

One
Good

DRAGON
DESERVES
ANOTHER



From the author of *Nice Dragons Finish Last*

RACHEL AARON

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One Good Dragon Deserves Another

*The long awaited sequel to Nice Dragons Finish Last by **Rachel Aaron!***

After barely escaping the machinations of his terrifying mother, two all-knowing seers, and countless bloodthirsty siblings, the last thing Julius wants to see is another dragon. Unfortunately for him, the only thing more dangerous than being a useless Heartstriker is being a useful one. Now that he's got an in with the Three Sisters, Julius has become a key pawn in Bethesda the Heartstriker's gamble to put her clan on top.

Refusing to play along with his mother's plans means death, but there's more going on than even Bethesda knows. Heartstriker's futures are disappearing, and Algonquin's dragon hunter is closing in. With his most powerful family members dropping like flies, it's up to Julius to save the family that never respected him and prove once and for all that the world's worst dragon is the best one to have on your side.

Prologue

Svena, Terror of the Winter Sea, White Witch of the Three Sisters, and acting head of the world's oldest and still most powerful dragon clan, was awake before noon, and she wasn't happy about it. She was even less happy to be awake and *alone*, sulking in the middle of Ian's giant bed while she watched her young lover dress through narrowed, resentful eyes.

"I don't see why you have to leave," she said, brushing the sleep-tangled, ice blond hair out of her eyes. "Not even humans are awake at this beastly hour."

"On the contrary," Ian replied, tying his silk tie in the bedroom mirror. "Lots of highly successful humans are up and busy at six in the morning, which is why *I* am up at five." His reflection smiled teasingly at her. "That's the downside of young, ambitious dragons, darling. We still have to work."

Svena's scathing look let him know what she thought of *that*. As always, though, Ian just smirked, running a brush through his perfect black hair one last time before walking over to the bed. "Go back to sleep," he said, leaning down to kiss her. "You need all the rest you can get. We have the party tonight."

He said this like he was delivering the gravest of news, and Svena laughed. "But the invitation was so heartfelt. How could I dash your sweet baby brother's hopes by refusing? I'm a dragon, not an ogre."

Ian scoffed. "If Julius actually wrote that, he's even worse than I thought." He crossed his arms over his chest. "You know my mother—"

"Of course I know," Svena cut him off, snuggling back down into the pillows. "But that's the problem with *old*, ambitious dragons, darling. You are free to cut your own way to the top, but the Heartstriker isn't someone we can ignore, and I have my family to think of."

"You think of them too often," he said coldly. "Why must it all fall on you? Your sisters are perfectly capable of spinning their own plots. Or they would be, if they weren't so used to Estella telling them what to do, they've forgotten how to function without her."

"Perhaps," Svena said sleepily. "But at least *they* never woke me up before noon."

Ian heaved a long sigh, and then the bed dipped slightly as he reached down to stroke her long hair. "I'll come home early," he promised. "I want to take you somewhere before we have to go."

Svena's head shot up. "Where?" she asked, trying not to sound too excited.

Ian didn't answer, just winked at her as he stood and walked out of the bedroom. Only when the door shut behind him did Svena let her suspicious expression melt into a smile as she flopped back into the mountain of pillows.

Not that she would ever admit it, but things with Ian were going remarkably well. He managed the delicate balance of courtship with the adroitness of a dragon three times his age; showering her with just enough gifts and surprises to keep her interested, but never so many that it came across as trying too hard. He was also exceedingly easy on the eyes as both a human and a dragon. A shallow consideration to be sure, but one Svena found quite pleasing. Most astonishing of all, though, was how well they got along.

It wasn't affection; Svena barely felt *that* even for her sisters, but there was an ease of like mind between her and Ian that was surprisingly delightful. So much so that she often found herself granting him more access than she should, which would have to be curbed. A courtship this lovely deserved to be savored, not rushed, and after all the work she'd put into digging her clan out of the hole Estella had left it in when she'd vanished without a trace four weeks ago, Svena had earned some time to herself.

With that delightful thought, Svena rolled over, snuggling back into bed to catch another few hours of sleep before she was due to meet Katya for brunch and a status report. She'd just begun to drift off when she felt a cold, sharp twinge at the edge of her consciousness.

Svena sat bolt upright, holding her breath, but there was no mistake. Magic was rising in the room. *Very* familiar magic, and it was coming fast.

She sprang out of bed, trailing frost across the carpet behind her as she grabbed her dressing gown. She was still shoving her arms into the padded silk sleeves when the air in front of her closet began to warp and bulge before finally ripping apart entirely as a dragon tore its way into the world.

Svena jumped back with a curse. Not because of the dragon—given the magic, she'd expected nothing less—but because it was *black*. What should have been glistening white scales and transparent, frost-traced wings was hidden under thick layers of tarry, black residue, almost as though the dragon had been rolling in ash. The stuff didn't smell like any char Svena had ever encountered, but before she could get a better look, the dragon shifted and shrank until all that was left was its human shadow, naked and gasping on the ice-coated carpet.

“*Estella!*”

Svena ran to her sister's side, her hands shooting out to help her up before stopping short. Something was horribly wrong. Estella's normally snow-white hair and skin were as dirty as her dragon had been, and her fingers were bloody, as though she'd been digging through sharp stones. Worst of all, though, was what she clutched between them.

There were two objects. One, a beautiful golden ball the size of a large orange, was expected. Estella had never mastered the finer points of extraplanar travel, and she couldn't have found her way back to this dimension without the Kosmolabe. But while Svena was most definitely not pleased to see the golden troublemaker again, it was nothing compared to what was waiting in Estella's other hand.

At first glance, they looked like coiled lengths of black rope. On the second, she saw they were *chains*. Pencil thin, ink black chains were wrapped around Estella's hands and wrists, their tiny links glittering dully under the dimmed lights. The closest one twitched as Svena watched, curling around Estella's thumb like a thin, black tentacle.

“What is that?” she demanded, recoiling back from her oldest, and once dearest, sister. “What have you done, Estella?”

The seer didn't answer. She just pushed herself to her knees, looking around the penthouse apartment like she didn't know where she was. “How long was I gone?”

Svena winced. Her sister's voice was as rough as the rest of her. “Four weeks.”

“Four weeks,” Estella whispered, lifting a shaking, chained hand to her face. “It felt like centuries.”

For a dangerous moment, the old sympathy came welling back, and then Svena remembered herself. “Maybe it should have been.”

Estella's head snapped up, but Svena only gave her a cold look, rising from the floor to stare down at the dragon who'd nearly doomed their clan. She'd hoped to have more time before it came to this, but it didn't matter. Svena was prepared, and it was best to settle things now, quickly, before Estella had a chance to recover.

“You should not have returned.”

“And you should not speak to me that way,” Estella said, lifting her chin. “I will give you a chance to take it back.”

“I don't need your chances,” Svena growled. “I'm not your pawn any more.”

Estella opened her mouth to argue, but Svena didn't give her a chance. “While you were gone, I convened our sisters. Eleven daughters of the Three Sisters, all together in one place for the first time since our mothers went to sleep, and for once in our lives, we were able to come to a consensus. You

are no longer welcome among us.”

—She stopped there, waiting for the shock, but she should have known better. Estella was a seer. She didn't even look surprised. “That's not something you get to decide,” she said haughtily. “Our mothers—”

“Our mothers have been asleep for over a thousand years,” Svena reminded her. “But if they woke today, they would be disgusted by how you've managed things in their absence. You are forever saying that we are the daughters of gods, but your endless, petty grudge against the Heartstriker and her seer has brought us closer to destruction than any other disaster in our history, *including* the loss of magic. Your selfishness put us all at risk, endangered Katya, and diminished our standing as a clan. That is incompetence, Estella, and we are no longer willing to tolerate it.” She bared her teeth. “Your rule is over, Northern Star. It is our consensus that your mind has finally been eaten by the seer's madness, leaving you incapable of guiding our clan any further. From here on, *I* lead the Daughters of the Three Sisters, and you will follow, or you will be banished.”

By the time she finished, Estella was shaking with rage, her hands curling into fists on the frosted carpet as magic began to rise. Svena called hers as well, ready to finish this. She was no longer afraid of the future. Estella was not the wise, savvy leader she'd once been, the dragon Svena had always looked up to. This filthy creature was nothing but a shadow, and Svena was younger, stronger. She would win. But as she summoned the ice to her hands, shaping the cold magic into a blast that would send Estella through the penthouse window, the seer suddenly slumped.

“I knew you would do this,” she said sadly, lowering her hands as she sat back down on the floor. “Your future vanished from my sight a long time ago, but I didn't need to see to know. You have always been ambitious, Svena. It was inevitable that you would turn on me.”

“Congratulations, then,” Svena said mockingly. “You were right one last time.”

“Not this time,” the seer said, shaking her head. “I will not fight you, little sister.”

Svena paused, confused. “Then you will bow?”

“No,” Estella said with a crooked smile. “You will.”

And then her arm shot out.

Svena dodged automatically, throwing up a barrier of razor sharp ice, but it didn't help. The moment Estella's arm extended, one of the black lengths of chain leapt from it, curving impossibly in mid-flight to slide over the barrier and wrap around Svena's throat. But while she saw the black chain hit, the metal had no weight against her skin, and when her frantic hands shot up to tear it away, there was nothing. Nothing at all.

“*What did you do?*” she roared, grabbing frantically at her bare neck.

“I fixed you,” Estella said sweetly. “Don't worry, love. I'm going to fix everything.”

The words fell soft as snow, and when they were done, the invisible thing around Svena's neck wrenched tight. She sank to the ground, choking as she clawed at whatever it was Estella had thrown, but like before, there was nothing to feel, not even magic. Her throat was simply closing, cutting her off, not from air, but from the world. It was like she was being squeezed out of her own body, and as she fought helplessly on the floor, Estella knelt beside her, reaching down to brush Svena's hair out of her face as she had when they were young.

“Go back to how it was,” she whispered. “Come back to me.”

That was the last thing Svena heard before everything ended.

Two thousand miles away, in the heart of the mountain that rose like a thorn from the center of the vast expanse of New Mexico desert that now belonged exclusively to Bethesda the Heartstriker, i

a cave stuffed to bursting with treasure and trash collected in equal measure, Brohomir, Great Seer of the Heartstrikers, fell out of his hammock.

He landed on his feet only by habit, shaking his head in an attempt to clear the horrible dream. Sadly, this too was only habit. He already knew what he'd felt was no dream.

It was a problem.

Bob turned away from his hammock with a scowl, clambering over piles of antique chessboards, watering cans, crowns, ancient artifacts, and hubcaps in his rush to get to the corkboard propped up on top of the unpainted, sideways door that served as his desk. His *actual* desk was currently being used as a stand for the massive bird habitat he'd installed for his pigeon.

His sudden fall must have woken her, because she came fluttering over to perch on the shoulder of his threadbare t-shirt, her talons picking tiny holes in the design that wouldn't be suitably ironic for at least another decade. For once, though, Bob didn't notice. He was too busy digging through the massive layers of pink and yellow sticky notes that covered the corkboard like overlapping scales, looking briefly at each one before tossing it on the ground.

"No," he muttered. "No, no, no, no—AH!"

He clutched the neon orange slip of paper like a winning lotto ticket and turned to the bird on his shoulder. "Darling," he said sweetly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to do some flying."

The pigeon tilted its head, blinking its beady eyes with a questioning coo.

"Yes, far," Bob said, showing her the paper. "As far as it gets, I'm afraid."

The pigeon cooed again, and Bob sighed, walking over to grab the tin of butter cookies lying on top of a dusty pile of VHS tapes. He cracked the lid and picked out a sugary square. The bird perked up immediately, hopping onto his open hand. When she'd pecked the bribe to crumbs, Bob stroked her rainbow-feathered neck with a gentle finger. "Now, please? It's kind of important."

The pigeon bobbed her head and took off, beating her wings hard as she worked her way up through the heavy air to the tiny window at the top of the artificial cavern. Bob watched her until she was out of sight, and then he slapped the lid back on the cookie tin, tossed it on his desk, and, since he clearly wasn't going to get another chance to do so any time soon, went back to bed.

Chapter 1

In a dark corner of the DFZ Underground where the touristy, old Detroit kitsch of lower downtown collided with the clapboard factory neighborhoods, in the top floor walk-up of a crumbling apartment building so poorly constructed, it had to lean on the nearby skyway pillar to stay upright, Julius, youngest son of Bethesda the Heartstriker and greatest failure of the Heartstriker dragon clan, was engaged in a standoff.

He stood with his back to the water-damaged drywall, his green eyes locked on the shadowy kitchen, where another pair of eyes—these round, reflective, and traffic-cone orange—watched him from the dark. Below the eyes, a massive jaw was open in a threat display, showing off twin rows of short, shark-like teeth with a growl that sounded like a miniature chainsaw. It wasn't nearly the scariest wall of teeth Julius had faced, but he knew from unfortunate personal experience that whatever those fangs lacked in size, they made up for in sheer power. A tank badger could bite through steel if it got mad enough, and this one seemed to be well on its way, stomping its stubby, long-clawed paws on the stained linoleum as it paced back and forth, looking for a way past the dragon's guard.

He was not going to find it.

The moment the badger's pacing brought it into range, Julius attacked, sweeping in with his catchpole. The long, carbon-fiber rod flexed like a fishing pole as Julius tipped it sideways, deftly slipping the steel wire loop at the end over the tank badger's armored head. The moment the noose was in position, he turned the pole again to cinch the loop tight, trapping the animal in a choke at the end of the stick.

"Gotcha!" he cried, bracing with his arms out to keep the thrashing badger at the end of the pole as far from his body as possible. He was reaching back with his foot to slide the warded cage into position when a *second* tank badger jumped out of the broken cabinet above the fridge to land on top of the first, biting through the steel wire that Julius had looped over its neck like so much taffy floss.

"Oh come *on*," Julius cried, yanking back his now useless catchpole as both tank badgers turned to growl at him, their squat, heavy bodies blocking the kitchen doorway in a wall of armored muscle and sheer orneriness. "I thought you guys were supposed to be territorial."

The badgers snarled in unison, snapping their powerful jaws. Julius bared his own teeth in reply, trying to remind them who the bigger predator was around here, but he might as well have been growling at one of his siblings for all the good it did. Tank badgers were immune to poison, most magic, and their armored hides were tough enough to stop bullets. They were also fireproof, which meant they cared about dragons only slightly more than they cared about humans, which was not at all. Plus, there were two of them now, which was one more than Julius was prepared to deal with.

"Marci!" he called, keeping his eyes on the badgers as he tossed the broken catchpole away. "How's it going?"

There was a long, frustrated silence before she called back. "Could be better."

That was not the answer he'd hoped for. "Better how?" he asked, risking a look away from the badgers just long enough to dart his eyes back to the living room where Marci was standing over their client, a young man whose prone body was overshadowed by the ghostly apparition of a tank badger the size of a car.

"It's not *my* fault," she growled, scowling into the glowing spellwork circles she'd drawn all over the cheap parquet floor. "This should have taken ten minutes, but this stupid curse is so buggy and poorly made, it's actually almost impossible to remove. It's like whoever did it went all the way around the circle of incompetence and ended up at accidental brilliance."

“I keep telling you, it’s not a curse,” the client croaked, his pale face covered in a sheen of nervous sweat that only got worse every time one of the tank badgers made a noise. “It’s a love spell.”

A love spell that attracted male tank badgers looking to mate sounded like a curse to Julius, but he kept his mouth shut. There was no point in antagonizing the client, especially since Marci was doing such a good job of it on her own.

“It’s a scam, that’s what it is,” she said, flaring her spellwork as she fed more magic into her circles. “You got yourself tricked into paying for a summoning by some idiot, no-license shaman, and now you’ve got a female tank badger spirit sitting on your head like you’re her new den. You’re lucky attracting randy males is all she’s doing.”

“So get rid of her,” he gasped.

“I’m trying!” Marci snapped. “But it’s kind of hard to undo spellwork when you have it permanently attached to your body.” She stabbed her finger down as she said this, pointing straight at the crude and obviously brand new spellwork tattoo encircling the client’s bicep. “Seriously, dude, what were you *thinking*? Why would you get spellwork *tattooed* when you don’t even know what it *does*?”

The man began to look panicked. “Just get it off!”

“Too late for that,” she said, rolling up her sleeves. “It looks like the spell’s already gotten cozy with your magic, which means it’s going to take more than physical removal of the ink to get it out.” Marci shook her head. “Nothing for it. We’re going to have to burn her down.”

The man began to sweat harder. “Burn down? That doesn’t sound good. Are you sure you’re qualified for this?”

“Burning down a spirit just means Marci’s going to siphon off magic until it’s small enough to banish,” Julius explained, slipping into his unofficial job of team peacekeeper. “Just relax. I’ve seen her do this plenty of times, and I assure you it’s perfectly safe.”

Marci rolled her eyes at that last bit. Fortunately, the client wasn’t looking. “Just hurry up,” he rasped, closing his eyes. “She’s crushing me.”

Like it could hear them talking about it, the giant female tank badger spirit hissed and crouched down harder over its prey. The noise caught the attention of both males, and they barked in reply, the stubby, club-like tails bashing holes in the kitchen floor in their excitement.

“Can you keep the hordes at bay for a few more minutes?” Marci asked, looking at Julius. “I’m going to try and finish this in one swoop.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised, unclasp the industrial strength cattle prod from his belt. The voltage was calibrated to stun a buffalo, which meant it’d be enough for one of the badgers. The other was another story, but from the intent way they were staring at the female spirit, Julius knew he was just going to have to wing it. Now that they outnumbered him, any hesitation the badgers might have had was gone. They were going to get to the female, and they were ready to go through him to do it. So, before the beasts could shuffle out of the kitchen to flank him, Julius jumped straight at the biggest one, leaping through the air to shove the cattle prod’s electrode deep into the gap below its armored jaw.

The animal’s squeal went off like a siren, piercing his ears as the tank badger’s body went stiff from the shock. It fell over a second later, too stunned to even breathe. The shock wouldn’t last long, though, so Julius didn’t waste time. He’d already whirled around, dropping the prod, which took five seconds to rebuild its charge, to grab the warded cage he’d hauled up five flights of steps back when they’d thought they’d only have to deal with one tank badger, and not a moment too soon. He’d barely closed his fingers around the cage’s spellworked metal tines when the second badger launched itself at his head.

For such a squat, heavy animal, the tank badger was impressively fast, but here, at last, Julius

had the advantage. Moving with supernatural quickness, he planted his feet and spun, positioning the cage in front of him. By the time the tank badger saw what was waiting, it was much too late. It was already in the air, and there was nothing it could do but squeal as it flew into the open cage like a ball into a goal. The impact when it crashed into the back was still enough to nearly take Julius off his feet, but he caught himself just in time, bracing against the doorway as he locked the cage door in place, shutting all one hundred pounds of furious tank badger behind an inch-thick grid of spelled metal.

And just like that, one threat was eliminated. The caged badger snarled and snapped, but the slits between the bars were too small to get its nose through, much less teeth around. Feeling satisfied that it was caged for now, Julius turned back to face the larger badger, who was already shaking off the cattle prod's stun, hissing like a cat as it rolled to its feet. He was trying to figure out what he was going to do about that since they'd only brought one cage when a bowling ball-sized blast of swirling air flew over his shoulder and slammed into the badger's face, knocking it head-over-claws back into the kitchen.

It hopped back up almost immediately, shaking off the magic like it was nothing, but when it turned around to growl at Julius again, its orange eyes no longer had the crazed gleam. The poor thing actually looked more confused than anything else, its pointy snout snuffing in the dark. Then, almost as though it had done the math and decided this whole mess was no longer worth the bother, the badger turned and fled, jumping through the shattered kitchen window and rattling away down the rickety metal fire escape.

Julius waited a few seconds to make sure it was really gone before looking over his shoulder to see Marci standing behind him with her arm out and her bracelet shining like a flood light. "Thanks."

She beamed at him. "Glad I could get the assist." Her bracelet snuffed out, and she shook her hand like it stung. "Man, those bastards are tough. That blast should have sent it flying into Ohio."

"I'm just glad it decided discretion was the better part of valor," Julius said, grinning back. "I take it you're finished, then?"

"Yep," Marci said, stepping aside to reveal their client, who was no longer being crushed under the shimmering image of a spirit. More telling to Julius, he also no longer reeked of female tank badger. This was a huge improvement for everyone, but especially for the badger in the cage, who was already noticeably calmer.

"Is it gone?" the client whispered.

"Not really, but she's banished for now," Marci said, reaching down to help him up.

The man looked bewildered. "What does that mean?"

"Well, a spirit can never truly be destroyed," Marci explained. "I drained enough of her magic to temporarily disperse her, but so long as there are tank badgers and magic, she'll always come back, and so long as you have that summoning spell tattooed on your arm, she'll come looking for you."

"So if I get it removed, she won't be?" he asked hopefully.

Marci nodded, her eyes sharp. "Next time, sir, I'd suggest you stick to qualified, licensed mages like myself for your spells, especially permanent ones." She flicked her wrist, and a business card appeared in her hand. "Our rates are very reasonable, and as you see, we get the job done right."

By the time she finished, the young man was gaping at her, but Julius could only smile. That was his Marci—she never missed a chance. Fortunately, the client was too happy to notice he was being hustled. Despite all the panicked complaining he'd done earlier, he was now staring at Marci and Julius like they were his own personal guardian angels. "Thank you," he said, voice shaking. "You saved my life."

"It was our pleasure," Julius said proudly, and he meant it. *Oh*, how he meant it.

Technically, their business was magical animal removal. This being the DFZ, though, the scope of the jobs that came in was much larger. In the month since he and Marci had gone into business

together, they'd done everything from banishments to home warding to clearing out an entire warehouse overrun with sentient snails. They'd seen some pretty crazy stuff, but while tank badgers were definitely too high up on the danger scale for Julius's comfort, jobs like today's were actually his favorites. Clients were always happy when you did a good job for a fair price, but when you saved someone from a monster in their home, they treated you like a hero. That was an incredible feeling for a dragon who'd been able to count on one hand the number of times he'd been thanked just four weeks ago, and Julius couldn't keep the stupid grin off his face as he reached down to hoist the snarling cage containing the remaining badger onto his shoulder.

A mistake he didn't realize until it was too late.

"Wow," the man said, his eyes going wide. "You're a *lot* stronger than you look."

"He works out," Marci covered quickly. "Necessity of the job. Speaking of." She whipped out her phone. "We've got a dangerous animal removal plus a banishment. Would you like to add on a ward as well? You know, just in case?"

The client began to sputter, and Julius took his chance to flee down the stairs so he wouldn't have to hear her taking the man for all he was worth. He didn't begrudge Marci her mercenary nature—it was the main thing that had kept them afloat since they'd started this business together—he just didn't like to listen to it. All that up-selling felt...rude.

That was a terribly undraconic thought, but Julius let it roll off with a shrug. He didn't care about stuff like that anymore. Ever since he'd left Jessica's apartment the night they'd rescued Katya and foiled Estella's plots, he'd barely thought about other dragons. Other than Ian's occasional check-ins he hadn't talked to one either. Even his mother hadn't called. It was like he'd fallen off the face of the dragon world, which was why—despite crazy animals jumping at his head nearly every day—the last four weeks had been the happiest of Julius's life. He had nothing he'd been raised to think was important: no wealth, no power, not even a proper lair, plus he was still sealed, but he couldn't care less. For the first time ever, he was living without constantly looking over his shoulder or worrying about when he'd be attacked. It wasn't much by dragon standards, but to Julius, it was paradise, and definitely worth risking some tank badger bites for.

Like it knew what he was thinking about, the badger in the cage chose that moment to try and bite his fingers where they held the cage handle, whining when it couldn't get through. Julius held the cage a little farther away as he took the rusted cement stairs down two at a time to the street where Marci had parked her car.

Technically, it was their car now, though Julius could never look at the rusted out, mustard yellow sedan without thinking of Marci. They could have bought a car ten years younger for what the old rust bucket had cost to fix, but the car had belonged to her father, and Marci was noticeably happier when she was in it, which, to Julius, made the repairs worth every penny. He'd still sprung for a few upgrades, though, like a better autonav and a ventilated, expanded trunk big enough to fit cages like the one he had now. He was strapping the metal box into place when he heard Marci's footsteps on the stairs behind him.

"How'd we do?" he asked, closing the trunk.

"Medium," she said, still tapping on her phone. "I couldn't sell him on the ward, but he did tip. I think you impressed him with that cage catch. We'll have to conjure another two calls before next Wednesday if we want to actually get into the black this month, but we won't starve for now, so that's something."

"We're not going to starve period," Julius assured her, walking around to the driver's door. "Speaking of, let's go get some dinner. It's nearly sundown."

"How can you tell?" Marci asked, looking up at the unchanging, cave-like dark of the DFZ Underground.

“Because I’m hungry,” he said, plopping into his seat. “Come on. It’s Friday night. Let’s find a nice empty lot to dump Mr. Snarls where he won’t bother anyone, and then we’ll go for pizza.”

He looked up to see if that appealed to her, but Marci was still standing beside the car. “You know,” she said quietly, leaning down to look at him through the open door. “The bounty for an intact living tank badger is currently listed at over two thousand bucks.”

Julius dropped his eyes.

“They’re pretty dangerous nuisances,” she went on. “And two thousand bucks *would* go a long way toward filling the hole in our budget...”

She trailed off, her voice painfully hopeful, but Julius couldn’t say a word. It wasn’t that he didn’t agree with what she was saying. Turning the animals they caught in for Algonquin’s animal control bounty had actually been his plan to start with. But that was back at the beginning, when he’d assumed every job would be like the lampreys: nasty, aggressive, violent menaces that needed to be put down for everyone’s benefit. Once they’d actually started going out on calls, though, he’d quickly realized that most of the animals they got hired to deal with weren’t like that at all. Even the tank badgers weren’t normally aggressive toward people. They were just animals doing their best to survive in the shadow of the enormous human city that had popped up like a mushroom on top of them, and as an illegal magical creature trying to make his own way in the DFZ, the thought of turning them in to be killed for Algonquin’s bounty hit a little too close to home. It must have shown on his face, too, because Marci let out a long sigh.

“Never mind,” she said, flopping into her seat. “Forget I said anything.”

Julius started the car. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she assured him quickly. “Really. I just wanted to ask.”

It *wasn’t* okay. Julius was all too aware of the money his bleeding heart had cost them. Without the added cash from bounties, the fees from their removal jobs were barely enough to cover expenses. Things had gotten better when Marci had started selling her spellwork services, but Julius was painfully aware that this wasn’t the life she’d signed up for when she’d agreed to come work with him. Happy as he was to be free of his family, the money issue was one of the two giant problems that kept Julius’s current life from actually being perfect. Even so.

“Things are getting better,” he assured her. “Word’s spreading, our name’s getting around. We’ll keep taking more jobs until we don’t have the time to do them all, and then we’ll raise our rates. It’ll all work out.”

“I know, I know,” Marci said, buckling in. “Like I said, no big deal. But can we stop by the house and change before we go for food? No offense, but you kind of smell like a badger.”

Julius looked down at the padded tactical suit he wore for work. The thick fabric was meant to protect him from the bites and stings and other unpleasantness they got into on a daily basis, but it also had an unfortunate habit of sucking up every odor it came in contact with, and tank badgers definitely had a strong odor.

“Of course,” he said, blushing as he gripped the wheel and gave the command for the autodrive to pull them out into the street. “Home first.”

Marci smiled and leaned back in her seat, propping her knees on the dashboard as she balanced her massively over-packed shoulder bag on her lap and started digging through the pockets, re-organizing her already meticulous collection of casting materials. Due to the bag’s size, this move bumped her leg into Julius’s arm where it rested on the console between the seats. It was a tiny touch, barely more than a brush, but he felt it all the way to his toes. It took all his self-control not to shiver and he looked away at once, hiding his flushed face behind a sudden feigned interest in the old car’s battery system.

This was his *other* giant problem. He’d always thought Marci was cute, but since they’d started

living together, the attraction had gone from exciting to downright debilitating. He could keep a lid on it when they were working and there were plenty of distractions, but at times like this, when they were sitting close together in the car or on the couch at home, his awareness of her went from constant to hyper. Even a tiny touch like the one just now was enough to unsettle him for hours, and given how much they were together, this meant Julius was unsettled pretty much all the time.

When he thought about it, which he did way too much, he completely understood what was happening. Marci was beautiful, strong, talented, and smart. She was also the only girl he'd ever spent real time with face-to-face instead of online. Add in everything they'd been through together and Julius would've been concerned if he *didn't* get a massive crush on her. But while he knew exactly what was going on and why, he didn't have any idea what to do about it.

He knew what he *wanted* to do. And given the number of times he'd caught her staring, he was pretty sure Marci felt the same, at least a little. But even assuming he could overcome his shyness enough to actually act on his feelings, Julius didn't dare. He *couldn't*. Marci was the most important person in his life: his trusted ally, insanely competent business partner, and best friend all rolled into one. Their relationship was the first he'd ever had that wasn't built on debts, fear, or obligation, which also made it the one thing in Julius's life that he absolutely, positively, could-not-under-any-circumstances afford to mess up. If he tried anything—a confession, a kiss, even a misconstrued look—their friendship as it was would end.

That was a risk Julius couldn't take. He was already happier right now than he'd ever been in his life. He was free of his family, doing work he enjoyed with his best friend for people who thanked him. Even his mother's seal didn't bother him much anymore. If he could just figure out how to solve their revenue issue, life in the DFZ would be perfect. It was close enough already. But while a proper dragon wouldn't stop until he had everything, Julius had never been one of those, and he wasn't about to risk what he had in a greedy grab for more.

This was the same conclusion Julius had come to every day over the last few weeks, but wise and prudent as he knew his logic was, it didn't do him much good at the moment. No matter how many times he told himself it was all a hopeless pipe dream, nothing could dampen the thudding of his heart that came from being in close proximity to Marci. It didn't help that she looked ridiculously adorable today in her brightly colored jacket and zippered skirt. He couldn't actually remember seeing her wear that skirt before, but she wore it well, and the purple tights she had on underneath it were some of his favorites. The way they hugged her legs so perfectly all the way up to—

He jerked his eyes back to the road, cheeks burning. The heat only got worse when Marci leaned closer, snapping her fingers in front of his face. "Earth to Julius. You okay?"

"Fine," he said much too quickly. "I'm fine. Let's go home."

Marci frowned, but she didn't press as Julius began madly fiddling with the autodrive's GPS, drawing a path manually along the grid of streets back to their house.

Thankfully, they didn't have far to go. In a move that'd surprised everyone, Ian hadn't just made good on his deal to find Julius a building as payment for his part in finding Katya, he'd done so spectacularly. The house he'd given Julius was just across the old interstate from the river in a fading neighborhood that had once been called Mexican Town. These days, it was an industrial crossroads where the haphazardly expanded Fisher Freeway fed traffic up from the Underground to the skyways for access to the New Ambassador Bridge, which was still the only road connecting Detroit to Canada. The resulting traffic jam had nearly wiped out what the flood had left of the old neighborhood, but a few classic old houses still hung on amid the forest of highway on-ramps and support columns. Ian's property was one of these: a classic brick three-story, pre-flood house with arched windows, a big porch, Gothic accents, and what must have once been a very nice, treed-in yard.

The trees had all withered and died years ago when the skyways cut them off from the sun, and

the yard was now little more than a gravel lot, but it was still an epic amount of room by DFZ standards. Even better, being surrounded by a spiraling maze of traffic ramps meant their house was almost completely cut off from the rest of the city. The only way in was through a tiny, unmarked access road that ran underneath an on-ramp, and the house itself was hidden inside the eye of the hurricane of ramps, bridges, and support structures that funneled commuters up from the Underground to the elevated Upper City. True, it was dark even by Underground standards, and being directly inside one of the busiest traffic exchanges in the city meant the roar of cars was constant, but the house and surrounding lot were big, private, in good repair, and, best of all, *safe*.

That was the most important factor when you were a dragon living in a city where you were considered prey. Marci had been a harder sell. She'd wanted a little bit of daylight, but she'd jumped on board once Julius showed her the giant, open attic with its peaked windows and marvelously pointed ceiling that he'd set aside to be her lab. After that, Marci had pretty much moved in on the spot.

Not that they'd had much to move, of course. At that point in time, everything they'd owned had fit on their backs. But the DFZ was a great place for secondhand anything. Now, one month of bargaining and hunting later, their hidden house was almost homey, the lit windows winking at them brightly in the dark as they drove under the ramp and pulled to a stop next to the front porch.

"I'm going to run upstairs and take a quick shower," Marci said, hopping out of the car. "I swear I smell more like a badger than you do."

Julius was opening his mouth to tell her she smelled fine when Marci froze. The change set him on instant alert, and he jumped out of the car. "What's wrong?"

Marci's eyes were wide as she turned and pointed at the flat stretch of gravel that had once been a side yard. "There's a freaking limo over there!"

He whirled around. Sure enough, though, she was right. A huge, black, heavily armored limousine was parked in the shadows right beside their house.

"Maybe it's a rich client?" Marci whispered, looking at him accusingly. "Did you give our address to someone big and not tell me?"

Julius shook his head, breathing deep through his nose. Now that he was outside the car, something in the air smelled off. Between the badger in the trunk and the reek of the highways overhead, he couldn't pick out what it was exactly, but it set his whole body on high alert, which meant it wasn't a good smell. He was still trying to sort it out when Marci turned and ran up the steps to the front door.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, running after her.

"What do you think I'm doing?" she hissed back, frantically fitting her key into the deadbolt. "There's an unknown car in our secret base! I'm going to get my big guns."

Julius hadn't realized Marci had things in her attic lab that would qualify as "big guns." When she opened the door, though, he forgot all about it. The moment the insulating seal cracked, the tiny wisp of teasing scent he'd been worrying over became overwhelming. It was the smell of his childhood, an unmistakable mix of blood and gold and fire. It was so out of place here, though, Julius couldn't do anything but stand and stare stupidly as Marci shoved the front door open to reveal the dragon sitting in their living room.

For a shocked moment, nobody said a word, not even Marci, and then the dragon smiled. "Now Julius," she said, her voice a thousand times sweeter and more terrifying than it ever could be over the phone. "Is that any way to greet your mother?"

And just like that, all of Julius's happiness vanished in a puff of smoke.

—“What are you waiting for?” Bethesda said, her human fingers curling like claws as she pointed at the folding chair in front of the couch. “Sit.”

Julius almost sat right there on the floor. He hadn't actually seen his mother since the night she'd kicked him out, and as always after an extended absence, the first sight of Bethesda the Heartstriker hit him like a punch.

It was a disconcerting thing to notice about your own mother, but Bethesda the Heartstriker was mesmerizingly beautiful. All dragons were pleasing to look at in their human guise. That was the entire point: to be so beautiful, actual humans fell at their feet. But Bethesda's beauty had always been in a class by itself, and she knew exactly how to use it.

Today, for example. She was wearing a super short, electric-blue cocktail dress that set off her black hair and dark complexion so perfectly, there had to be some sort of advanced color calculation going on behind it. Her eyes, the original Heartstriker green, were thickly lined in the fashionable new Egyptian style, a heavy counterpoint to the overt sexuality of her razor precise red lips. Her hair followed the Egyptian trend as well, falling in a perfectly straight, ink-black curtain over her shoulders and down her bare back. Gold flashed at her ears, throat, wrists, and anywhere else that would hold it, including her shoes, which looked to be little more than diamonds and gold chains knotted around her perfectly pedicured toes. The combined effect was classic Bethesda: dazzling, unspeakably expensive, and just past the edge of good taste. Her most striking accessory of all, however, was the dragon leaning on the wall behind her.

He was *massive*, six-foot-six easy with shoulders that took a lot of creative tailoring to fit into human-sized clothes. Between his giant build and the massive Fang of the Heartstriker positioned prominently at his side, the dragon strongly reminded Julius of Justin, though the truth was the other way around. Julius might have spent his life avoiding the upper alphabet members of his family, but even he knew that the dragon standing guard behind his mother was none other than Conrad, First Blade of Bethesda, Champion of the Heartstrikers, and the last surviving member of C-clutch aside from Chelsie herself. He was also Justin's idol, and if they looked alike, it was because Justin copied everything Conrad did, from his military-short haircut to his preference for motorcycle boots to the way they both wore their swords low on their right hip, despite the fact that Justin was not left-handed.

But terrifying as it was to have his mother and her champion appear unexpectedly in his living room, Bethesda's fancy get-up and Conrad's presence actually gave Julius hope. His mother would never waste this kind of display on a disciplinary visit to an underperforming child. He was probably just a stop on their way to somewhere more important, and he was scrambling to think of what he could say to make sure it stayed that way when a high-pitched squeak went off right next to his ear.

“Oh my *God*, you're *Bethesda the Heartstriker!*!”

In the shock of seeing his mother, Julius had completely forgotten about Marci. She was still beside him, staring at the head of the Heartstriker clan with eyes wider than he'd known a human's could go.

“I've wanted to meet you forever!” she cried. “You look just like you do on TV!”

Her excitement was met with stony silence as Bethesda's eyes narrowed to dangerous green slits before flicking back to her youngest son. “Is this *your* human?”

“Yes!” Marci proclaimed happily, producing a business card from her sleeve with a flick of her hand as she charged forward. “I'm Marci Novalli, Julius's mage and business partner. We're—”

“Why is it talking to me?”

The chill in her voice would have stopped most mortals cold, but this was Marci. She rolled right over the warning with barely a pause for breath.

“I'll only be a moment. I just have a few—”

“Still talking,” Bethesda said sweetly. “Conrad?”

—Conrad pushed off the wall with a sigh, dropping his hand to his sword. But while he didn't actually seem ready to draw, the threat alone was enough to finally knock Julius out of his shock.

He lurched into motion, grabbing Marci and dragging her behind him before Conrad's hand finished tightening. “I'm very sorry,” he said, holding Marci in place as he bowed low before his mother. “It's my fault. She's new, she doesn't know—”

“So teach her,” Bethesda snapped, running her fingers through her perfect hair. “Really, Julius, you're going to keep a pet, the least you can do is teach it some manners.”

“Yes, Mother,” he whispered, tightening his grip on Marci's arm in an attempt to make her understand just how much danger she was in.

A wasted attempt, it turned out.

“I meant no disrespect,” Marci said, squirming against Julius's hold. “I just have so many questions! You were old and powerful before the magic vanished, right? If I could just get a few seconds of your time—”

“*Marci!*”

She jumped at his tone, but Julius didn't even look at her. “Get out.”

“But—”

“*Now.*”

Marci froze in shock, her whole body going still. Julius was a bit shocked himself. He'd never heard his voice sound so menacing and, well, draconic. But it was the only way he could think of to make Marci stop talking and go. And she had to go. Right now. Before his mother's infamous temper turned her into a pile of ash.

“I'm sorry,” she said, softly now. “I was just—”

“Hush, child,” Bethesda said, her voice switching from terrifying to honey sweet again as she gloried in Julius's discomfort. “Can't you see you're embarrassing him? Surely you know my son doesn't need any help on *that* score. Now run along. Clan business is no place for chattering humans.”

For one long moment, Julius thought the hurt on Marci's face would actually kill him. Then, without a word, she turned and fled, running up the stairs toward her workshop. He was still staring at the place where she'd been when his mother heaved an exasperated sigh.

“*Mortals.* They're so dramatic. But I must say I was impressed with how you handled her. For a moment there, I could almost imagine you were one of my other, less embarrassing children.”

She paused expectantly, a cruel smile on her red lips, but Julius was in no mood for his mother's games. He wasn't even that scared anymore. He just wanted her to leave so he could go upstairs and apologize to Marci. “Why are you here?”

“Watch your tone,” Bethesda said sharply, rising from the couch to loom over him. “Do you even know how lucky you are that I've deigned to visit your little...” Her voice faded as she looked around the sparsely furnished room. “What is it you're doing here again?”

“Running a business,” Julius replied, standing a little taller. “We're called New Horizons Magical Solutions, and—”

“*That's* what you're calling it?”

When he nodded, she laughed. “What? Were you trying to stand out in the listings by having the longest name, or were you trying to make a clever acronym and got confused?”

Julius scowled. It *was* a bit of a silly name, but he liked it. It was fitting, because even after he messed up on the killing-animals-for-the-bounty end of things, New Horizons had remained exactly that: a new horizon for his life. A promise for a better future. But his mother would respect that kind of sentimentality even less than a harebrained scheme to game the business listings, so he decided to just move on.

“We’re a magical animal control company,” he explained patiently. “It’s a booming business here in the DFZ. We’ve haven’t even been operating for a month, and already—”

“So you’re a rat catcher.”

Julius couldn’t exactly argue with that since he’d just gotten back from a job catching what were essentially giant magical rodents, but he didn’t appreciate her tone. “It’s a major industry!”

“Still waiting to hear why I should care,” Bethesda said, looking down to examine her knife-sharp, gold painted nails with a dangerously bored expression.

Julius clamped his jaw shut, forcing the growl back down his throat before it got him into trouble. “With all due respect, Mother, it’s only been a month. If you’d given me more time before checking in, I would have had something more impressive to show you.”

“Show me?” she scoffed. “*Really*, Julius? Did you *really* think I’d risk setting foot in Algonquin’s little playground to hear your humdrum tales of small business success?”

Well, not when she put it like that. “But,” he said, confused. “If you’re not here to check on me, why *are* you here?”

As always, Bethesda let him dangle for a moment before saying, “I’m taking you to a party.”

He couldn’t have heard that right. “A what?”

“A party,” she repeated. “A social event in a private home. A get-together.”

“I know what a party is,” Julius said. “But why would you want to take *me*?”

“Because it suits me,” she replied, her voice growing dangerously sharp. “And if you want to be unsealed this decade, you’ll stop asking stupid questions and do as you’re told.”

The word “unsealed” had barely left her lips before the block she’d placed at the root of Julius’ power started to clench up. It was only moderately painful, nothing like when she’d actually put the seal on him, but it made him extremely aware of how cramped and uncomfortable he was in this shape. His wings, which he normally didn’t even think about, suddenly ached to uncurl, and his tail prickled like a limb that’d fallen asleep. Even his feathers were itching, making him want to roll around on the ground. Bethesda must have known it, too, because her smile only grew crueler. “Any more comments you’d like to add?”

“No, Mother,” he said softly, lowering his head.

“Good boy,” she cooed. “Now let’s go. This detour has taken far too long already.”

She and Conrad were already halfway out of the room before Julius realized she meant *right now*. “Wait!” he cried, looking down in a panic at his padded work clothes, which still reeked of tank badger. “At least give me a moment to change.”

“Why?” Bethesda said, sweeping down the short hall toward the kitchen. “No one expects anything of you, so why should we pretend? It’s not like you have something nicer to wear.”

Julius did not, in fact, have anything in his closet at the moment that wasn’t second-hand jeans and t-shirts, but that didn’t make her assessment sting any less. “I can still—”

His mother growled deep in her throat, an inhuman noise that vibrated through the floor and set his hair on end. After that, Julius didn’t say another word. He simply lowered his head and scurried after her, ducking through the kitchen and out the back door Conrad held open into the gravel alley behind the house where Bethesda’s limo was waiting.

Chapter 2

And this was how, an hour later, Julius found himself flying over the Great Plains in his mother's private sub-orbital jet.

Under different circumstances, this wouldn't have been so bad. Like everything else she owned Bethesda's private jet was luxurious to the point of absurdity. It didn't even have seats, just couches and lounges strewn across a cabin that looked more like a flying living room. But it was hard to enjoy the luxury when he didn't know where they were going, or why Bethesda had decided to take *him*. His mother wasn't helping, either. She hadn't actually said a word to him since they'd left the house.

This wasn't to say she'd been silent. His mother had talked the whole time, just not to him. Instead, she'd been lounging on her throne-like couch, using her phone and smart mic to have multiple, simultaneous conversations with at least a dozen of his brothers and sisters, switching seamlessly between each call so each dragon thought she was talking only to them.

As a small and unimportant cog in the Heartstriker machine, Julius had heard of his mother's legendary ability to multitask, but this was the first time he'd witnessed it himself. At least now he understood how one dragon managed to keep a hold on so many plots, though it did make him wonder just how many other family members she'd had on hold all the times she'd called to threaten him.

Since Bethesda seemed to have temporarily forgotten he existed, Julius took the opportunity to message Marci, both to let her know he'd be gone for a while and to apologize for what had happened earlier. Seconds after he hit send, though, the text bounced back with an error message that the number he was trying to reach was not receiving calls. He tried again, just in case, but again, the text bounced back, making it clear this was not a technical failure. Marci's phone was getting his messages just fine. She just didn't want to talk. At least, not to him.

This realization sent Julius slumping down into the overstuffed leather sofa that passed for a real seat on Bethesda's mansion of a plane. Really, though, he had no one to blame for this situation but himself. He should have seen this coming, should have been prepared, but *no*. He'd stupidly let himself believe he was free, that a few weeks of no dragons somehow meant he'd escaped them forever. What a joke. His mother had swept into his house in the DFZ just as easily as she used to barge into his room back at Heartstriker Mountain. His victories last month might have won him a bit of leeway, but when push came to shove, nothing had really changed. He was still a pawn, a tool, and unless he was willing to stand up to Bethesda and challenge that (and accept the swift death that would follow), he might as well get used to it.

It shouldn't have been hard. After all, until last month, his whole life had revolved around keeping his mouth shut, his head down, and his opinions to himself. But for a failure who'd had a sweet taste of freedom, going back was proving to be a surprisingly bitter pill to swallow. Fortunately for him, his survival instincts were picking up the slack, burying his simmering anger under a self-protective mask of meek submission as the plane began its final descent into the arid wastes of the New Mexico desert.

In hindsight, their destination should have been obvious. There was only one place in the world a dragon with as many enemies as Bethesda could safely attend a party, and that was in her own territory. But knowing they were going home only made Julius's sense of impending doom worse, especially when Heartstriker Mountain itself came into view on the horizon.

Tall enough to blot out the setting sun, Bethesda's fortress rose from the flat desert like a dragon's fang. Once a petrified seabed, most of the natural rock had been dug out ages ago to make way for the numerous expansions needed to house a clan as large as Heartstriker. But while the base of the mountain looked like a military base with its air strip, helipad, and human town crouching in its

shadow like a feudal village around a castle, the thorn-like peak was every inch the classic dragon mount with a rugged, natural surface and numerous dragon-sized caves open to the night air for easy landings. At the moment, it even had a full flight of rainbow-feathered serpents circling in the sky above it, their green eyes keeping constant watch on the surrounding desert. Julius was pressing his face against the window to try and see who was on patrol when his mother abruptly hung up all her calls and turned her own green gaze on him.

“I expect you to be on your absolute best behavior,” she said, tapping her nails on the leather arm of her massive, throne-like chair. “It’s not often a dragon like you gets to mix with a crowd like this. Fortunately, tonight should be a very simple visit for you. Just keep your mouth shut and try not to look so nice.”

Julius glanced down at the shabby clothes she hadn’t given him a chance to change out of. “But you said—

“Not *that*,” Bethesda snapped irritably. “This.” She smiled wide, her eyes growing distant and happy in a way that made her look totally different, almost kind, before her face went back to its usual cruel, dangerous beauty. “Nice.”

“Got it,” Julius said with a sigh.

“Good,” she said, pulling a compact mirror out of her gold-beaded clutch purse to check her still-flawless makeup. “If things go the way I expect, I won’t even need you, but you can still mess things up if you act too Julius-y, so don’t.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised. “Though it’d probably be easier if you just told me what I’m now supposed to act like myself for.”

His mother flashed him a knife-sharp glare. “Don’t get cute. You might have wiggled your way off my To Kill list for the time being, but that can change at a moment’s notice.”

He dropped his head at once. “Yes, Mother.”

“That’s better,” Bethesda said, closing her mirror with a snap. “And, as you’d already know if you paid *any* attention to current events, tonight’s the night we cement our new friendly relations with the Daughters of the Three Sisters.”

Julius nearly choked. He managed to hide it under a cough at his mother’s dirty look, but still. . . *friendly relations?* With the *Daughters of the Three Sisters?*

That couldn’t be right. The Three Sisters had been their clan’s greatest enemies since forever. Estella had been openly trying to murder them all just last month. He’d heard from Katya that Ian and Svena were doing well, but there was no way a few weeks of progress could overturn centuries of hatred.

“I can hear you thinking,” his mother said, her voice a teasing sing-song. “Have you finally figured out why you’re here, then?”

He flinched at being put on the spot, and Bethesda rolled her eyes. “Come *on*, Julius,” she said, snapping her fingers impatiently in front of his face. “For all your other failings, you’ve never been stupid. Do you think I brought you along tonight for the pleasure of your company?”

“No,” he started. “But—”

“Then use your brain,” she growled. “Why would I burden myself with you? What is the *one thing* you have that I could possibly want?”

By the time she finished, Julius was sweating bullets. Fortunately, when she put it like that, the answer was pretty obvious. “Katya of the Three Sisters owes me a life debt?”

Bethesda smiled, making his chest heave in relief. “See?” she said. “Was that so hard?” She leaned back in her throne-like lounge, smiling out the port-hole window at the setting sun. “This is the night of our victory, Julius. With the Northern Star run off to lick her wounds in another plane of existence and the Three Old Hags still asleep, we’ve never had a better chance to bring the remaining

ice snakes to heel. Svena and her baby sister have already been invited. All you have to do is stand around and be a reminder of what they owe us.”

She said this like she was doing him a favor, but his mother’s words left a sinking feeling in Julius’s stomach. He had no idea how she was actually planning to leverage Katya’s life debt, but he didn’t like the idea one bit. He doubted Katya would return the sentiment, but in his mind at least, she was his friend, and friends didn’t use each other. Not that Bethesda would care. She’d just ripped Julius out of his home and walked all over his mage just so he could serve as a sign post. Fortunately for him, his mother seemed to be overlooking a vital point.

“You’ve invited them,” he said nervously. “But will they accept? The Three Sisters have hated us since before the Heartstrikers were a clan. I know we’ve got a life debt now, and I’m sure Ian’s been working on her, but I can’t imagine Svena would be trusting enough to accept a party invitation from her ancient enemy at our home fortress?”

“Of course she’s not,” Bethesda said sweetly. “That’s why I made sure the invitations she and Katya received came from *you*.”

Julius blinked. “Me?”

His mother grinned wide, showing a line of sharp, blindingly white teeth. “Brilliant, isn’t it? The White Witch has always been a suspicious snake. She’d never accept an invitation from me, but who could suspect our very own Nice Dragon of laying traps?” She chuckled. “Of course, once they accepted, I had to go out of my way to make sure you’d actually *be* here, but that’s a minor inconvenience. Putting up with you for a few hours is a small price to pay for such a victory, don’t you think?”

The plane touched down as she finished, letting Julius hide his horror under the guise of bracing against the landing bump. If he hadn’t been so terrified for them, he would have been flattered that Svena and Katya trusted him enough to be lured into something like this. But while part of him couldn’t believe his mother would use his good name like that, the rest of him wondered why he was surprised by anything his mother did anymore. Bethesda had never met a circumstance she couldn’t exploit to her advantage, and now she’d pulled him into it, too.

Just the thought made him sick. He spent the rest of the landing desperately trying to think of some way he could warn Katya and her sister without it being blatant treason against his clan. He was still working on it when the plane finally rolled to a stop, and his mother rose gracefully to her feet.

“Don’t look like that, darling,” she scolded as Conrad hopped up to open the exterior door. “This is the most use you’ve been to me in years. You should be happy, especially since you don’t actually have to do anything. In fact, if you behave yourself tonight and this all works out like it should, I *might* just be happy enough to unseal you. Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

She paused there, waiting for his answer, but Julius said nothing. What was there to say? If he agreed, he’d condone the use of his good reputation to trap those who trusted him. If he didn’t, she’d accuse him of being ungrateful, revoke the offer, and use him anyway. That was how his mother worked: by leaving you no option but to dance to her tune and thank her for the opportunity.

When he didn’t answer, Bethesda’s smile fell. “You truly are a miserable excuse for a dragon,” she said, turning away. “I give you opportunity after opportunity, but do you take it?”

He took a breath to defend himself, but his mother cut him off. “Do yourself a favor, Julius,” she said as she started down the stairs the human crew had just finished rolling into position. “Keep that mouth shut. When we get to the party, find a corner and stand in it until I tell you to do otherwise. Can you manage that?”

“Yes, Mother,” he said quietly, following her down the stairs to the tarmac where Frieda, the Heartstriker who served as his mother’s secretary, was already waiting to walk them into the mountain.

Given how much he'd hated living here, Julius didn't even want to look at the place again. Before he could think of dragging his feet, though, a voice behind him growled, "Move."

Julius looked up with a start to see Conrad standing on the stairs behind him, his massive arms crossed over his inhumanly wide chest. He looked pointedly at the doors on the other side of the airstrip, and Julius got the hint, scurrying after his mother like a mouse. His terrifying brother followed right on his heels, bringing up the rear as they left the jet to the human crew and stepped through the automatic, sound-proofed doors into the massive complex that was Heartstriker Mountain.

It looked the same as always. Julius wasn't sure what else he'd expected. He'd only been gone a month. Given how much his life had changed in the last four weeks, though, coming back to the same spotless green carpet, overly ornate gold light fixtures, and arched stone hallway full of human servants all scrambling to bow to Bethesda as she passed felt oddly surreal. The fortress didn't even feel like home anymore, an uncomfortable realization given that, up until a few weeks ago, this was the only home he'd ever known. He was still trying to decide how to feel about that when his mother marched them past the multiple elevators leading to the various family floors and into the special, gilded elevator at the far end that connected the public base of the mountain with her private lair at the peak.

Julius stopped with a gulp. He'd lived his whole life in Heartstriker Mountain, but he'd only taken this elevator a handful of times, and only when he was in deep, deep trouble. There was no other reason a dragon like him would be invited up to Bethesda's throne room or treasury. Considering clan parties were always thrown in the grand ballroom on the first floor, he was surprised they were going there now. Perhaps Bethesda was just going up to her rooms to change? If so, then he might be able to duck back down to his old room to grab something as well. He was sure he had something that could pass as formal wear in his old closet. Assuming, of course, Bob had been kidding when he'd said he'd sold everything.

When he mentioned going back to his room to his mother, though, Bethesda just scoffed. "Don't be stupid," she said, yanking him into the elevator without looking up from the tablet Frieda was holding for her to read. "This is an intimate gathering of the Heartstriker elite, not a cattle call. The ballroom is for the masses. *We're* going to the throne room." Her reflection in the elevator's golden mirrored doors smirked at him. "Now do you understand what an honor it is to be included?"

Julius muttered something about it being an honor, indeed, but inside he was fighting down panic. Any party hosted by his mother was a terrifying ordeal, but the Heartstriker gatherings he'd been forced to attend growing up had always been big enough for him to count on hiding in the crowd. A small, elite party was another matter entirely. Julius didn't even have a strategy for something like that, and there was no time to think of one. The swift, silent elevator had already rushed them to the mountain's peak, the great doors opening to reveal a stone hallway big enough to drive a tank down.

As the home of a young, modern clan who'd come into their power during the magical drought, most of Heartstriker Mountain had been designed to a human scale. Here, though, in the place that was the top of Heartstriker in all ways, things were built for dragons. Just stepping out of the elevator made Julius feel like an insignificant speck, but, as always when entering his mother's lair, what really got him were the heads.

The giant stone tunnel that ran from the elevator to the throne room's enormous double doors a hundred feet away was lined with severed dragon heads. They hung in a grid from floor to ceiling, each one a grisly trophy from the clans the Heartstriker had destroyed during her rapid rise to power, mounted on a custom mahogany plaque the size of a car. Since Bethesda's first conquests had been in the Americas, most of the skulls were feathered, including those from her two older brothers, but there were plenty of scaled heads from the European clans, fish-like heads from the Sea Serpents who ruled the Pacific, even two narrow, snake-like skulls from the Asian clans, and these were just the intact

ones she liked to show off. Bethesda had even more trophies stored in her treasury, but the entry hall was reserved for the most impressive specimens, the defeated dragons big and famous enough to serve as a proper reminder of just who lived here, and what she was capable of.

Julius *hated* walking down this hall. Even knowing the severed heads were stuffed and their eyes were glass, he swore he could feel the dead dragons watching him and plotting revenge. His mother, on the other hand, loved it. She'd rushed them all the way from the plane to the elevator. Now, though she took her time, smiling up at each head like she was greeting old friends. But creepy as it was to stroll through a postmortem gallery of your enemies, Julius was actually grateful for the slow pace. It gave him time to adjust to the growing scent of dragons coming from the doors at the end.

Since his mother had come to pick him up herself, Julius had hoped he'd have some time to prepare himself before the others arrived, but leave it to Bethesda to be fashionably late to her own party. He didn't have the experience needed to separate all the individual scents floating down the hall, but there were definitely a *lot* of dragons already waiting on the other side of the doors at the end of the hall. Nothing like the massive gatherings of Heartstrikers that showed up for his mother's annual birthday celebration, of course, but still more than Julius wanted to deal with in an enclosed space.

Just thinking about standing in that predatory crowd made him twitchy, but it was way too late to run. Conrad had already walked ahead of them to grab both of the massive door handles, looking over his shoulder at their mother for a signal. After taking a moment to pull herself to her maximum height, Bethesda nodded, and Conrad pushed the heavy, dragon-sized wooden doors open with a single shove to reveal Bethesda's enormous, gilded throne room, which was packed nearly to the walls with the most terrifying crowd Julius had ever seen.

When he was a young dragon, his sister Flora, who'd been in charge of the new Heartstriker's education, had shown J-clutch a scale model of the solar system. Years later, Julius could still remember how tiny and insignificant he'd felt coming face to face with the reality of interstellar distance, and it was the same feeling he had now. Even with his mother standing between him and the throne room, Julius could feel the force of the crowd's attention like a pressure zone as every dragon in the room turned to look at Bethesda's grand entrance.

Apparently, "small, elite gathering" was a relative term. There were so many deadly, beautiful faces turned toward them, Julius couldn't begin to count them all, but one glance was enough for him to know to his bones that he was the smallest thing in this room by a power of ten. Bethesda, of course, took their notice as her due. Regal as a queen, she lifted her chin, surveying the well-dressed crowd like she was trying to decide if it met her minimum requirements.

Like all her displays of power, it went on forever. Since Julius was trapped up there at her side, this meant *he* had to stand and be stared at forever, which was rapidly becoming a problem. Being the focus of this much draconic attention would have been the stuff of nightmares under any circumstances, but for some reason, the fear was hitting him even harder than he'd anticipated, weakening his knees even as it jacked up his body with the desperate need to flee.

It was this place, he realized, reaching up furtively to wipe the nervous sweat off his brow. Just looking at the gilded cave-turned-palace that was the Heartstriker's seat of power brought back a lifetime of bad memories. It was here that he'd first had to prove to his mother that he could fly, jumping off the massive, open balcony at the room's far end while Bethesda watched. He'd nearly crashed, too. Not because he was a bad flier—flying was actually the one part of being a dragon Julius had never had trouble with—but because his mother's critical glare had made him trip all over himself. The throne room was also where she'd first singled him out for being a failure, calling him up to stand beside her on top of her throne in front of all his siblings so he could see the view he'd never earn. But bad as the old memories were, he had a sharper, far more recent reason to hate this place,

because the throne room was where Bethesda had sealed his dragon form.

—That was a night he never wanted to remember, but it was impossible not to think about it when he was standing on the threshold of the place where it had happened. Everywhere he looked—the massive throne on its dais, the walls set with gold and gemstone mosaics depicting his mother in all her feathered glory, the smooth stone floor with its numerous, tell-tale dark stains—reminded him viscerally of what he didn't want to think about. Even just standing here in the doorway beside his mother, he could almost feel her claws in his flesh again as she dragged him up here from his room, but he couldn't get away. He couldn't even turn. So Julius did the only thing he *could* do. He looked up, staring determinedly over the heads of the terrifying crowd.

Since he'd always had his head down in his mother's presence, the roof was the only part of her throne room that didn't trigger flashbacks of events he'd rather not revisit. But even this wasn't a completely safe strategy, because looking up meant that Julius was now staring straight at what he used to consider the scariest part of his mother's trappings of power: the massive, bus-sized skull that hung suspended from the domed ceiling by enchanted chains.

Unlike the preserved, taxidermy dragon heads they'd walked past on their way here, this one was nothing but bleached bone. But despite its shabbiness, the huge skull was Bethesda's greatest trophy, because it was the head of her father, the Quetzalcoatl, the ancient dragon whose death by her hand had earned Bethesda the title of Heartstriker. It also looked different than the last time he'd seen it.

At least that was enough to shock Julius out of his fear. The Quetzalcoatl's skull was the Heartstrikers' most priceless family heirloom. His mother didn't allow it to be dusted, let alone messed with, but something was definitely different. He was staring harder, trying to put his finger on what, when a dragon broke from the crowd to approach the still preening Bethesda.

Not surprisingly given the purpose of this party, it was Ian. The dragon looked as impeccable as always in his slim-cut tux, but his expression was uncharacteristically nervous as he bowed low over Bethesda's hand. "Mother."

"Darling," she cooed back, eying Ian like a rancher would her prized bull. "Where is your date?"

There was only one "date" Ian could possibly bring tonight, but Julius didn't smell Svena, or any daughter of the Three Sisters, in the crowd, which explained why Ian's face was now the color of his white tie. "She's running a little late," he said, his voice impressively smooth, considering.

Bethesda's smile fell. "Late?"

The word came out like a dagger, making Julius flinch, and he wasn't even the one it was aimed at. But Ian was the dragon's dragon, and he took it with barely a grimace. "I'm given to understand she had some difficulties with her sister," he said calmly. "She will be here soon."

"She'd better be," Bethesda growled, turning away with a sweep of her shiny black hair. "Since we're being made to wait, I'm going to make my rounds," she announced. "Ian, you're with me. Julius, go find a corner and stand in it. When Svena deigns to grace us with her presence, return to my side. Otherwise, I don't want to see so much as a—"

Bethesda's voice cut off like a falling knife. Her body went still at the same time, freezing in place like someone had hit pause. At this point, Julius would have said it was impossible for him to be on higher alert than he already was, but apparently the sight of his mother freezing in her tracks was enough to jack his survival instincts to new heights. Time actually seemed to slow as his eyes flew over the crowded room, scanning the beautiful faces for the threat that could make Bethesda the Heartstriker stop in her tracks. In hindsight, he needn't have bothered. Picking out the dragon who'd made Bethesda freeze was as easy as following his mother's death glare.

In the far corner of the room, a dragoness in a crimson red dress was lounging against the mosaic-tiled wall, drinking what appeared to be a pint glass filled to the brim with whiskey. When she noticed Bethesda glaring, the dragoness lifted her glass like a salute. The whole interaction couldn't

have taken more than five seconds, but by the time she'd lowered her cup again, Bethesda had dismissed her existence completely, shoving her arm into Ian's and marching into the crowd, her golden heels clicking angrily on the stone. Back on the steps, Julius was still trying to figure out what he'd just witnessed when a hand the size of a dinner plate landed on his shoulder.

"Move."

The terrifying order made him forget all about the strange dragoness. He jumped, whirling around to see Conrad glaring down at him like he was daring Julius to disobey. Not wanting to lose the joint Conrad currently had a death grip on, Julius put his head down and obeyed, letting his hulk of a brother steer him along the wall until they reached the throne room's inside corner. When they got there, Conrad took hold of both his shoulders and set Julius bodily against the wall and ordered, "Stay."

"I'm not a dog," Julius muttered, earning himself another deadly glare. "Right," he amended, dropping his eyes. "Staying."

Conrad nodded and turned away, resting his hand on the hilt of his massive sword as he walked back through the crowd toward Bethesda. But while it was amusing to watch the other dragons scurry out of Conrad's way, with his scary brother gone, Julius realized he was now alone. Alone, in a giant room full of the cruelest, most ruthless dragons in his family, many of whom were now looking at him like he might be entertaining.

He squeezed himself into the corner, putting his back to two walls at once as he hunched his shoulders in an effort to look as inconspicuous as possible. Blending into the background was a defense he'd learned early in his life. Dragons exploited weakness as a matter of principle, but if you could get them to overlook you entirely, you had a chance. To that end, Julius focused on staying small, staying back, and most importantly, avoiding eye contact. Since the room was packed, this once again meant looking up, which, since it took up most of the ceiling, brought him right back to his grandfather's skull.

Given the unspeakable, life-scarring things that usually happened in his mother's throne room, he'd never actually gotten a chance to just stand and stare at what was left of the Quetzalcoatl, which was probably why he'd never noticed just how much the skull's triangular, viper-like shape and curving front fangs resembled his own. Or, rather, Julius resembled him since the Quetzalcoatl was the original. As someone who'd always thought of his grandfather as more of a myth than an actual, historical figure, though, it was eye opening to see the physical proof that he actually was related to one of the most powerful dragons who'd ever lived, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that something was different. No matter how hard he stared, though, he couldn't place it. He was about to dismiss the whole thing as paranoia when it finally hit him.

The Quetzalcoatl's skull had an extra fang in its mouth.

His eyebrows flew up in surprise. Being so firmly at the bottom, Julius didn't know much about the treasures of his clan, but *every* Heartstriker was taught how the clan's greatest weapons, the five swords that made up the Fangs of the Heartstriker, had originally been *actual* fangs, as in *teeth*. Only one—the sixth—had been left in the Quetzalcoatl's skull, supposedly as proof of the legendary weapons' origins, though Julius didn't buy that for a second. If the teeth really did become the Fangs of the Heartstriker, then there was no way Bethesda would leave one just hanging around as decoration if she had any other choice. Whatever the real reason was, though, the fact remained that Quetzalcoatl's skull had had only one fang in its mouth for as long as Julius could remember. Now, there were two. The front two, specifically, curving from the skull's top jaw like a pair of viper fangs.

Careful not to draw attention, Julius inched away from the wall to get a better look. Sure enough, the new tooth looked as natural and deeply embedded as the old one, but that couldn't be right. There was no way a thousand-year-dead skull could just grow another tooth, so either his mother had decided

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