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Chapter One

Gazing out at the quiet lake, I know the risk is worth it.

The water is still and smooth. Polished glass. Not a ripple of wind disturbs the dark surface. Low-rising mist drifts off liquid mountains floating against a purple-bruised sky. An eager breath shudders past my lips. Soon the sun will break.

Azure arrives, winded. She doesn't bother with the kickstand. Her bike clatters next to mine on the ground. 'Didn't you hear me calling? You know I can't pedal as fast as you.'

'I didn't want to miss this.'

Finally, the sun peeks over the mountains in a thin line of red-gold that edges the dark lake.

Azure sighs beside me, and I know she's doing the same thing I am—imagining how the early morning light will taste on her skin.

'Jacinda,' she says, 'we shouldn't do this.' But her voice lacks conviction.

I dig my hands into my pockets and rock on the balls of my feet. 'You want to be here as badly as I do. Look at that sun.'

Before Azure can mutter another complaint, I'm shucking off my clothes. Stashing them behind a bush, I stand at the water's edge, trembling, but not from the cold bite of early morning. Excitement shivers through me.

Azure's clothes hit the ground. 'Cassian's not going to like this,' she says.

I scowl. As if I care what he thinks. He's not my boyfriend. Even if he did surprise attack me in Evasive Flight Maneuvers yesterday and try to hold my hand. 'Don't ruin this. I don't want to think about him right now.'

This little rebellion is partly about getting away from him. *Cassian*. Always hovering. Always there. Watching me with his dark eyes. Waiting. Tamra can have him. I spend a lot of my time wishing he wanted her—that the pride would choose her instead of me. Anyone but me. A sigh shudders from my lips. I just hate that they're not giving me a choice.

But it's a long way off before anything has to be settled. I won't think about it now.

'Let's go.' I relax my thoughts and absorb everything humming around me. The branches with their gray-green leaves. The birds stirring against the dawn. Clammy mist hugs my calves. I flex my toes on the coarse rasp of ground, mentally counting the number of pebbles beneath the bottoms of my feet. And the familiar pull begins in my chest. My human exterior melts away, fades, replaced with my thicker draki skin.

My face tightens, cheeks sharpening, subtly shifting, stretching. My breath changes as my nose shifts, ridges pushing out from the bridge. My limbs loosen and

lengthen. The drag of my bones feels good. I lift my face to the sky. The clouds become more than smudges of gray. I see them as though I'm already gliding through them. Feel cool condensation kiss my body.

It doesn't take long. It's perhaps one of my quickest manifests. With my thoughts unfettered and clear, with no one else around except Azure, it's easier. No Cassian with his brooding looks. No Mom with fear in her eyes. None of the others, watching, judging, sizing me up.

Always sizing me up.

My wings grow, slightly longer than the length of my back. The gossamer width of them pushes free. They unfurl with a soft whisper on the air—a sigh. As if they, too, seek relief. Freedom.

A familiar vibration swells up through my chest. Almost like a purr. Turning, I look at Azure, and see she is ready, beautiful beside me. Iridescent blue. In the growing light, I note the hues of pink and purple buried in the deep blue of her draki skin. Such a small thing. I never noticed before.

Only now I see it, in the break of dawn, when we are meant to soar. When the pride forbids it. At night you miss so much.

Looking down, I admire the red-gold luster of my sleek arms. Thoughts drift. I recall a chunk of amber in my family's cache of precious stones and gems. My skin looks like that now.

Baltic amber trapped in sunlight. It's deceptive. My skin appears delicate, but it's as tough as armor. It's been a long time since I've seen myself this way. Too long since I've tasted sun on my skin.

Azure purrs softly beside me. We lock eyes—eyes with enlarged irises and dark vertical slits for pupils—and

I know she's over her complaints. She stares at me with irises of glowing blue, as happy as I am to be here. Even if we broke every rule in the pride to sneak off protected grounds. We're here. We're free.

On the balls of my feet, I spring into the air. My wings snap, wiry membranes stretching as they lift me up.

With a twirl, I soar.

Azure is there, laughing beside me, the sound low and guttural.

Wind rushes over us and sweet sunlight kisses our flesh. Once we're high enough, she drops, descends through the air in a blurring tailspin, careening toward the lake.

My lip curls. 'Show-off!' I call, the rumble of draki speech vibrating deep in my throat as she dives into the lake and remains underwater for several minutes.

As a water draki, whenever she enters water, gills appear on the side of her body, enabling her to survive submerged . . . well, forever, if she chooses. One of the many useful talents our dragon ancestors assumed in order to survive. Not all of us can do this, of course. I can't.

I do other things.

Hovering over the lake, I wait for Azure to emerge. Finally, she breaks the surface in a glistening spray of water, her blue body radiant in the air, wings showering droplets.

'Nice,' I say.

'Let's see you!'

I shake my head and set out again, diving through the tangle of mountains, ignoring Azure's 'c'mon, it's so cool!'

My talent is *not* cool. I would give anything to change it. To be a water draki. Or a phaser. Or a visiocrypter. Or an onyx. Or . . . Really, the list goes on.

Instead, I am this.

I breathe fire. The only fire-breather in the pride in more than four hundred years. It's made me more popular than I want to be. Ever since I manifested at age eleven, I've ceased to be Jacinda. Instead, I'm *fire-breather*. A fact that has the pride deciding my life as if it's theirs to control. They're worse than my mother.

Suddenly I hear something beyond the whistling wind and humming mists of the snow-capped mountains at every side. A faint, distant sound.

My ears perk. I stop, hovering in the dense air.

Azure cocks her head; her dragon eyes blink, staring hard. 'What is it? A plane?'

The noise grows, coming fast, a steady beat now. 'We should get low.'

Nodding, Azure dives. I follow, glancing behind us, seeing only the jagged cropping of mountains. But hearing more. Feeling more.

It keeps coming.

The sound chases us.

'Should we go back to the bikes?' Azure looks back at me, her blue-streaked black hair rippling like a flag in the wind.

I hesitate. I don't want this to end. Who knows when we can sneak out again? The pride watches me so closely, Cassian is always—

'Jacinda!' Azure points one iridescent blue finger through the air.

I turn and look. My heart seizes.

A chopper rounds a low mountain, so small in the distance, but growing larger as it approaches, cutting through the mist.

'Go!' I shout. 'Drop!'

I dive, clawing wind, my wings folded flat against

my body, legs poised arrow straight, perfectly angled for speed.

But not fast enough.

The chopper blades beat the air in a pounding frenzy. *Hunters*. Wind tears at my eyes as I fly faster than I've ever flown before.

Azure falls behind. I scream for her, glancing back, reading the dark desperation in her liquid gaze. 'Az, keep up!'

Water draki aren't built for speed. We both know that. Her voice twists into a sob and I hear just how well she knows it in the broken sound. 'I'm trying! Don't leave me! Jacinda! Don't leave me!'

Behind us, the chopper still comes. Bitter fear coats my mouth as two more join it, killing any hope that it was a random helicopter out for aerial photos. It's a squadron, and they are definitely hunting us.

Is this how it happened with Dad? Were his last moments like this? Tossing my head, I shove the thought away. I'm *not* going to die today—my body broken and sold off into bits and pieces.

I nod to the nearing treetops. 'There!'

Draki never fly low to the ground, but we don't have a choice.

Azure follows me, weaving in my wake. She pulls close to my side, narrowly missing the flashing trees in her wild fear. I stop and drift in place, chest heaving with savage breath. The choppers whir overhead, their pounding beat deafening, stirring the trees into a frothing green foam.

'We should demanifest,' Az says, panting.

As if we could. We're too frightened. Draki can never hold human form in a state of fear. It's a survival mechanism. At our core we're draki; that's where we derive our strength.

I peer up through the latticework of shaking branches shielding us, the scent of pine and forest ripe in my nostrils.

'I can get myself under control,' Az insists in our guttural tongue.

I shake my head. 'Even if that's true, it's too risky. We have to wait them out. If they see two girls out here . . . after they just spotted two female draki, they might get suspicious.' A cold fist squeezes around my heart. I can't let that happen. Not just for me, but for everyone. For draki everywhere. The secret of our ability to appear as humans is our greatest defense.

'If we're not home in the next hour, we're busted!'

I bite my lip to stop from telling her we have more to worry about than the pride discovering we snuck out. I don't want to scare her even more than she already is.

'We have to hide for a little—'

Another sound penetrates the beating blades of a chopper. A low drone on the air. The tiny hairs at my nape tingle. Something else is out there. Below. On the ground. Growing closer.

I look skyward, my long talonlike fingers flexing open and shut, wings vibrating in barely controlled movement. Instinct urges flight, but I know they're up there. Waiting. Circling buzzards. I spy their dark shapes through the treetops. My chest tightens. They aren't going away.

I motion Az to follow me into the thick branches of a towering pine. Folding our wings close to our bodies, we shove amid the itchy needles, fighting the scraping twigs. Holding our breath, we wait.

Then the land comes alive, swarming with an entourage of vehicles: trucks, SUVs, dirt bikes.

'No,' I rasp, eyeing the vehicles, the men, armed to the teeth. In a truck bed, two men crouch at the ready, a great

net launcher before them. Seasoned hunters. They know what they're doing. They know what they're hunting.

Az trembles so badly the thick branch we're crouched on starts to shake, leaves rustling. I clutch her hand. The dirt bikes lead the way, moving at a dizzying speed. A driver of one SUV motions out the window. 'Look to the trees,' he shouts, his voice deep, terrifying.

Az fidgets. I clutch her hand harder. A bike is directly below us now. The driver wears a black T-shirt that hugs his young muscled body. My skin tightens almost painfully.

'I can't stay here,' Az chokes out beside me. 'I've got to go!'

'Az,' I growl, my low rumbling tones fervent, desperate. 'That's what they want. They're trying to flush us out. Don't panic.'

Her words spit past gritted teeth. 'I. Can't.'

And I know with a sick tightening of my gut that she's not going to last.

Scanning the activity below and the choppers cutting across the sky above, I make up my mind right then.

'All right.' I swallow. 'Here's the plan. We separate—'

'No—'

'I'll break cover first. Then, once they've gone after me, you head for water. Go under and stay there. However long it takes.'

Her dark eyes gleam wetly, the vertical lines of her pupils throbbing.

'Got it?' I demand.

She nods jerkily, the ridges on her nose contracting with a deep breath. 'W-what are you going to do?'

I force a smile, the curve of my lips painful on my face. 'Fly, of course.'