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For you, faithful reader

My love for you is a journey.

Anonymous





Chapter One

The air traps hot inside my lungs as I hover outside the van, peering within, studying the shadowed depths, so reminiscent of another van not so long ago. This one is empty, but soon I'll occupy its space. Alone. My eyes start to burn from staring so hard at my soon-to-be prison and I blink swiftly. This is my choice, I remind myself.

'You don't have to do this,' Will says, holding my hand, his fingers brushing back and forth against the inside of my wrist, making my pulse jump to life, and I suddenly remember how to breathe. With him, everything is always easier. Bearable.

Even this.

I nod even though fear twists like a hot poker inside me.

It takes everything I have to slip my hand free from his and grip the edge of the door. 'Yes. I do.'

'We can come up with another way—'

'No. This will work.' It's my idea. Of course I believe in it. I persuaded them all, countering their protests until

they agreed. Will. Cassian. Tamra. We've already come this far. Left my sister several miles back, waiting, hidden away until Will and Cassian return for her.

Will's expression tightens, making him look older, tired. But still achingly beautiful. I blink and smooth my fingers against his face, along his square, bristly jaw. 'It's going to be all right,' I reassure him. 'Just stick with the plan.'

'Don't do anything stupid in there . . . don't try to be a hero—'

I press my fingers to his lips to silence him, and relish the firm, cool texture. His eyes soften, the gold, browns, and greens like a forest in fall. Something unfurls in my chest as it always does when he looks at me that way.

Drawing in a deep breath, I look over at Cassian, self-conscious that he's watching us. But he's staring out at the tree line, one shoe kicking the ground. Even so, I can feel him through our shared awareness of each other. He's trying hard to give Will and me our space, but I sense his active concentration to avoid looking at us . . . his struggle to hide the annoyance snaking through him.

I wait for him to glance over. Maybe I even will him to do so. I don't know. This whole we-share-a-bond thing is still new. When he finally looks, I nod at him. He gives a slight nod back.

I twirl a finger in a small circle and say loud enough that it's clear I'm addressing them both, 'Now turn around.'

The barest smile lifts Will's mouth, but he obliges. So does Cassian. With their backs to me, I strip, focusing on my movements, each one so deliberate—untying my shoes, stepping out of my jeans. I fold the clothes neatly

into a pile, taking extra care . . . as if this action is of the utmost importance. I guess I'm stalling.

Naked, I stand and stare at Will's back. The smooth, grey cotton stretched taut over his strong shoulder blades. Air slides over me and the sun kisses my flesh. This is when I'm supposed to climb into the van and close the doors. This is when we head into the lion's den. Where they will leave me. Abandon me—at my request. If things go wrong . . . I give myself a mental shake. *Not going there.*

My throat tightens anyway. Suddenly modesty doesn't matter so much. I grasp Will's shoulder and force him around, plastering my lips to his in a kiss that feels a lot like goodbye. I give it everything. I put the memory of us into it. All we've been through. Our time in Chaparral. His family—*hunters*—trying to destroy me. Losing Miram. Corbin trying to kill him . . .

His hands wrap around my back. I kiss him until the familiar burn starts at my core and crawls up my windpipe. Face flushed hot, I break away, panting, yearning.

And naked.

Will's gaze flickers down, missing nothing before looking back up. His chest lifts high on an inhale. My cheeks burn hotter, but I still linger. Searing emotion flashes in his hazel eyes and I know I have to go. I have to go or I never will.

I jump in the van and start to pull the doors shut.

His voice stops me. 'Wait.'

I peer out at him.

'You have to manifest.' He holds up the ties.

'Oh.' How did I forget? We have to do this right. Bait the hook.

I step down. Standing there, I force the change. With my emotions high, body flushed and tingly in reaction to Will, it doesn't take long. I manifest quickly, my skin snapping tight, my wings pushing free with a faint crackle on the air.

Will gazes at me a moment, his admiration evident. It winds through me, melts me inside to see that he still can look at me, in my draki form, appreciatively. Just like he did the first time he saw me. Like I'm something beautiful, and not the creature his family hunts. It's a helpful boost to my confidence as I'm about to face the hazy bogeymen of my childhood—the enkros—the ones who send the hunters after my kind. At last their faces will be revealed to me. A tight, shuddery breath ripples through me.

Will quickly but gently ties my wrists, and then my wings. He avoids my eyes as he works, as though he can't bear to do this to me.

I feel the change come over Cassian as he turns. Doubt radiates from him as I'm bound like a captive before his very eyes.

Will looks up at my face as he helps me back into the van. I offer a smile. It feels weak, and forced, so I let the smile slip away and just communicate with my eyes. *This is right.*

Then I turn, positioning my back to him. So he can't see my face anymore.

So I don't see his and back down.

I feel him wait, hesitate behind me just as I feel the waves of gnawing worry roll off Cassian. But I don't look back. Not for either of them. I can't. If I look, I'm afraid that I will cave, crumple into the little girl that quaked under the covers as Az whispered stories in the dark of

the enkros and the terrible things they do to the draki they capture. We have no way of knowing for sure because none of those draki ever return home.

Finally, Will pushes the doors shut on me, sealing me in. I turn. For a moment, I press my trembling hands to the cold metal and hold them there, as if I can somehow reach him, feel him on the other side. *Him.* Not Cassian.

A moment later doors slam as Will and Cassian climb in up front. Then we're moving. The van rumbles all around me. I find a place to sit on the grimy floor and hug myself tightly, my stomach in knots.

Inhaling deep breaths, I wait for the van to stop and for it to begin—the battle I've waited my whole life to fight.

The bumpy ride strips away some of my courage. It's all so familiar that I question my sanity in volunteering to go through this again. The back of the van feels claustrophobic. Little air. No space to move. And I'm crippled. Hobbled like in my worst nightmares. My mind sticks on this, fastens on the memory of the last time I was a captive in a van like this. *Last time . . .*

It's the reason I'm here, after all.

I take small sips of air, fighting for calm and promising myself that I'm in control this time. Shaking my head, I swipe tangled strands of hair from my face and try to keep my balance as we take a sharp turn.

I make a mental list of the differences to steady my nerves. I trust the drivers. They have my back. I know where we're going—I've seen our destination. And I'm not in pain this time. At least not physically. But I'm also by myself. No Miram.

Miram is who we're doing this for—who we're saving. To be honest, she's only partly why I'm here. This has

become something bigger, something more for me. A quest for truth. Will knows it. I don't think Tamra realizes, or even Cassian, but Will knows this is about finding answers. Finding Dad.

The van slows and stops. I hold my breath, air puffing from my lips and nose like fog. It's not deliberate. I can't help it—I am this: a creature that breathes fire. Right now emotion rules me, making it especially hard to be anything else.

Fear. Rage. Doubt. Was I kidding Will when I said this would work? Deluding myself? All of this rises inside me in a wash of char and cinder, ready to burst free in flame and fire.

Voices carry from outside my tin box. In moments I'll be on my own among the enkros. Just as planned. I wait, muscles tense and vibrating beneath my draki skin. My wings pull against their binding. Will did a good job. I couldn't break free if I wanted to. And I don't. That's not the plan. The plan is for me to play the role of a believable captive.

For a moment, I think of my sister alone in the motel room, waiting for the guys to return. She smiled when we parted ways, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. It wasn't in her heart. Moisture gleamed in her frost-coloured gaze and I know she broke down and cried as soon as we left.

Tamra was against this whole scheme as soon as I proposed it. Even after I persuaded Will and Cassian she continued to object. As the bindings dig into my flesh, cutting off my circulation, I shove aside thoughts of Tamra and my rising worries. With fresh resolve, I fix my gaze on the van's back doors and wait. Voices ride the air and I think I recognize the muffled sound of Will's voice.

Or it could just be that I want to hear him so much, so badly.

Cassian is there. I don't need to hear him to sense that. I can feel him. As I wait in shadow, his anger hits me like a fist, swift and fierce. He must be face-to-face with them now. A hissing breath escapes between my teeth as his rage suffuses me in a cold so deep it freeze-burns me to the marrow of my bones.

To combat this, I reach into myself for what I know—what I am. Heat swells up inside me, smoulders a path up my windpipe to war with Cassian's icy fury.

There's a clang and the scrape of metal on metal. I snap my gaze straight ahead, watching as the door opens.

Light floods my metal-walled cage and I lift my bound hands to shield my eyes. I peer through the cracks in my fingers and spot Will, looking relaxed and at ease, giving nothing away. At least outwardly. A muscle flickers, feathers the flesh of his jaw, signalling his tension to me even as he motions to me with his hand. 'There she is, boys . . .'

Cassian lingers a few feet behind him with several others—lab-coated individuals who peer at me with deep, measuring eyes. *Enkros.* This sight jars me. I couldn't have prepared for it.

Cassian. Standing with them. The irony isn't lost on me. A ridiculous urge to laugh bubbles up in my throat.

I force myself to focus. The van is backed in through some kind of garage door. A long narrow corridor of dull white stretches out before me. A single steel door waits at the far end. There's no possibility of escape to the outside world, to the sky. Not that I'm here to escape. Not yet anyway.

One of the lab coats steps forward. He holds a prod with a loop around the end. Before I realize what he's doing, he drops the stiff circle around my bound hands and cinches it tight, dragging me from the van with a rough yank. I catch only a glimpse of the man's determined eyes, so pale a blue they seem colourless, before I plunge from the van and hit the cold floor.

Landing on my shoulder, I cry out from the pain—all the while marvelling that these men should appear so *ordinary* in their lab coats. Like doctors or researchers, and not the secret menace that's shadowed my life for so long.

A fresh wave of Cassian's rage sweeps over me. I shudder and try to shake it off. It's debilitating—makes me want to fight, to unleash all that I am on these enkros. And I can't.

A sound escapes Will. Something between a grunt and a growl. When I glance up, my gaze collides with his. His hands flex at his sides. He's barely restraining himself. I give the barest shake of my head, hoping to communicate that he should hold himself in check.

They should go. I know this has to be killing them both and I can't risk either one of them showing the slightest sign that they're affected by my treatment.

'Get up! C'mon!' The guy yanks on the prod, and the binding cuts into my wrists so deeply I'm convinced if I don't move I might lose my hands.

Glaring at him, I'm struck by the dispassion in those pale blue eyes. There's nothing there—not even what I expected. None of the venom, none of the malice. *Because he's unbothered. He believes he's doing the right thing.*

Cassian's wrath continues winding its way through me.

'Look at her,' one of the lab coats exclaims. I'm almost tempted to look down at myself to see what he's talking about.

There's a rustle of quick, panicked movements, and then my mouth is sealed with duct tape before I even have time to react. I guess they know enough to know what I am. What I can do.

The lab coat stands back. 'There. That will do for now, until she's processed. She won't be lighting anyone up.'

Smothered, I grunt. My gaze swings wildly, searching for Will, needing to see him again, just once more before I'm taken away and 'processed'.

Another hard yank, and I scramble to my feet. I'm pulled forward quickly down the corridor, past the others. Caged bulbs of light emit a merciless yellow.

I'm moving. I can't see Will or Cassian any more.

But Cassian's fear and frustration still reach me. The blistering ice of those emotions wash over me. I look over my shoulder for a final glimpse of them.

Cassian stands statue-still, staring after me. Will is talking to one of the lab coats. His gaze slides to me once, briefly, and then away. He looks unusually pale, his hand chafing at the side of his neck as if there were something there he could rub out.

Then I reach the end of the hall. We're through the door and I can't see Will any more.

There is only what lies ahead of me now.

* * *

The elevator descends with me in it, surrounded by my captors. They hold themselves distant from me, hugging tight to the walls, weapons at the ready.

Even with my mouth taped, it's reassuring that they still consider me dangerous. I feel the absence of Will and Cassian as keenly as a knife's blade. Even as my heart longs for Will, it's Cassian's void I feel more intensely as his cold rage fades, departing with him. And it's not just his rage I lose. His concern, his worry and fear . . . his doubts. All that evaporates like smoke into the air.

Now it's just me with my feelings, but at least I no longer have to muddle through my emotions and struggle to separate what's me and what's Cassian.

I don't need to fake my fear as I'm led into the bowels of the stronghold. I'm not sure what I expected . . . maybe a castlelike dungeon? Either way, the white walls and brightly glowing ceiling aren't it. The tiled floor is chilly and smooth under my bare feet, and while I usually prefer the cold, I shiver. This is no cool forest floor, soft with pine needles and yielding soil. The sterile floor is hard and lifeless beneath me.

We approach a door that slides open silently from ceiling to floor.

I blink at the sudden glare of the room before me. As my eyes adjust to the light, my throat constricts at the sight that greets me.

A long observation table stretches before several cells. They all have Plexiglas fronts with three plain white walls. And inside each cell is a draki. All shapes, sizes, and colours.

I don't get an exact count. Maybe ten all together.

It's too much to take in and I can't move. I'm jabbed in the back so hard that I stagger. The lab coat in front of me shouts, his lips twisting in a snarl as he jerks on my wrists and pulls me up the moment before I fall to my knees.

Pain lances through the joints in my shoulders. The plastic ties tighten, cutting off my circulation.

I really am an animal to them. Less than that. A touch of disgust lurks in their eyes, but also a hint of fascination. For all that I'm a beast to them, I'm similar enough to them to creep them out. If I were just a simple animal, a common creature of the forest, they would treat me with more kindness and courtesy.

But I'm not.

I'm this alien thing to them, some freak they view as an anomaly even though my ancestors, dragons, have been here longer than man.

My heart beats a wild rhythm in my chest as I'm shoved forward into the wide room. I quickly scan each cell, not absorbing any draki individually in my search for Miram.

I spot her. My nostrils flare with excited breath to see her alive. She lies curled on her side, her tan, nondescript skin dull, not as vibrant as any of her neighbours. Her eyes are closed and her hair trails over the floor, lank and bland, like dried wheat.

I shout to her in our draki tongue. Despite the tape covering my mouth, I make a lot of noise. Several draki lift their heads in my direction.

But she doesn't react. Not even a flicker of her eyes.

I scream against my gag, saying her name over and over.

Her eyes flutter open, and I think she's heard me. She even looks in my direction. Then, no. Her lids close again. I deflate inside. It's like she doesn't care. Or maybe she can't process it's me. Maybe she's been drugged. Who knows what they've done to her.

Then I can no longer see her because I'm led to an empty cell. The Plexiglas slides open and I'm thrust inside. Several lab coats follow me. They stick me with a new prod and this one jolts me with an electrical current.

I drop, dead weight, choke on a scream. They make quick work of unbinding my wings and wrists as I twitch on the cold floor, able to see and feel but unable to control my movements. In short, hell. They leave the duct tape over my mouth, but I lack the strength to rip it free.

All of them leave my cell except one. He lingers, staring at me with mild interest. My pulse stutters against my neck as I endure his scrutiny, knowing he can do anything to me and I can't lift a finger to help myself.

He bends down and strokes my arm with a slow drag of fingers that makes my stomach twist sickly. Scalding bile rises to the back of my throat.

Another lab coat appears behind him. 'C'mon, Lewis.'

Lewis shakes his head, musing, 'This one sure has pretty skin.' He watches me with cold curiosity.

'Yeah, and she breathes fire, so if I were you, I'd get out of here until we've studied her properly and know how to deal with this particular dragon. Remember the stories from those hunters who last captured a fire-breather?'

'Think this is the same one?'

'Dunno. Doesn't matter. My point is she escaped them. Don't underestimate this one. Now, c'mon.' The lab coat dispensing advice moves away.

Lewis continues to watch me, his head cocked at an angle. 'Yeah. But you can't do anything right now, can you? You're harmless.' His hand glides over my belly. He palms my flesh leisurely before his fingers grab and pinch me, twisting my skin with swift savagery. 'How

does it feel to be defenceless? You're at our mercy now. There's no escape. Understand?'

After a long moment, he gives a satisfied nod and releases me. 'See you later.' He steps back several paces until the Plexiglas slides shut between us.

Alone, I lie still and press my trembling lips shut. It's all I can do not to scream.