

He gave in and had another eye roll, but removed his clothing as he did so. “I will indulge you, but only because we have been separated, and it is the way of dragons to claim their mates upon return.”

I giggled as I squirmed my way out of my shirt. “You already did that when you returned at three o’clock this morning. Twice. In a way that left me utterly breathless for hours.”

“And yet you seem to have your breath again,” he murmured as he whisked off the last of his clothing, kneeling on the bed to stroke a hand up my belly to my breasts.

I reached for him, shivering with pleasure as I slid my hands along the muscles of his arms and shoulders. “I expect you can do something about that.”

“Perhaps,” he murmured, his cheeks nuzzling my breasts at the same time his hands busied themselves with removing my bra.

One hand slid down to the waist band of my jeans, about to unzip them, but a sudden shadow looming overhead had me gasping.

The black-haired Baltic of the past stormed into the room, quickly removed his clothing, and flung himself down onto the bed, right on top of where I lay.

“Whoa now,” I said, scooting to the very edge, looking down at the naked man who had once been my Baltic. “That startled me. Er...is he going to be here for a while?”

“Who’s what?” a voice asked behind me. I spun around, staggering slightly when the world spun with me for a few moments, finally resolving itself into a familiar, if uninspiring, bedroom atop the old pub. “Are you all right? You look funny, like you smell cabbage cooking.”

“I’m fine, lovey.” I smiled at the brown-haired boy watching me with eyes that always seemed to be far too old for their nine years. “And there’s nothing wrong with cabbage, despite your step-father’s insistence that it was put on this earth only to try his patience. That stir-fried cabbage with peanut sauce that Pavel made last night was to die for, which you’d

know if you had tried it.”

Brom wrinkled up his nose. Always a placid child, if a tad bit eccentric, in the month that had passed since our house had been destroyed, he’d seem to have adopted Baltic as a hero-figure. I’d caught him more than once watching Baltic closely, as if fascinated with the way a wyvern acted, but I think it went deeper than mere curiosity about the dragons with whom we now found ourselves living. He’d started parroting Baltic’s likes and dislikes, even going so far as to spurn food I knew he didn’t really mind.

“Are you going into London today?”

“Nice change of subject, and yes, I am.” I shook off the last few dregs of anger over the idea that the First Dragon had tried to force Baltic into taking a mate, and finished putting away the shirts I’d bought in a local shop. “Where is Nico taking you today?”

“He wants to go see a history museum.” Brom looked thoughtful. “It has ships and stuff, but no bodies, although Nico says there might be some surgeon’s tools. When are we going to get our own house so I can set up my lab again? You said you’d start looking right away, and it’s been forever.”

“Four weeks is hardly forever.” I smiled and gave him one of the three daily hugs he allowed.

“But I’ll ask Baltic again about a house. Would you mind if we lived outside of England?”

He’s likely to want to be near Dauva in order to oversee the rebuilding, and I hate to make him travel between here and Riga all the time.”

“Are there mummies in…” His face screwed up in thought.

“Latvia?” I finished. “I have no idea, although it is close enough to visit St. Petersburg, which I know has some fine museums. Whether or not they have mummies is beyond me. You can ask Nico, though. Perhaps he’ll know.”

“OK. Will he come with us? Because he’s a green dragon, and not in Baltic’s sept, I mean?”

“I’m sure Drake will give him permission, since he’s agreed to let Nico tutor you for a year. Oh, you probably want your allowance, don’t you? Let me get my purse.”

Brom’s expression turned painful for a few seconds before his shoulders sagged, and he said with obvious reluctance, “Baltic gave it to me this morning when he got home from Nepal. But if you wanted to give me more, that would be OK.”

I laughed and gave his shoulder a little pat. “I’m sorry to have burst your little scheme to get money from both of us, but you really don’t need more than one weekly allowance.”

“How am I going to buy supplies when we get a house?” he asked as I herded him before me back into the narrow hallway. The floor and walls were wooden and uneven, and made me feel like I was walking at an angle. I didn’t complain, though; I found the small pub run by some human friends of Pavel, Baltic’s second-in-command, charming and quaint in its Elizabethan Englishness. Baltic insisted we would be safe there should Thala, his former lieutenant, decide to try to kill us again. I had no doubt that he would keep us safe no matter where we were located, but like Brom, I was growing tired of such a transient lifestyle, and yearned for my own home where we could settle down once and for all.

“When we have room for you to set up another mummification lab, I’ll buy you some supplies. Although, really, Brom, couldn’t you find some other hobby than mummifying animals?”

“You said it was illegal to mummify a human,” he pointed out as I tapped on the door to his tutor’s room. “Besides, I don’t know where to find a dead person.”

Nico, an auburn-haired, studious green dragon who had charge of Brom’s education for the last few months, greeted me and grabbed up a small backpack. “Did Brom tell you that we’re going to the naval museum today?”

“Yes, despite the fact that it won’t have bodies.” I shared a smile with Nico before reminding Brom to behave himself. “I won’t be back until just before dinner, but Pavel said he was going to cook up something special, so be home by six.”

“Absolutely,” Nico agreed, and with a glance at his watch, hustled Brom down the stairs. I heard the rumble of male voices drift upwards after them, and waited, wondering how best to broach the subject of my vision.

Baltic appeared at the head of the stairs, his hand quickly whipping away from his pocket as he spotted me.

“You didn’t!” I said, frowning as he approached, Pavel on his heels. “Baltic, really, it’s too bad of you!”

Guilt chased across his face, followed immediately by a look of pure seduction as he swept me up in his arms, and bathed me in dragon fire. “Cherie, what is it you’re frowning over? Could it be that you have missed me in the last ten minutes as much as I’ve missed you?”

“Whenever you call me ‘cherie’ I know you’re feeling guilty about something,” I said, melting against him even as I giggled a little. “Of course I missed you, and not just for the last ten minutes. It’s been a hellish twelve days while you were trying to find Thala, not only because I was worried sick about you, but because you weren’t here to drive me wild with desire, but that’s not the point. Brom did not need more money. And don’t deny you gave him some because I saw you putting your wallet away.”

“We’ve spoken of this subject already,” he murmured against my lips, pulling me brazenly against his hips. “Can you think of nothing more you’d rather discuss after my absence?” “Why, yes, I can.” I almost purred as I let him kiss me, amused that he thought he could distract me in such a way before I realized that he had a very good record of doing just that. I gave myself up to the sensation of his fire sinking into me, of the hardness of his body against mine, of his scent, that masculine, spicy scent that seemed to kindle my own dragon fire. And when his mouth moved against mine, I knew I didn’t stand a chance. I kissed him with all the passion I possessed, making him growl into my mouth as I tugged on his hair, wordlessly demanding more of his dragon fire.

Pavel passed by us, murmuring something about waiting for Baltic in the sitting room, but even that didn’t stop me from welcoming Baltic’s fire with a little moan of my own. His tongue burned as it swept inside my mouth, his chest and legs hard when he pushed me up against the wall. I clung to his shoulders, rubbing myself against him, pulling hard first on my fire, and when that didn’t come, his to bathe us both in heat.

“Ysolde, if you do not stop attempting to seduce me in the hallway, I will take you right here,” Baltic said in a low voice filled with passion. “And while I would be happy to fulfill this latest of your secret fantasies, we risk shocking anyone who comes upstairs.”

I slid one hand down to pinch his adorable behind. “For the last time, you incredibly sexy dragon, I do not have sexual fantasies that are anything but perfectly ordinary, and certainly do not involve voyeurism. Besides, parts of me are still humming after the way you greeted me this morning when you arrived home. That was quite the homecoming.”

“I merely gave you the attention you were due.” Baltic raised an eyebrow seconds before he dived for my chest, his mouth and hands hot on my breasts. I squirmed against him, shifting his hands so I could have better access to his chest, wondering if I had time to indulge us both, but at that moment, my phone vibrated in my pocket and bellowed out a recording of one word: “Ysolde!”

Baltic raised his head from where he was licking the valley between my breasts, frowning something fierce. “Mate! I thought I told you to change your alarm sound.”

I giggled against his mouth, and nipped his bottom lip. “But it’s so perfect! Nothing catches my attention more than you saying my name. And speaking of attention, you should have stuck around that vision. It was most interesting.”

He ignored the emphasis I put on the words, wrapping his arms around my waist and lifting me off the ground as he squeezed tightly. “You try my patience, woman. I have no time for reminders of what happened in the past. I have lost twelve days chasing Thala, and there is

much work that I must accomplish in a short amount of time.”

I took a deep breath. “I wish I could ignore them, but I can’t. You’re not the only one who lost twelve days, my darling. When the First Dragon demanded I salvage your honor—”

“I’ve told you before that my honor is fine as it is.”

“When your father, the godlike ancestor of every dragon whoever was and whoever will be tells me to salvage your honor, then I’m not about to ignore anything that might help me do just that. Especially since you aren’t making it in the least bit easy for me.”

“If you choose to waste your time—”

“Waste my time? Waste my time!” I gasped, shoving at his shoulder. “I cannot believe that you would call my visions a waste of time!”

“You are being emotional, Ysolde,” he started to say, but I slapped both hands on his chest with a glare that by rights should have stripped his hair off his head.

“I am not being emotional!” I yelled. The echo of my voice along the wood-paneled hallway was quite audible. Baltic’s glossy dark chocolate eyebrows rose. “Fine! I’m emotional! I can’t help it. I’m hormonal right now.”

“Are you having your female time? I hope it will be over soon. I do not like having to wait for it to cease,” he said, passion firing in his eyes.

“People can hear us downstairs, you know, and you haven’t quite embarrassed me to death. Would you, perhaps, like to inquire as to the state of my bowels?” I took a deep breath when he looked like he was going to do just that. “What were we talking about that didn’t involve my bodily functions?”

“You being emotional. It is a good thing that I am a wyvern, and thus am able to control my emotions where you cannot.”

“Oh, I like that—”

“It is just like that time at Dragonwood when you tried to geld me with your eating dagger. You were most emotional then, as well. You remember that, do you not?”

I frowned for a few seconds as I tried to dig through what remained of my memory. “No...at Dragonwood? I tried to geld you? Are you sure?”

“Do you distrust my memory?” he asked. There was something about the innocent look on his face that made me suspicious, but there was nothing I could say to challenge his statement.

“Your memory of the past has never been in question, no,” I said slowly. “If you say I tried to cut off your noogies, then I assume I did so, but I’m also sure I had a very good reason for doing it. What did you do that made me so annoyed?”

“You are going straight to the meeting and back again,” he said, totally ignoring my question, setting me down to escort me down the narrow stairs to the main floor of the pub. “The driver will wait outside for you. I would accompany you myself, but the builders are ready to leave the country, and I must check with them before they do so.”

“You are getting more and more like Drake Vireo every day,” I told him, alternating between annoyance, and pure, unadulterated love. I decided that it was better to indulge the latter rather than former, and accordingly gave the tip of his nose a little lick before waving at Pavel as he stood talking to three men whom Baltic had engaged to begin the process of restoring Dauva.

“I am infinitely superior to the green wyvern,” Baltic said loftily, nodding to one of the blue dragons he’d hired as drivers for us. “And you must remember that I will do anything to keep you and Brom safe.”

“I know that, and I appreciate what it cost you to borrow some of Drake’s men to watch over Brom and me while you and Pavel were tracking Thala, but as I told you before you left, we’ll be fine. There’s no reason for Thala to want to harm Brom, and really, that goes for me, as well. As for you...well, she went to the considerable trouble of resurrecting you, so despite that whole situation of her blowing up the house on top of us, I don’t think she wants to kill

you. I think she was just frustrated, and angry, and felt cornered, and let loose on us because of that, not because of any murderous intent.”

“She did an exceptionally fine job of making me believe otherwise.”

I touched his shoulder. Although Thala’s destruction of the house hadn’t killed us—dragons being notoriously difficult to kill—it had done so much damage to Baltic’s back that even today, he still bore scars. “Well, I should say she has no reason to want to kill you, so therefore, she can’t gain anything by offing me. After all, you’re not like the other dragons who cork off if your mate dies.”

Baltic, who had been frowning at my slang, instantly switched into seductive mode, something he was wont to do whenever I mentioned the newly-discovered fact that he was a reeve, one of the very rare dragons who could have more than one mate. “I would not survive your death again, cherie,” he murmured against my lips, bathing me in a light sheen of his dragon fire. “Not a third time. It is for that reason I insist that you not see the archimage again.”

“We may not have a choice in the matter,” I said slowly, brushing off an infinitesimal bit of lint from his shoulder. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you earlier, but I reached Jack this morning. Do you remember him?”

“No.”

“He was apprenticed to Dr. Kostich at the same time I was—only Jack is a very gifted mage, and I’m...well, you know how my magic goes all wonky because I’m a dragon. Jack is now a full-fledged mage, and very talented, from what I heard, but even he says there’s just no one of the caliber we need to tackle Thala other than an archimage.”

Baltic watched me closely. I kissed his chin, knowing he wasn’t going to like what I had to say.

“There are other archimages,” he said.

“Two others, and one is out of reach while he’s on some sort of a magi retreat. The other is a woman I have had no experience with, and I suspect wouldn’t be overly easy to persuade to help catch a highly dangerous, partially psychotic half-dragon necromancer.”

“Thala is not that dangerous,” he said dismissively.

I pulled down the back of his shirt collar. “Have you looked at your back, lately? That dirge she sang brought down an entire three story house on top of us, Baltic. You can’t do that if you’re not able to tap into some pretty impressive power.”

He made a disgusted noise.

“I’m just saying that I think Dr. Kostich is going to be our only choice.”

“I do not like it.” Baltic’s frown was, as ever, a stormy thing to behold, but I had long learned to ignore them.

“Neither do I, but so long as mages wield arcane power, they are going to be the best bet for combating the dark power that necromancers use. I’m afraid, my delectable dragon, that it’s Dr. Kostich or nothing.”

His jaw worked, no doubt sorely tempted to tell me we’d do without my former employer, and head of the Otherworld, but we had few choices open to us.

“You and Pavel chased Thala for twelve straight days and nights,” I told him, my hands caressing his chest. “You know her better than anyone. You know what she’s capable of, you know how many outlaw dragons follow her. Can we bring her to justice without the aid of people outside our sept?”

“No.” I knew just how much it cost him to admit that. He took a deep breath, his eyes sparkling with the light of vengeance. “She has grown more powerful in the last month. I do not know where she is getting the members for her tribe of ouroboros dragons, but we encountered over thirty of them in Belgium, and another two dozen in Turkey. That she can lose that many members and still have the number of dragons we saw when we finally chased

her to Nepal..." He shook his head and didn't finish the sentence, clearly frustrated that he hadn't caught her to deal with her himself.

For a moment, I was stunned by what he said. "You ran into over fifty of Thala's ouroboros dragons before you lost them in the wilds of Nepal?"

"Fifty-eight."

"What happened to them?" I knew from the manner in which Baltic had greeted me upon his return that morning that he had no injuries, so it wasn't likely he'd fought the dragons.

His eyes grew hard and even shinier. "What do you think happened to them?"

"You didn't kill them?"

"Not alone. Pavel was with me."

I gawked at him. "Baltic!"

"They were trying to kill us," he pointed out, instantly quelling the lecture I was about to make. Although I had my doubts as to whether Thala's intentions with regards to Baltic were of the murderous nature, I knew from the past experience that her gang of outlaw ouroboros dragons, were much more cutthroat.

"I still don't like it."

"Your heart is too soft," he said, giving my behind another squeeze.

"That is not my heart, and you know full well I don't like killings. Which is why I wholly approve of the plan to bring Thala to the Otherworld Committee for justice. They can banish her to the Akasha, or something appropriate like that."

Baltic made a noncommittal noise that had me glancing sharply at him, but before I could do more than wonder, he said, "You will ask the archimage if there is another who could deal with Thala now that we know where she is."

"I thought you said she disappeared in Nepal?"

His lips thinned a little. "She did. But I suspect she has taken control of an aerie high in the Himalayas."

"The one I saw in my vision a few months ago?" I asked, remembering the cold, bleak stone building.

"That is the aerie, yes. It used to be held by Kostya, before Thala confined him there."

I shivered at the thought of being held prisoner in such a stark location. "All of that notwithstanding, I will ask Dr. Kostich, but I can tell you now there isn't anyone else to help us. And stop looking at me like that—I don't want to have to deal with him any more than you do, even though he's really not the horrible person you think he is."

"He is responsible for your death, Mate."

"You know as well as I do that he wasn't responsible for me dying a second time. Well, not directly responsible. Besides, I apologized about that, so you can stop looking like you're going to yell at me again. It's not as if I die so often that I deserve a lecture. Honestly, Baltic, you really are becoming just as bossy as Drake, and you know that only irritates me."

"I do not like you going where I cannot protect you," he said in a low grumble that was softened by the look of love in his beautiful onyx eyes. I melted against him, unable to resist the emotions I knew bound us so tightly together. "The other mates should come here, instead of you going into London."

"It's Aisling's turn to host the Mate's Union meeting, and even if it wasn't, I'm not going to live my life hiding in the shadows because Thala is on the loose." I kissed him quickly so as to avoid the temptation his mouth offered, and climbed into the back of the sleek dark blue car. "I'm going to do a little shopping before I meet with Aisling and May, and yes, I'll be careful, so you can stop fretting. Thala is in Nepal, not here in England."

"There is nothing to say she hasn't escaped."

"You left a whole bunch of Drake's guys to watch the borders, didn't you? Stop worrying. They'll tell you if she leaves the aerie."

“Assuming they see her,” he muttered darkly.

“I’m the first one to admit she’s powerful, but I don’t see her getting out of the country without someone noticing. I’ll be back before dinner. If Brom and Nico come home early, remind them that Brom’s vacation was officially over yesterday, and it wouldn’t hurt them to start on his lessons this afternoon. Oh, and Baltic?”

“Yes?” He leaned into the car.

I grabbed his head and pulled hard on the little core of dragonfire that slumbered inside me, letting it flow out to him as I kissed him again. “Perhaps later we can explore some more of your secret fantasies,” I whispered, smiling to myself at the look of mingled surprise and passion that flitted through his eyes.