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# SNOW AND RED

DRAGON SHIFTERS' HOARD

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EILEEN MUELLER & A.J. PONDER

A DRAGON SHIFTERS' HOARD SHORT STORY

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**Magic every time you turn the page**

# **Dedication**

To our readers everywhere who love dragons, shifters and magic!

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## Night Out

Red shimmied into her green velvet top and tugged it down over her dark skinny jeans. “Snow, what do you think?” she called.

Her sister sauntered through Red’s doorway in her silver sequined tank, black miniskirt and sparkly stiletto sandals. Snow raised an eyebrow. Her cool gaze roamed the room. “A mess as usual.”

Red rolled her eyes. “I don’t mean my room, Ice Queen.” She jabbed her thumbs at her top. “This.”

“I know, just teasing.” Snow grinned. “What should I say? Hot. With you dressed like that, no wonder none of the boys look at me.”

Red laughed. “I doubt that.” Snow was pretty, but so shy she fled when most boys smiled.

Snow shrugged a slim pale shoulder, her white-blond hair cascading around her. “I’m starving. Let’s eat. You can clean up your room later.”

As if. No one cleaned any room in this house except the icy neatness freak. As much as Red loved her, Snow was a little over the top. Red shoved a mountain of clothes to one side of her bed so she could sit, and pulled on her boots, then followed Snow into the kitchen.

Red opened the fridge and slapped some slices of cold pizza onto two plates. Holding the plates in her hands, she let heat flow from her core, singing through her veins like liquid fire until it ran along her forearms and into her fingers. The sizzle of magic made her bones thrum and her adrenaline kick in. How could anyone live without magic? Life would be so boring. In moments, the plates were hot and the pizza was steaming. Red plonked the plates onto the kitchen counter. “Food’s up. Let’s eat. I don’t want to be late tonight.”

Snow pulled a carton of orange juice and two glasses from the cupboard. “Ice?” She gave Red another one of her infamous eyebrow arches.

“Sure.” Red laughed.

Snow held the glass until it was slick with condensation.

“Hey, whoa. I want a drink, not an ice block.”

Snow passed her the chilly glass.

Red took a slug. “Ah, perfect. I hope you keep my drinks cool tonight.”

Snow frowned. “You know what Mom said. We can’t do anything like this in public, Red.”

“Course not.” Despite Red never intending to use her talents in public, sometimes stuff happened.

Snow glared at her. “I mean it, Red. You can’t use your powers tonight. Not on purpose. We can’t risk being found out as freaks.”

Pizza suddenly clogged Red’s throat. She swallowed. Freaks—yeah, that was about right.

Gingerly avoiding the hot plate, Snow picked up a piece of pizza, and took a dainty bite. “Oh, this is the fuel I’ve needed. I’ve been running on empty all afternoon.”

“Fuel!” Red gasped. “Oops.”

Snow grinned. “I knew you’d forget, so I ducked out and filled the tank while you were in the shower.”

“Thanks, you saved my sorry butt.” Where would she be without her sister?

“Mom will be home in a couple of hours. We’d better skate so she doesn’t catch us.”

“She’s on night shift,” Red said. “We still have a few hours.” Things had been the same for as long as Red remembered: Mom working night shifts in the emergency room at the hospital; them taking care of each other. It wasn’t that Mom didn’t care—she was barely earning enough to pay the crazy rent—one of the many reasons they always ate at home and only bought a drink or two if they went out. “I’ll grab my things.”

Of course, Snow already had her stuff in a tiny silver purse, slung across her shoulder.

Red dashed to her room and rummaged through her piles, throwing pieces into a black leather backpack trimmed with silver studs: wallet, mascara, and... She ducked back out of her room. “Have you seen my lipstick?”

“You’ve probably lost it in that pigsty you call a bedroom.” Snow was perched on the edge of her immaculately-made bed, reading on her phone. Probably the latest thriller—Detective Hardcastle and the Impossible Murder, or whatever. On the other side of the room, her pristine-white desk was empty except for a closed laptop and a neat line of pens. The room was cool, the way Snow liked it. Who needed air-con with her sister around? Without looking up, Snow fished into her purse and held up a lipstick. “Use mine.”

Red rolled her eyes. “Frosty pink hardly goes with my outfit. I was going for cherry-red.”

Snow looked up from her phone. “You could always try Mom’s spare one...” She bit her lip.

“The Revlon Red she keeps in—”

“—her bedside drawer,” Snow finished.

Their eyes met. Neither of them laughed.

Red's heart banged against her ribcage. "Sure, why not?" She kept her hands clenched to stop them from trembling as she strode into Mom's room. They'd been little last time they'd forced the lock on Mom's secret drawer, but neither of them had ever forgotten their mother's white-lipped fury.

Nor quenched their curiosity about why she'd been so mad.

Snow dashed after her. "No, Red..."

"It's not as if Mom's hiding state secrets." Red tried the drawer. It was locked. She held out her hand. "Hairpin, Snow. Come on, we can't let our childhood fears rule us."

"You've been watching too many movies. A Swiss army knife is more effective for picking locks." Snow whipped a pocket knife out of her purse and pulled out the toothpick attachment and a tiny hex key. "Move over."

What the—?

Snow knelt in front of Mom's bedside cabinet, hands shaking, and stuck the hex key into the lock. She bit her lip, pushed the toothpick in and jiggled it. The lock sprang open.

"Where'd you learn that?"

Snow put her phone on the bedside table. "YouTube."

"And where'd you get that?" Red waved her hand at the knife.

Snow shrugged evasively. "Online." She pulled the drawer open.

"I figured that. Where'd you get the money to buy it?"

Snow ignored Red's question. "Her lipstick should be in here, somewhere."

Red's gaze fell to Snow's phone. Her phone's wallpaper was a picture of a tanned guy who looked like he belonged on a surfboard. She groaned. "Oh, man, have you been ogling that I.T. guy again?"

Snow blushed. “Krispin’s cute.”

“Yeah, and good with computers. But you snapping a shot like that is almost stalker-ish.”

“I think of it as art. Anyway, I’m hoping the school Internet goes out again.”

“Isn’t every girl?” When drop-dead-gorgeous Krispin—with his sun-bleached hair, caramel skin and warm brown eyes—had swaggered into the school library last week to fix the broken Internet connection, whispers had washed through the room like a tide hissing on sand.

Snow glanced up. “Shall we?”

Mom would kill them if she found out. Red let warmth seep through her to combat the prickle down her spine. She couldn’t let fear rule her. “Might as well... After all, we’re only looking for lipstick. Harmless, right?”

“Um yeah, harmless.”

She wished Snow wouldn’t gnaw her lip like that. Red eased the drawer open.

The lipstick was lying on top of a few old papers and a small leather-bound book with a lock on it. Red took out the lipstick and applied the tiniest bit to her lips, so Mom wouldn’t notice it’d been used. She snorted, gesturing at Mom’s drawer. “Looks pretty normal to me. Don’t see why Mom gets her knickers in a twist.”

Snow, still holding the Swiss army knife, stared at the book and papers. She licked her lips and gazed up at Red, eyes full of daring. “Let’s look.”

“It’s Mom’s private stuff, we really shouldn’t.” Red traced a finger over the soft black leather book cover. “Probably love letters from dad.”

“Yeah, but why would she keep love letters from a man she refuses to talk about? And why would she lock them up?”

Since their father had died, Mom had barely acknowledged they even had a dad. The only thing Red remembered about him dying was the weird skin disease he’d developed on his deathbed.

“What was he like?” Snow murmured. “Tell me what you remember.”

Red sighed. “He was fun, larger than life, always picking us up and spinning us around, taking us for horsey rides in the lounge. You know…”

“Yeah, I do know—that I don’t remember a thing. It sucks to be two years old when you lose a parent. A year older, like you were, and I might’ve held onto some shred of Dad.”

Every time Snow spoke of Dad, pain and longing filled her voice. Red squeezed Snow’s hand. “One quick look, then we’ll put everything back and get out of here.”

Snow laid the two envelopes and the leather book on Mom’s duvet. “Letters first,” she said, sliding a document with yellowed edges from an official-looking envelope.

Red held her breath as Snow held it under the light.

“It’s their marriage certificate,” Snow said. “But it’s weird.”

Red leaned in. The certificate featured an ornate gold seal of dragons with intertwined necks in the shape of a heart. There was fancy gold writing beneath the dragons. Mom’s familiar signature was signed in red ink. Their Dad’s was three crooked diagonal lines. No words. No name.

“Like werewolf claws in a bad horror movie,” Snow whispered. She traced the gold lettering: *Semper iuncti in Draconia*. “That’s Latin for *Together forever in Draconia*.”

Trust Snow to recognize Latin. At least one of them had paid attention in class. “What or where in the heck is Draconia?”

Snow shrugged and went to slide the marriage certificate back into the envelope.

“Wait,” Red held up her phone and snapped a shot. “I’ll hide it somewhere on my hard drive and delete it from my phone in case Mom checks it—I promise.”

Snow raised an eyebrow—something Red had never mastered. “Really? Your hard drive is almost as messy as your room. And your brain is messier than both.”

“True.” Red grinned.

The next envelope was smaller, with Mom’s name on it. Inside was a short note from Dad.

*My dearest Hazel,*

*My heart burns for you. I’ll always be yours.*

*I know I’m sick, but no matter what shape I’m in, I’ll always love you.*

*Ash*

Red picked up the worn, dark leather diary from Mom’s duvet, and examined the tiny brass lock. “Snow, can you open this?”

“Hmm, my hex key won’t work on that.” Snow pried the lock open with a hair pin. Two pretty luminescent discs shaped like petals and about the size of quarters fell out of the diary. Red held them up. They shimmered gold in the light.

Snow scrunched up her nose. “What are those?”

“Some sort of shell, I think. Like mother of pearl slivers.”

“Look, the book’s hollow.” Snow held it out. There weren’t any pages, only an empty compartment inside the covers. An old piece of paper

was tucked into the liner with *Kodak Premium Photography* stamped on it.

So much for it being a diary. “What’s this photo of?” Red flipped it over. Mom was grinning, her arms around a handsome man dressed in a dragon costume. Red’s heart thrummed and heat shot through her like quicksilver. “That’s him! That’s Dad. I’d know that sandy-blond hair anywhere.” She passed the photo to Snow.

“Man, that’s some face-painting job,” Snow breathed, holding the photo with her fingertips as if it would shatter.

Red examined the shells again. “Look, these match his costume.”

Snow squinted at the photo. “It looks more like a bodysuit than something with shells stitched on, but yeah, they do. They’re the same color.” She snapped a photo with her phone, murmuring, “Mom actually looks happy. I can’t remember the last time I saw her like that. She’s usually so stressed.”

Red took a photo of the snapshot too. “We’d better get out of here, or we’ll have no chance to go dancing before she shows.” She put the photo and shells back in the fake book and clicked the lock shut. Then she tossed the book, letters and lipstick back into the drawer.

Snow took them out and rearranged them. “They were like that.”

“Thanks. How are we going to lock the drawer again?”

“Like this.” Snow thrust the hex key back into the lock and wiggled it. The lock clicked shut. She stashed her tools in her purse and stood.

How had her sister learned so much about lock picking? Red doubted it was from YouTube. And where had she got the money for those tools? All of their clothes were from thrift shops. It wasn’t as if they had spare cash lying around.

Smoothing her silver sequined tank top with her hands, Snow asked, “Is this too low cut?”

“No, it leaves a lot to the imagination.” Barely anything, but if Red said something, her sister would want to get changed again and they’d never get out of here.

“Yeah, but whose imagination?” Snow pouted. “It’s not as if I ever get a date.”

Red threw her head back and laughed. “I don’t care about a date. I just want to dance.”

## Shifting Sands

The glass doors to the Shifting Sands were rattling on their hinges as Red pushed them open and pulled Snow inside. Rock music blasted Snow, the bass thrumming through her skin and rattling her bones. This place sure was a change from doing homework or sitting around reading Detective Hardcastle thrillers. They nudged their way through the throng toward the bar. Men kept giving her and Red the once over. Snow was sure Red barely noticed—her sister was in such a rush to hit the dance floor. Orange, blue and yellow lights pulsed in time to the beat. A strobe flashed across the crowd. The scent of beer and spirits hung in the air. They could probably get drunk off the fumes. That reminded her...

Snow pulled Red close, and cupped her hand over Red's ear, yelling above the blaring music. "Please don't drink booze tonight," Snow said. "Not after what happened last time." That night had ended with more than one thing in flames.

"I may be crazy, but I'm not deluded." Red squeezed past two brunettes in miniskirts and knee-high boots. "Alcohol and I don't mix."

Yes, Red had sworn off the stuff, saying it made her veins turn to liquid fire, but Red was impetuous, and it made Snow nervous. And Mom nervous, too. Even though they'd grown up with Mom warning them they'd be in grave danger if anyone discovered their powers, sometimes Red let loose. Accidentally.

But not tonight. Snow would make sure of it. For the hundredth time, she wondered what life would be like if Dad was still alive.

"Anyway," Red continued, "the way I dance, most people assume I'm drunk already."

Well, yeah. Red was a little less inhibited than most. Okay, maybe a lot. But she always had a good time. Snow sighed. If only she could loosen up.

A bunch of underage guys from school were crowded around a table, sharing drinks and pretzels. “Want to join us?” a brown-haired guy from math class called, his eyes running over them both.

“Sure,” Red answered, tossing her hair.

Snow gripped her elbow hard. “Maybe later.” She flashed them a smile and Red a warning eyebrow as they pushed their way through the throng to the bar.

A plaid-shirted man grinned as they approached. “Want a drink, darlings?”

“No thank you,” Snow said, sidling away.

Her back hit something solid. A glass crashed to the floor and smashed, scattering shards.

A geek with a buzz cut, black-framed glasses and a Dungeons and Dragons T-shirt glared at her. “Now look what you made me do,” he snarled. “I’ve lost my drink and smashed a glass.”

“I’m sorry, it was an accident. I—”

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that,” Red snarled back, already in the geek’s face. “You heard her. She didn’t do it on purpose.”

People were turning and staring. The man in the plaid shirt sniggered. Snow wanted to melt into the floor. She bent down and picked up the shards. At least no one could see her down here. Maybe.

“Are you all right?” a guy asked Red, his tight surfer tee showing off the muscles in his broad back.

Typical. Guys always came waltzing in to help her sister.

“Sure, I’m fine.” Red flung a hand between Geek and Snow. “But she bumped him, and now he’s being a jerk.”

“Don’t I know you?” the guy in the surfer tee asked Red.

Red tilted her head. “Maybe.” She shrugged.

“Maybe I’d like to get to know you,” Geek purred.

What a loser.

“You’ll get to know my fist if you keep talking like that,” Red snapped.

Geek glowered, but the other guy just laughed and crouched down. Warm, tanned fingers touched Snow’s wrist. “Hey, let me help you.”

Cheeks burning, she glanced up. Gorgeous chocolate-brown eyes met hers. The guy took the shards from her hands. Oh gods, it was Krispin. His dazzling smile melted her bones.

“We’ll have this cleaned up in no time.” His rich deep voice made her melt even further.

Red crouched down to help. Krispin’s eyes widened as he glanced between her and Red. The strobe flickered over Krispin’s sun-bleached hair and lit up his even white teeth. “Don’t I know you both?”

Snow had no chance. All the boys liked Red. They were attracted to her like moths to a flame—and just as easily burned.

“I’m sure I remember you,” he yelled over the bass. “Where did we meet?”

Not a brilliant one-liner. “School,” Snow said, unable to force out a full sentence. She picked up more shards.

“You were fixing the school internet connection,” Red yelled back.

“Yeah, I’m good at connections.” He arched an eyebrow.

Oh freaking gods, his eyebrow arch was just like hers. Snow’s heart ratcheted up a notch.

“I’m Red and this is Snow.” Red glanced meaningfully at Snow. “Anyway, I’m off to dance.”

Krispin’s eyes followed Red as she sashayed into the crowd, then his gaze flicked back to Snow. “Would you honor me with a dance?”

Snow opened her mouth. She had to say something clever. Something witty. But her words died. She nodded, a lump the size of an iceberg in her throat, and stood there with the shards in her hands.

The broken glass in Krispin’s cupped hands glittered in the strobe light. “Here, give me that,” he said, “I’ll get rid of it.”

As Snow dropped the shards into his waiting hands, their fingers bumped, sending an electric jolt through her. Her ice power surged, shooting cold through her fingers.

He yanked his hand back. His eyes shot to hers, a tendril of wariness in them. “I’ll be back soon.” He strode over to a trash can.

She shook her tingling hands and wiped them on her skirt. Had he noticed her powers? She had to get a grip on herself.

“Hey,” someone bellowed. “My drink.” Geek thrust his sweaty face near hers, waving a hand at the beer seeping across the shiny black floor.

“I told you it was an accident. I didn’t mean to—”

Suddenly Krispin was there between them. He put a hand on Geek’s chest. “Be a gentleman, and back off.” He flipped out his phone and pulled ten bucks out of the flap, throwing it onto Geek’s table. “There. Get yourself another beer and leave my lady alone.”

My lady. A cool tidal wave crested inside Snow. She smiled at Krispin. “Thank you, that was kind.”

“No problem.” He placed his hand on her back and guided her toward the bar. “After you having to put up with that rotter, the least I can do is get you a drink.”

Her skin beneath his fingers tingled, all warm and fuzzy. She was seriously in trouble. She'd never felt her power radiating out of her back. This guy did something crazy to her. She really had to get a grip. Snow slid a glance at his attractive, smiling face. Had he noticed anything?

“What would you like?”

There was that bone-melting smile again. Snow slid onto a bar stool. “A lemon lime and bitters, thanks.”

He ordered their drinks and leaned on the counter, his bronzed bicep bulging as he raked a hand through his hair. She tried to keep her eyes off his body-tight tee. He totally rocked the surfer look. It hadn't been her imagination. He was even more drool-worthy than in her photo.

Krispin turned to her. “I haven't seen you here before.”

Another one-liner nearly as lame as *What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?* Snow didn't care. This was Krispin. And he was finally talking. To her.

He passed her drink and asked her something, but his words were drowned out by the music.

He placed his hand on her back, making her skin do that yummy thing again, and gestured past the dance floor. Krispin steered her past dingy tables, enormous throbbing speakers and a mass of writhing bodies. A flash of red hair whirled at the center of the crowd. Red looked like she was having a good time. And she hadn't drunk anything, so she'd be fine on her own for a few minutes, wouldn't she? Snow gnawed her lip.

“Are you okay?” Krispin asked, leading her to a door that Snow hadn't noticed.

“Fine, thanks.”

He opened the door and held it, motioning her onto a stone patio surrounded by shrubbery on three sides. Wrought iron candles flickered in

stained-glass jars on tiny tables. In the far corner of the patio, two couples sat at tables. One pair laughed, hands intertwined. The other couple clinked glasses, speaking in hushed voices then leaned in to kiss each other. Snow glanced back through the panes in the door at the flashing lights and dancing crowd. A few minutes outside wouldn't hurt. Then she'd check on Red.

"It's not as loud out here. Much easier to talk." Krispin ushered her to a table far from the other couples.

Hang on, *other couples*. They weren't a couple. She'd only just met him. Not that she'd mind... They sat down, facing each other. Snow took a gulp of her lemon lime and bitters. The bubbles went straight up her nose. She spluttered, spraying her drink all over the table and Krispin's T-shirt. How mortifying. "Ah, sorry." Her cheeks burned. "I seem to be having a bad night."

He burst out laughing. "You can say that again. We're lucky I wasn't drowned. Still, just in case, I'll fetch a life jacket. There must be one around here, somewhere."

His laugh was so genuine that for the first time that night, Snow relaxed and grinned back. "Great first impression, huh?"

"Oh no, it's a terrible second impression."

Her heart fell.

Krispin continued, "Luckily, my first impression when you were studying in the library was a knockout. What were you reading? Wasn't it something deep about mind anatomy, or something?"

Snow frowned. "What day were you there?" She knew exactly what she'd been reading the moment he walked in the door. Exactly how many hours it had been since she'd first laid eyes on him. One hundred and

seventy-nine hours and 30 minutes approximately. Or nearly seven and a half days.

“Wednesday last week.”

“What time?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Hey, you can arch one brow too.” He smiled and took a chug of his beer, before finally answering her question. “About ten.”

“Then it was *Anatomy of the Troubled Mind*. I had a psych assignment due. That must’ve been it.” She’d had no such assignment. And, anyway, all of her assignments for the next three weeks were already done. She’d been researching how to control their powers. Not that she was about to tell that to him—or anyone else. Not even Red.

“Mental health in high school? That’s advanced.” He eyed her over the rim as he sipped from his glass. “Yes, I remember you being engrossed in that book. You looked cute. Pink shirt, cut-off jeans. Do you play any sport? You look like an athlete.”

He’d remembered what she was wearing? He’d *noticed* her. A good sign. “Nah.” She couldn’t really call her and Red’s magic practice sessions out in the woods sport, although they were physical enough. “What about you? What do you play?”

“Power sports.”

“What’s that?” She felt like a complete idiot.

He leaned in, as if he were sharing a secret. “Where I cast a spell on you with my powers and you fall for me.”

A delicious shiver ran down Snow’s back. A magic spell. Yeah, right. However, if there were such a thing as magic spells, he was well on the way to succeeding. Her heart skipped a beat. Was he toying with her, because he’d sensed her powers? She froze, not literally—no ice crept from

her hands across the table and over her glass making it freeze and shatter. But she stilled, and sat staring at him without a twitch.

He laughed. “Are you all right? I was teasing. It’s not every day I get to chat with someone so beautiful.” His cheeks pinked and he busied himself with his beer.

Cute. He was blushing, actually blushing. And he thought she was beautiful.

He cleared his throat. “I would be honored if you’d dance with me.”

What quaint speech. “That’d be great.” It was time she checked on Red anyway.

They drained their glasses, and Krispin whipped Snow back through the door, past the crowd, to the dance floor. Red had kicked off her shoes, her flaming hair swirling as she spun and threw her legs out like she was doing karate. Around her, everyone from school was gyrating and waving their arms.

Typical. They were all having a good time, while she stood here, frozen. People always said she should loosen up. But she’d never want to lose control of her powers—like Red sometimes did.

Krispin glanced at the crowd, then turned to Snow, grinning, the dimple in his cheek working its magic on her. He gently took Snow’s hand and enticed her onto the dance floor.

A shot of nervous cold leaked from her fingers. Had he noticed? She smiled, the way social media said you were supposed to, coyly looking up at him.

He smiled back. “You like dancing?” It wasn’t the most romantic of lines. Nor was it the worst, especially as her tongue was stuck, unable to say anything.

She nodded. Time to focus on him and the music, and have fun. And ignore Red, who had jumped on table and was gyrating to the beat, a crowd of yelling guys around her. Puhlease.

Krispin's eyes roved over Red. "Your sister has an, ah, unusual dance style."

Snow grinned. "I call that move the egg-beater."

He grinned back. "Egg-beater. I'm not sure I've seen one of those before."

Snow flashed a grin. She was here, with a guy she'd drooled over for a week. She had to get a grip and relax. As the music pulsed though her and they started to dance, she let herself go, just a little. Krispin was a good old-fashioned dancer, twirling Snow in his arms and flashing her smiles that could melt the iceberg that'd sunk the Titanic.

The guys around Red were now tossing peanuts at her and cheering. She flicked her long red mane over a shoulder and threw pouty kisses at them, swaying her hips like she was trying to dislocate them.

Even though everyone was still dancing, they were all staring now. Even Krispin. Snow didn't blame him. She was staring too, waiting to see if Red lost it. So much for them keeping a low profile.

Snow's phone alarm buzzed. It was time to get home—before Mom got in, discovered them gone, and had kittens. "Sorry, gotta run," she yelled to Krispin over the music—a heavy number that had Red bouncing her head up and down like a pigeon on fire.

"Just five minutes more?" Krispin asked, giving her another winning smile. "Or could I buy you another drink?"

"Sorry, we have to be somewhere." Snow pushed through the crowd, Krispin trailing her to the table Red was dancing on. She shoved

through the throng of guys, and grabbed Red's leg, yelling, "Come on Red. We have to go."

"I've got to find my shoes," Red yelled back. She slugged back a juice and clambered off the table to guys cheering and others groaning that she'd finished.

While Red was scrabbling under the table, Krispin pulled out his phone. "Before you go, we should friend each other."

Well, it couldn't hurt, could it? He'd been so nice to her tonight. Until he'd been distracted by Red. And, with a show like that, who'd blame him? She slipped out her phone, opened social media and friended him on the spot. What a cute profile image. Even drenched in rain, he looked good.

Red jammed her shoes on and joined them, making serious googly eyes at Krispin. What was she doing? Trying to edge in on Snow's action? Not that calling dibs on guys was a thing, but it would be nice if Red backed off from this one.

Krispin's eyes flicked over Red, then he met Snow's gaze. "I'll see you soon."

"Thanks for the, um, drink. Sorry you had to wear it."

He laughed. "It was my pleasure." His chocolate eyes met hers, making her pulse pound.

This guy's smiles were addictive.

"I'll see you soon, too," Red purred, tossing her wild mane over her shoulder again.

Not if Snow had anything to do with it. "Gotta run," Snow said. She practically dragged her sister away from Krispin.

"Hurry up." Snow strode through the busy tables toward the door. "If Mom realizes we've been out, she's going to be so mad."

“Come on then,” Red put on a show of speed, racing past the bouncers, out the doors of the Shifting Sands, and into the street.

Snow had to hurry to keep up with her. “Don’t be like that, Red. It’s me who should be mad. After all, you were making moony eyes at Krispin.”

Red yawned. “Krispin? You can have him. He’s not my type.”

As if Red had a type. She flirted with everyone with a Y chromosome.

Snow tugged her jacket tighter around her and glanced along the street. Traffic was sparse. A group of guys were hanging around one of the two alleys across the street; otherwise, hardly anyone was around. It was later than she’d thought. “If we want to beat Mom home, we’d better take the shortcut to the car.”

Red checked her phone and grimaced. “Oops, yeah. This is gonna be tight.”

They cut across the road and marched straight to the furthest alley. Snow peered between the brick buildings into the gloom. Nobody was loitering down this shortcut. “Come on, let’s go.” They dashed along the narrow lane, their footfalls snapping on the concrete sidewalk and bouncing off the walls.

Boots thudded along the alley. Snow cast a glance over her shoulder. Murky figures appeared—four guys in leather coats were stalking down the alley behind them.

“Hurry,” she hissed to Red.

“On it,” Red answered a spark flitting from a finger as they increased their pace.

Despite their burst of speed, the guys were quicker. Snow and Red edged to one side, walking in single file to let them past.

Just as the guys had passed them and Snow was breathing a sigh of relief, one turned and grabbed the strap of her purse, yanking it tight across her body.

She spun. Her hand shot out and grasped his wrist. Goosebumps skittered along her forearms as tendrils of power flowed from her fingertips.

“Ow!” He let go and shook his arm.

Shoot. She’d given him an ice burn.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. One of his friends grinned, his teeth a flash of white in the dark, as his blade slashed toward her.

## Dante and Zephyr

Dante cracked his knuckles. “Can’t believe we’re doing this,” he said. “What were you thinking?”

“He’ll be back this way sooner or later,” Zephyr replied.

“I guess sometimes you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do,” Dante said, “not that I like it. Hey, is that him?” He pointed at a hooded figure slinking out of the Shifting Sands.

The beat from the nightclub wafted through the doorway, then cut off as the doors slammed shut. The guy glanced up and down the street.

“Yep, that’s him, all right,” Zeph murmured. “I can smell sulfur wafting off him from here.”

The grungy slimeball raced into an alley, legs pumping.

“Quick! Move!” Zephyr snapped.

Dante and Zephyr sprinted, and caught up to Grunge half way down the alley.

“Told you he’d be along sooner or later.” Zephyr muttered through gritted teeth, bailing Grunge up against the brick building. He wasn’t even puffing. Zeph was like that, a bit of a featherweight, but he could move. “Shifting Sands is where the action is.”

“Where’s the money you owe us?” Dante said to the scumbag.

Grunge squeaked, no doubt wanting to call out to his slummy gang mates. If Zeph was right, they wouldn’t be far off. Dante kicked the concrete wall. He was hacked off and wanted this cheat to know it. “Don’t know why you gave this idiot the goods without getting the money first.” Dante punched the wall. Grunge flinched as concrete chips flew onto the sidewalk.

“I needed to know the goods were the real thing,” Grunge whined. “I’ll have the money soon.”

“We’re the only ones in town with the real deal. You know that,” Zephyr purred.

“We need cash, now. How much have you got on you?” Dante demanded.

“Or maybe you’d like to pay interest,” Zeph said, teeth glinting. “Ten percent a day will do.”

“Okay, okay, I have some cash. Let me get at it.”

Dante’s eyes flicked to the alley mouth. This could be a ruse to buy time until his gang got here. But it was the only chance they had. He gave a sharp nod to Zeph.

Zeph let go of the deadbeat, his hands still at the ready.

Grunge pulled off his shoe and yanked out hundred-dollar bills, counting off ten of them. That’s all I got.”

A thousand bucks.

“Knew it,” Dante growled. “You’ve probably just sold the stuff. Where’s the rest?”

Zephyr crossed his arms, standing over Grunge as he laced his sneaker. “You shouldn’t burn bridges. You can’t get this stuff from anyone but us,” he crooned. “Where will you go if you need more?”

Dante reached down and pulled Grunge to his feet. Towering over him, he thrust his face into the dude’s space. “Give us the rest tomorrow night, or the interest rate goes up to twenty percent.”

“You said ten.” The guy’s eyes were wide, mouth flapping like a fish.

“Not anymore.”

Grunge flung out an arm and spun free. He took off down the alley.

“You can run, but you can’t hide.” Zeph’s wicked laugh skittered down the alley and bounced off the walls. “*We’ll get the rest off him tomorrow night,*” he mind-linked.

“*You’d better be right,*” Dante thought. “*If we don’t find that quarter of a million by next week, we’re so dead.*”

A scream cut through the night. Dante spun.

“Quick!” Zeph raced out of the alley to the street toward the scream.

Typical of his twin—always dropping them in trouble without a thought. Dante sprinted to catch up.

## Stalkers

Red whirled to help Snow, fire racing through her veins. A guy yanked her leather backpack—hard. He lunged toward her. Red-hot anger flashed through her. She flung a hand up to defend herself. Flames sprang from her fingertips and shot out. Fire licked along the thug’s sleeve.

He screamed, dropping her arm, and backed off, batting at his jacket. The stench of burning fabric jammed up Red’s nose.

Snow wasn’t doing much better. Her clothes were glittering with ice as she dodged and kicked at a guy slashing at her with a wicked curved blade. “Red!”

A tall guy grabbed Red by the shoulders and slammed her against a building. Her head whacked the bricks. Sharp pain lanced through her skull. She struck out with her foot and kicked him in the shin.

He swore. A knife flashed, angling toward her neck.

She ducked, heart racing. Gods, were she and Snow going to die tonight in a stinking alley? She’d felt so alive, with fire running through her veins. And they’d just found that photo of Dad. They were onto something, she was sure.

“Give me your purse, lady.” The man’s leering eyes and stinking attitude made Red want to burn his face off.

Red’s legs trembled. Her feet were shaking. No, the ground itself was shaking. Wow, that was some weird anxiety reaction. Or maybe someone had spiked her juice while she’d been dancing. Surely not. They’d been with Snow’s cute I.T. guy and friends from school.

“So, think you can play with fire?” the tall man sneered, his blade at her throat. He had the cutest baby blues. And a face that could belong to an angel. Not much good when a guy was holding you at knife point.

Red gulped.

A rumble filled the air and two large dark figures in leather hoodies dashed down the alley. Another tremor ran through the ground. An earthquake at a time like this—whaddaya know, hyper crazy. What else could go wrong tonight?

One of the dark figures ran at them and swung a punch at the man holding the knife. The puncher's fist, covered with gold tattoos, flashed past Red and connected with Angelface's nose. There was a crunch. Angelface crumpled to his knees. His knife skittered across the asphalt and clanked against a trash can.

The dude in a leather hoodie towered over Angelface, his face deep in the folds of his hood.

Had the earth moved for him, too?

A freak gust of wind blasted the alley. The other hooded stranger tackled the thug harassing Snow.

The thug hit the ground, then rolled away and scrambled to his feet. "It's the Draki twins. Let's get out of here." He raced off, two more of his gang following him.

The man who'd thrown the punch dragged Angelface up by the scruff of his neck and held him against the wall. "What did you want with these girls?" he growled. Dark hair peeked from the edge of his hood.

The other guy in the leather hoodie, a blond, crowded in, cracking his knuckles.

"Uh, n-nothing. Mr. Sparkles sent us."

Snow dashed over to Red, clutching her flimsy purse against her body. Ice rimmed the hem of her sequined tank. She was shaking, lips white with rage.

The hoods were too busy questioning Angelface to notice.

Red grabbed Snow's hand. "Come on. Let's get outta here," she hissed.

Snow blinked. "Who are they?" she asked. "The guys in the hoods? And that pretty gang? I mean, all those boys were so good looking it was crazy."

So, she'd noticed their looks too. "Whoever they are, they're dangerous as hell." Red pulled Snow's arm. "Let's get to the car." Together, they raced along the dingy alley past trash cans and dumpsters.

"Hey!" Boots pounded behind them. The two hoodies were on their heels.

Snow groaned, high heels hammering the cobbles. "From the frying pan into the fire."

She was right. No point being saved from one gang of thugs to be mauled or robbed by others. And those guys looked shadier than Angelface's pretty-boy gang.

The thudding feet were gaining on them.

Within moments, the dark-haired puncher overtook them and stopped in front of them. He held his hands up, palms out, in front of his chest. One heavily tattooed, the other not. "Don't be scared. We just want to make sure you're okay."

Yeah, right. Red yanked Snow, trying to duck around them.

He put his arm on the wall, blocking them. "Hey, slow down. What was going on back there?"

Red's heart thundered. His deep velvet voice made the skin on her arms break out in a heat rash. You could hypnotize people with that voice—honestly—and make a million. But he was dangerous. Mom had warned them about the gangs. About how they'd take pretty girls. About people smugglers.

Red dropped Snow's hand and clenched her fists.

The guy's tall blond buddy moved up the alley, standing near Snow. He held his palms up too. As if that would make her and Snow trust them.

"Hey, we just wanna help," the buddy said. "What did those guys want from you?"

The puncher tilted his head, revealing a tattoo on half of his face that glowed gold in the sputtering lamplight.

Red's heart stuttered in her chest. Gods, he was beautiful. All dark skin and hair and gold tattoos with eyes so green she could swim in them.

## §

Zephyr flicked his thumb, giving Dante a quick signal to back off. Man, he was intimidating the girls. The blonde's pulse pounded at her throat. Wafts of cool air raked his skin.

She turned, chilly eyes gliding over him in cool appraisal. If she wasn't the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, he'd eat his own hoodie.

Zephyr pulled his hood forward so she couldn't see the disfigurement on his face. He made sure his voice was gentle. "Did they hurt you?" Although he spoke to both of them, he couldn't take his eyes off the blonde's creamy porcelain skin, and those ice-blue eyes that seemed to see into his soul, stripping him buck-naked right here in the middle of downtown.

Holy smoke. Now wasn't the time to crush on some girl. Someone that thought he was trouble—or worse.

"We're fine," she said clutching her silver purse, eyes sliding to her friend.

Her voice made him shiver. By the draki gods, he'd never seen someone so pretty.

Or dangerous.

Those wafts of chilly air had nothing to do with this warm summer night. They were coming from her. She was a mage. He was sure of it.

And draki didn't mess with mages.

§

The redhead thrust her chin up, eyes sparking. "Thanks for your help."

A rush of heat accompanied her words, sliding along Dante's skin like a lick of flame. He couldn't help staring at the gorgeous wavy hair that cascaded over her shoulders accentuating her curves. The street light flickered. Shots of crimson and orange glowed in her hair like living flames.

Nah, he was imagining it, getting all romantic again. Zephyr always teased him for being a sop.

Or was he? As he moved closer, the heat spiked.

He wiped his brow, and habitually tugged his hood forward—slowly, careful not to make a sudden move.

He'd seen flames dancing along that jerk's sleeve before he'd rushed in to help. He'd sensed magic in the air. These girls could be dangerous, almost as dangerous as the mage gang who'd attacked them.

"Don't tangle with us unless you want trouble," the redhead threatened, thrusting out her hand like a weapon.

She was trouble, all right, and her friend, too. His brain screamed to warn Zeph and walk away, but his other senses honed in, wanting more. Lips compressed, Dante took a deep slow breath through his nose.

By the draki gods, she smelled incredible. There was no hint of the sulfur he'd expect from a powerful mage, just an alluring mix of campfire and perfume. A guy could get drunk just being near her. He wondered if she was aware of how attractive she was.

“*You’re scenting the redhead, aren’t you?*” Zephyr intruded on his thoughts.

Flaming telepathy was a curse at times like this. “*Of course not.*”

“*Then why are your nostrils flaring? You look like you’re about to eat her for dinner.*”

Dante took a step back. He wasn’t the only one transfixed. Zephyr was practically drooling over the blonde, who was crusted in ice—a mage for sure. What was his twin thinking? Especially now they didn’t have the guardian stones to protect them anymore.

“Well, if you ladies are all right,” he said, tugging his brother’s sleeve, “we’ll be on our way.”

Zephyr tensed.

Dante narrowed his eyes. “*Drop that cool little snowdrop before she gives you freezer burn.*”

The redhead’s eyes flicked to Dante, her intense gaze burning through him.

“Good night.” The blonde spoke with icy politeness. Still, she hesitated, and so did the gorgeous redhead.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to walk you to your car?” Dante blurted, against his better judgment.

“Or home?” Zephyr added, not taking his eyes off the blonde.

“We’re fine,” the blonde snapped, snatching the redhead’s arm and stalking off down the alley.

## §

As the girls disappeared around the corner, Zephyr waved an arm in Dante’s face. “Why did you have to scare them off?” he asked. “Man, you don’t get it, do you? We’re intimidating with our dark hoods and tattoos. Those girls were scared of us.”

Dante glowered. “Just as well. I’m sure they were mages. You sensed their magic. I know you did. And did you see the ice crusting the blonde? That’s not natural.”

Zephyr shrugged. Sometimes his twin was so stubborn. And way too cautious.

“Mage girls are the last thing you or I need. We’re in enough trouble already.” Dante’s eyes darted down the alley. He flipped back his hood and ran a hand through his long dark hair. “Phew, it’s hot.”

Hot? A tendril of the cool breeze the blonde had left behind caressed Zephyr’s wrist and wound up his forearm. “You think we can hustle our way out of our mess?” he asked, voice low. They had to find some way to get the rest of the money.

“Dunno, after tonight’s deal...” Dante shrugged. “I don’t trust any of those guys. But we’ve got no choice. We’ll see what we can lure out of the woodwork tomorrow night.”

“That message you sent yesterday has done the rounds. We should get some bites.”

“As long as we don’t get bitten again,” Dante grumped as they strode back to their Jag.

Zephyr locked down his thoughts so Dante couldn’t hear. He wouldn’t mind getting bitten by a certain little ice mage.

## §

“Have you ever seen anyone so cute?” Red sighed. “We could have let them walk us back to our car. That wouldn’t have hurt.”

Snow threw her arms up in the air. “What about those kidnapers with tattoos Mom always warns us about? Those guys fit the bill.” Honestly, her sister was crazy.

“Mom was spinning fairy tales to scare us about stranger danger. Besides, I swear I recognize those two guys from school.”

“Oh wow. You’re right. They’re those brothers who got expelled for getting inked and doing drugs.” Snow checked her phone. “We’re really late. Mom’s going to be furious. And, anyway, why would you want those dangerous guys to walk us to the car, even if they are good looking?”

“It’s all right for you—you have a new boyfriend.” Red flounced along at her side, her stilettos echoing off the buildings.

“Barely. And if Krispin’s my boyfriend, then why were you throwing yourself at him?”

Red rolled her eyes and dragged Snow across the road to the parking lot. “I was just having fun. Stop being so paranoid.”

Snow let out a long sigh. It had been a crazy night. She’d danced with a cute guy, fought off attackers, and then the hoodie brothers had showed up. She was beat. “Don’t you think it’s suspicious that those two turned up at the right moment?” she asked.

“Whatever.” Red shrugged. “We’ll never see them again, anyway.”

“Or Krispin.” Snow huffed. It was a shock he’d noticed her in the first place. And Red was right: they’d probably never see the hoodie guys again either. So, why did that make her sad? Yeah, the green-eyed, blond guy who’d helped her was hot, but why was she admiring a boy she knew was trouble and had only seen once? It was crazy. Besides, Krispin had been nice, with his sunny smile and gorgeous surfer look.

Her phone buzzed. “On no, that’ll be Mom.” Exasperated, she looked at her phone. Her frustration washed away, and she gave an excited squeal. “Red, look.” She thrust her phone at her older sister. “It’s Krispin. He’s invited us to a cosplay rave at a warehouse tomorrow night.”

## No Clue

Zeph jogged down an alley, flaring his nostrils. Nothing—well, nothing useful. He coughed and raced back out again, before taking another side alley, the rows of garbage cans like sentinels on guard outside the high-rise apartments. He couldn't sense anything here either—except the stink of garbage.

His phone buzzed—Dante.

Zephyr answered. “Ciao bello.”

“Quit the smart cracks,” his twin brother snapped. “Did you find anything?”

A scrawny cat leaped from the top of a garbage can and pounced at Zeph's undone shoelaces. “Only a stray cat,” he replied, shaking his foot. The cat shied away, as if it expected to be kicked.

Dante snorted. “Come on, Zeph, anything useful?”

“Nope. I scented sulfur outside the Shifting Sands, but we've checked there a few times already, and never found anyone that looks like that ancient mage.”

“He may have minions doing his dirty work.”

Zeph had thought of that: the girls from last night; the mage gang that had accosted the girls in the alley. “I haven't come up with anything concrete yet. Although that gang last night stank of sulfur, there wasn't an old mage among them.”

“Keep going,” Dante said. “We've got to find a clue to where that ancient mage took Mom and Dad.”

“I know, but right now it's hopeless. I'll check if Assiya and Feron have found anything.”

“We can’t give up until we’ve found our parents.” His voice was steely at the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, bro, that’s exactly how I feel. We might have to find another way.”

“I’ve got to go,” Dante said. “A customer’s here about that Biedermeier table.”

“I hope we make a sale,” Zeph said.

“Me too. Every bit of money counts.” Dante rang off.

Zeph sighed and tucked his phone in his back pocket as Assiya and her little brother Feron raced around the corner, panting.

“There you are. We’ve found something.” Assiya’s face was slick with sweat, her dark hair plastered to her forehead. “I scented sulfur outside The Eagle.”

Feron grinned. “And I found a similar scent to that stinky ancient mage near The Enchanted Phoenix.” Feron and Assiya had been out flying with them when the mage had kidnapped their parents. They knew his scent well.

“Good work, they must be new mage hangouts,” Zeph said. “We have another hour until I have to get home and help Dante set up for tonight. Let’s keep looking.”

Feron high-fived him.

“Don’t worry Zeph, we’ll find your parents,” Assiya said.

Zeph nodded. Although her words were meant to be comforting, worry showed in Assiya’s green eyes. The same worry was churning in Zeph’s gut: what if his parents were already dead?

Three weeks ago, their parents had been kidnapped by an ancient mage and their family home had been demolished in a blaze of mage fire. Since then, they’d found nothing—no sign Mom and Dad were alive.

Assiya jogged off with Feron.

Zeph cricked his neck and ran down the street, turning into the next street, and then the next. Sleeping on the sofa bed in the private, screened off area at the back of their parents' antique store was killing his back. Maybe he should organize real beds or mattresses. Money wasn't an issue—apart from the quarter million ransom the mage had demanded for their parents.

He inhaled, scenting the next alley. No trace of sulfur. The night of the fire, the mage had bound their parents in titanium ropes to restrict their draki shifting powers so they couldn't manifest and fight back with talons, wings and fire. When Dante and Zeph had found the mage he'd cast a spell that stopped anyone in Pinevale from shifting, and then disappeared through a portal with Mom and Dad.

A freaking portal.

They could be anywhere. Zeph kept jogging. He'd focus on their plan to search every stinkin' street in Pinevale until they found their parents.

§

Dante swiped the customer's credit card and gestured at the table. "Thank you for your business, sir. We'll deliver the table this evening."

The guy shoved his wallet in his pocket and rubbed his hands. "A fine collection of antiques you have here. I'm surprised to see someone so young managing the shop. Have you finished high school?"

Dante smiled. "I'm taking a gap year before college," he replied. No need to tell a random dude that he'd been expelled.

"Excuse me, for my impropriety. Usually antique stores are run by older people."

Dante shrugged. “It’s been in the family for years.” He showed him to the door. “Thank you very much. As I said, you can expect your delivery this evening.”

The man stopped to admire a vase then wandered out onto the landing and down the stairs.

Dante followed him down and flipped the *Closed* sign on the door. He rushed back upstairs and started moving antiques behind the screen that partitioned off the living and sleeping area. He had a lot of work to get done before the party tonight, but after that, he’d hit the Internet and find out if there was a better way to search for that mage.

## §

Dante squinted, then rubbed his eyes. Zeph had come home to help him set up for the party, but now he was out, pounding the streets again, looking for the stench of mages. Meanwhile, Dante had been researching portals, potions and spells on the Internet. It was no good—the information here was all too new, too modern. And most of it, too whacky.

Dante went upstairs and locked the office. Then he wandered along the narrow storage area behind the office that ran the length of the mezzanine floor above the penthouse full of antiques. He ducked past chests of drawers, tables, cabinets, a gramophone and a stack of yellowed scrolls.

Right at the back, he came to a pile of dusty worn leather tomes, some as wide as his chest. He lifted the top volume onto a carved antique desk from the 1800s. Gingerly, he turned the first page. Holding up his phone for light, he scanned the flowery, ancient handwriting, looking for clues—anything that would help them find their parents or break the spell the mage had used to freeze their shifting powers.

His phone buzzed—Zeph again. He thumbed the call. “Yeah?”

“It’s me. I’m back near Shifting Sands. For a couple of hundred yards either side of the bar, I can scent sulfur, but then it disappears.”

Dante scratched his ear. “I guess that’s going to happen if he’s using a portal to get places.”

“I think we’ll have to monitor Shifting Sands. Between there and The Eagle, and The Enchanted Phoenix, we’re going to have our work cut out over the next week.”

The restless energy that slumbered in Dante’s belly awakened, sensing a new adventure. “That shouldn’t be a problem,” Dante said smoothly. “The dealers we’re working with hang out at those places anyway. Let’s hope that something turns up tonight at our cosplay rave.”

“Right on,” said Zeph. “I’m dying for some action.”

## Rave

Snow held her phone up to stare at Krispin's invitation.

"Where in flames' name is the party?" Red asked, peering over her shoulder.

"We have to go around the next corner, then to the end of that alley." Snow gnawed her lip, glancing over her shoulder. Their phone was shining in the dark—a beacon for waiting gangs. "Come on."

She and Red were in the industrial sector of town. Well-maintained shiny factories stood next to ramshackle deserted warehouses. They rounded a corner. Oh, a lane. After yesterday, the narrow space was enough to make her hesitate.

Squeaks and skittering came from a dumpster as they hurried past. Snow wrinkled her nose. Nice neighborhood. Perhaps this rave wasn't the best idea, after all. She pushed her silver tiara back into place.

Red tugged Snow along the lane, her footfalls echoing off the factory's concrete walls.

"Do you have to walk that loudly?" Snow hissed. "You'll wake the dead with your stomping."

"What are you scared of?" Red flipped her wild hair over her shoulder and adjusted the phoenix mask she'd found at a thrift store, her beak glinting in the lamplight.

"Well, another gang for starters." Snow twisted, glancing over her shoulder, and picked up her snow queen skirts. She'd dressed as Elsa from Frozen, which had cracked Red up.

Red adjusted her vibrant gold and orange wings. "Can you hear that beat?" Drums pulsed at the end of the alley.

Snow's eyes darted the shadows. It was a long way to the splash of light falling from a doorway at the far end of the alley. A way fraught with dark doorways and deep shadows between flickering street lamps. "Come on, let's just get there."

Red nudged her. "Look."

A few heavies were hanging around the entrance, beyond the light spilling from the door.

Snow dug her fingers into Red's arm. "That's it. I'm outta here. It's another gang."

"Come on, Snow. We have to live a little. Do you want to see Krispin or not?"

Snow bit her lip again, wavering. The three brawny guys were probably bouncers. And Krispin might be inside already. She didn't want him to think she was a wimp. "Yeah, I do."

"We can take care of ourselves. If all else fails, we have our powers. Let's go." Red dragged Snow along the alley, into the shaft of light.

The three guys were leaning against a chain-link fence as if they were guarding treasure. They were big and muscly, with leather jackets, tight dark jeans and biker boots. As Snow and Red neared, one of the guys shifted off the fence and sauntered in front of the door. "Evening, ladies. Party's invite only."

Snow fished out her phone and opened her app. "Here's our invite," she said with more bravado than she felt.

The guy glanced at Snow's phone. "You're fine. You're in." He grinned, his eyes raking over Snow's dress. "Save a dance for me, beautiful."

"Sure," Snow replied, giving him her iciest glare. He started to question Red, but Snow snapped, "She's with me," and sped through the

doorway faster than a terrified rabbit, dragging Red up the narrow stairs.

§

Dante shut the safe with a clang and pulled the gilt-framed oil painting of fighting dragons back over it. There, now it looked like a normal wall in a tiny attic room full of junk, not a safe holding bundles of cash. Their narrow office was on a mezzanine floor that ran along one side of the warehouse, high above tonight's dance floor. Although they only let their buyers into this front office, they used the whole mezzanine area for antique storage and hiding their stash. He adjusted the picture so it was straight. "This is going to take forever. A quarter of a million is a lot of cash."

Zephyr shrugged. "We're almost halfway. We can make it by their deadline if we do a few more deals. Tonight's rave was a great idea—a good way to bring dealers to us without anyone wondering about a constant stream of visitors."

Dante strode to a gray metal cabinet in the corner of the office wedged between a waist-high golden vase and a towering oak dresser with a carved dragon mirror. He pulled the leather strap out from the neck of his T-shirt and used his key to unlock the third of twenty-four individually lockable drawers in the cabinet. He slipped a bag into his palm, relocked the drawer, and placed the bag on the desk. Dante gestured at the black velvet sack and ran a hand through his dark hair. "If only we didn't have to sell this stuff. I hate it."

"So do I." Zeph sighed and leaned back in his chair, shoving his feet up on the desk.

Dante leaned against the desk, arms folded. "I'll deal this time. Your turn to play guard dog." He slapped Zeph's feet off the desk. "I wish there was another way. Our parents would have a fit if they knew what we were up to."

“Gods, Dante, I hope they’re not dead,” Zephyr growled. “That stinking mage better still have them alive.”

“Speaking of mages, here comes one now.” The beat of the music had nearly drowned out the thuds on the wooden stairs up to their dealing room. A waft of sulfur accompanied the footsteps—a telltale sign a mage was nearing. Zeph got to his feet, sending a gust of wind over Dante. “All right, here we go again. How much are you going to ask for this?” Gesturing at the bag, he strode to the door.

“Twenty thousand.”

Zeph’s eyebrows shot up. “That much?”

“Yeah, that bag contains enough to keep a small suburb buzzing for months. If we get fifteen I’ll be happy.”

Zeph opened the door and strode out to meet another of their arch enemies. “*Oh flame it, Dante! This guy is one of the creeps from the mage gang that attacked those two cute girls in that alley last night.*”

“*I don’t want to deal with a creep.*”

“*We’ve got no choice.*” Zeph folded his arms over his chest, glaring at the baby-faced dude in a Harry Potter costume coming up the stairs. “*We need the money.*”

## §

The music was so loud the stairs were pulsing beneath Red’s boots as she followed Snow up a narrow staircase above a warehouse. Strobe lights and bright colors flickered on the wall at the top of the stairwell. When they got to the landing, Snow stopped in the doorway and gasped.

Red nearly slammed into Snow’s back.

Whoever had organized this party knew what they were doing. Who would’ve guessed this ramshackle building had such a beautiful penthouse with slick gray-tiled floors and creamy walls.

A DJ was busy at a mixing table in the far corner. Speakers taller than Red were positioned around the apartment, blasting a throbbing beat. A throng at least four deep clamored at a bar on the far side of a crowded dance floor. Behind the bar was an enormous screen that stretched across the entire apartment—no doubt, hiding the host’s living quarters. Bodies gyrated on the vast dance floor, swaying in time to the beat with upstretched hands. Most were in costume, a bizarre collection of superheroes, animals, otherworldly-creatures, monsters and fairies. More people milled around the edges—dragons, and even a vampire or two—lounging on expensive leather couches that lined the walls.

But it was the light show that had made Red and Snow stop.

A projector was beaming images above the heads of the dancers. Blue and purple unicorns with silver horns spun and whirled across the high ceiling, flickering lights playing across the crowd. Wild blue ocean splashed across the room, chasing away the unicorns.

Red squeezed into the doorway next to Snow as a spectacular spray of fireworks exploded across the ceiling and dripped down the walls, bathing the dancers in orange, red and green. The light morphed into patterns and shapes. An enormous gold flash rippled across the ceiling. Red gasped as it turned into a dragon, wings outspread. Gold glimmering across its scales, it flew over the ceiling and opened its maw, exposing sharp fangs. Fire belched from its mouth, roiling over the roof and down the walls, reflecting upon upturned faces of the screaming dancers.

Heat coalesced in Red’s veins, rushing along her forearms. She clenched her fingers tight, tamping it down, not that anyone here would notice if she let a few sparks fly.

In a puff of smoke, the dragon disappeared, and another unicorn, this one rainbow-colored, waltzed across rolling green fields. Cheers and

shouts rose from dancers in rainbow costumes, some with unicorn horns and others with wings.

“There’s obviously something here for everyone,” Red said. “Although I can’t spot Krispin, I’m sure he’s here somewhere. Come on, let’s get a drink.”

“Sure,” said Snow. “But no alcohol, right?”

Snow was always checking after her last gaffe, but Red didn’t blame her—she’d really messed up big time. “Of course. No booze, just fun.” She gave Snow’s icy hand a reassuring squeeze.

They strode past a few built guys with bare chests, jeans and wolf masks. One of them pointed his wolfy snout skyward and howled, making chills skitter down Red’s spine. Oh, it was nice to have relief from the warmth coursing through her. Something about seeing that dragon light show had roused her magic. Now it was burning to be released. The wolves were dancing with a group of women dressed in skin-tight cheetah suits. Beyond them were swaying tardises with human feet sticking out the bottom of their metal shells, a bunch of Harry Potter look-alikes and a few superheroes. But it was the animals that fascinated Red.

“Are those cat suits or skin paint?” Snow leaned in, her cool breath brushing Red’s ear.

It was hard to tell. Red shrugged and skirted around a group of panthers. Dancers spilled off the dance floor. A girl in a fairy-costume sprawled in front of them, laughing, before a guy dressed as a phoenix swooped in to pull her to her feet and carry her, shrieking with laughter, back into the dancing crowd. His costume was amazing, with golden feathers and wings that looked like they could really fly.

Snow grabbed Red’s hand and squeezed it. “I think we’re out of our league. Let’s just see Krispin and leave.”

Muting the fire coursing through her veins, Red straightened Snow's crooked tiara. "We should have a bit of fun while we're here. How often do we get to come to something like this? It's amazing."

Snow's wide blue gaze was taking everything in. "Okay, but we can't be late home. We were lucky Mom got held back at E.D. last night or we would've been toast."

Red shrugged. "Leave the toasting to me." With all the fire thrumming inside her, toasting anything would be easy.

"Not a spark," Snow muttered as they walked past a bunch of people in medieval cloaks in a circle around a steampunk dude doing a head spin.

They got to the bar, and stood in the crowd behind a lady in a blue superhero cape. A fairy with a beard and a long glittery wand squeezed in next to Snow, and then a dragon with enormous pearly wings stepped up next to Red and furred them so naturally, they looked as if they were real. Her friend was dressed as a medieval princess with a full, flowing skirt and bodice.

"Nice wings." Red nodded. "How do you move them like that?"

The dragon flashed her teeth in a smile, the scales on her face shimmering pearlescent in the reflected light. A tiny rumble issued from her mouth.

"Awesome acting. You even have the voice." Red was astounded. This girl was full on.

"You get used to the wings," her friend, the medieval princess, said. "She said to tell you she was really clumsy at first."

The dragon eyed the orange, gold and red feathers on Red's wings, and let out a snarl.

"She also says she likes your costume. Nothing like a little dress up to fit in."

A little? Man, no one here was doing a little. It was all full on. The dragon obviously wanted to keep up the charade that she could only snarl and roar, so Red played along. “Her scales are pretty too. The face paint must’ve taken hours.”

“Nah, it was done in a flash,” the princess said. “It doesn’t come off easily though.” She laughed and a rumble built in the dragon’s throat, as if they were sharing a private joke.

The princess turned to talk to a wolf guy. Red tipped her head back and stared at paisley patterns rotating across the ceiling in a drift of pinks, yellows, turquoise and purples. Snow glanced up too, and her tiara fell off. Red shot out a hand and caught it before it hit the floor. She grinned and popped it back on Snow’s head.

“What’ll it be, ladies?” the blond bartender asked, flashing a smile.

“Orange juice please,” Snow replied.

“Squeezed or bottled?” He flicked back a lock of blond hair.

“I’d like a bottle please,” Snow said. “No glass.”

The cute bartender grinned at her. “Sure thing, Ice Princess.” He cracked open a bottle of orange juice, broke the seal and passed it to her with a straw. He winked. “Making sure no one slips a roofie into your drink?”

“Something like that,” Snow said wryly, taking her drink.

Red wondered whether the guy had noticed the condensation now frosting the glass bottle her sister was holding. At least she wasn’t the only one struggling to hold in her powers.

“There are no roofies on my watch.” He winked. “How about saving a dance for me? I’m off shift soon.”

“Lemon lime and bitters, thanks.” Red grinned. “You’re out of luck, Buddy. This Ice Princess only melts for one guy.” She snatched Snow’s

phone and thrust it in front of the bartender, showing him Krispin's picture. "This one. Have you seen him here tonight? It'll make the Ice Princess' day if we can find him."

"He was over there a few minutes ago." The bartender's face shuttered, and he waved a hand over the dancers' heads toward a dingy staircase near the entrance to the penthouse leading up to a mezzanine.

At the top of the stairs, a ripped dude in dark jeans and a black T-shirt stood in front of a closed door, arms crossed and biceps bulging. At the bottom of the stairs, a bunch of guys milled around too casually, pretending to watch the dancers, trying hard not to look as if they were waiting.

Waiting for what?

Whatever or whoever was in that room.

## §

Zeph ducked his head through the door.

"Let's have a break," Dante said, "and check out what's happening downstairs. Maybe find someone with serious money and cut out the middle men."

Zephyr stretched, cracking his knuckles. "Tomorrow we could try somewhere else, maybe the Shifting Sands."

"You just want to find those cute girls again." Dante shook his head. "You're impossible. We can't afford more problems right now. We're in enough trouble already."

He was trying to convince himself as much as he was Zeph. He hadn't been able to get that gorgeous redheaded mage out of his mind since yesterday. The tendrils of smoke at her fingertips. Her smoky scent. The sparks that had flared in her eyes.

He piled the cash into a neat stack. "Come on, let's go downstairs." He locked the money in the safe and pulled the painting across it. "We'd be

lame hosts if we didn't show at our own party. Besides, I wouldn't mind a dance." That'd help get her out of his head. Maybe it would loosen Zeph up too.

"One more trade. I already signaled a guy to wait. After that, we'll go and mingle." Zeph turned in the open doorway and motioned a guy up the stairs.

Dante slipped another velvet sack from the cabinet and placed it on the desk as heavy feet made their way up to the office.

§

"Hey, Snow isn't that one of those dudes that attacked us in the alley the other night?" Red asked, jerking her thumb at a guy coming down the staircase in the corner. "I'm sure of it."

Snow whipped around, blonde hair flying and her tiara slipping off her head. "You might be right. He's got that same baby face and blue eyes." She wanted to shrink off somewhere and hide. But, of course, she didn't. Detective Hardcastle would never back out of a mystery, no matter how dangerous. "Shall we take a closer look?"

The guy was dressed in a velvet cloak and Harry Potter spectacles, and was even carrying a wand that looked like it was straight from Ollivanders. He made his way down the stairs from the office on the mezzanine that overlooked the dance floor.

"He's not the only one that's been up there tonight," Snow said. "I've seen a whole lot of people traipsing up, one at a time, guarded by that tough guy at the top of the stairs. Something weird's going on."

Red rolled her eyes. "We came here to have a good time. And for you to see Krispin. You haven't even found him yet. Or had a dance. I think those lock-picking YouTube shows and detective thrillers are getting to you.

Relax and have fun. I'm going to." She eyed the dancers moving among tendrils of smoky dry ice.

The guard dog at the top of the stairs placed his hands on his hips, biceps straining the fabric of his T-shirt. Silver shimmered across half his face and rippled down his arm.

There was something familiar about him.

Snow grabbed Red's arm. "It's the hot guy from the alley. He was talking to that gang thug. They know each other. Do you think they set us up in the alley yesterday?"

"Why would someone attack us and have their friends save us?" Red wrinkled her nose making her phoenix beak wriggle. "It doesn't make sense."

"How about to get us to trust them, so they could waltz in like heroes and then have their way with us. They could be those tattooed people smugglers Mom's always ranting about." It sounded ridiculous the moment she said it.

Red gave an exasperated sigh. "I doubt it. They wouldn't have let us walk off to our own car. Come on, I'm here to have fun and I thought you were too."

"Whatever those guys are doing up there, it can't be legal." A ripple of unease skittered down Snow's spine. "Look at them, admitting one shady character after another into that room. They're probably drug dealers."

"They're bound to be." Red laughed. "As long as we watch our drinks, we'll be fine. You're doing well in that department, but look out." Red pointed at Snow's orange juice.

Oh, no. The juice had turned half solid, like a slushy. If she didn't watch it, she'd freeze the lot and shatter the bottle. She passed her drink to Red. Her sister cradled it in her hands, then passed it back. Warm. Ugh.

Snow cooled it slightly, drained the bottle and set it on a low table near the door.

“Last night got a little rough. Let’s enjoy ourselves tonight. Come on,” Red sashayed off to the dance floor to join a group of beautiful angels in glittery tank tops with huge feathery wings. Unicorns and dragons whirled past. A gryphon and a centaur were whispering to each other, ignoring a herd of delicate fairies in shimmering rainbow-wings dancing nearby.

Snow’s phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her purse. Krispin’s profile pic appeared with a message:

*It’s great to see you.*

She spun.

He was right behind her, dressed in a pair of chocolate medieval breeches, long leather boots, a flowing white shirt and an emerald waistcoat embroidered with gold moons. Atop his head was a gold circlet. His warm eyes drank in her costume. He flashed a dazzling smile.

Snow’s heart danced a crazy staccato as he took her hand and bowed. “You look lovely tonight, my princess.” He put on an old-fashioned, cultured accent. “Would you care for a dance?”

So dashing. Snow stashed her phone in her tiny silver purse and curtsied. “I’d love to.”

As Krispin took her hand, she battled to keep her icy tendrils of excitement from escaping. Gods, she was acting just like Red. She had to get a grip.

It was nearly impossible as Krispin pulled her close and danced with her in an old-fashioned dance that belonged to another era. A romantic era of tiaras and castles. Somehow, he kept perfect time to the modern beat, never faltering as he danced her through the throng.

If she didn't watch it, she was going to melt into a gooey puddle. Snow tilted her head to gaze up at his chocolate-brown eyes.

Her tiara slipped and he caught it, looping it over his wrist, without missing a beat. "These things aren't as easy to wear as they look." Smiling, he winked. "Mine kept toppling off my head as I was getting ready. I think that's why royalty only wear them for ceremonies."

They chatted as he led her through a couple more numbers, then he asked, "Would you like a drink?"

It was muggy and the dry ice was irritating Snow's throat. "I'd love one."

They made their way to the bar. Thankfully the crowd had thinned. Krispin turned to her. "What would you like, milady?"

How he could keep up that old-fashioned accent without messing it up was beyond her, but it suited him. "A lemon, lime and bitters, thanks."

He tilted his head and gave her a lazy smile. "Wouldn't you rather have a Frosty Blue? It'd match your costume."

Not a Frosty Blue. Snow had only had Frosty Blues once—a lethal cocktail with equal parts of Minttu—a 50% proof Finnish peppermint mint liqueur—and lemonade served over ice. She'd barely been able to walk by the end of that evening. "Ah, no thanks."

The cute bartender picked up a couple of empty bottles, tossed them in the air and caught them behind his back before popping them in a crate. "What'll it be?" He practically glared at Krispin.

Krispin ordered and pulled out his wallet. Something fell out of his pocket and bounced on the floor.

A ring.

Snow picked it up. A green gem the size of a quarter flashed in the light. The band was made of silver-gray metal, and covered in runes that

looked like something out of a fairytale. “This is beautiful. It looks very old.” Almost elvish... That was ridiculous. As she turned the ring, the runes took on a luminous glow, as if they were magic. But that was crazy. The runes must be catching the light from the images on the ceiling—rolling green meadows full of prowling lions.

Krispin cleared his throat. “Ah, yes, it’s old.” He held his hand out. “Once a year, I take my mother’s family heirloom in for polishing.”

“Really? They haven’t done a good job.” It looked like it hadn’t been polished in years.

He shifted uncomfortably. “I’m due to take it in tomorrow.”

Snow passed the ring back. Her fingers brushed his. He closed his hand around hers, gazing at her with those soul-melting eyes. “My mother would’ve killed me if I lost this. Thank you for noticing I dropped it.”

His touch was warm and made her fingers tingly. And her heart flutter. Snow pulled her hand away and fiddled with the lace on her dress.

Krispin unlooped her tiara from where it still hung on his forearm and placed it on her head, his eyes gazing into hers. “You look lovely.” He took their drinks from the counter.

She sipped her lemon, lime and bitters. “Thanks. Um, do you live with your mom?” Somehow he’d seemed older, more self-assured.

“No, I just visit her regularly.”

What a nice guy. Most guys barely had time to say hi to their parents.

Krispin took her hand. “Let’s have another dance.” He spun her onto the floor in an old-fashioned twirl.

Nearby, Red was a blur of gold, orange and red feathers as she whirled on the dance floor, right at home among the people masquerading as wild creatures.

## Those Two Again

Dante locked the office door and joined Zeph on the landing, gazing down at the dancers below. “Good idea of yours to hold this party. It’s really brought those lowlife mages out of the alleys, right to our doorstep. It would’ve taken us weeks to make the money we’ve made tonight.”

Zeph grinned. “I’m not just a pretty face, you know.” He glanced at his phone.

“You checking out that pretty face or taking another selfie?”

Zeph stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “We have a few minutes to have some fun before the next round of deals starts.”

Lights swept across the crowd, flashing on red hair, then catching a glimmer of pale blonde. Dante peered into the throng of dancers. “Hey, aren’t those two the girls we helped in the alley last night?”

“Dunno.” Zephyr shrugged. “But I’m going to find out.”

“You really like the frosty one?” Dante asked. She was all right, but the red-head was stunning.

They sped down the stairs two at a time and pulled up short. The girls weren’t by themselves. They were chatting with a dude. Dragon’s breath, the man was some serious competition, all beach-blond hair, rippling muscles, and a fat budget, if his wardrobe was anything to go by. The guy guided them over to the bar and ordered some drinks.

“Hey, that’s the I.T. guy from school,” Zeph said. “Who invited him?”

“Not me, but word about our party got around.” The dude was way too close to both girls.

The blonde laughed and straightened her tiara. The redhead accepted a drink and smiled, leaning in close to say something to the dude.

Then she pulled a lock of hair back from her pretty cheek.

“Which is he with?” Zephyr asked, ripples of air rolling off him. Clearly jealous.

“Not sure,” Dante admitted, hoping it wasn’t the redhead. “Let’s mingle. We’ll find out later.”

## §

Red caught someone staring at her from across the dance floor—the tall well-built guy from the alley with the dark hair and green eyes. Despite the seething mass of dancing bodies between them, her eyes were drawn to him. The orange glow of a sunset played across the ceiling, making the tattoo down the side of his face glimmer. Gold glinted down his muscular bicep and forearm, in a striking pattern as if he was some exotic scaled fish. A merman perhaps?

The thought made Red giggle.

His eyes swept the dance floor then landed on her as she took a sip from her bottle of lemon, lime and bitters, the fizz shooting straight up her nose.

They locked stares.

His dangerous gaze washed over her, taking in her face, mask and feathered wings. Even her fingers on the bottle. She took another sip.

His eyes flitted away, but he’d seen her, all right. He was making his way around the dancers, casually, as if she wasn’t his destination.

Two could play at that game. She’d ignore him too. Red put down her drink and tapped a brawny leopard on the shoulder. “Want a dance?” she asked.

The guy grinned at her. “Sure,” he said. “Why not?”

As Red danced with him, she wished she hadn’t bothered. His eyes raked over her as if she were a slab of fish at a market. His grin was

accompanied by a wave of stale beer. She resisted wrinkling her nose and smiled, trying her best to look enthralled.

A dark head towered behind the brawny leopard's back, and a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

"Mind if I dance with her?" The guy from the alley asked.

"Sure, Dante." Leopard held up his hands. "I'd hardly deprive the host of the party of the chance to dance with a hot treat like her."

Hot treat? Red bristled, but the leopard was already stalking off to the bar. Instead, she smiled. "Dante?" she asked. "Like the artist?"

He quirked an eyebrow. One corner of his mouth twitched up. "Yeah. Your name is Red, right?"

Dad's nickname had stuck since she'd been tiny, so she'd decided to roll with it. That familiar pang of missing Dad twinged in her breast. Things would be so different if he were still alive. She gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Yeah." How had he found out?

Dante gave a slow, easy grin. "Red it is. Well, now that's over with, let's dance."

Now Red did bristle. He hadn't asked. Just ordered her to dance. There was something alluring in his dark-green gaze, his tats glinting gold under the whirling lights.

So she sashayed further into the crowd, letting him follow her.

## §

Red's hair cascaded over her shoulders and back, and her phoenix feathers swayed as she walked. Man, she was hot. Wisps of heat trailed past Dante and he inhaled, scenting her. Glorious, like campfires and warm summer nights—not a wisp of sulfur. He followed Red deeper into the press of dancers. When she was in the middle of a horde of shifters, she turned to face him with a flirty smile. That mask was so cute on her—although he'd

love to see her face. She flung her slim arms up and swayed to the music, staring at the dragons rippling across the ceiling. The lights played across her mask and throat.

She was alluring, wild and beautiful.

She lowered her chin and her eyes fell to his face, his so-called tattoo. His disfigurement. He winced. What the heck. He was what he was. The sooner she saw that, the better. He flung his head back too, and let the light bathe his face.

She stepped closer, and so did he—a moth dancing into her flame.

They moved in unison to the music. He was engulfed by the heat in her eyes, her gaze searing through him. A cocoon of warm air wound its way around them and wrapped them in its embrace. Dante couldn't take his eyes off her face, her hair, her stunning smile.

A wave of heat washed over him.

An inferno erupted inside his head. Roaring, drowning out the music. By the draki gods, if this is what dancing with her did to him when they weren't even touching...

He gulped and kept moving to the beat, his eyes pinned to the beguiling mage dancing with him. She could be weaving a spell over him right now.

For once, Dante didn't care.

## Dealers

A cloaked man with a pirate patch wandered over to talk to Krispin. Snow excused herself and headed over toward the coat rack opposite the stairs leading up to that mezzanine office.

No one was up there at the moment, but goodness knew what they were dealing. Something dangerous by the looks of the people wandering up and down the stairs. Probably drugs. She'd seen the two guys from the alley join the dancers earlier. Right now, they could be slipping roofies into everyone's drinks. She had to do something.

Snow slunk behind a coat rack full of jackets, wraps and hoodies. She pulled out her phone, tapped in the number of the police, and pressed call. She edged toward the exit, hoping no one would see her. As soon as she'd reported them, she'd get Red and go. She'd had fun with Krispin, but she'd catch him another time.

The emergency services operator answered. "Fire, ambulance or police?"

"Police please." Her voice was breathy. Cool trickles ran down her spine.

A tall figure stepped around the coat stand. A hand closed around her wrist. One of the drug dealers—the blond guy from the alley—took her phone from her. He glanced down at the number and ended the call. His piercing green eyes cut through her, sending a shiver through her belly.

"Why would you be calling the police? Aren't you here to party?" He raised an eyebrow.

Snow bit her lip.

He twirled her phone in his fingers, then passed it back to her. "Now, let me think. There could be a number of reasons. Did somebody

threaten you again?”

Snow took tiny steps, edging backward. “N-no.” Gods, how could she get out of this?

“Did somebody steal something of yours? If they have, let me know and I’ll deal with them.” There was steel in his voice. He took a step closer.

Her foot hit the wall behind her. There was nowhere to go.

“I um...” She stuffed her phone in her purse.

He folded his arms, the muscles in his forearms standing out and his biceps and pecs straining beneath his black T-shirt. He tilted his head, his pretty green eyes glittering like emeralds in the strobe lights. “I’m listening. Please continue.”

A lost dog? No. A break in? No. “I, um, lost my car keys earlier today.” Panicky shots of cold flew down her arms. She tucked her hands behind her, against the wall.

“And you want the police to help you find them?” His expression said he didn’t believe her.

The music pounded through her, making her temples ache. Ice slicked the wall underneath her fingertips. “It’s nothing, really. I’ll call them later.”

“Good idea. I’d hate to ruin the party.” His face lit up with a dazzling grin. “You’re the prettiest girl in the room and I’d love to dance with you. Are you keen?” His gaze locked with hers, and he held out a hand.

There was something compelling about his eyes. His outstretched hand. The glimmer of silver down his face and arm.

“Yes. I’d love that.”

Her ice-power shivered through her veins. What was she doing? She was mad. She’d been about to call the police on him. She desperately reeled

in her power. If she didn't watch out, she'd freeze his fingers off. Snow wiped her hands on her dress, then tentatively held out her fingers, hoping he wouldn't notice how cold they were.

His eyebrows twitched as he took her freezing hand in his toasty one. Warm air wafted over their entwined fingers, but he didn't say a thing, just smiled and led her past a group of werewolves and vampires with terrible fake blood on their chins, to the dance floor.

He took her other hand in his and flashed a smile.

Gods, this guy was way too good-looking, dangerous in more ways than one. Snow tried to smile back, but she was sure she'd failed. Her heart raced a thousand miles an hour like a dizzy thunderstorm. The music throbbed through her, and she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

And opened them to find him very near, grinning down her. He leaned in, his minty breath tickling her cheek. A waft of fresh air rippled over her, carrying the scent of freshly-cut grass and warm sunny days at the beach.

His emerald eyes intense, he said, "I'd like to see the way you move, Snow Queen."

It was all she could do not to melt into his arms.

## §

Zeph scrubbed a hand through his hair. The stunning blonde he was dancing with looked nervous, and she was so damned cute with her crooked tiara and Frozen costume. "I never knew Anna could look so hot. Well, actually, so cool." Argh, he was messing this up. He may as well play it straight. He had nothing to lose. "I thought you were pretty in the alley, but tonight you look stunning."

She giggled.

“I was serious. Why’s that funny?” He frowned and moved to the beat, still holding her hands. “What did I say?”

“It’s Elsa,” she said, “not Anna.”

“Sorry, I meant the character’s name, not yours.” He grinned. “I often mess things up.”

“No.” She shook her head, her soft laughter shimmying through Zeph’s bones. “The character you mean is Elsa. This is an Elsa costume,” she said. “Her sister’s Anna. I’m Snow.”

“Oh?! Snow?” He felt his eyebrows shoot up. “Then we have something in common. We’re both named after the elements. My name’s Zephyr—which means wind. My friends call me Zeph. A name that earned me no end of ribbing when I was little.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being little.” She gazed up at all six foot three of him and grinned, her straight blonde hair falling over one shoulder and those stunning ice-blue eyes staring right through him.

By the draki gods, she was gorgeous. He shouldn’t flirt with a mage. Dante had warned him not to. But she was so cute, he couldn’t help himself. He tugged her toward him.

She responded, tilting her head and stepping closer. A refreshing wave washed over him, like a plunge in a lake on a hot summer’s day. The scent of pine and mint wafted around him. He inhaled, memorizing her distinctive scent. A fierce hunger woke in his chest. Gods, he craved this. Wanted more. He’d never gone out of his mind over a girl like this before.

Her eyes slid across his draki scales.

He felt like flexing, letting his wings ripple from his back and scooping her up in his arms to fly over a vast forest of sprawling green. If only he could still transform into his draki form. The restless energy inside his chest kicked in. “So, Snow, huh? Is that a nickname or your real name?”

“Both,” she said, flashing a coy grin.

They were still dancing, now only inches apart. She mimicked his body language and movements, probably without realizing it. Zeph wanted to close that gap, but didn’t dare. He’d only just met her, and she was obviously shy. But she was into him, too. He was sure of it.

“So, your name is really Zephyr, as in Ford Zephyr? Are you sure you want to dance, not drive?” She blushed. “Sorry, that was lame.”

He grinned. So, she had a sense of humor—a bonus.

“My dad had a Ford Zephyr when he was younger.” Her expression grew wistful.

He cradled her hands in his, slowing. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “He passed away when I was little.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Worry gnawed at Zeph’s belly. Where were his parents? Were they safe? Since they’d received the ransom note three weeks ago, they hadn’t heard anything. Mind you, they’d been kidnapped and taken through that portal so fast, they could be anywhere. Or any when.

Snow slowed too, still moving in perfect rhythm to the music, as if she had an internal metronome. As if she was born to dance.

“Are you an athlete? Or a dancer?” he blurted. What a goofy question. What was about this girl that tied his tongue in knots?

She blushed, her pale cheeks turning ruby red. “No, I’m far from an athlete.”

“A musician then? You have a great sense of rhythm.”

Her blush deepened. “Thanks. I love music, but no, I’m not a musician.”

He spun her, her cool fingers so tiny in his, her skin soft against his calloused hand.

“What about you?” She smiled. “Play any instruments?” She ran a thumb over his callouses. A thrill thrummed through him.

“I play guitar and my brother plays base. We were in a high school band once, but not anymore.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “At Pinevale High. You both played in the Soaring Dragons. I knew you looked familiar.” Her smile was genuine. “I loved your music. Your lyrics were such an ear worm. I couldn’t get them out of my head.”

“So you go to Pinevale? How come I never noticed you?” He shook his head. “Which lyrics stuck with you?”

*“Born to Fly: Soaring over pine and vale, flying through storm, thunder and hail. The imagery was so vivid, it was stuck in my head for weeks.”*

Heat crept into Zeph’s cheeks. He hadn’t blushed in years. Man, she was getting under his skin. “That’s awesome. I had no idea we had groupies.”

Snow laughed. “You had groupies, all right. Half the girls at school went into mourning when you two were expelled.” She tilted her head and her face grew somber.

“What is it?”

She glanced away. Wouldn’t meet his gaze. They sidestepped a wolf couple and moved around a fake vampire pair in a lip-lock. “I never knew vampires, kissed,” she joked. “I thought they were more into biting.”

“Or drinking,” he quipped, rolling his eyes. Zeph reached down and placed his fingertips under her chin, ever so lightly, raising her face so her ice-blue eyes met his. “Hey, what is it?” He leaned in and crooned in her ear, hoping she could hear him over the music.

She shook her head and refused to meet his eyes again. “Come on.” Her cool fingers entwined with his, and she tugged him over to the conga line winding through the crowd. Snow grasped a mermaid’s hips.

Zeph grabbed her waist before another guy did, and hung on as the chain of dancers wove their way through the gyrating bodies, kicking their legs out in time to the beat. A clown grabbed onto him and more people piled on behind them. Zeph hung on, knowing that somehow he’d lost Snow, even though he was holding her.

### §

These boys had been expelled from school for having tattoos down their faces. Snow remembered the rumors like it was yesterday. No one had believed that Principal Jonas had really expelled them for tats. Conjecture had run wild, but the consensus had been drugs.

And here she was now, dancing with a drug dealer. She’d seen those guys trooping up the stairs one by one, some of them tucking tiny black bags into their pockets as they’d left that little office.

Moments ago, the light from sea dragons cavorting across the ceiling underwater had made Zeph’s silver tattoos a shimmery blue. Snow had wanted to run her fingers over his tats. Feel them. See the blue light flicker over her fingers as she traced the silver outlines. Of course, she’d resisted—but only just. Zeph was a bad boy through and through. The sort of boy Snow had vowed she’d never get involved with.

What was she thinking? She’d come here hoping Krispin felt the same way about her as she felt about him. Still, this was only a dance and that’s all it was, and Zeph was attractive, all right. With a smile, he made her insides melt. Even now, his comforting warm hands around her hips made her feel safe—but that was an illusion.

As the human chain disintegrated into a bunch of laughing dancers, Zeph caught her hand, and tugged her closer. “What is it, Snow? What’s upset you?”

Gods, he could read her like the face of a watch. She shrugged.

Red and the guy with the dark hair and gold tats danced over. Red glanced up at her guy, batting her long lashes. “Thank you, Dante,” she purred.

Dante nodded at Zeph and motioned toward the shady stairs in the corner.

“Snow, this is my brother, Dante.” Zeph flashed a smile. “We’ll be back in a minute, ladies. Don’t go anywhere. I’d love to dance with you again, Elsa.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Snow couldn’t help the bolt of ice that shot from her fingers as panic surged through her chest. They were drug dealers, all right. She had to steer clear of him from now on.

As the guys wove their way through the throng of dancers, Zeph stopped to help a fairy who’d fallen over. “Dante, like the artist?” Snow asked Red.

Her sister dreamily gazed at Dante’s broad shoulders. “Yeah, romantic huh?”

“Romantic? Look at them about to do another drug deal. They weren’t even shy about it. Can’t you see what these guys are?”

Red tilted her head, eyes still locked on Dante’s broad back. She flicked her mane over a shoulder. “Sure, I can see what they are—gorgeous. And I’m interested. You should be too. It’s not like you’re married to Krispin, or anything.”

“We have to get out of here.” Snow yanked Red off the dance floor, not caring as icy energy shot through her fingers, zapping her sister.

“I thought you wanted to dance with Krispin again,” Red protested, dragging her heels.

Snow did. But also with Zeph. And it was doing her head in. She spun, ducked around a guy in a blue dragon costume—and smacked into a wall of medieval-clad muscle.

She hadn’t realized Krispin’s green and gold velvet waistcoat would be so soft. Or that his chest was quite that firm.

“Could I request the pleasure of another dance with you, milady?” Krispin asked.

Cheeks heating, Snow babbled, “Um, hi. Ah, sorry, we have to go. I’m not feeling that well.”

A faint frown puckered Krispin’s brow. His warm brown eyes filled with concern. “At least let me escort you to your car.” He placed a hand on the small of Snow’s back.

Red smirked as if Snow had planned to smack into Krispin. How mortifying.

“Was it something you ate?” Krispin asked gently. “Or too much excitement for one evening?”

That sounded like something a grandmother would say, not a date. Snow shrugged it off. “Oh, I’m, ah, tired and a little dizzy.” She felt awful fooling him. He was so sweet, such a gentleman. Unlike Zeph, who was dealing drugs in the office above while everyone partied.

“Are you sure another dance wouldn’t help you recover?” Krispin gave her a smile that made her melt all over again.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. Gods, what was wrong with her tonight? Two guys? And at the same party. She was going crazy.

Krispin spread his hands in a gesture that encompassed her and Red. “Your friend could join us, in case you continue to feel unwell.” His eyes

scanned Snow's face. "Or would you rather go?"

He was such a nice guy. Perhaps one more dance wouldn't hurt. "Just one, and then we'll go."

They made their way past a girl in a ruby-red dragon costume and Krispin placed his hands on her shoulder and waist as if they were about to waltz.

Red got her shimmy on, gyrating to the beat. A guy whistled and danced over. Others cheered. Around them, everyone was getting into the music. Suddenly, Snow felt out of place with Krispin and his old-fashioned act.

"Relax." Snow smiled. "Let's have some fun."

And then snarls broke out in the middle of the dance floor.

## Wolves

Red spun as snarls drowned out the music—as if a pack of hounds was scrapping. Someone threw a bottle at a wall. It smashed, shards flying over the dancers. A sliver pierced a unicorn girl’s cheek. She screamed, clutching her face, her fingers bloody.

A bunch of guys in wolf costumes were howling realistically—well, probably playing howling ringtones. They faced off against some guys in medieval flowing shirts and breeches, with pointy elf ears.

A wolf lashed out, claws springing from its fake paws like switchblades. A convincing costume. The wolf slashed, tearing through a medieval guy’s voluminous shirt. The man leaped out of range, then was flanked by four others, who drew swords.

Red gulped. She’d thought their blades were decorative, costume only, but there was nothing playful about the steel glinting under the dance lights.

Maw open, another wolf lunged at a medieval guy’s throat as if he were a real wolf. People were yelling, drowning out the DJ’s beats. Someone stomped on a mermaid’s tail and she hit the floor face first. A puma with a jagged scar along the side of its nose lunged, pushing two of the medieval guys over in one leap. One of the mermaid’s friends threw a punch.

A brawl broke out.

Snow gripped Red’s hand. This time, Red didn’t need any encouragement—it was time to leave. As she and Snow rushed to the door, two confident broad-shouldered figures raced down the stairs from the office and barged through the crowd—Dante and Zeph.

Zeph was closing the office door to head back downstairs when snarls rang out. He mind-linked with Dante, *“It’s probably that stupid alpha wolf shifter getting territorial about his girl again.”*

*“Yeah, he’s been glaring at those medieval dudes all night,”* Dante replied, already racing down the stairs.

The wooden steps juddered beneath their feet. They dashed through the crowd to the fighters. A coil of restless energy danced in Zeph’s chest. He thrust it outward, creating a strong wind that blew the fighters apart.

The DJ stopped the music as the wolf flew through the air. The wolf landed, sprawling on all fours, and leaped to his feet, claws clattering on the tiles. But Dante sprang between them, hands out, separating the fighters.

More wolf shifters snarled, glares locked on Dante, spoiling for a fight.

Zeph readied more of his wind energy.

*“Come on. You know we’re not each other’s enemies,”* Dante crooned. *“Save your energy. We can’t afford division between us. We know the Fae are out there, so we have to stand strong and united. If you’ve got any petty disputes, settle them. No fighting on our turf.”* He bent and plunged his fist down, smacking the floor. A tremor ran underfoot. A little one.

Zeph suppressed a smile. It was strange enough for his twin to demonstrate his earth powers without damaging anything.

Zeph, Feron and Assiya flanked Dante. Other draki shifters slunk through the crowd, subtly forming a wide circle around the fighters.

The wolves glanced around, realizing they were surrounded. *“Sure thing.”* The alpha wolf nodded. *“No problem.”* An uneasy truce settled over the fighters.

The medieval guys scowled and headed to the bar. Zeph signaled the DJ and the music kicked back into life. Wolves drifted back to dancing. Zeph fished a first aid kit out from under the bar and tossed it to Assiya, who patched up the girl with the bleeding cheek.

“*Well handled,*” Zeph mind-linked with his twin brother. “*But where are Snow and Red?*”

§

Dante spied that guy with the expensive wardrobe rushing the two girls toward the doorway. “*Look, over there by the door.*”

Zeph scowled. “*What does he want with them?*”

“*Probably the same thing you and I do—to get to know them better.*” The moment the words popped into his head, Dante regretted them. If he were any judge of things, those girls were mages. One with fire powers and the other ice. Dangerous territory.

The guy had his hand on the small of Snow’s back and another hand on Red’s elbow. Dante felt a surge of something protective—jealousy? No, it couldn’t be. He barely knew Red. All the same, he wanted to bowl over and punch that dude on the nose.

Zeph stalked after them.

“*What are you doing?*” Dante mind-linked.

“*Getting to know them better—like you said.*”

“*No, they’re bad news. Powerful mages.*” But his feet automatically followed his brother. Of course—he had to keep Zeph out of trouble.

The guy was escorting the girls toward the exit, when a couple of mages in cloaks interrupted him. He nodded to the girls, motioning them to wait, while he walked over to a seedy group of guys skulking in the shadows near the coat rack.

With a jolt, Dante stopped as the unmistakable smell of sulfur assaulted his nostrils. Those seedy guys were the mages they'd been selling stuff to. *"Why's Red and Snow's friend talking to our dealers?"*

*"What in the draki god's name?"* Zeph exclaimed. *"How does he know them?"*

The girls were heading through the door.

Dante swallowed a pang of disappointment as he watched them leave. He'd have loved another dance with Red. *"It's best that they go. We should have nothing to do with them."* He couldn't help admiring Red's fiery hair as she waltzed out to the stairs.

*"Suit yourself. I'm not backing off."* Zeph strode off.

Dante rushed after him. It was only to stop Zeph from doing something stupid. Still, he found himself flaring his nostrils to catch an elusive whiff of Red's smoky scent. *"You're mad. You know they're trouble."*

*"Hey, loosen up, you're turning into an old bore. You were having fun dancing with Red."*

Fun? Yeah, she was more than fun. He'd loved dancing with her, caught up in the moment, like they were meant to be together. Zeph was always telling him he needed to relax and live a little. She'd probably be really good for him if she weren't a mage. The beat of the music receded as they thudded downstairs and out through the doorway into the lane.

The lane was empty. *"They moved fast."*

He and Zeph broke into a run, racing down the street and around the corner.

The girls were unlocking a dented Honda hatchback. Mages in an old clunker? It wasn't what Dante had expected. Most mages were wealthy.

“Hey, wait up.” Zeph strode over, grinning. He tilted his head, laying on his boyish charm real thick.

Dante wanted to roll his eyes. But he could feel himself grinning, too, as he took in Red without her phoenix mask. A shaft of moonlight broke through the cityscape illuminating her beautiful face. She angled her head and grinned at him, her cheeks tinged pink from dancing and her emerald eyes sparking with fun. A wave of warmth danced out from her and enveloped Dante like a bubbling spa pool. Trouble or not, Red was hot. Just being near her made him feel warm and glowy.

“Did you want another dance?” she asked, batting her lashes.

His cheeks ached, he was grinning so hard.

Snow rolled her eyes. “For goodness sake, Red. Not here in the street.”

Zeph laughed. “Sure, we’d both like to dance with you again, but maybe not now. How about we take in the new Bond movie tomorrow night? It’s showing at the Odyssey Cinema at eight.”

Snow’s smile lit up her face. Dante could see why his brother was into her. She was really pretty, but still, nothing compared to Red.

“Bond? You want to take me to an action flick?” Snow said. “Lucky for you, I like thrillers.”

You could have knocked Dante down with a draki scale. He’d never thought Snow would be a thriller buff. He mind-linked with Zeph. *“For the record, this is a terrible idea.”*

Zeph turned and caught him eyeing Red. *“Yeah, right. As if you’re not into Red. Tell you what, if you don’t want to come, I’ll take Snow on my own. I’ll tell them right now.”*

Dante swallowed. *“Nah, I’ll come. Someone has to keep an eye on you.”*

Zeph whipped out his phone and took Snow's number. He texted her so she had his.

Dante reluctantly pulled his phone out. "I'd better get your number too, in case we have to cancel," he said.

Red grinned. "No need. Snow's my sister. We'll both get Zeph's messages."

Sisters? These two were full of surprises.

"I'm sure tomorrow will be great." Red gave Dante a sultry gaze that made him overheat on the spot.

Dante swallowed and resisted the urge to take her in his arms right then and there. Suddenly, tomorrow night felt like miles away.

## Forebodings

As they drove off, Snow gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white. “We shouldn’t have agreed to go with them. I’m sure they’re dealers.”

“I like Dante. He makes me feel—”

“What?” Snow snapped. “Hot? It’s not like every other guy you dance with doesn’t.”

“No,” Red insisted. “It’s not like that. He makes me feel like I can be myself. As if he could like me, despite my powers. Or even because of them. I feel special. Appreciated for being me. I’ve never felt that before.”

Snow sighed and halted at a stop light. A truck rumbled across the intersection, followed by a stream of cars. Apart from her worry about drugs, how *did* Zeph make her feel? Gnawing at her lip, she snatched her phone out of her purse and pulled Zeph’s number up. His face grinned at her from his Gmail profile image. In this photo, he had no tattoos. He was cute without them, but with them, his attractiveness was off the top of the charts.

This was crazy. Since when did she like bad boys? And how could she like two boys at the same time? “No, this isn’t right. I’m canning the date.” She stabbed the screen with her fingers, typing: *Sorry, something urgent has come up. We have to cancel.*

Her hand hovered above the send icon.

Red took hold of her fingers, pulling them away from her phone. “You agreed to go to the movies. There must be a reason,” her sister said. “What is it about Zeph that you like?”

He’d sensed her powers and not run. And he had powers of his own, she was sure of it. A thrill ran through Snow as she remembered the feel of Zeph’s warm breeze wafting over their entwined fingers. The type of thrill

she'd once had on vacation with Mom and Red when they'd stood on the edge of a cliff high above the sea. Back then, a shimmer had run through her belly. She hadn't known whether she was scared of falling or thrilled at the sensation that if she let go, she could soar through the sky.

Utter madness.

That same shimmer ran through Snow again now—and not just through her belly, but her entire body.

Without answering Red, Snow deleted her message. The light turned green. She jammed her foot on the gas and surged through the intersection. Maybe it was time to live a little.

## §

Red fished cups out of the dishwasher. The cutlery clattered into the drawer as Snow unloaded the basket. They'd planned to be out of the house by now, heading to the Odyssey Cinema, but Mom had been asked to do a later shift, so she was still home.

“When's she leaving?” Red hissed to Snow, shoving the cups in the cupboard and shutting the door.

“Half an hour,” Snow whispered back. “If we get changed quickly, that'll give us enough time to get to the movies.”

Mom stalked into the kitchen. “What's going on, Red?” Her face was lined with worry, eyes tired.

Mom shoved a wisp of graying hair back from her forehead. When had Mom started to go gray? She waved the top Red had worn to the cosplay rave. “Your clothes are burned to a crisp. Have you been at a party, Red?”

Red plucked a plate out of the dishwasher. “They're only singed. It was a stray spark. It's nothing.” She turned her back on Mom to put the plate in the cupboard.

“I knew you’d been to a party. I’ve talked to you about this,” Mom snapped. “If people find out you’re a freak, it won’t end well. There are kidnappers out there looking for girls like you. You don’t understand...” She trailed off with a gulp that might have been a sob. “Why can’t you behave? Like your sister.”

Red rolled her eyes. “Yes, Snow’s the good girl. Snow never does anything wrong. She could freeze the whole school, and you’d never know.”

“I didn’t say that.” Mom spun to Snow. “Snow, is there something you want to tell me?”

“Yes.” Snow glared daggers at her sister. “There is something I want to say.” She spun to face Mom. “What have you been hiding from us?”

“What do you mean?” Mom pinned Snow with a narrow-eyed glare.

Somehow, Snow remained ice-cool. “We don’t know anything about our father. I want to know more. About who he was, and why he died. I want to know why we can’t go to dances, and why you’re always telling us to be careful of everyone. People with tattoos, people in gangs, people who are overly-beautiful, even people who look at us strangely—which is almost everyone.” Snow jammed her fists on her hips. “We can look after ourselves. I’m seventeen and Red’s eighteen. We don’t need to be coddled like children.”

“Tell us, Mom,” Red snapped. “We’re adults now. Why can’t we just be ourselves?”

“Because it’s dangerous,” Mom whispered. “And you’re not ready.”

Red bristled. “If we’re not ready now, we’ll never be ready.”

Mom shook her head. “Ask me when you can control your emotions enough to stop spraying ice and fire everywhere. I’m warning you now, you

won't like the answers. Now, don't go to another party without my permission."

"Fine." Snow stormed off to her room and slammed the door.

Red frowned, it wasn't like Snow to lose her temper.

Mom sank into a chair, rested her elbow on the dining table, and propped her head on her hand. She sighed. "I didn't want to argue. I just..." She gave a weary sigh. "Will you talk some sense into her?"

Guilt spiked though Red. She softened her voice. "Sure, Mom."

Red stalked after Snow, slipped into her room, and closed the door. "We're still going to the movies tonight, right?" she whispered.

"Mom never said we couldn't," Snow answered, as cool as a cucumber, already searching through her wardrobe for a pretty top. "We'll go as soon as she leaves."

Red shook her head. "And Mom thinks I'm the troublemaker."

## Bond

Dante peered down the escalator. This had to be one of the most stupid, impulsive things he'd ever done. How had he let Zeph talk him into going to the movies with mages? Yes, Red was beautiful, and last night had been exhilarating, but this was nuts. "We're wasting our time when we should be hunting for Mom and Dad."

Zeph looked over his shoulder. "Stop panicking. We've searched flat out for weeks and found nothing. We can take a few hours off before our deal later tonight."

Maybe this was a set up. "We shouldn't be here." Dante scanned the faded red carpet and walls lined with framed movie posters, trying to take his mind off the way Red had moved on the dance floor. "This was a bad idea." Gods, even the color of the carpet reminded him of her hair.

Zeph flashed the smile he used to disarm everyone. "Come on, you want to see Snow's sister, Red, don't you?"

Dante smiled, remembering the rush of heat he felt whenever Red was near, and the way his earth powers tingled, responding to her magic. Anticipation surged up his spine. Despite his better instincts, he knew he'd stick around.

There they were: Red striding through the foyer, wearing skinny jeans and a fire-engine-red sparkly top, her leather backpack slung over her shoulder, Snow behind her. There was something about Red that made him want to wrap his arms around her, although he knew he should run. "*This is crazy.*"

"Hi." Zeph waved, puppy-dog eager to greet his ice-princess.

She was pretty enough with strappy high heels and an ice-blue summer-dress, but why did Zeph have to drool over her? "*Don't fall so*

*hard. You've got to play it cool."*

*"Yeah, I know, but I get chills all over when I think about kissing those lips."*

"Nice to see you both." Dante smiled. The alluring grin Red gave him burned through his defenses, making his face heat.

*"Now, you're blushing like an eight-year old. Who told me to play it cool?"* Zeph snarked.

Sometimes, his brother was a pain. Maybe a double-date wasn't such a good idea after all, but there was no way he was letting Zeph go out with Snow on his own.

"The movie starts in a moment. Would anyone like snacks?" Dante asked, putting on the charm as best he could. "Ice creams? Lemonade? Popcorn? My treat."

"Yes please," Red jumped in. "I'd love a lemonade. And why don't we all share a jumbo popcorn?"

"A lemonade sounds wonderful, too," Snow said shyly.

Zeph was edging closer to Snow.

"Come on, Zeph, help me get them." Dante practically dragged his brother over to the counter.

Soon, with four lemonades and a jumbo popcorn carton in hand, they found their seats, right in the center of the cinema. Dante led the way into the row.

"Great seats," Red said, sashaying in to sit beside him.

They should be, Zeph had insisted on arriving half an hour early to snag them.

Dante gave Red the popcorn. Snow shot her sister a meaningful glance, before primly sitting by her side.

How could two sisters be so different? And how could Zeph fall so hard for a girl who gave him subarctic treatment?

§

“So,” Zephyr said. Surely he’d be able to think of something to say, now that they were all seated. He was known for his silver tongue, but it had completely deserted him. “Isn’t this perfect?” Groan. Was that the best he could do? He angled his body in his seat so he was closer to Snow. Her scent of pine on a crisp snowy day wafted around him—distracting him and twisting his tongue like origami.

Snow was ice-cool, sipping her half-frozen lemonade. She looked him up and down. “Very pleasant.” Her laugh was like a tinkling bell.

Did she mean it? Was she enjoying herself or faking it? Man, she tied him into more knots than a bag of pretzels. Dante was lucky, Red wasn’t nearly so hard to read. She was all smiles and charm, teasing Dante with popcorn, feeding him kernel by kernel.

The popcorn was steaming with buttery goodness. Zeph reached his hand past Snow, his arm brushing hers, and took a handful. The popcorn nearly burned his fingers. “This is good stuff, nice and hot.” Damn. What was wrong with him, today?

At the word *hot*, both girls froze. It was a good reminder that he needed to be careful.

Sure enough, his brother butted in. “*We can’t let them know we sense their powers.*”

Before Dante could get antsy, or Zeph could say anything to redeem himself, the lights lowered. The theatre was dark except for the shimmer of his brother’s golden draki markings.

Zephyr felt exposed. His hand flew to his silver draki scales. They’d be lit up like neon lights. Fortunately, everyone seemed focused on the

movie screen. Everyone except the two girls—Snow and Red were staring at them like they were chocolate fondue.

§

Red's fingers tingled. Dante's tattoo looked spectacular in this light. Half his face was covered in shimmering scales that were almost alive. She longed to run her fingers over the tattoo, but she didn't dare.

Dante's hand was resting on the arm between their seats. Heat coursing through her, Red gently placed her hand on top of his. The hardest bit was controlling the fire that wanted to seep out of every pore in her palm. Flame it, her whole body was ablaze. Without even knowing it, this guy did crazy things to her.

A beat ran through the floor as the brassy Bond opening music swelled. Seductive female silhouettes wove across the screen, backlit with flames. Heat surged through Red. She dropped Dante's hand and grasped the popcorn carton. Sparks flitted from the tips of her fingers. Oh, gods, a tiny tendril of smoke wound up from the edge of the carton.

She shot Snow a panicked look.

Her sister reached over and brushed Red's fingers with a wave of icy cold, before taking a handful of popcorn and cooling the carton. At least the sparks were gone. Boy, her sister's fingers were cold. Hopefully she wasn't holding Zephyr's hand, or it'd snap right off.

Snow had been right. Going to the movies with the Draki twins had been a dangerous idea. Why had she insisted? She reached out to hold Dante's hand again, but another pulse of flame ran through her.

Dante turned toward her, eyes wide.

Oh no. He'd felt her heat. Red burned with mortification. And not the good sort of burning. She remembered a date from a year ago where she'd almost set fire to her date's hand. The boy had plunged his hand into

his drink and left half-way through a movie, yelling at her that her practical joke had gone too far. She'd never told Snow.

Dante didn't flinch. A jet boat exploded on the screen, and her seat rumbled beneath her—probably the subwoofers. She burst into nervous laughter.

Zeph and Snow turned as one to face them.

“What's happening?” Snow whispered.

“Nothing,” Dante muttered as the opening sequence continued.

On the screen, Bond was now skiing down a mountainside chased by paramilitary villains in a helicopter. Strafing fire caught the mountainside, bullets peppering the snow as Bond plunged downhill weaving between rocks and pine trees.

Red leaned into Dante. He was warm and solid, and smelled earthy, like fall leaves.

Beneath her feet, the floor vibrated again. This time, Red was sure it wasn't the speakers.

## §

A breeze ruffled Snow's hair. She glanced back to the entrance. The doors were firmly closed.

“Was that you?” Red whispered, sparkling snow melting in her fiery hair.

“I didn't do anything,” Snow whispered back. The snow must have come from her. She sat on her hands. She mustn't touch Zeph. He'd definitely notice—if he didn't freeze to death first.

“Are you okay?” Zephyr asked, patting her elbow.

A pretty ring glinted on his finger. What was it about boys and fantasy jewelry? His ring was silver with a large green gem, like the one Krispin was getting cleaned for his mom.

“Do you want some popcorn?” He leaned over her, took the carton from Red and held it out to her.

That was a good idea. Anything to warm up, and not be such a freak. Every time she thought about holding his hand she could feel the waves of ice coming off her fingertips.

Zeph wrapped an arm around her shoulder. He smelled amazing—like the wind off the ocean, and fresh-cut grass. She resisted leaning in, dreading the moment he’d realize how cold she was. Surely, he’d pull away any minute now.

Be warm, be warm, she kept telling herself. It should be easy with the waves of heat rolling off her sister. All she had to do was control her cold-power. She took some popcorn.

A warm breeze swirled around her shoulders, making her feel powerful. Strong.

Was that Zeph? She turned to him in amazement. Zeph had powers, too?

Popcorn flew out of the carton in a gust.

“Quit it, Zeph.” Dante glared at his brother.

“Hush,” someone behind them hissed.

Snow burst out laughing, then snorted as she desperately tried to stifle her laugh. Maybe, if Zeph had powers, too, he wouldn’t think she was a freak. For the first time on a date, she relaxed and leaned into Zeph.

§

The end credits rolled. Dante was still holding Red’s hand, waves of delicious warmth seeping through his bones. He felt like a cat stretching luxuriously before a blazing hearth.

“That was fun,” Red’s voice was like velvet.

“*See, you really do like her,*” Zeph teased as they left the theatre.

Yeah, maybe he had fallen for the fiery red-head. Tonight, he hadn't been able to suppress his powers, letting tremors of excitement ripple through their seats. He hoped she thought it was the subwoofers, but surely she knew. Gods, he felt more vulnerable than ever. Like she knew all his secrets. And Zeph's. Him shaking the ground had been careless, but Zeph's wind tricks had been blatant. He could only hope the girls thought they were mages, too. Then again, their last name, Draki, was a bit of a giveaway. How long would it be before the girls found out they were dragon shifters tasked with protecting Pinevale's shifter community?

Maybe he could find out a little more about these two girls before he and Zeph did tonight's deal. "Would you like to grab a bite? There's a cool little cafe around the corner."

"We'd better be getting home." Snow waved her phone. "Or Mom will murder us."

Hopefully that was an exaggeration.

Not from the way Red was acting, flashing guilty glances at her sister. "You're right, Snow. We'd better dash." She picked up the pace down the stairs. "I'm so sorry. Can we take a raincheck?"

Dante nodded. It was too late to back out now.

"Cool," Zeph said, bounding about. "You have my number."

Of course Snow did. Dante tried not to roll his eyes. That's what he got for being the eldest, the sensible one. The one who had to look out for both of them.

With a flourish, Red pulled out an eyeliner pencil and wrote her number on Dante's arm.

It was strange. He'd been so lost for so long, and now, whenever she was near he felt truly happy. Could the girls have cast a spell on them? Anything was possible without their guardian stones. It would explain so

much: why the girls were so captivating; why he and Zeph were taking these crazy risks.

“Would you like us to walk you to your car?” Zeph blurted.

“Would you?” Snow asked as they exited the theatre into the warm evening air. “It’s not far.” She gestured at an alley. “The carpark’s through here.”

Rubbish bins, staircases and ramps, all crammed into a narrow concrete causeway. If the girls planned an ambush, this would be the place to do it. “You two really parked your car down here?” Even he’d have hesitated parking there. He preferred brightly lit places for their Jaguar XJ.

Red shrugged. “Cheap parking. Besides, we can look after ourselves.”

“I bet you can.” Dante flexed his shoulder muscles, not that they’d do any good against mages.

“This way.” Snow strode ahead.

Zephyr followed like a puppy dog, his romantic notions bleeding through their mind-link.

“*Do you mind?*” Dante snapped.

“*I can’t help it,*” Zeph said. “*I think she’s the one.*”

“*And you thought I was a sappy romantic,*” Dante shot back. At least it helped him keep his mind off Red.

“Here it is,” Red said. “Our old Honda.”

“Thanks again.” Snow hopped in, wound the window right down, and waved.

Red blew some flirty kisses and started the engine. She drove off with one hand on the wheel, waving until the old Honda hatch took a corner.

“What was that all about?” Snow asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Red stared at the road. “Oh wow, they’ve got powers, too. Mom was wrong—we’re not the only weirdos.”

“I know, right? I’m sure Zephyr was using some sort of wind power, but maybe we’re imagining it? He was so sweet.”

“What? There’s someone cute in this world besides Krispin? I thought you were in love with him?”

Warmth crept up Snow’s cheeks as she bit back a retort. “I think Krispin’s cute, too. I thought I’d decided that he’s the one, but...” She waved a hand at a red car on the side of the road outside a mall. “Hey, wait a minute. Isn’t that Krispin?”

“Yeah, that’s him all right,” Red answered.

Krispin was kicking the flat tire of a shiny Jaguar convertible. The red car had a massive white scrape down one side.

Snow whistled. “That’s an amazing car. I wonder what happened?”

Red slowed and pulled over. She leaned out of the driver’s window and flashed Krispin a smile. “Can we give you a hand?”

Krispin was trying to put the jack under the bumper.

“That’s not how you use a jack,” Snow blurted. Hopefully she hadn’t offended him.

Krispin turned, frowning, but quickly smiled when he recognized them. “I must’ve run over something back there.”

“Yes.” Snow got out and assessed the damaged tire. “That tire’s shredded.” She’d never seen one quite so thoroughly destroyed. There were ribbons coming off it, like it’d battled metal teeth. “You got a spare somewhere?”

“Ah,” he said, “...in the um, trunk.” He glanced at the wonky car-jack. “I’ve never had a problem with this car before.”

Red leaned against the Honda, scrolling through her phone, letting Snow take over.

“Let me help you,” Snow said.

Shoulder to shoulder, Krispin and Snow rummaged under the panel in the trunk to get at the spare tire. His muscled arm brushed hers. “First things first, let’s get this tire out.” Snow unbolted the long screws holding the tire in place and pulled.

As she pulled at the tire, an old-fashioned wooden jewelry box tumbled from the compartment and hit the road. Its carved lid shattered and two necklaces flew out. Snow bent and scooped up the pretty bling.

A blue teardrop glittered at the end of a silver chain. The other necklace was gold and held a cluster of clear stones in a floral arrangement. The lights of the passing cars made the floral stones glimmer like diamonds.

Snow turned the necklaces over, admiring the solid old-fashioned handiwork. “Let me guess, you were running errands for your mom again.” His mom sure had a lot of nice jewelry.

He flashed her a smile. “Yes, exactly.” He took the necklaces from Snow and tucked them in his pocket, then retrieved the jewelry box from the road and stowed it back in the trunk.

Snow went around to the jack. She crouched, wishing she’d worn something more practical than stilettos. Krispin’s gaze skimmed her legs as her dress rode up. He hurriedly looked away, bending to help her unscrew the wheel. In no time at all, they’d changed the tire. They stowed the shredded tire back in the compartment and dusted off their hands

“Thank you so much for your help, Snow,” Krispin said. “What would I have done without you?”

Snow shrugged. “Don’t mention it.”

“No, I must. I don’t know how long I would’ve been stuck here. I’ve never had to change this car’s tire before. I borrowed it from Mom.”

That explained why he had such an extravagant car.

“As a gesture of my appreciation, I’d like to give you this.” He pulled the blue teardrop necklace from his pocket and fastened it around her neck. His fingers brushed her collar bones, making her skin tingle.

Snow touched the blue stone. “No, r-really, I don’t n-need this,” she stammered. “It’s your mother’s.”

“Mom won’t mind. She has so many.” His smile was radiant.

“Thank you, it’s beautiful.” Krispin was so generous. And whenever he was near, she wanted to fall into his arms. She needed to pull herself together and say something. Anything. “So where is the place that’s so good at restoring jewelry?”

“It’s the other side of town,” Krispin said, his smile fading. “I was on my way earlier, but I guess time slipped away on me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Red chimed in. “What a day you’ve had. Snow, we really have to get home, now.”

“Yes.” Krispin chuckled. “It’s been quite a day. And a night. What did you say you’d been up to?”

“We went to the latest Bond movie,” Snow volunteered in a rush. “I think James Bond would be jealous of this car. It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it is,” Krispin said. “However, not nearly as beautiful as you.”

That was cheesy. But with his sun bleached hair and caramel skin, Krispin could get away with a little cheese. Warmth crept up Snow’s cheeks. “Uh, thanks.”

“Would you like to come for a drive? We could go do something. Maybe pop by the Shifting Sands?” He waved his hand at them both, his

gorgeous brown eyes fixed on Snow.

She hesitated. If she liked Krispin she should go for it, not act like a wallflower. Zeph was amazing, but she was really only going out with him to keep Red company. Besides, as Red had said at the party, it wasn't like she and Krispin were about to get married or anything—they were just having a little fun. Then again, Mom would soon be home. “Maybe another time?” she managed.

“Sure,” Krispin said. “I'll message you.”

“We need to go,” Red called, getting back in their Honda.

“Bye, Krispin.” Snow waved and climbed into the passenger seat.

The car surged forward and Red plunged into a gap in the traffic.

“What are we going to tell Mom? She'll be home by now and she's going to be furious.”

“We'll say we were helping a friend change a tire.” Snow yawned.

“And that we went to the movies. By ourselves.”

“With the money we don't have.”

“Mere details.” Snow waved a languid hand. Two boys liked her—her, and not Red.

## Jagged

Dante gritted his teeth, scanning the car park. There were no red Jags.

“Where did you park it?”

“You were with me,” Zeph said. “It was right here. This is floor D. It has to be here, unless...” Zeph groaned. “Don’t tell me it’s been stolen. Now we can’t sell it for Mom and Dad’s ransom.” He strode along the row. “Here, D19. That was our spot.”

Black tire marks led from the empty parking bay along the aisle. Did the car thief even know how to drive? He’d burned off more rubber than a stunts on a burnout. He must know something, though. The Jag had state-of-the-art anti-theft systems.

Dante scratched his neck. “I don’t understand. How could the thief have driven the car away? If you try to hotwire it, the motor disables itself.”

“Ah...” Zeph shifted uncomfortably.

“What?’ Dante growled.

“I, um, left a spare key in the glove box.”

Although he wanted to throttle Zeph, Dante didn’t say a thing. His twin looked guilty enough. But how dumb could you be? A few weeks ago, Zeph had hidden Pinevale’s guardian stones in the spare tire of the Jeep. When the mage had attacked them, the tire had been shredded and the mage had plucked the stones off the road like they were discarded baby’s toys.

Now Zeph had put the spare key in the glove box? Not under the mat, in the trunk or tucked above a visor. No, the glove box, for flame’s sake.

His eyes followed the tire marks. There was a stripe of candy-apple-red paint on the concrete column by the down ramp. Anger burned through Dante’s gut. He tried to swallow it. The car and the shop were the only

things they had left of Mom and Dad's. Everything else had been torched when the mage had kidnapped their parents and razed their family estate. "I swear, whoever it is, will regret it." His earth magic surged and the concrete floor juddered under his feet. Gods, he had to get a grip.

"The car will have a new number plate and be in the next state by morning," Zeph replied. "There's no way we can catch our Jaguar XJ on foot. We should call the police. Or at least, the insurance company."

"Wait." Dante stopped and sniffed. There was a faint whiff of sulfur. "Do you smell that?"

"It stinks of mage. Do you think it was one of the young mages from the Shifting Sands who attacked Snow and Red?"

"Don't know." Dante wasn't thinking about the young mages in the club. He was thinking of the ancient mage, the one that had hunted them and kidnapped their parents. "Whoever it is, I'm going to find them. I'm tired of mages. I'm tired of their tricks. And I'm tired of selling the dragon shifters' hoard for our parents' ransom. By the draki gods, I wish we could fly again."

"We're still draki," Zeph said. "Even though we can't fly, we can still track." They started walking, flaring their nostrils to pick up the mage's scent. "I smell Snow. Fresh as wild mint," Zeph said. "It's like I can't get her out of my head."

"Me too," said Dante. "Except with Red it's a smoky campfire on a warm night. What do you think those girls will do?"

"Tonight? Probably go to bed."

"No, I mean they must know we have powers. You weren't very subtle with your wind."

"And what about you, shaking the cinema seats?" Zeph shot back.

“I—” Dante shrugged. “You’re probably right. It’s about time we found out more about them.”

“And if they’re mages, why don’t they smell like mages?” Zeph asked.

Dante shrugged. “They’re girls? Maybe they’re better at glamoring the rotten-egg stench.” The thought made his stomach queasy.

### §

Dante rifled through the letters as he trudged upstairs to the antique store, Zeph trailing him.

“That was a cool date,” his twin said. “Good movie.”

“Yeah,” Dante said. “Except for the part where we lost the car.”

Zeph cringed. “Yeah. Sorry, pretty dumb of me to leave the keys in the glove box.”

Dante sighed. “Not much we can do now, but there were a couple of nice necklaces in the boot. I was hoping those deals and selling the car would provide a good portion of Mom and Dad’s ransom.”

They paused on the landing while Zeph fished the store keys out of his pocket. Dante turned over an unaddressed letter. His eyes slid across the envelope, and he inhaled, flaring his nostrils. The tang of sulfur wafted at him. He opened the envelope. “Zeph, it’s from the ancient mage.”

Five words stared up at him from a piece of aged, yellowing parchment.

*Make it half a million.*

Dante’s pulse raced, hammering at his throat. “We’re doing everything we can, hawking off the dragon shifters’ hoard, selling everything we own, and it’s still not enough?” He slammed his fist against the wall. The concrete shook.

A chill wind rippled over the landing and the paper fluttered in his hands. “Look,” said Zeph. “There’s something else inside the envelope.”

Dante pulled out a lock of their mother’s hair, and then their father’s.

“Doesn’t prove they’re still alive,” Zeph said. “We have no idea where that mage is—if he’s even in our world, or if he’s gone through a portal to the past or the future.”

A surge of wild energy ripped through Dante’s belly. He wanted to smack the walls, but he knew he’d probably shatter the concrete. Instead, he gritted his teeth and snarled, “Let’s smoke out that dung-infested excuse for a slimeball. We’ll get him his money, but he’ll regret it. Because I’m hunting him down—if it’s the last thing I do.”

## Bella Magika

Snow's bedroom door opened. Red quietly closed it and tiptoed over to sit on the edge of Snow's bed. "Oh, wow, weren't those guys delicious? And twins. How did we manage that?"

Snow grinned. "Yeah it was a lot of fun," she said. "But they're complicated. I'm worried about you going out with Dante alone."

Red stretched and tossed her mane over her shoulder. She gave a luxurious sigh. "Dante is so dreamy. And admit it, you're into Zeph."

"Yeah, they're gorgeous. Zeph is really attractive. He makes me want to drool." Snow's cheeks heated. She played with the end of her hair. "But he's into something shady."

"I know," Red whispered. "You never thought you'd fall for a bad boy, right?" She gave a low throaty chuckle. "Bad boys or not, they're both pretty hot."

Snow giggled.

"Quiet," whispered Red. "Mom will hear us."

"I never pictured a potential boyfriend half-covered in tattoos and doing weird deals at a rave," Snow murmured.

"We don't know if they were doing deals. They could've been doing anything."

Snow arched an eyebrow. "Movies are way more fun with them."

"I had no idea there were people out there like us." Red's eyes gleamed. "People who have powers. I thought we were the only ones in the world."

"So now you like them because they're freaks like us?"

"Nah, not freaks. Just like us," Red replied. "Imagine being able to be ourselves and really show who we are. We'll never have that chance with

other boys.”

Snow nibbled her lip. “True.” She glanced up at Red. “So why do you like Dante?”

“Who’s to say I like Dante?”

Snow chortled. “Seriously? I’m surprised he didn’t catch on fire with the looks you were giving him at the movies.”

Red laughed. “And then I set the popcorn on fire. Thank goodness you were there.”

Next door, Mom murmured in her sleep.

They both froze. Waited.

Snow’s phone buzzed. Red passed Snow her purse. “I bet it’s Zeph,” she whispered. “He can’t get enough of you.”

Snow gingerly took her purse, as if it would bite her, and pulled out her phone. She glanced at it.

Red’s eyes locked with hers. “What did Zeph say?”

“It’s Krispin.”

“Two guys huh?” Red sniggered. “I never thought you were that sort of girl.”

Snow slugged her. “I’m not.”

Red slugged her back. “So what are you going to do? Are you going to brush Krispin off?”

“Brush Krispin off? Are you crazy?” Snow felt like she was on the edge of a precipice. No, she’d never brush Krispin off.

“Wouldn’t you rather go out with Zeph?”

“It was only one date to keep you company.”

“And because he’s so hot,” Red interjected.

“Yeah, but Krispin’s hot and he’s not doing shady back-room deals—and he wants to take me out to dinner tomorrow.”

“What are you going to say?”

Snow stroked her finger across the image of Krispin’s face, then typed in: *Yes, I’d love to. C U outside Pinevale Mall at 7.*

§

Snow smoothed her top and adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder. She twiddled a strand of hair between her fingers, and glanced up and down the road. Sure, she was early, but she’d thought maybe Krispin would be too. There was no sign of the red Jag, just a steady flow of traffic heading through town. The bright lights of the mall cast a harsh light over clusters of teenagers gathered outside making plans for the evening.

Brock, a boy from her chemistry class, called, “Hey, Snow, want to catch the newest Bond movie with us?”

Grinning, Jena waved her over. “Come on, Snow, it’ll be fun.”

“I’ve already seen it. Enjoy.” Snow glanced up and down the street again. A motorbike rumbled past and parked, drowning out her friend’s voices. A tall guy got off the bike and strode toward her. He pulled off his helmet, revealing chocolate-brown eyes and sun-streaked hair—Krispin.

Snow smiled, her stomach swooping.

He grinned. In a dark leather jacket, black T-shirt and jeans, Krispin looked as if he’d stepped off the front of *Boyfriend* magazine. “Hey, ready for our night out?”

“Sure.” Snow waved to her friends.

The girls nudged each other, their eyes roving over Krispin’s broad shoulders and down his jeans. Brock glowered.

Snow flashed her friends a smile and followed Krispin to his bike. Seriously, a motorbike? What if she’d worn a miniskirt?

He grinned at her, showing that perfect dimple of his. “Hey, I hope you don’t mind the bike. My car’s at the mechanic’s. It had engine trouble.

It should be fine for our next date though.” He was so gorgeous, his eyes glowing with warmth as he fixed her with his magnetic gaze. “You look pretty. I don’t know how you do it. Every time I see you, you look better. I think you’re growing on me.”

Snow gaped, heat blazing her cheeks. How did he make her jelly-kneed with a sentence or two?

He passed her a spare helmet, jumped on the motorbike, kick-started it and revved the throttle. “Hop on. Let’s go for a spin before dinner.”

Snow pulled the helmet on and clambered on the back of the bike.

He grinned at her over his shoulder. “Wrap your arms around me, and hold on nice and tight.”

She put her arms around his waist breathing in leather and spice. As he opened the throttle and moved into the traffic, Snow leaned into Krispin to cut out the wind, his body warming her as he wove past cars and powered through an intersection.

This was crazy. She could never have imagined herself clambering on the back of Krispin’s bike a week ago, but after a double date with the Draki twins, she could do anything. If only Red could see her now.

The engine purred, thrumming beneath them as they sped through town and onto the highway. They zipped past cars, the engine roaring. Finally, Krispin took an off-ramp. The bike rumbled up through pine-clad hills.

“Where are we going?” she called, her chin nestled near his ear.

“I hope you like Italian,” Krispin called back, laying the bike into a wicked curve.

Snow clung on, squeezing her eyes shut, her stomach dropping. When she opened them, the trees flicked past, a blazing sunset above the

hillside painting the sky dusky pink and fiery orange. Her breath caught in her throat. This was so romantic. Better than a movie, any day.

Snow's stomach clenched. She'd assumed they'd be eating in town, but now they were heading into the middle of nowhere among heavily-forested hillsides. He could be taking her anywhere. Could do anything. No one would know. She could be the next victim in a real-life thriller. She gnawed her lip. This was crazy! What had she been thinking?! Krispin could be one of those people snatchers Mom was always talking about.

No, that was silly. Red was right—she was so uptight. Here she was on a date with the boy of her dreams and panicking. She had to relax.

Zeph's easy smile and sea-green eyes shot to mind.

No, Krispin was the boy she wanted. He was a good guy, keeping to the rules. Not shady, like Zeph.

Icy jitters shot through Snow's belly. She loosened her grip so Krispin wouldn't feel the cold through his jacket. He veered up an old driveway lined with trees. Wheels crunching through gravel, the bike's rumble ricocheted off tall pines.

She had to give herself space to think. "Um, I need the bathroom," Snow said.

They came to an enormous stone wall with wrought iron gates. "Sure, we're almost there," Krispin called over the roar of the motor.

"A restaurant, here in the middle of nowhere?"

Krispin rubbed his hand. Hazy yellow light sprang from two lanterns mounted on posts and bathed the gates as they slid open. He must have a remote on his watch, and maybe the gates had sensors to turn on the lights. That must be it.

A tingle ran through Snow's body as they rode through the shimmering golden light, anticipation thrilling through her. They drove past

a copse of beech trees and came to a halt by a sweeping lawn and manicured gardens in front of an old stone mansion framed by two turrets.

This was classy, for sure—she hadn't expected anything so grand.

Candles twinkled in the windows, and a majestic marble staircase led to a massive wooden door. A sign carved on honeyed wood hung over the entrance: Bella Magika. What an exciting date. It beat eating in town.

Krispin parked the bike next to the marble stairs. The car park was empty, so they must be the only guests. This place must be a well-kept secret. He slung his helmet over one handlebar, and took Snow's, hanging it on the other one.

Then Krispin helped her off the bike. He bowed. "Welcome to Bella Magika."

He was using the cultured accent he'd put on at the rave, playing the medieval prince again. Snow giggled. It was cute.

He ushered her up the stairs and opened the door. They walked into a white-marbled grand foyer with candles burning in ornate sconces on the walls. Underneath, a suit of armor stood at attention. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, complete with yellow candles emitting the faint odor of beeswax. Snow gaped at a grand staircase of gray-streaked white marble leading to a landing of plush carpet the same shade of brown as Krispin's eyes.

"I've booked a private function room for us, tonight," Krispin said.

Snow's heart pounded as cool rivulets of icy pleasure charged through her. A private function room, for her? She'd never been on a date like this.

"First, please be my guest. The bathroom is here." He gestured to a discreet doorway between two floor-to-ceiling oil paintings of mages and dragons flaming beautiful people with pointed ears. Of course, with a name

like Bella Magika, the restaurant would be appropriately decorated in a fantasy theme.

She'd been so awestruck, she'd almost forgotten she'd lied to him about needing the bathroom. "Thank you." Snow opened the door, strolled along a corridor and entered the ladies' room.

Mirrors hung on the walls in wooden frames carved with leaves, owls, dragons and woodland creatures that peeked from the thick foliage. She ran a finger over the honey-blond wood, marveling at the art. Oh, this was silly. She couldn't keep Krispin waiting, not when he'd brought her somewhere so special. Her heart fluttered and she took several deep breaths to calm herself. How silly she'd been to panic earlier and think he was taking her somewhere dire. She felt like a fool. An overexcited fool. Her powers were going crazy, icy blasts zapping through her with an intensity that was hard to control.

She tried to turn on a faucet, but it was an old-fashioned one with a pump action. She pushed a few times to get the water flowing, then ran her hands under cool water, trying to calm herself. The water solidified into icy shards. She shook her hands off, ice tinkling into the porcelain basin. She'd have to avoid touching his hands until hers warmed up, or he'd notice she was a freak. Snow rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them, then hurriedly pulled out her frosty-pink lipstick and re-applied some.

"Come on, Snow, relax and have a good time," she whispered, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She ran her fingers through her white-blond hair and left to join Krispin.

## §

When Snow came out into the foyer, Krispin was hovering near the doorway. "Allow me." Smiling, he offered her an elbow.

She crooked her wrist through his arm, trying to avoid touching him with her icy hands.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve ordered for us already.” Krispin led her to another door, and escorted her through a long living room, past fancy mint couches with curved wooden legs and rolled arms. Oil paintings of castles nestled among hills and flower-speckled meadows adorned one wall, and on the other, leadlight windows edged in gold brocade drapes looked out over the lawn and pretty beech trees. Everything about this place screamed ostentatious. Not like their crummy little apartment with Mom. It took her breath away. What would it be like to live like this?

Krispin must be loaded to hire a private room here.

“Surprise.” Flashing her a smile, he opened a small door and gestured to a tiny spiral staircase leading up a round tower. “Tonight, we’re dining in the west turret. I hope you enjoy the view.” He bowed, then flourished his hand elegantly, gesturing her to ascend the wooden stairs. “After you, milady.”

“Thank you.” It was so cute that he was keeping up his old-fashioned manners and accent to go with the old-fashioned house.

Snow made her way up the creaky stairs. They walked up past several landings until they reached a tiny room at the top of the turret. A small chandelier studded with candles burned over a small table set for two. Against the wall was an elegant sideboard with several candles burning under old-fashioned silver serving dishes on stands. The aroma of tomato, basil and oregano wafted toward her.

As he helped her out of her jacket and hung it up, Snow’s stomach grumbled. Krispin grinned and pulled out a chair. She sat, and he tucked her chair in neatly, as if he’d had years of practice. Her cheeks warmed. She had to stop blushing like a six-year-old. It was mortifying.

Her seat faced creamy silk drapes that edged a window with a lovely view of the lanterns twinkling through the foliage.

He bowed and took her hand. “Thank you for allowing me to bring you here.”

Snow giggled. He was laying on the old-fashioned charm all right. It was working—heady, intoxicating stuff.

He brushed the back of her hand with his lips.

A shot of cold energy zinged through Snow. She gasped. She’d heard of electric attraction before, but this was over the top. How was Krispin doing this to her? She took a couple of deep breaths to regain control of her power. If she wasn’t careful she’d turn the whole room into an ice cave.

Krispin sat opposite her—his divine brown eyes melting her—and leaned over the table, taking her hand in his. “Pray, tell me, did you enjoy the motorcycle ride?” He gave her a lopsided grin.

Before Snow could answer, there was a tap on the door and a woman in an old-fashioned lace-up bodice, ruffled sleeves and full skirts swept into the room. Her light-brown hair was streaked with gold and hung in ringlets. She was carrying an engraved silver tray with an ornate lid.

“Don’t mind me, sir, milady.” She bobbed her head and moved across the room, her dress rustling. The faint scent of starch tickled Snow’s sensitive nostrils as the lady laid the tray on the sideboard. “Your dessert, Master Krispin. Especially prepared the way you requested. I trust you’ll enjoy your meal. Would you like me to serve it?”

“I’ll serve the lady myself,” Krispin replied. “Why don’t you take the rest of the evening off?”

“Thank you, sir. Very kind of you.” She threw Krispin a grateful smile and bustled out.

“Oh, Krispin, this is so wonderful of you,” Snow babbled. “Bringing me to such a lovely place and having the waitress dress in costume and act the part.”

An odd expression flashed over his face. He quickly smiled. “It’s no trouble at all. And now, my Ice Queen, let me serve you the mouth-watering delicacies they’ve prepared.”

Snow started. Ice Queen? Oh! He must be referring to her Elsa costume.

He stood and strode to the sideboard, leaving Snow staring at the elegantly-folded linen napkins and the array of fake gold-plated cutlery arranged on either side of her plate. She lifted a fork. It was heavy—probably real silver and gold. She gulped. A room like this must cost thousands of dollars. With such an outlay, what was he expecting from her? Her friend Jena had gotten into a tricky situation when a slimy guy had expected favors in return for a fancy dinner.

Krispin brought over a bowl of tomato soup. She gave him what she hoped was a cheery smile. Come on, this was Krispin, not some sleaze-ball from school. She was determined to relax and enjoy the evening.

“Your soup, milady.” He placed her bowl in front of her, his arm brushing her shoulder. Another tingle ran through her. Crazy chemistry.

A plume of sour cream sat in her rich red soup, topped with a fresh sprig of basil. Snow inhaled the divine scent of tomato and basil, her mouth watering. “This looks like a masterpiece. I can’t possibly eat it.”

He gave a relaxed laugh and sat down with his own bowl. He picked up a fork and swirled the sour cream through her soup. “Watch this.” The cream rippled before her eyes, forming a pretty turreted castle on the surface of her soup. Krispin dragged his fork in front of the castle and a

majestic staircase formed. “There you go.” He grinned. “Just like Bella Magika.”

Snow boggled. It was amazing. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“I worked as a kitchen servant at a restaurant in town while I was studying,” he answered.

“A kitchen hand, you mean, or a barista.” She smiled. He was carrying the old-fashioned act a little too far. “Where did you study?”

“Oh, here and there. We moved around a lot.”

Snow waited until he picked up his spoon, so she knew which spoon to use. She took a sip and held in a groan. It was the best thing she’d ever tasted. “I can’t believe you went to all this trouble for me,” she said, and took another spoonful.

“Do tell me more about you, Snow, and your friend... Red, isn’t it?”

It was a bit of an abrupt change in conversation, but then again, he didn’t really know much about her. “Sure,” said Snow. “We’re not actually friends.”

Krispin arched an eyebrow and took another sip. “You could have fooled me. You look pretty close.”

Snow laughed. “Yes, we are. We’re sisters.”

“Aha. Then I’m lucky to be dating the prettiest one,” he said smoothly.

Snow battled the heat rushing into her cheeks with a wave of coolness. She had to keep her head. “So, how did you find out about this restaurant? I had no idea it existed.”

Krispin winked. “It’s a family secret. My parents came here on their honeymoon in the late seventeen hundreds when it had just been built.”

Snow frowned. “Your parents?”

He looked a little flustered. “I meant my many times great grandparents.”

“That’s amazing.”

“I’ve never brought anyone else here, but from the moment I met you, I knew you were special.”

Those chocolaty eyes were deep enough to drown in. She was going to melt on the spot. This date was so romantic—like being in a movie, a fantasy world, or a Victorian romance novel. Dining in a turret room? She bet Zeph Draki would never think of that.

Krispin leaned over the table. “So tell me about your parents, how you grew up.”

As he served a course of pasta and creamy herb sauce, Snow chatted about her childhood. There wasn’t really a lot to tell. She glossed over the painful aspects: Dad dying; the lonely hole she’d felt inside, always missing him; Mom’s late night shifts. Instead, she told tales of the antics she and Red had gotten up to as kids, and how, in their teens, they’d started sneaking out on adventures.

“Tell me more about your sister. She sounds like fun.” His keen eyes missed nothing as she nibbled on her pasta and salad.

Snow told the carefully-rehearsed stories she’d told friends over the years, leaving out the disasters when she or Red had misused their powers.

Krispin cleared their plates and carried over the engraved silver dessert tray and two small dishes. “At last, the crowning masterpiece of the evening, a speciality of the house. You’re going to love it.” He whipped the lid off the tray, revealing two mini heart-shaped chocolate cakes smothered in cream, chocolate flakes and fresh raspberries. They were garnished with shiny angelica leaves.

Oh! Snow’s mouth watered anew.

Krispin watched her as intently as if he'd made the dish himself and she was the judge on a cooking show.

"They look amazing," she said, her voice breathy.

He lifted her cake onto her dish using a silver slice with a handle engraved with fiery dragons, and passed her a gold-edged cake fork.

As she cut a slice off with the edge of her fork, gooey chocolaty sauce rushed out. The first morsel was a taste explosion, the rich chocolate and sharp raspberry ricocheting across her tongue. Snow stabbed the cake again, swiping the next piece through the sauce, and groaned as she took another bite, not caring what Krispin thought. "Ooh, this is wonderful."

His eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "I'm so glad you're enjoying it."

"It's exquisite." She shoveled more cake into her mouth, talking around her food. "This reminds me of Mom's baking, back when she used to bake before Snow and I got old enough to do it ourselves. You know, she used to bake a mean chocolate cake, but Red says she's changed a lot since Dad died. Nowadays, she hardly does anything except work. Red and I think she's hiding secrets, so the other day, we broke into Mom's drawer and found the strangest thing..."

Krispin nodded, staring into her eyes with charming intensity.

The rich food and his rapt attention made her feel euphoric. Almost giddy. She wanted to tell him everything. Have him understand who she truly was. But there were some things that shouldn't be said. It was something Mom had drilled into her for as long as she could remember.

She finished her cake, let out a satisfied sigh, and then eyed Krispin's desert. He hadn't touched it. "Are you going to eat that?"

"I've had an elegant sufficiency," he said.

"You what?" Snow giggled. "Oh, your accent and mannerisms are adorable."

He pushed his dish toward her, his old-fashioned silver ring flashing in the candlelight. “It’s great that you’re enjoying it. Have mine, too.”

“You’re so generous, and it was so kind of you to bring me here. You’re such a gentleman. Did you know my friend Zeph has a ring like that, one similar to your mother’s?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Oh? Who’s Zeph?”

“You know, one of the guys who threw the rave the other night. The cosplay thing.”

“Rave? Cosplay? What’s that?”

“The party. I danced with you there.” She felt as if she was floating on air.

“Oh yes, that was a lovely function.”

She giggled again. “Your fake accent is so endearing.” As the memory of dancing with Zephyr Draki popped to mind, icy shivers shot through her. The section of tablecloth beneath her fingertips iced over. Oops. She glanced up at Krispin, but he was so busy gazing at her eyes that he hadn’t noticed.

Snow surreptitiously brushed the ice off the table.

“That necklace looks so pretty on you,” Krispin murmured, leaning over to touch the fake sapphires. His fingers accidentally caressed the skin on Snow’s throat.

Liquid lightning pooled in her belly. He was so near, his breath tickled her neck. She wanted to arch into his touch, craving more. What was wrong with her? She was usually reserved with boys, but tonight she didn’t care. This was Krispin, her dream date. Her agonizingly-forever crush. Well, all of the two months since he’d started working as the I.T. consultant at school.

His chocolate eyes met hers. “You’re beautiful,” he breathed. The pulse at his neck jumped.

She angled her head, waiting for his lips to descend upon hers.

The candlelight surrounded his face in a hazy yellow glow as if he was an angel with a halo. Light rippled across his face. Were those wrinkles around his eyes?

Snow blinked.

“Truly beautiful.” Krispin smiled, his gorgeous tan skin, once more, smooth and unblemished.

The lines must’ve been a trick of the light, caused by flickering candles. All this rich food was going to her head. Snow let out a shaky breath as a cool wave raced through her veins. She pulled back, afraid he’d sense a drop in her temperature.

“You were telling me about something strange that you found in your mom’s drawer.”

“Was I?” Snow laughed. “Oh yeah, we found a weird piece of shell locked in a secret diary. You know those journals that look like a book, but have a lock and are hollow inside? Mom was hiding a pretty shell that looks like mother-of-pearl and a photo of her and Dad at a costume party.”

Krispin arched an eyebrow. “So your parents liked dressing up? What costumes did they choose?”

Although his eyes were riveted on her face, Snow didn’t feel the least bit self-conscious. Krispin’s gaze was like basking under a sunlamp. Her ice powers danced inside her, rising to the surface. She gripped a glass to try and control them. “Dad was a dragon, you know, pearly scales and tail, with gossamer wings. Quite pretty, really. Mom was dressed in normal clothes.” Snow yawned. “I can’t ever imagine Mom dressing up. She takes

life way too seriously. She's quite anxious, always warning us to be careful."

"She must love you very much."

Snow wrinkled her nose. It hit her that Mom wouldn't want her talking so freely. She gripped her glass tighter. In an instant, the whole thing froze and shattered, spraying glass and ice across the table.

She grimaced. Stared at Krispin. She'd blown it. Tonight, she was totally out of control.

And she'd thought Red was bad.

Krispin glanced across the mess, but, like a gentleman, didn't say a word. He stood. "It's getting late. I'd better get you home." He brushed glass fragments and icy shards off his jeans. "I'd love to take you out another time though."

He would? Even though she'd just sprayed the table with debris? "That would be nice," Snow said meekly.

As he retrieved her jacket from a hook behind the door, Snow's phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her purse and gasped at the time. If she didn't get home soon, Mom would get home before she did, and then there'd be fireworks. Or more ice works.

Zeph was messaging her: *What are you doing on Thursday during lunch period?*

Snow texted him back: *Duh! Eating lunch.*

Oh no, so rude. What had she been thinking? She really was firing from the hip tonight.

*My shout. I'll meet you on the lawn behind the baseball field.* He sent cute, excited puppy emojis.

Snow's finger hovered over her screen. Here she was, out with Krispin...

It wasn't as if she was exclusive with either of them. She was just getting to know them. Zeph hadn't kissed her yet. Neither had Krispin, although, moments ago...

Her fingers flew over the screen. *Sure, c u then.* She pushed send and jammed her phone back into her purse.

Krispin held her jacket out. His eyes grazed the melting ice scattered across the table.

Snow gnawed her lip.

"Ready for the chilly ride home?" he asked.

"Sure." Chilly never bothered Snow. She was in her element—literally. She had to say something to rescue herself from the hole she'd dug them into. "Hey, this is such a pretty place. Let's get a selfie."

"No thanks." He flashed her a smile. "I'm actually quite shy."

"No, you're all over social media. I'd know, I've been stalking you for ages." Oops! Snow slammed her hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

Krispin chuckled. "I'm lucky I got to take you out tonight, so I guess a photograph won't hurt. We'll take one outside." His warm fingers closed around hers and he led her down the spiral staircase.

The wood squeaking beneath her feet made Snow giggle. "Sounds like mice," she blurted.

He gave her an odd look.

What was wrong with her? Her mouth was firing off like a loose cannon.

They wandered back through the beautiful lounge. "Oh this room is stunning." There were lovely brass lamps she hadn't noticed on the way in, a tapestry of two dueling mages, and pretty carved bookshelves full of ancient leather-bound books. Everything here looked so authentic. Maybe

Krispin wasn't joking about the mansion being around since the eighteen hundreds.

Krispin bowed and held the door open. She walked into the foyer. "I've never been anywhere this luxurious. Thank you for a wonderful night out."

"You're welcome." He gazed at her, his stunning eyes lingering on her lips as if he wanted to devour them.

Snow's heart raced. Now, he'd kiss her. Right under this giant chandelier of beautiful flickering candles.

Krispin edged closer. Lowered his head.

The waitress bustled down the grand marble staircase. "I hope you had a pleasant evening."

They jerked apart.

"It was lovely, thank you." Snow bit her lip.

Krispin bowed. "Absolutely delightful. Thank you for your hospitality." He whisked Snow outside to his motorbike.

"Speed well." The lady called from the doorway, the light catching the gold streaks in her hair.

Funny. The shade of her hair was similar to Krispin's. And he must've asked her to use that old-fashioned accent, especially for tonight. Unless it was a regular thing at Bella Magika.

"Now, our selfie," she reminded him, determined to get a shot of this beautiful place to show Red. Snow pulled out her phone. Krispin wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. She hit the rapid fire button to make the most of the photo opportunity. The flash went nuts. Krispin stiffened beside her. He wasn't kidding. He really was shy. She shoved her phone back in her purse.

Krispin grinned and passed her a helmet. "I'll take you for a joyride on the way home." He flung a leg over the bike and kick-started it.

Snow flicked her blonde hair over her shoulders, shoved her helmet on and grinned back. "Just being with you is a joyride," she flirted, clambering up behind him. This time, she hugged his waist and nestled against his back. Somehow, tonight, she'd lost her inhibitions. Whatever it was, it felt good not to be so tied up in knots.

When they reached the closed gates, Krispin rubbed his ring. The wrought iron gates slid open and they were enveloped in a shimmering yellow haze. A familiar tingle swept through Snow as they rode through. Krispin really must like his theatrics, he'd gone all out. The remote hadn't been on his watch at all. He'd put it into his Mom's old-fashioned ring. Pretty cool tech.

The bike rumbled beneath them as they sped down the winding driveway between the trees. Snow glanced back for one last look at Bella Magika, but the mansion had been swallowed by the night.

## Brown Sugar Cafe

Dante tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and glanced over at Zeph, waiting for the lights to change. “Are you texting Snow?”

Zeph grinned, pushed send and slipped his phone in his pocket. “What if I am?”

Dante rolled his eyes. The light turned green, and he powered the Jeep through the intersection. “You know we shouldn’t see them again, but if you’re insisting on going against common sense, the least you could do is pump Snow for information.”

Zeph’s eyebrows shot up and he gaped. “What?”

Dante sighed, feeling like a complete hypocrite. “You heard me. If you’re going to see her, we might as well find out more. Like where mages hang out. Or how to find that mage that took our parents.”

“Yeah, right. I just ask, ‘Hey where do all your mage friends hang out, and do you happen to know if they have two adult hostages at the moment?’ Like that’s gonna work.” Zeph shook his head. “Besides, no one said I was seeing Snow again. Why don’t you see Red and ask yourself?”

Dante’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel. He took a slow deep breath through his nostrils. Surely his brother didn’t suspect anything.

“Just along here.” Zeph gestured at a tiny row of boutique stores—a baker, florist, delicatessen and a bookstore.

What Zeph wanted there, Dante didn’t know. But it was perfect—he’d been wondering how to get his twin out of the car before he got to Pinevale High. “What are you doing here?”

Zeph’s eyes slid away from him as he opened the Jeep door to get out. “Um, buying a book.”

“Can you be back at the shop in an hour or two?” Their ‘Gone to lunch. Back soon.’ sign wouldn’t do much for the antique business. “We need every scrap of money we can get so we can pay that ransom.”

Zeph nodded and shut the passenger door.

Dante pulled away from the curb, and merged with the traffic, glancing in the rear view mirror. Sure enough, Zeph wasn’t going into the bookstore at all, but into the delicatessen. Dante had a sneaking suspicion that he knew what Zeph was up to. He drove the two blocks to Pinevale High.

Red was leaning against a tree, using her phone, her vivid hair tumbling over her shoulders. Even in jeans and a T-shirt, she was stunning, His breath caught in his throat, and a tremor ran through him.

He jammed his powers down deep. Now was not the time for them to manifest. Not when he was meeting a powerful mage. He’d been a fool to let his control slip at the movies, yet here he was, back again for more.

Dante shook his head. No, he was after information. They had to find their parents. These girls could be the key to vital clues. The moment he turned off the motor, his phone buzzed. He glanced down to a text from Red.

*I’m here, waiting. Ready when you are.*

He hopped out of the Jeep and strode over, digging his hands into his pockets. He stopped on the sidewalk, a couple of a yards from her. Technically, he wasn’t on school grounds, so he wasn’t breaking any rules. Red was scrolling through her phone, oblivious to her surroundings.

Dante pulled out his phone and typed: *Look up.*

She raised her head. And when her clear emerald eyes met his, an electric jolt ran through him, searing him to his core like a bolt of lightning.

“Hey.” Red’s smile shot straight through him.

Oh, she was bad news. A mage this powerful could completely undo him. He steeled himself. This was not a date, this was an intelligence-gathering mission with a dangerously-attractive enemy.

They crossed the road to the Jeep. He held the passenger door open for her, and she climbed in. Huffing out his breath, Dante strolled around the car and hopped behind the wheel. Red adjusted her hair on her shoulders. An elusive whiff of smoky campfire wafted across the vehicle and he had the overpowering urge to kiss her. Man, that was some mage trick, but he wasn't the sort to fall wildly in love. He wasn't going to be as easily fooled as Zeph. Blazes! He had to focus on finding Mom and Dad.

She tilted her head. "So, where are we going?"

"The Brown Sugar Café, just up the road. Is that okay?"

She grinned and her eyes lit up like birthday candles. "I've never been there," she said. "It sounds like fun."

That grin and the excitement on her face quickened Dante's heart rate. His urge to take this dangerous, gorgeous mage in his arms and kiss her senseless grew. He pulled into the traffic, gritting his teeth in what he hoped was a smile and cursing himself for being so stupid.

## §

Red couldn't believe her luck. She'd had such a shock when Dante had phoned her out of the blue last night and invited her out to lunch. Lots of seniors from school went to the Brown Sugar Café, but she and Snow had never had enough spare cash. Now she finally had a chance to go there with the boy of her dreams. Although Snow would be sad to miss out, Red was glad to have Dante to herself.

A muscle rippled along Dante's jaw as he turned a corner. The gold shimmer on the side of the face was so alluring, she longed to run her finger

over his cheek and see how it felt. Silly, really, it was a tattoo—but it looked so real, as if she'd be able to feel the ridges on those pretty golden scales.

A cute dimple creased his cheek as he smiled. “Did you grow up around here?”

“We used to live in Black Oak on the other side of Pinevale before...um, well, before my dad died. We moved when I was little, so I don't remember much of the house there, just our apartment, now, in town.” Red peered at him. “Do you miss school? I mean, you've been expelled, so what do you do now?”

“Me and Zeph help with the family business.” He slowed as they approached a pretty red cottage with yellow shutters and a yellow picket fence with a cheery orange *Brown Sugar Café* sign on it. Dante turned down a driveway and drove around the back into a car park.

Snow's drug-dealing theories jangled though Red's head. “What sort of business does your family have?”

He shrugged, put the car into reverse and eased into a parking space, the muscles in his arms flexing as he reached over the back of her seat to look behind him. “Uh, we sell stuff.” He turned the motor off and looked at her. His piercing eyes burned through her, igniting fire at her core. She swallowed. She had to stay on track and find out if they really were drug dealers. “Oh? What kind of stuff?”

“Antiques. The penthouse where we held the rave is our parent's antique dealership. Me and Zeph are looking after everything while they're away.” A muscle worked in his jaw again, and his eyes slid to the parking lot outside.

He was hiding something. And not very well.

Without another word, he got out of the car and strode around to her side to open the door, tension radiating off him. So he didn't like talking

about his job. Maybe Snow was right. Maybe they were dealing. And not only in antiques.

§

Zephyr Draki was there, waiting where he said he'd be, on the lawn behind the baseball field. His long legs were stretched out in front of him and he had a brown paper shopping bag beside him with a baguette sticking out the top. As Snow walked over, he leaped to his feet and came to greet her, moving with fluidity and grace.

Snow exhaled. He was nothing like Krispin, but every bit as alluring. The wind tousled his hair and the sunlight played across his face, making his silver-scaled tattoos shimmer. Even through his jeans, his legs were well-muscled. Maybe he was a runner, or did lots of sports—he certainly looked the part.

Zeph threw his hood back and gently took her hand, his warm fingers closing around hers. “Hey, I’m glad you showed.” He led her back to his spot on the grass.

They sat, and Zeph pulled a cloth out of the paper bag and spread it on the ground between them. He took out some small deli containers. “Olives, feta, tomato and spinach salad... I didn’t know if you were vegetarian, so I got a selection of veg food, just in case.”

Wow, he’d really gone the extra mile. “No, I’m not vegetarian, but that was really thoughtful of you.”

“Thank you.” He quirked an eyebrow, and pulled out a knife, a round of cheese and some steaming vegetarian pizza. Zeph grinned, reaching back into the bag. “I hope you’re hungry. I have enough for an army.”

He unpacked a mix of deli spreads and salads, including salsa and pesto. Zeph had really gone all out on this little picnic.

His green eyes shone as he spread pesto onto the baguette. “Want some?”

“Yes please. This is great.” Snow took a bite. The baguette was perfect—crunchy on the outside and soft and chewy in the middle. “This pesto is divine.” She took another bite then helped herself to Fragata olives and spinach salad.

Zeph put down his half-finished slice of pizza and gave Snow a lazy, lopsided grin. “You know, there’s a special place I’d like to show you. A wild place with a pretty little lake and a beautiful forest.” He scratched the back of his neck and a warm breeze drifted around Snow.

She savored his scent of freshly-mown lawn and the salty tang of the ocean.

“Do you like hiking?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Hiking? Yeah, sure.” The words were out of her mouth before she had a chance to think. Surely a walk would be fine—although, a week ago she never would’ve dreamed that she’d go into the middle of the wilderness with a guy who’d been expelled from school. “When?” she blurted. Oh no, there was no graceful way to back out now, but maybe there’d be safety in numbers. “We should bring Red and Dante too,” Snow hurriedly added.

“How about Saturday?” His green eyes, so like Red’s, settled on her. “You know, you have the cutest nose.”

Warmth rose into her cheeks. How did he do that—make her blush with just a word or a grin?

Zeph leaned closer. “Everything about you is cute.” He gave another one of his lazy grins.

Snow swallowed. “Sure, Saturday sounds great.” She was a goner. With Zeph, she couldn’t say no. She was a sucker for his smile.

“Good.” He grinned wider. “And don’t forget your swimsuit. Although my special little lake will be way too cold to swim in, there’s a bigger one that might be okay.”

“Really?” Maybe she could freeze the little lake, like she froze the local skating rink after every downpour—and the pond in the woods when she and Red practiced their magic. Her heart thundered at the thought of showing Zeph her powers.

He pulled out two small tubs of ice cream and a basket of cherries. “Voila! Dessert. We should eat them before they melt.” His eyes held a challenge, as if he was daring her to keep their ice cream cool.

“Oh, nice.” Snow kept the flicker of her power buried. “How did you know I love cherries?”

He beamed.

Snow wanted to bury herself in his arms, but two people were coming their way—Assiya, a girl from her chemistry class, with a junior in tow. The junior was shooting Zeph weird looks from behind Assiya’s shoulder as she marched over the grass.

“Zeph. What are you doing?” Assiya hissed. “You’re not supposed to be here. What if someone sees you?”

“Yeah,” the junior said. “You’re expelled, remember?”

“Hard to forget,” Zeph said. “Still, I thought I’d stop by.” His eyes sparkled with defiance. “As you can see, it’s worth the risk.”

“Is it?” Assiya flounced off, the boy following her.

“They won’t say anything, will they?” Snow said. “Maybe we should—”

Zeph put his arm around Snow’s shoulders. “Assiya and Feron? No. They’re not like that.”

A clique of girls giggled as they sauntered past, making eyes at Zeph. Clearly, Snow wasn't the only one blown away by his good looks and charm.

"We'll be fine for a little longer." Gently, Zeph turned Snow's face toward his. His eyes fell to her mouth.

Snow closed her eyes, waiting for his lips to brush hers.

"Zephyr Draki!" a voice yelled behind them.

Snow turned. A school resource officer was storming toward them, wiping his hands on his police uniform. "What do you think you're doing here? I should be arresting you on the spot."

Snow gasped. "What for?"

"For trespassing. You're forbidden to be on school premises."

Zeph rolled his eyes. "That's crazy."

The SRO turned to Snow. "Zephyr's lucky I'm not arresting him on sight, aren't you, Zeph? Principal Jonas and Chief Wykner will be livid if they find out."

"Yes, sir." Zeph was already tossing their picnic back into his paper bag. Small gusts of wind pulled at his hair and tugged at his hoodie. "You know, we should never have been expelled."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't set fire to the library..."

"I didn't," Zeph protested. "It wasn't like that."

The man sighed. "Come on. I hate to think what will happen if they discover I've let you trespass without arresting you, but if you're lucky, I'll tell them I missed their email. And you, Miss, you should know better than to hang out with an arsonist and an expelled student." He grabbed Zeph's shoulder and pushed him toward the gates.

Snow gulped.

Behind them, students were whispering and pointing. Someone called, “Rock on, Zeph!”

Was the whole school watching? Snow blushed, feeling the eyes of all the students on her back, unable to do anything but watch as Zeph was evicted. Still, she had to find out what this was all about. Arson? And what else? What was so terrible about Zeph and Dante?

The SRO ignored the commotion as he hustled Zeph outside the school gates. “I have my eye on you,” he growled at Zeph under his breath. “This was a favor because of the time you helped me get that basketball off the gym roof. Now we’re square, understand? If I see you here again, I’ll have no choice except to arrest you on sight. You know, you can’t go around starting fires and doing whatever you want just because your parents donated the funds for the new library wing. Your behavior will come back and bite you, sooner or later.” The SRO put his hands on his hips. “And by the way, Chief Wykner really has it in for you.”

“Yeah, I guessed,” Zeph replied glumly.

“Then clean up your life. If any of the rumors are true, you’re in a world of trouble. And I can’t protect you.”

Snow stood at the fence with her mouth hanging open. Zeph was trouble. Big trouble. He was an arsonist and probably into drugs. And so was his brother. And she’d agreed to go out on a hike with them. She had to cancel. But still, he had a heart. He helped people.

A Jeep drove up toward them. Was that Dante? Oh—and Red!

Zeph flashed her a rueful grin and a wave as he sauntered over to their Jeep.

“And don’t come back,” the SRO yelled. “Go on. Don’t let me see either you or Dante here again, or you’ll be paying a visit to your good friend Chief Wykner.”

Red leaned back on her chair and gave a contented sigh. “That was delicious, thanks.”

“They sure know how to cook, right?” Dante had forgotten how good the food was here. Seeing Red savor every morsel had helped him experience his own meal through new eyes—or new taste buds.

“I’m so stuffed. I couldn’t eat another bite,” Red said. The sun streamed through the window, highlighting a smattering of pale freckles on her nose.

“You’re kidding me. I was about to order you a house special.” He grinned.

Red groaned. “Na-ah. I’m done.”

“Not another bite?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Good, then, I have the perfect thing for you. I promise you won’t have to take a bite.” Before Red could protest, Dante signaled a waiter and whispered his order.

When their iced chocolates arrived, even Dante was surprised at the towering pile of whipped cream on them. And what were those red sprinkles?

“Oh, little hearts.” Red looked up, eyes shining. “So sweet. I bet you ordered those just to make me feel special.” She tilted her head, her hair tumbling over a shoulder. “Guess what? It’s working.”

Warmth wafted over the table. Dante wanted to bask in it like a cat on a sun porch. “You’re welcome. Enjoy it.”

The waiter wandered past and winked. Oh, so he’d been playing cupid. Not that Dante minded. It’d made Red happy.

She ignored her straw and sipped her iced chocolate straight from the glass. Sure enough, the tip of her nose got a fleck of cream on it.

“Uh, you have...” He tapped his own nose. “Um, cream...here.”

Red leaned in. “Where?” She smiled sweetly, the heat radiating from her suggesting that the gesture was anything but innocent. Those emerald eyes locked with his, and he was drawn forward, his finger moving of its own accord, as he traced it over the tip of her nose, swiping up the cream.

Red grasped his wrist. “It’d be a shame to waste something so delicious.” She drew his hand to her mouth, flicked out her tongue, and licked the cream off his finger.

The moment her tongue touched his fingertip, the glowing knot of power exploded inside his stomach, sending energy coursing along his limbs. Goosebumps rippled over his back. He leaned closer, his breath colliding with hers. Her tangy campfire scent enveloped him. He flared his nostrils, inhaling deeply. His chair shook beneath them. The crockery on their table rattled.

A heatwave surged over the table. Red’s fingers seared, her burning grip on his wrist almost enough to kindle his extinguished draki flame.

The cutlery shook, jangling.

And Dante’s bones melted. So much for him finding anything out—she was wrapping him around her little finger.

By the draki gods, he wanted to sink into her embrace and lose himself in those luscious red lips. Instead, Dante yanked his hand out of her grip and stood, thrusting his chair back. “Lunch period is nearly over. I’d better get you back to school,” he rasped.

She pulled back. “Dante?”

He had to regain control. Limbs surging with energy, he stalked to the counter to pay the bill.

He sensed her behind him, her gorgeous smoky scent teasing him long before she was at his side and heading to the Jeep. As they crossed the car park, he battled, spooling the earth power back from his limbs and stuffing it down deep in his core—a slumbering beast, waiting to waken at her next touch.

Red grasped his hand, her hot fingers sending a jolt up his arm, threatening to waken his powers again. “Dante, please.”

He spun to face her, and was lost in those emerald eyes. Gods, she was beautiful. And deadly.

“I’m sorry, I was only flirting. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He was mesmerized, watching as words spilled from her lips. Those pretty eyes pleaded with him, begging him to cut her some slack.

“I really enjoyed today. I didn’t want to ruin things.” And then Red’s bottom lip trembled. “I’m sorry. I really like you. I’m just so impulsive.”

If Dante obeyed his impulses, she’d be cocooned in his arms right now, nestled against his chest, and he’d never let her go. But he wasn’t Zeph. Wasn’t Red. Wasn’t impulsive. And falling for Red was not an option.

But rescuing his parents was. He needed her for information. Throughout lunch, she’d answered all of his careful questions about her childhood, her family, friends, school, hobbies, and anything else he could think of that might reveal her secrets as a mage. They’d danced around questions that’d reveal more about her powers.

The only thing remotely interesting was that she’d lived in Black Oak as a baby before her father died. Her family of mages had lived smack in the middle of community thick with draki shifters. He had a nagging feeling it was a key to the puzzle, but couldn’t figure out the connection.

Perhaps they'd been spying on the draki, collecting intel for mages. Or had they befriended draki, only to betray them to Fae?

Dante glanced at her again. One thing was sure. He had to find out more. "It's fine," he said. "I enjoy being with you, too. I got a shock, that's all." He squeezed her hand, and dropped it before he could lose control again.

"No, I'm sorry," she whispered, tucking her shaking hands in her pockets.

He'd rattled her—not only the table. Clicking the remote, Dante unlocked the doors to the Jeep, and she climbed inside. He raced around the back of the Jeep where she couldn't see him, shaking out his hands and thrusting his feet into the asphalt—anything to let loose some of the pent-up energy bucking inside him.

Dante slipped behind the wheel and drove to school, the space inside the Jeep crackling with tension. Red was sitting jammed against the passenger door, her arms hugging her frame. She stared out the window—away from him.

He cracked a joke.

Red gave a brittle, edgy laugh.

When he pulled up to the curb, the bell was ringing, signaling the end of lunch period.

"Thanks. I have to dash." She opened the door before he could climb out and get it for her.

He'd scared her with his powers. Or hurt her with his reaction. He didn't know which. Dante lunged across the Jeep and grabbed her arm. "Hey, Red, I'd like to see you again."

Her face was pale. She nodded and pulled her arm from his grip, unsmiling. "You have my number." She climbed out of the car.

Dante jumped out and raced after her.

What the—?

Zeph was being strong-armed by the school security guard, who was marching him off the school grounds. “And don’t come back,” the SRO yelled. “Don’t let me see either you or Dante here again, or you’ll be paying a visit to your good friend Chief Wykner.”

Dante’s gaze flicked between Red’s back and his brother’s scowling face. His twin was clutching a brown paper bag emblazoned with the logo from the delicatessen down the road. Snow was standing, as pale as ice, on the path that led to the school entrance, students streaming past her back to class. When Red reached her sister, she took her arm and guided her into the building. The whole way, Snow kept glancing back over her shoulder.

Not once did Red look back.

“Make sure neither of you are seen back on school grounds,” the SRO barked, releasing Zeph from his grip. “I’ve been nice today, but it won’t happen again.”

“Technically, I’m not on school grounds, only on the sidewalk,” Dante answered smoothly, “but yes, we’ll make sure neither of us are back on the premises again.”

“Good, that’s the only attitude that’ll keep you out of trouble.” The guard nodded and crossed his arms, waiting for them to drive off.

Zeph pushed past Dante and clambered into the Jeep.

Dante slipped back into the driver’s seat, started the engine and pulled into the traffic. “What in the draki gods’ name were you doing on school grounds?” he growled. “I told you not to see her.”

“No, you didn’t. You said to question her, so I did. Anyway, who are you to talk? Hypocrite.” Zeph reached into his bag and pulled out a piece of pizza, stuffing it into his mouth. “Not that Red looked very happy. What’d

you do? Lecture her, the way you're always lecturing me?" Zeph opened a half-empty bottle of juice and chugged it down.

Dante checked his mirror and changed lanes. "None of your flaming business."

"Oh yeah? Then why is what I say to Snow any of yours?"

"It'll be mine when I have to bail you out of jail for trespassing. You can't go on school grounds. When are you going to get that into your head? You're always flying off, doing whatever you want, without thinking."

"Me, flying? That'll be the day! I long for a good flight, just like you do." Zeph stabbed his pizza crust at Dante. "Admit it, not being able to shift into our draki forms is eating away at you. You think you can fix things by controlling everything. But you can't."

Zeph's eyes blazed, his harsh breathing crashing through the vehicle. "Our parents are gone, Dante. Gone. Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow? We've got to live life now. While we still have a life."

"And you're throwing yours away on Snow? On a mage?" Dante spat.

"Throwing it away? Are you mad? I've finally found a girl I like. A girl who likes me, despite all this." Zeph waved his hand at the silver scales half-manifested down his face since that horrible mage had cast a spell and frozen the shifting abilities of everyone in Pinevale—and kidnapped their parents. "You need a life, Dante," he snapped.

Dante put his foot on the gas, speeding through an intersection as the lights turned red. Anger burned through his gut. How dare Zeph accuse him of not living. "I'm trying to get Mom and Dad back. I'd do anything to find them."

"Well, so am I!"

"Yeah? By dating Snow?"

“Look who’s talking, sneaking off with Red behind my back.”

Dante would do it again in a flash. “I’m getting intel on mages.” Not that he’d gotten far. All he’d done was alienate Red.

“Yeah, right.” Zeph bit off a hunk of his pizza crust and stared out the passenger window, hunched over like Red had been on the way home. Then he straightened and turned to Dante with a smirk. “If you want more mage intel, you’ll be happy to know I’ve created the perfect opportunity.”

Dante smacked his forehead with his palm, groaning, “What’ve you done this time?”

“Go on, admit it. I saw her face. Red’s upset with you—and it’s eating away at you.”

Dante bristled.

“Oh boy, are you gonna be mad with me.” Zeph tucked the paper bag on the floor and folded his arms, still smirking.

Dante snorted. After a few moments he asked, “Go on, what is it? Spill.”

“First, promise you won’t hassle me about Snow again.”

Dante let out another groan. “Sure.”

Zeph’s smirk morphed into a grin. “You and I have a double date with fire and ice. We’re taking Snow and Red into the hills to go hiking on Saturday.”

Dante gripped the wheel—hard. The tremor that ran through the steering wheel and down the steering column had nothing to do with the engine.

## Take a Hike

Snows' phone pinged. A message from Zeph popped up: *Leaving now. Where shall we meet you?*

She texted Zeph back. *At the east entrance of Rosewood Park.*

She didn't dare let the guys pull up near their apartment in their Jeep. Mom would have a fit if she knew they were spending the whole day out in the wilderness with two tattooed thugs in leather hoodies.

*We'll be there in ten.*

*Cool.*

Snow tucked her phone in her pocket and picked up her backpack, shifting it so the contents didn't dig into her back, then strolled out into the hallway.

"So, which friends are you going with?" Mom called from her room, still half asleep after working the late shift.

"The usual. Jena, Brock and a few others."

Red came out of her room wearing a backpack that was practically empty. She frowned at Snow's bulging bag and hissed, "What have you got in there? A waffle iron?"

"Very funny." Snow jiggled the bumps away from her spine. "Just stuff."

Red opened her mouth, but, thankfully, Mom saved Snow from her sister's prying questions. "What time will you be home?" Mom's voice was muffled through the bedroom door.

"We're catching a movie at Jena's after, so it might be a bit late," Snow lied without batting an eyelid.

"I'll be at work. Call me if there are any problems. Stay safe, you hear?"

“Sure. Bye Mom.” Snow rushed out the door.

“Love you both,” Mom called.

“Love you, too,” Red answered as she closed the door. Out on the landing, she narrowed her eyes. “Go on, tell me. What’s in there?” She tapped Snow’s backpack.

“A surprise,” Snow replied. There was no way she was putting up with Red teasing her all day. This surprise was for Zeph, not her nosy older sister.

Traffic humming past, they wandered along the street to Rosewood Park. Snow took off her pack and plonked herself down on a park bench. It was beyond her how she was going to carry such an uncomfortable bag for hours through the forest, but it would be worth it to see the smile on Zeph’s face. He was the type of guy that loved a laugh and an adventure, so she’d give him one.

Red sat down next to Snow, examining her hiking boots. A jogger dashed past into the trees, his eyes sliding over Red, checking her out. A few families were out, walking dogs, pushing strollers and tugging toddlers along the trails between flower gardens. Starlings flitted in the beech tree above her, and a breeze rustled the leaves.

“At least you look cute in shorts and hiking boots. Look at my mess.” Red scuffed her boots against the sidewalk, shedding flakes of dry mud. Her shorts had a tear halfway up the thigh.

“You look fine,” Snow said. “Honestly, you could dress in a sack and still look great.”

A gray Jeep pulled up, its enormous tires grinding to a stop by the curb. Zeph and Dante jumped out, both clad in dark jeans, black T-shirts and their usual leather hoodies.

“I knew it,” Red hissed. “We look so nerdy wearing hiking gear. I shouldn’t have listened to you.”

“You’ll thank me when we’ve been walking an hour and your feet aren’t sore,” Snow muttered back.

“My feet always get sore in these boots,” Red grumbled. She flashed a stunning smile at Dante and Zeph. “Good morning boys,” she purred.

“Morning ladies.” Dante smiled back at Red.

“Hi Snow.” Zeph’s sea-green eyes took her in, and he flashed her a smile that would melt the Arctic. A warm breeze danced across her shoulders, ruffling strands of her blonde hair. She leaned into the breeze, inhaling freshly-mown grass.

Hang on, was that Zeph’s scent or the grass in the park? “Hi. This is going to be fun. Thanks for inviting us.” Snow stifled a groan. She sounded like she’d just graduated from Miss Marple’s Finishing School for Teenage Girls. Why did her tongue always knot up when cute boys were around?

## §

Dante grabbed the girl’s packs and put them in the trunk. Snow’s was heavy with hard pokey shapes straining at the fabric. Zeph had told the girls they’d provide lunch and Dante had gotten up extra early to bake, so what on earth did Snow have in her bag? He shrugged and slammed the trunk, then hustled to open Red’s door.

Red clambered into the front of the Jeep. Dante shut her door and rushed around the car. He slid into the driver’s seat, her musky woodsmoke enveloping him. “So, ready for an adventure?” he asked. Hopefully not the sort of adventure he and Zeph had had last time they were up in the hills when they’d been attacked by a mage and their parents had been kidnapped.

Red smiled, a few stray wisps escaping from her ponytail. “I’m always up for fun.” There was a challenge in her eyes—daring.

Thank goodness she'd forgiven him. His grin cracked wider. Man, he was a lost cause. If he didn't watch it, he'd fall for her—hard. She toyed with a strand of her hair. Her jean shorts were torn and her shoes had dried mud on them, but it didn't matter what she wore—she was gorgeous.

*“Hey, Zeph. Did you bring some of the hoard with you?”*

*“No. Why?”*

*“I thought I sensed something. That's all.”* Ignoring the faint tremor of his earth powers in his belly, Dante started the motor. They rumbled out of town up toward the hills above Pinevale.

## §

The moment Snow was seated in the back of the Jeep with Zeph, her phone buzzed. She slipped it out, surreptitiously angling it away from him. And stifled a gasp. It was Krispin—again. Already. They'd only had that fancy Italian dinner together two days ago.

*I'd love to see you again. What are you up to today?*

Snow texted back. *I'm busy. Sorry.*

*Are you giving me the brush off?*

*No, I'm just out. Busy. That's all.*

*Okay then. What are you up to tonight?* Krispin replied.

Her eyes slid to Zeph. What would they be up to tonight? Mom was off to work before they were due to get home. If they wanted, they could extend this trip until late. She didn't want to commit to Krispin and ruin everyone else's fun.

*Sorry, I'm tied up all of today. Perhaps tomorrow?*

*Sure thing. I'll pick up at seven. What's your address? By the way, I have the car again. There's a cool club in town I'd love to take you to.*

*Sounds great.* Snow typed in her address, sure that Mom would be impressed with a well-groomed guy like Krispin turning up in his shiny red

Jag. She leaned back in the seat and smiled, tucking her phone in her pocket.

“Hey.” Zeph passed her a pack of pine-scented chewing gum. “Somehow, this reminds me of you. Would you like some?”

Snow nodded and took a stick of gum as they snaked their way up through the towering pines, deep into the mountain range above Pinevale.

Keen energy danced around her. A tendril of Zeph’s breeze playfully teased her hair and rippled over the backs of her hands.

“Good news?” he arched an eyebrow and cocked his head.

Snow cringed. She felt like a two-timer. Here she was, going out with a gorgeous boy who obviously liked her, while texting another one.

## §

Zeph was fine with letting Dante drive, so he could sit in the back with Snow. He had no idea what she’d been doing on her phone before, but it had made her blush. Two could play at that game. Zeph whipped out his phone and sent her a text: *You look really cute today.*

Her cheeks pinked up even more as she gazed at him from beneath her long blonde lashes. Her smile was so gorgeous, it made Zeph’s toes curl in his hiking boots. By the draki gods, she was pretty. Zeph casually leaned back against the seat, letting his arm brush hers. The storm in his chest expanded, making him want to explode out of his human skin and soar above the forest with her in his arms.

Dante flashed a warning stare at him in the rear-view mirror. “*Don’t get too close to her,*” he warned. “*We have to find out what their deal is. Don’t let your raging hormones get in the way of our mission. Mom and Dad’s lives are at stake.*”

Of course, Dante had to ruin the moment—the worry wart. “*As if I don’t know that,*” Zeph snapped. “*I’m the one who’s been hunting around*

*town while you gaze at dusty old spell books.”*

*“You’ll risk everything if you fall under her spell,” Dante growled via mindspeech. “Find out about her childhood, what she knows about other mages, how her powers work, whatever. Especially if she knows the mage who took Mom and Dad.”*

*“Yes, boss. By the way, I’m not at work. It’s actually my day off.”*

Dante’s glower should’ve shattered the glass in the rear-view mirror, but then Red pointed out a cute cottage among the trees, and Dante smiled at her, distracted.

Zeph stared out the window as they wound up through the hills toward the ranges where they liked to fly in their draki form. On a long straight, Zeph spied remnants of tattered rubber where the mage who’d chased them on a Harley-Davidson had flung blue flame at the Jeep’s rear tire, bursting it. For the hundredth time, he kicked himself for hiding the guardian stones—jewels from the dragon shifters’ hoard—in the spare tire. He’d been so dumb. The mage had retrieved the jewels and used them to cast a spell—freezing the abilities of all shapeshifters in Pinevale.

Sure, they still had access to their powers—Dante had his earth powers, and Zeph, his wind power—but they could no longer shift. They were frozen with scales across half their faces and down one side of their bodies.

And others had been frozen too—in their animal or human forms, and a few were half-shifted, like them.

And now, Mom and Dad were gone—kidnapped by the mage and taken through a portal—after the mage had left their home in flames.

And they’d been powerless to stop him.

Then, instead of helping, the Draki Council had raked them over the coals for being so careless.

“Oh, this is beautiful,” Snow exclaimed, staring out the window at the majestic snow-tipped peaks that rose beyond the pine forests. “Do you go hiking often?”

“Yeah, we do. Me and my brother love it up here. It’s great to get away from the city. Out in the middle of nowhere.” It was the only place they could fly.

Red murmured, “We haven’t been here for years. It was such fun. With Mom’s crazy work hours, we hardly have time to get out with our family anymore.”

Snow paled, making Zeph want to cocoon her in his arms—even if she was a mage. Even if Dante would slaughter him.

## §

Dante pulled the Jeep into the gravel car park and got out, swiftly pacing around to open Red’s door for her.

As they retrieved their packs from the trunk, he had another try at convincing Zeph via mind-link. “*Come on, Zeph, stop looking at Snow as if she’s dessert. She’s bad news, a mage through and through. Don’t lose focus.*”

Zeph turned to him, his gaze piercing. “*Sure, bro. Just make sure you’re not contemplating kissing Red.*”

“*Never. I have no problem controlling my hormones.*” Although Dante had to admit Red looked really nice in her shorts, T-shirt and worn hiking boots. “Everyone ready?” He clicked the remote to lock the Jeep and led the way over to where the mage had leaped out of the forest on his Harley and nearly killed them. He mind-melded with Zeph again “*Let’s take them right past the evidence and see how they react.*”

Red tilted her head. “Weird. It looks like there was a motorbike through here recently.” She pointed at where the bike’s tires had mashed

ferns, grass and undergrowth.

*“Go on, say something.”* Zeph mind-linked. *“There’s your opening if you’re keen on pumping them for information.”*

Looking down at Red’s carefree open smile and red eyebrows pulled down in a cute frown, Dante didn’t feel quite like interrogating her. *“It’s your turn,”* he said. *“Go on, Zeph.”*

*“I wouldn’t know where to start.”* Zeph smirked at Dante, and then turned to Snow, who was bending to inspect a toadstool.

Dante scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, we were up here three weeks ago on Saturday, like today, going for a hike…” He swallowed as Red gazed at him. “Well, um…a guy charged out of the trees on a black Harley-Davidson and nearly ran us down. Do, um, either of you know anyone with a black Harley?”

Red’s frown deepened. “Most of the kids at school have much cheaper motorbikes.”

Dante was about to reply when Zeph’s thoughts broke through his. *“Look how pale Snow is,”* his twin mind-linked.

He casually turned his head, taking in Red’s blonde sister. Her hand had flown to her mouth and her cheeks were the same shade as the alabaster teacups in their antique store.

Zeph tilted his head. “So you know someone with a black Harley?” he asked Snow, his voice gentle.

“Who, Snow? I can’t think of anyone.” Red’s eyebrows shot up as comprehension trickled over her face. “Oh!”

Snow shrugged. “Just a guy I dated once,” she said offhandedly. Her cheeks turned candy floss pink. She wandered down the trail, and Red hustled to catch up.

*“She knows something, all right,”* Dante mind-linked.

*“Yeah, a guy with a black Harley,” Zeph retorted. “Big deal. It might not be the same one.”*

*“What are the chances? She’s a mage, has ice powers and knows someone with a bike like that. It must be our mage.”*

Zeph rolled his eyes. *“Dante, for someone who’s so controlled and logical, you’re sure leaping to conclusions.”* He hurried after Snow.

When Dante caught up with them, he fell in alongside Red. *“Who’s the guy your sister was dating?”*

*“A boring computer nerd.”* Red smiled.

Dante refused to give up. *“The weird thing is, the guy was shooting flame from his palms. Can you imagine that?”* He watched Snow’s reactions.

The blonde’s eyes slid away from his.

Zeph mind-linked. *“Hey, Dante, look at Red.”*

Red’s cheeks were scarlet. She bent and retied the laces on her old hiking boots, not meeting Dante’s gaze.

She had fire powers. She’d let them trickle out at the movies, nearly burning their popcorn. He wouldn’t let himself be sucked in by a pretty face, so he repeated himself, determined to get to the bottom of things.

Red straightened and looked him right in the eye. *“How weird. Maybe he was holding a firecracker.”*

Dante looked right back at her without smiling. *“No, it was definitely flame.”*

Her fiery emerald eyes appraised his. *“Very strange.”*

*“Come on guys,”* Zeph called. *“The trail’s waiting and there’s a rumor that Dante’s even done baking.”* He chuckled, took Snow’s hand and they walked ahead into the forest.

*“Holding her hand?”* Dante snapped. *“Are you mad?”*

*“No,” Zeph snapped back. “I’m not mad. I’ve got a gorgeous girl out on a date and I’m going to enjoy myself.”*

§

After a couple of hours of meandering through pretty glades and up a hillside, Snow and Zeph broke out onto a ridge. Zeph gestured at Dante and Red who were disappearing into the pines ahead. “Let them go on. There’s something here I want to show you.”

Snow gasped at the forest-clad hills and the vast lake of shimmering blue below them. “This view is amazing. That lake is so enormous, it looks like I could reach out and touch it from here. Is this the lake you wanted to show me?”

She enjoyed the wilderness as much as he did. Nice. “Nope,” Zeph said. “Come with me.” He never thought he’d share his favorite spot with anyone, but somehow Snow was different to other girls. Special. He refused to believe she was evil. Surely he’d sense it if she was. Giving her a warm smile, Zeph took her hand and led her off the trail, up onto a grassy knoll. “The view is better from here.”

He turned to her. As she deposited her pack on the ground a chain slipped out of her T-shirt with a blue teardrop suspended from it—the same blue as her eyes.

Hang on. That necklace looked mighty familiar.

“Wow, there’s the lake. It’s just as pretty as you said.” She pointed down the hillside to a tiny pool of glimmering turquoise-blue nestled between the pine trees above the large lake. She smiled at him expectantly, drawing his gaze to her mouth.

He swallowed. “That’s my special little lake. I’ll take you down there later.”

Snow grabbed her water bottle and took a swig. “It looks like it’s miles away. It’ll take all day, to get there and back won’t it?” The sunlight played across her blonde hair. “How will we get back to the car park before dark?”

Zeph swept his arm across the landscape. “We’re walking in a giant circle so it won’t take long.” He gestured at her day pack. “What have you got in there? Those lumpy bits don’t look that comfy to carry.”

Snow gave him a cheeky grin. “Nothing much.”

He nudged her with his elbow. Any excuse to touch her. “Go on.”

“A surprise. I figured if you wanted to show me your favorite place in the world, I could surprise you too.”

“A surprise? Really?”

“Really. I have another one, too.” Snow pulled a gold package from her backpack. “How would you like a kiss?”

Zeph was so startled, a gust of wind tore from his fingers and whipped around them, flinging her hair across her face. “Ah, sorry. Sure, I’d love one.” He brushed the hair back from her cheek, gazing at her soft lips.

Snow grinned and pulled a little chocolate from the gold packet. “Here, Hershey’s Kisses—one of my favorite chocolates. Open wide,” she said, looking like the most gorgeous dentist he’d ever seen. She unwrapped the tiny chocolate and popped it into his mouth.

So, she wanted to toy with him. He didn’t mind at all. “Kisses are my favorite too.” Zeph reached into the package, plucked out a chocolate and unwrapped the crinkly gold paper. “Your turn to open wide. It’s my turn to give you a kiss.”

He couldn’t help staring as her pretty pink lips opened. Restless energy battered against Zeph’s chest, trying to hammer its way out. The

leaves stirred at his feet. Phew, he was already a sucker for her. She could probably wind him around her little finger and spit him out. By the draki gods, his hands were shaking. He placed the chocolate on the tip of her tongue, grazing her lips with his fingers.

Pink rushed into her cheeks and her cool energy danced around him.

It took every ounce of willpower not to take her face in his hands and kiss her until sunset. He'd bide his time. He didn't want to rush her.

Snow chewed the chocolate, blushing brighter than ever.

And then fed him another.

He accepted the treat, reveling in the sweetness. Zeph restrained himself from pulling her flush against his chest and burying his face in her hair. He wanted a real kiss—kissing Snow was bound to be sweeter than any candy.

Dante's warning shot to mind. If they didn't get a move on, his brother would harass them even more.

Zeph took her tiny hand in his. "Come on," he said, voice husky. "Let's catch up to the others." It was the last thing he wanted, but he'd have to wait until he and Snow were alone at his little lake.

## §

Red mopped her brow with her hand and pulled her pack off. She glanced down the trail. No sign of Snow and Zeph. Was her sister back there, flirting? Or were Snow and Zephyr tired after the long uphill hike?

"We can wait along the trail." Dante motioned to a grove of trees. "There's a lovely picnic spot over there with a beautiful view."

She undid the lid of her canteen and took a swig. She offered it to Dante. "Would you like a drink?"

His emerald eyes met hers. "I'd love one." His velvet voice rumbled through her, and his fingers brushed hers as he took the canteen, eyes

lingering on her face.

He took a long slow swig.

A tiny tremor ran through the ground under Red's boots. Waves of heat coursed down her limbs. She clenched her fingers to stop them from sparking, then took the canteen from him and stowed it in her backpack.

It was great to know other people had powers. Perhaps with them—with him—she could finally let her hair down and be herself. But what about the other guy he'd mentioned with fire powers? Maybe there was someone like her out there. "Do you have a vendetta against this guy who had flames dancing out of his palms?" she asked.

"Ah, no, but he took something that belongs to us and we'd like it back."

The guy had stolen something. Red almost sighed in relief. So Dante didn't hate flame wielders, he was just trying to recover his stolen property. "What did he take?"

A shadow veiled Dante's face and his eyes shuttered, but instead of answering her, he muttered, "What's taking Zeph and Snow so long?"

## §

That had been a close call. When Red had asked what that mage had taken, Dante had nearly told her everything—including the details of his parents' kidnapping, the mage attack and the ransom. Although he instinctively wanted to confide in her, he couldn't afford to. As much as she was gorgeous, she was his enemy. He'd find out what he could today and make sure he never saw her again.

As they wandered along the ridge, she smiled up at him. And even as his heart softened, he steeled it again. He was not falling for a mage.

"Let's find that picnic spot, shall we?" she said. "I'd love to sit down for a few minutes." As Red glanced up, her foot caught on a gnarly

tree root.

Before he could think, Dante's hand shot out. He grasped her small fingers in his, and she crashed into him. He held her close, bathing in her warmth. His heart pounded as he stared into her eyes. She felt so frail he'd do anything to protect her from harm—and yet here she was, a mage and his sworn enemy.

“Oh, thank you,” she murmured.

If he wasn't careful, he'd lose his heart. His eyes were drawn to the pulse hammering wildly at her throat. Trying to hide the rush of heat to his cheeks, he stepped away and motioned down the trail. “The picnic spot's along here to the right. I'm sure you'll love it.”

He walked ahead of her, through a grove of spruce and maples to a picnic table flanked with two benches. The sweeping expanse of forested hillside fell away, and a broad lake gleamed against a backdrop of rugged, snow-capped mountains.

“This is mind-blowing,” Red said. “Absolutely stunning. I love it.” The breeze blew her addictive woodsmoke scent across his face, and he couldn't help inhaling. She grinned, looking genuinely happy. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

He dumped his backpack on the picnic table and sat on the bench, motioning Red to join him. She sat and scooted along until her thigh brushed his. His heart stuttered. Dante inched away as he unpacked the picnic.

“Seriously?” Red eyed the containers he was placing on the table. “All this food for lunch?”

Dante laughed. “Wait until you see how Zeph eats. He'd polish all of this off on his own if he had the chance.”

She grinned. “Sounds like a growing lad.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “And exercise makes him worse. He’s got the appetite of a lion.”

“Or a dragon,” laughed Red. “Gobbling up everything in sight.”

A twinge of unease trickled through Dante. Did she know they were dragon shifters?

Zeph and Snow wandered into the clearing and sat on the bench on the other side of the table.

His earth powers thrummed again. He shrugged it off. Zeph had said he hadn’t brought anything from the hoard with him. He must be imagining it.

Zeph laughed, helping Snow with her backpack then placed a casual arm across her shoulders.

Those two didn’t seem to be keeping any distance between them.

With the other hand, Zeph flicked the lid of a container open and grabbed a brownie, passing one to Snow. “You’ll love this. My brother’s been up since sparrow’s fart baking.”

“Sparrow’s fart?” Snow laughed and took a bite.

“Do you mind if I have one too?” Red asked.

Zeph held the container out and Red helped herself.

“Hey guys, no dessert before lunch,” Dante grumbled half-heartedly.

“Too late,” Zeph quipped, “I already had some sweet kisses up the trail.”

That fool. Rage blazed through Dante. “*You what? You kissed her?! I told you to stay away from her!*”

“Wow, that was fast work,” said Red, boggling at her sister.

Snow laughed. “Yeah, I orchestrated the whole thing myself.”

Zeph rolled his eyes. “They sure were sweet kisses.”

Dante fumed.

“Hershey’s chocolate kisses.” Snow pulled a gold package from her backpack. “Want one?”

Zeph took a chocolate. “Thanks for the kiss, babe.”

Oh, man. Dante felt like such an idiot—and Zeph’s smirk just proved the point.

Red rolled her eyes and turned to Dante. “These brownies are so good. What’s in them? Berries?”

“Raspberries and coconut.”

Red’s eyes shone. “Oh, that’s what it is. So delicious. When we first met you in that alley, I never would’ve picked you as a homey baking type.”

Snow tilted back her head, leaning into Zeph, and laughed. Really laughed. The sun caught a blue teardrop on her necklace.

That necklace. A jolt rocked through Dante. “*Snow is wearing a stolen necklace from the dragon shifters’ hoard. I knew I felt something.*”

Zeph’s jaw dropped and his eyes flitted between Snow’s necklace and Dante. “*I thought it looked familiar.*”

“*It’s familiar all right, it’s the Starglow Sapphire.*”

“*How did she get it?*”

“*From whoever stole our Jag. It was one of the jewels we were going to sell that night after the movies.*”

“*No. It can’t be. Maybe it’s one of the pieces we sold to the dealers to earn Mom and Dad’s ransom money. I mean she could’ve picked it up at a bar, from a mage, or a jewelry store...*”

“*No, Zeph. I packed those little velvet bags. I know what was in each one, and I can feel their essence.*” Sensing jewels was part of his gift as an earth draki. His twin couldn’t talk his way out of this mess. The girl

was in cahoots with whoever stole the car. *“We stowed those necklaces in the jewelry box in the boot.”*

Zeph’s Adam’s apple bobbed. *“It’s just that—”*

*“What?”*

*“I trust her.”*

*“Zeph, they’re mages. They could be weaving love spells over both of us. An enchantment would explain the insane attraction.”*

*“There, you admitted it: you’re attracted to Red. I knew it.”*

*“You missed the insane part, bro. It’s totally abnormal to get a burn for a girl this bad.”*

*“Nah, I disagree. It’s amazing. I’ve never fallen this hard. I think she’s the one.”*

Dante rolled his eyes and shook his head. Man, Zeph was impossible.

“Ah, when you two have finished glaring at each other, do you mind if we eat?” Red asked. “I’m famished.”

Here they were, losing control in front of these girls again. Usually they could hold a mind-linked argument in front of others without showing a thing, but somehow, around these two vixen, they both lost it.

## §

Red grinned, trying to ease the tension. Somehow the boys had gotten all worked up over something. But, what? “So what’s in these containers?” she said, opening one. Dainty savory muffins were nestled inside a red linen napkin. A red napkin—had he done that intentionally for her?

She tried to catch Dante’s eye, but he was still having a glare-off with his twin brother. Crazy.

Snow kicked her under the table and gave her a nervous glance.

Red passed her the container. “Try one.”

Zeph leaned in. “Don’t mind if I do. Thanks, Red. My brother may be lacking in manners today, but his baking is amazing.” He held a tiny muffin up to Snow’s lips.

It was cute to see someone fussing over Snow.

Her sister blushed, and bit into the muffin. Ice fringed the edge of the table under Snow’s fingertips. Red shot her warning glance, but Snow was too busy making eyes at Zeph to notice her powers leaking.

“These muffins and the brownies are a good snack,” said Zeph, obviously trying to get Dante to chill out. “What’s the main course, Dante? Some of your famous pizza?”

Red joined in. “I love pizza. It’s one of my favorites.” Partly because it was so easy to heat. “I like mine spicy. How do you like yours?”

Dante turned to her, the blaze of his emerald gaze hitting her full force. Warmth surged along her arms. She reined it in, swallowing.

“I love my pizza piping hot and spicy,” he said.

Did he like his girls that way too? He’d been giving her mixed signals all day: moving close, then pulling back; flirting, then cool. As if he was fighting an inner demon. Or fighting not to like her. Usually Red strung guys along, toying with them, but the problem was, she really liked him. Way more than she’d ever liked another boy. “Did you make pizza today?” she asked hopefully.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

“I can make some tonight after we’re done hiking, if you want.” His words came out in a rush.

Zeph leaned over the table and clapped Dante on the shoulder. “You’re on, bro. Pizza tonight at our place.” He beamed at Snow. “Dante’s pizza is to die for. Man, you’re so lucky.”

Red tried not to let her smile slip as Dante awkwardly glanced away and busied himself with unpacking more food. Snow was lucky—lucky Zeph was so open with his affection. Unlike Dante. Something was eating at him, and she was determined to find out what.

## Thin Ice

“It’s a bit of a steep descent,” Zeph said, “We’re almost there.” He and Snow scrambled down the rocky slope onto a plateau.

Snow whistled at the view. “It’s beautiful.” Cradled in the rugged mountains and surrounded by trees, low lying shrubs and gravel, there was the tiny lake—an astounding shade of aqua-blue.

“The water comes from the ice-melt high in the mountains. I just—” Zeph shrugged. “I just wanted to show you.”

“This is perfect,” Snow said. “I’ve got something to show you too.” She pulled out her pale-blue ice-skating boots, then her father’s old white lace-ups—carefully unpacking the tissues nestled inside them. “Here, I think you’ll fit these.”

Zeph looked to the water. “It’s cold, but it’s not frozen,” he whispered, his jade eyes meeting hers.

Snow giggled. Now the moment had come, she was nervous. She’d been wanting to do this all day—show Zeph her powers. Something she dared not show anyone else—except Red. Maybe Zeph, with the wind-powers he tried to hide, would understand. He was a freak, too. “Can you keep a secret?”

Zeph gave her a slow easy grin and took her hand. “You know I can.”

True. He had plenty of his own. They strolled to the lakeside.

Snow’s ice power thrilled through her. It was now or never. She crouched on the shore and placed her hand on the water. The chill from the ice-melt was nothing more than a tickle, a memory of the cold snow from the high peaks.

She plunged her hand into the water. “Are you ready?”

A shiver of excitement hit Zeph as Snow's power flared, her hand shimmering under the aqua-blue surface. His wind power rose to meet hers, soaring out of his chest and tugging at his hair. "Are you sure you can do this?"

"It's ice melt, so it's pretty cold already." Snow frowned. "If we want to skate, the biggest problem is the wind. Too much, and the lake will be full of ripples, then I won't be able to freeze it so we can skate."

"I'm sure the wind will be fine." Zeph inhaled deeply, calming his nerves and reeling in his wind powers. The leaves on the bushes stilled and a hush fell over the glade. "Try now."

A cold mist rose from the ice. "This will take a while," Snow pursed her lips. Below her fine collar bones, the sapphire pendant sparkled in the sunlight. It matched her pretty eyes, but why had she worn it today? Didn't she know it was stolen?

Zeph turned his attention to the old-fashioned ice-skates, loosening the laces. They must be at least twenty years old. Should he put them on? Or was this whole ice-skating thing a joke? Exactly how powerful was she?

Power seeped from Snow's fingers, freezing the water around her hand so it sparkled like diamonds.

Zeph readied himself for the waft of sulfur that accompanied every mage's magic. Nothing. He leaned in close, drawn to her power as if, like the lake, he was caught in her spell.

The water shimmered, a thin film of ice stretching across the lake to the not-so-distant shore. He held his breath. The sky-blue water paled and hardened, until thick ice stretched to the center of the small mountain lake. Beneath the icy surface, the aqua waters swirled.

The temperature plummeted, and tiny snowflakes tumbled from the sky.

Grinning, Zeph shook the flakes from his hair. Snow's cheeks were tinged pink and her eyes sparkled. She was so powerful. So beautiful, it stole his breath.

Snow pulled her hand from the frozen lake leaving an icy-blue hole, and turned to him with a radiant smile. "You ready?"

"Definitely." He pulled on the skates, fumbling to tie the laces. By the draki gods, he was as nervous and excited as a school boy on a first date.

Snow pulled on her skates and held out her hand. "Come on."

"Sure." Zeph took Snow's hand. For the first time ever, Snow seemed warm. As if all of her cold had been drained into the water. He grinned. "I feel like I should say something formal, like, 'May I have this dance?'"

"Why, certainly." Snow grinned back. "I thought you'd never ask." She stepped onto the ice like a dancer, and did a pirouette.

She had skills. Gods, she was more elegant on ice than on land. He followed, half terrified he'd crack the ice and fall into the freezing water. Snow twirled while he found his footing.

"Music?" Snow asked, pulling a set of earbuds from her pockets. "What would you like?"

"Something slow," Zeph said. "It'll give me a chance to keep up." And hold Snow close. If only he could tell her everything. He took a breath. He'd promised Dante not to say a word. But he hadn't promised not to use his powers. He pulled on his wind power.

"It's nice not being the only freak," Snow murmured, passing him one earbud while she popped the other into her ear. She tapped her phone

and stowed it in her pocket.

A beautiful flute melody drifted through his earbud. “Freak?” Zeph said, taking her hand again. “You’re not a freak. You’re perfect.”

§

Snow loved the feeling of flying on ice. But today she started slow, Zeph holding her hand. She’d shown him her secret and he hadn’t flinched. She was sure he had a secret, too. Would he reveal it to her today?

Zeph gained confidence, and soon they were skating side by side, arm in arm, in perfect synch. A flurry of windblown snow twirled around them, protecting them from the world outside. Snow felt like she could skate forever in a winter wonderland of swirling snowflakes.

In the center of the lake, Zeph pulled her to a stop, amid the flute strains of Lord of the Rings theme music. They stopped, a jolt running through Snow as Zeph’s eyes met hers. He wrapped his strong arms around her shoulders, pulling her close. His silver tattoo glimmered, a zephyr playing through his hair.

She tilted her head, her gaze drawn to his lips—

Cracking, like the popping of party streamers, reverberated around them. The ice shuddered beneath their skates.

Breaking ice. The lake was unfreezing! Snow grabbed Zephyr’s hand. “We have to go! Now!”

Zeph moved, wind swirling around him. A huge gust pushed them across the ice as fractured ice spiderwebbed behind them.

“I’m so sorry,” Snow yelled, her words whipped away.

“Don’t be,” he replied, his words snatched by the wind.

“Slow down!” Snow called as they hurtled toward the gravelly shore.

A whump shuddered through Snow's legs—the ice fracturing under their feet. They leaped onto the gravel, buoyed by Zeph's wind, and sprawled on the shore in a heap of limbs, laughing like maniacs.

“We made it!” Zeph's eyes were bright with triumph.

“Thanks to your wind assist.” Snow grinned.

“What? Um...I'm, ah, not sure what you mean.” His eyes slid away from hers.

Snow drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, we made it.” She'd been about to kiss Zeph, and now the moment was over. She'd shared her power, but he hadn't even acknowledged his.

## Lakeside Dip

The picnic had been diabolical. So, as they hiked down through the forest toward the lake, Dante decided to relax and enjoy Red's company. But he hadn't given up looking for answers. All the questions he'd asked so far had drawn a blank. There must be a better way to find out more about these two mages. Why had her family been living among the draki shifter community years ago? And what had killed her father? A powerful mage, if his daughters' talents were anything to go by.

Dante helped Red over a fallen log. In a moment they'd reach the lake shore. He often flew over this pretty little corner of the lake when he was in his draki form. Nestled away from the world, it was a haven, somewhere he came when he had something difficult to figure out. He hadn't intended to bring Red here, however, when he'd realized Zeph was going to show Snow his special lake, he'd impulsively decided to bring Red to this spot. He wanted to share it with her—wanted her to know more about him. By the draki gods, he was a fool. Today had only made him want to draw her closer into his life.

Mind you, that might not be a bad thing. Perhaps he could lure her into letting down her guard so he could find out more. "What's your favorite childhood memory?"

"Going down a slide in Dad's arms as a tiny kid." She smiled, eyes misty, and reached for his hand.

Her tiny warm fingers grasped his. His hands felt huge whenever he held hers. He'd do anything to chase that misty look from her eyes. She swallowed and glanced away.

Red and Dante broke through the trees to the rocky shore. Sapphire waters spread for miles edged by dark pines climbing the hillsides. Mountains soared above the far side of the lake, their reflections mirrored on the lake's surface. The immensity of the lake swallowed Red, its far shore disappearing into the distance, making her feel tiny and insignificant. There wasn't a building, or a trace of human existence—as if she and Dante were the only people in the world.

“Amazing,” she whispered, afraid to break the spell.

Crystalline waters lapped at the rocks on the foreshore. In some places, trees grew right to the water's edge, their roots bathed by the lake's pretty waters.

Without a word, Dante tugged her hand and picked his way across some boulders. He smiled, tension ebbing from his face, his eyes alight with adventure. “Wait until you see this.” His breath ghosted across her cheek.

They reached an enormous boulder rising from the edge of the lake flanked by foliage so dense it was impassable and by water on the other. Their way was blocked. He let go of her hand and clambered up, then reached down to help her. Red grasped his hand and climbed to the top.

Below the boulder, a deep pool of teal water was nestled in an inlet between spruces and a sandy shore—as if some giant being had especially scooped out a little corner just for them. She sucked in a breath. “It's like our own private bay.”

“It sure is.” He grinned, and squeezed her hand. “You up for a swim?”

With him? Was she ever! “Sure.” Red gave Dante a coy smile.

His grin grew wider. He jumped off the boulder onto the sand, and held his arms out. Red half-slid, half-jumped. Dante's firm hands caught her waist, holding her a fraction longer than he needed to. She wanted to lean in

and throw her arms around him, to lose herself in his musky, sun-baked-earth scent.

Red grinned at Dante. Gold shimmered down the side of his face. He was so stunning—tanned skin, a gorgeous smile and those striking eyes that seemed to look right through her. Eyes that peeled back the front she put up for the world and really saw her.

Red swallowed and reached up to touch his face.

He flinched away.

Why was he so nervous—because, for once, he wasn't wearing his hood?

“Have you got your swimsuit?” he asked. She nodded, and he gestured to the trees.

Red ducked behind a broad tree trunk. She pulled her swimsuit from her pack and peeked around the tree. His back to her, Dante tore off his shirt revealing broad, tanned shoulders. Oh, flaming, dancing hellfire—his golden tats glimmered right down one side of his body. She looked away as he tugged off his jeans. Somehow she knew he'd never peek at her. There was something about him that was steady, reliable, honorable. Oh man, now she was being a hopeless romantic—but it was true: he made her feel cherished. She tugged off her hiking boots and shimmied into her swimsuit, then came out from behind the tree.

He turned to her and her breath caught. He was beautiful. Absolutely flaming beautiful. His tattoo ran down one side of his chest across sculpted muscles that looked like Michael-Angelo's sculpture of David. They even covered his leg and foot.

He didn't ogle her like other boys did. Eyes on her face, he smiled. “Race you in.” Dante grabbed her hand and they ran to the pool.

Red laughed. “It’ll be cold.” The chill wouldn’t bother her, although her making the water steam could be a whole different problem. She had to stay cool. What would Snow do? Probably create an ice floe.

Dante let go of her hand and dived into the teal water. He surfaced, his dark hair slick against his head, and splashed, sending a spray of droplets over her. “Come on in.”

Red sprang, arms outstretched, arcing into the inlet. The cool kiss of the water on her limbs and torso sent shivers through her, but one glance at Dante’s strong shoulders had warmth surging through her veins again. “I’ll race you to the other side,” she called. With strong strokes, she propelled herself across the swimming hole toward the trees. Dante chased her, plowing through the water until he was alongside, where they matched each other, stroke for stroke, until they reached the far side of the pool.

## §

A current of warm water eddied around Dante as he swam beside Red, chasing away the goosebumps he’d had since he’d first jumped in. It was like basking in tropical shallows, not bathing in icy mountain runoff.

When they reached the far bank, Red grasped a tree root and turned to him. “I beat you.” Her chest rose and fell as she gulped in deep breaths.

As much as he was tempted, Dante kept his eyes on her face. “You’re a strong swimmer.” Her smile was so cute, and she was gorgeous in her bathing suit. If she wasn’t such a powerful mage, he’d take her in his arms right then. He trod water, enjoying the warm current that danced out to meet him.

“Yeah, I love the water. Keeps me cool.” Her wild mane of hair had been tamed, dragged into damp strands by the weight of the water. It was so long, it swirled around him.

“Am I imagining it, or is it warmer swimming with you?”

Red shrugged. “You know about my fire, don’t you? Guess my secret’s out: I’m a freak.”

Finally, she was admitting it. “A freak? You mean a mage, right?”

She scrunched her nose, looking cuter than ever. “A mage? What’s that?”

Dante chuckled. So she was trying to play him, after all. “Come on, Red.” He kicked closer, a strand of her hair caressing his chest, sending hot shivers through him. He plucked the strands out of the water, rolling them between his fingers. “You can’t deny it. Both Snow and you have powers. That makes you mages.”

“Oh?” Red asked, “Are you and Zephyr mages, too?”

“No!” He rocked back, creating a wave of water that slapped her shoulders. “We’re not mages, but I know you are.” He was a fool—here he was, falling for her—literally in deep water.

“Mage?” A frown creased her brow. “If you say so, but I don’t really know what that is.”

Dante sighed. Perhaps he’d better take a different tack. He took her hand and kicked over to an underwater ledge along the bank. They sat side by side. Dante carelessly let his thigh brush hers—definitely warmer than his other leg.

Still frowning, Red gazed at him, the water lapping around her shoulders. “You make the ground shake—I noticed—so you have powers. If I’m a mage, then surely that makes you a mage too.”

Her gaze was frank. She looked genuinely puzzled. Was it possible that she really had no idea about the Shifter and Mage Wars?

What was he thinking? Gods, he was falling for her—hard. He’d almost believed her when she’d said she had no idea what a mage was. He

had to get things back on track. He had to find a clue. Maybe her childhood held the secret. “So, what was your Dad like?”

Red sighed. “He was pretty special, lots of fun, always horsing around. He died when I was little, though. The only thing I really remember about him dying was...” She stared at Dante. “A weird sheen came over his skin. A little like your tattoo, now that I think of it. But not gold...” She tilted her head.

Dante sat stock still, barely breathing.

She reached up and stroked his face. “These tattoos look so realistic, like the part of your skin.” She frowned. “I... I don’t get it. Are these tats or have you got the same disease my dad had?”

Dante’s heart soared. She wasn’t a mage after all. Gently, he rested his hands on her shoulders and leaned down until only a whisper of air was between their foreheads. Gazing deep into her emerald eyes, he said, “What I’m about to tell you might be a bit of a shock.”

A wave of heat swarmed over him.

His pulse sped, and his gaze fell to her lips. Before he knew it, he’d leaned in and kissed her. Oh gods, her lips were as smooth as satin.

§

Dante’s green eyes, so like her own, gazed at Red intently. His lips grazed hers, as soft as velvet. He brushed them against hers again. Delicious heat licked through her belly, slowly building.

He pulled back, leaning his forehead against hers.

She traced the outline of his lips with her hot fingertips, their breath crashing together. His hands slid from her shoulders, through the water, down her back, and he pulled her against the firm planes of his chest. Red slid her fingers up into his hair and tugged his face closer.

His lips met hers again, but this time he didn't pull away. His hands glided up her back. He kissed her sweetly, tenderly, as if he was afraid she'd break.

She wanted more. Red wove her hands through his damp hair, pulling him closer. Their kiss became more urgent—their lips, satin sliding over velvet. Fireworks exploded inside Red's chest. Heat surged through her like a blazing comet.

Holding her, Dante broke their kiss. Steam rose from the water around them.

Oops.

He tilted his forehead against hers again, and grinned. "Red, you're a fire draki." His breath gusted across her lips. "A dragon shape shifter with the gift of fire."

"I—what?" Red sagged against him. His solid arms anchored her, holding her tight. She felt as if the world had tilted and she was sliding off.

A tremor ran through earth beneath her as Dante pulled her tighter. Fish flitted out from under the ledge, brushing past her legs, making her gasp again.

"Zeph and I are draki too." He placed her hand against the golden glimmer on his face. "That guy on the Harley was an ancient mage. Three weeks ago, he stole our guardian stones, jewels that protect all the shifters in Pinevale. We were half way through shifting into our draki forms when he cast a spell, preventing anyone from manifesting. There are other shifters in Pinevale too. Most of them were in human form when the spell was cast, but the other night at our cosplay party, some of those creatures weren't in dress up."

Still cupping his cheek with her hand, Red said, "I thought some of those costumes looked realistic."

Dante nodded. “They weren’t just realistic, they were real.”

“But me?” A pit was opening inside her about to swallow her whole. “My whole life has been a lie...”

“Not a lie. Think of it as a secret, a new journey of discovery.”

A discovery. She traced her fingers over his cheek. The scales were smooth, three dimensional—tiny raised golden ridges on his tanned skin. “And Mom...she knew. She hid our true identity from us. Made us think we were freaks.”

“She was probably trying to protect you.” His steady jade eyes anchored her.

“How do I shift?”

Dante chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, pulling Red into his embrace, the water lapping at his chest, and steam rising around his face. She snuggled against his chest, reveling in his strong protective arms. “You don’t shift,” he murmured into her ear, his loamy scent enveloping her. “Not until we break this spell. Until then, you’re stuck as a human with cool powers—like us.” He laughed and released her, taking her hand. “Well, not cool—that’s Snow.”

Red shook her head. “All my life I’ve worried that Snow and I were freaks, and now I’ve found out what we really are.” She burst out laughing. “A draki. I mean a dragon shifter? That’s awesome. I can’t wait to fly. What’s it like?”

“Amazing. The most thrilling thing I’ve experienced—apart from being with you.” Dante leaned in and kissed her forehead, inhaling deeply. “You smell so incredible.”

“And I keep thinking you smell great. That’s hilarious.”

“Draki have a highly-developed sense of smell, among other talents.” He grinned. “And all this time, I was worried you were a mage.”

“Yeah, that. What’s the deal with mages?”

“Let’s head back to the beach and I’ll tell you.”

There was a whole new world to discover. She couldn’t wait to tell Snow.

## §

She was a fire draki. Not a mage, a fire draki. The knowledge sang through Dante’s veins, his heart soaring as they swam back to the beach. They emerged, dripping, onto the shore. The cool breeze zipping down from the mountains couldn’t pierce the bubble of warmth that Red had unconsciously wrapped around them. She was so powerful, she manifested heat without thinking. Oh draki gods, he’d been a fool. All this time, he could’ve enjoyed her, treasured her, but instead, he’d been building barriers between them.

No more.

“I brought marshmallows,” he said. “Let’s grab some wood so we can toast them.” Not that she’d need wood. She could probably use sparks from her fingertips.

Red smiled. “Sounds like fun.” Still enveloped in her warmth, they strode into the trees and gathered up fallen twigs and branches. “This’ll last a while.” Red dragged a long branch back to the shore, and sat on the sand.

Dante dropped his pile of wood and sat beside her. He couldn’t believe his luck: she was gorgeous, always up for fun—and a draki. He placed his hand on the sand. The grains trembled and fell away beneath his palm, forming a mini fire pit.

Red burst out laughing. “That’s handy.”

He tossed driftwood into the depression. “I wonder how we’re going to start a fire?” he raised an eyebrow, grinning at her. Now, he’d get to see her in action.

§

Red held out her hand. Mom would kill her for revealing her secret. But Mom wasn't here, just Dante with his deep-green eyes. Warmth was already surging from her core through her limbs, but now she stoked the heat, letting it build. Sparks flitted from her fingers, landing on the wood. They sputtered out.

Dante grinned, eyes shining. "Go on," he said. "Burn, baby, burn."

Flame burst from Red's fingers, engulfing the firewood. Twigs crackled and branches blazed, tongues of fire flickering skyward.

Dante's large hand enclosed hers. "You're amazing, but be careful. You don't want to set the forest on fire." He laughed, the golden-scales on his ab muscles rippling. Dante reached into his backpack and flourished a pack of marshmallows. They speared the marshmallows, two to a stick, and held them over the blaze.

When the marshmallows were lightly browned and gooey inside, Dante blew on his and held out his stick for Red.

She took a bite, careful not to burn her lips. A long string of goo got stuck on her chin. She laughed.

Dante leaned in and traced his finger over her chin. As he sucked the sticky marshmallow off his finger, their eyes met. Red's laughter died. She swallowed, fiery tendrils running through her.

§

One moment they were laughing, the next Red was looking at him as if *he* were dessert, not the marshmallows. Her lips parted to say something, but he couldn't stand it any longer. Cupping her cheek with his palm, he leaned in and brushed his mouth against hers. Once. Twice.

The third time, the air crackled with heat and he couldn't stop. Her arms tightened around him, pulling him against her soft curves. His earth

powers coiled inside his belly and surged through his chest and arms, flying out of his fingertips, rocking the ground beneath them. Kissing Red was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before.

“Dante, you rock my world.” Red’s giggle gusted across his lips and he kissed her again, his draki powers singing.

And then a whirlwind blasted through his mind. *“You hypocrite. Kissing a mage when you told me I couldn’t.”*

He jerked backward, falling away from Red, landing on the sand on his elbows, gaping.

Zeph was standing at the top of the boulder, Snow at his side, eyes blazing. A fierce wind lashed the trees, and funneled across the bay, water whipping into peaks and showering Dante with cold spray. Furrows rippled through the sand. Grit pelted him.

*“I can’t believe it,”* Zeph raged. *“You lying snake. So holier than thou. ‘Don’t you dare kiss a mage, Zeph,’ and yet here you are, plundering her lips like they were treasure from the dragon shifters’ hoard.”* Green eyes blazing, he flung out a hand. A branch cracked and thudded to the sand.

Dante jumped to his feet, fists bunched. A tremor ran through the sand all the way down to the lake.

No, he had to control himself. He couldn’t fight his twin.

He held his hands up, trying to placate Zeph. “It’s okay,” he called out. “They’re draki shifters. You can kiss her all you want.”

Shock rippled across Zeph’s face, and he spun to Snow.

§

Sand flew through the air, and wild wind whipped Snow’s hair across her face. Trees lashed the sky with their branches. The water in the pretty bay was suddenly raised in stormy peaks—and Zeph and Dante were shooting

daggers at each other with their eyes. No, not daggers—make that cannonballs or nuclear weapons.

A huge branch cracked off and hit the beach. Snow jumped back. “Zeph, what’s going on?” It was as if the twins were arguing without a word.

Then the wind died and Zeph spun to her, jade eyes wild. His gaze fell to her lips. “Do you mind if I kiss you?” he asked.

Right here, in front of her sister? He was mad. “I thought you’d never ask.” The words slipped out of Snow, her voice breathy.

A playful breeze danced around her, combing its fingers through her hair, tugging her closer. She moved in, sliding her hands onto his chest. Grabbing a fistful of his T-shirt, she pulled his head down toward her. Her heart singing, Snow brushed her lips against his, tendrils of cool pleasure dancing through her veins.

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her tenderly, raised an eyebrow and grinned. And then he kissed her back.

Snow sighed and leaned into Zeph. She knew kissing him would be like this. Her stomach dipped and twisted like a wild roller-coaster.

He ran his fingers through her hair and gave her a cheeky smile. “Let’s save the rest for when we’re alone. Would you like that?”

He stole her breath when he looked at her like that. “Make it sometime soon,” she whispered.

“First, we’d better join my boring brother and your sister and find out the full story.”

“The full story about what?” Whatever had happened between Zeph and Dante had been pretty intense—but luckily, short lived.

Zeph enveloped her in a hug, running his fingers over her cheek. “Snow, you’re a draki, a dragon shapeshifter. In fact, you’re an ice draki.

When you manifest, you'll be able to shoot bolts of ice through the sky. And from the looks of things, you're mighty powerful. Can you imagine the snowstorm we could cook up together—me with my wind, and you with your ice? When we shift, we're gonna have lots of fun.”

“Shift? What? I—I don't understand.”

Zeph took her hand. And raised his eyebrows again. “Do you trust me?”

Snow gazed into his cheeky green eyes. “With my life.”

He gestured to the sand below. “Then, come on.” He tugged her hand and they leaped.

Snow's stomach lurched, wind swirled around them, slowing them, and they landed gently in the sand.

They strode over to Dante and Red, who were now toasting marshmallows over a crackling fire—Red's doing, no doubt.

“I didn't know you brought marshmallows,” Snow said to her sister.

“I didn't. Dante did. Apparently he always plans ahead.” Red glanced at the ice skates peeking out of Snow's pack, and grinned. “I should have realized you'd brought skates. You can never resist, can you?”

Snow shrugged. Did Red suspect anything? She'd had to use her powers and let loose or she would've gone mad, so, after each heavy rainfall, she'd sneaked out to the local skating rink late at night. Using her lock picking gear to get in, she'd frozen the thin layer of rain so she could take her skates for a whirl. Had Red known all along? Snow didn't dare ask. There were some things you didn't want your sister to know.

Zeph patted the sand and passed Snow a bunch of marshmallows speared on a stick. “Let me and Dante tell you both all about the dragon shifters' hoard, mages and the dangerous Fae that seek to control us.”

Snow and Red toasted their marshmallows over the crackling flames as Zeph and Dante revealed their secret, dangerous world.

## Dante's Pizza

Snow held Zeph's hand the whole way back in the Jeep, snuggled against him. Thinking of skating with him and kissing him made her feel like she still was dancing on ice. Soon, they were parked outside the warehouse and Draki Antiques. They made their way up the stairs behind Dante and Red.

"Come on in." Dante opened the door to the penthouse.

"It looks so different, without the lights, bar or DJ, and now it's full of antiques," Snow said.

Zeph grinned and took her hand in his. "Yeah, it took a bit of work to set up the party, but it was worth it because I got to dance with you." He led them over the slick gray tiles—past couches, oil paintings in gilt frames and pretty antique tables laden with blue-willow-patterned plates—to the area behind the screen.

A plush brown sofa squatted on a thick creamy rug. Beyond the living area, four bar stools were lined up by a marbled gray breakfast bar and kitchen island. The whole place looked like something out of a showroom. Their parents must be loaded.

"You're going to love my pizza." Dante opened the fridge and pulled out some yeast, then grabbed an enormous bowl and some flour from the pantry. "The trick is fresh ingredients and a good hot pizza stone."

Red waltzed over to Dante, giving him a sultry wink. "I can help with hot."

He grinned, and mixed the pizza ingredients.

"Just a moment." Snow pulled Red aside. "We can't be too late home," she whispered.

Red rolled her eyes. "I know. Stop panicking. Relax. Besides, I'm starving after all that exercise. Aren't you?"

Snow's stomach grumbled. "Yeah, I am, but we need to keep an eye on the time."

Zeph opened the fridge. "So, ladies, what would you like?"

"Hiking's thirsty work," Red said. "What have you got?"

"Orange, lemonade, raspberry, cola, beer."

"Water, please." Snow smiled.

Zeph poured water for everyone, barely taking his eyes off her.

"With lemon and ice?"

Snow laughed. "I hardly need ice, in fact I can cool everyone's drinks." She ran her hands over the glasses until they were misty. "There."

Zeph brushed her cheeks with his lips. "You're so handy."

Red sipped her drink, her eyes glued to Dante as he kneaded the pizza dough and flipped it in the air.

"This'll take a while." Dante took pizza sauce and cheese out of the fridge. "Zeph, why don't you show the girls around?"

"Sure, this way." Zeph took Snow's hand.

"I'll stay." Red picked up the pizza stone and grinned. "A little heat will speed up the cooking."

Snow rolled her eyes. "Please don't burn the place down."

Zeph cringed, and the twins exchanged glances.

"Sorry. I—I didn't mean..." Snow stuttered. Oh, she was a fool. Zeph had told her their home had been razed by that mage.

"It's fine. Come on." Zeph squeezed her hand. "There's loads of cool stuff here. I'll give you a guided tour."

Her fingers entwined in his, they wandered from behind the screen through the penthouse. Beautiful couches with rolled arms and studs lining their wooden frames were dotted around the showroom. They strolled

between old desks, carved dressers, gilt-edged mirrors and gramophones. Oil paintings adorned the walls, many of them fantasy themed.

“There’s so much stuff here. It must’ve taken hours to clear this all away for the party.”

“Yeah, our living room behind the screen was stacked high.”

Snow pointed at a painting. Fire roiled between the dragon and a man in a dark-green cloak. “Are those dragons draki? I mean, shifters, like us?” The style was familiar. She’d seen something similar lately. But where?

Oh, at Bella Magika with Krispin.

“Yes, they’re draki,” Zeph replied. “That’s my great-great-great grandfather, Ramus, fighting a mage during the Shifter and Mage Wars.”

“That’s amazing.” Their lives were the stuff of legends and fairytales.

They wandered up the stairs to the office where she’d thought the boys had been dealing drugs. Snow chuckled as Zeph showed her inside.

“What is it?” He grinned and led her past some steel cabinets, a pretty carved dresser and a tall gilt vase.

“I thought you were drug dealers at the party the other night.”

“Nah, I told you we were selling jewelry to get ransom money for our parents.” His eyes fell to her necklace. He opened his mouth, then snapped his jaw shut and showed her along the mezzanine storage floor.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing.” Zeph opened a door at the back of the office that led into a storage area that ran the length of the mezzanine. “Look at this.” He flipped back the lid on a polished roll top desk carved with flowers and ivy, revealing tiny compartments. “These drawers are for inkpots, quills and rolls of parchment. Cool, huh?”

They wandered among stacks of furniture, past pretty tables and fancy cabinets. At the end of the storage area was a huge stack of dusty leather-bound books. One lay open on a table, yellowed pages filled with ancient handwriting in Latin.

“This place is amazing,” she said. “We couldn’t see half of it from the party the other night.” She gestured though the windows to the showroom below. “It doesn’t really look like a dance floor anymore.”

Zeph slid his arms around her. “We don’t need a dance floor to dance. Shall we take a twirl, right here?” He rested his forehead against Snow’s, his breath brushing her cheek.

Snow’s eyes locked with his. A gentle breeze danced between them.

“Pizza’s ready,” Red bellowed from below, her voice jolting them apart.

Snow’s stomach growled. “Sorry,” she said, “I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

“Never mind. We can dance later.” Zeph led her back through the antique furniture and down the stairs into the kitchen.

The rich aroma of mozzarella, oregano and tomato made Snow’s stomach rumble again. Red and Dante were at the kitchen island, slicing pizza.

Zeph swooped in and plucked up a piping-hot slice and passed it to Snow, then got one of his own and took a huge bite. “It’s hot. But it’s good.” He licked his fingers.

Dante grinned. “Not bad, huh?”

Red took a bite and groaned. “Delicious.”

Snow held her pizza, cooling it with a shot of ice power. Her mouth watered.

A crash resounded below. Footsteps thudded up the stairs. Fists pounded on the door.

“What the heck?” Still munching pizza, Zeph raced over to open it. Snow hadn’t even taken a bite when the door burst open.

“Down on the floor! Get down! Get down!” Cops swarmed into the penthouse and tossed the screen to the floor, led by a woman with a buzz cut and arms as thick as a weightlifter’s.

Guns lifted to their shoulders, cops pounded into the living area.

“Down on the floor!” Buzzcut yelled again.

Heart thumping, her stomach in knots, Snow dropped her pizza. It landed face down as she scrambled to the ground. Beside her, Red and Dante also hit the floor.

Dante lifted his head. “What the—?”

“Police! Police! Search warrant!” Buzzcut pointed the gun at Zeph. “Get on the ground! Now. Hands where I can see them.”

As Zeph dropped to the floor, the gun veered toward Snow.

“Watch where you point that thing,” Zeph snapped. The muzzle of Buzzcut’s gun veered back to him.

Snow’s chest tightened.

Behind Buzzcut, an older cop smirked and stuck a thumb through his belt. His gaze slid over the girls and landed on Zeph and Dante. “Well, well, well,” he chortled. “I always said you two were trouble. And you thought you were such big shots.”

Snow peeked up and met Red’s gaze.

“We’re thigh deep in poop,” Red whispered.

Snow swallowed, her mind whirling. Zeph was adorable, smiling ruefully at her, flickers of wind teasing his blond hair. She’d suspected these

boys were bad news, but maybe Dante was the bad egg. “Please, sir, ma’am, Red and I shouldn’t be here. Can we go?”

“Shut up,” Buzzcut barked, waving her assault rifle at Snow again.

Snow wanted to blast the stupid weapon with ice. Next to her Red was sparking. Snow stretched out her hand to cool her sister.

“She’s right,” Zeph said. “The girls should be—”

The paunchy old cop kicked Zeph in the ribs and sneered, “I’m here to put you in your place—prison.”

What a lowlife.

“We haven’t done anything wrong.” Zeph winced, holding his side.

Dante elbowed Zeph. “Chief Wykner, I apologize. I’m not sure what you’ve heard, but we’re only running the antique shop.”

Chief Wykner? The SRO at school had been right—Chief Wykner really had it in for the Draki twins.

Chief Wykner’s lip curled. “Antique shop? A reliable source tells me that you’ve been dealing in drugs and stolen jewelry. And now, look what we’ve found.” He grabbed Zeph’s hand and yanked it up behind his back. Zeph cried out as Wykner slid his ring off his finger. “Like I said, stolen jewelry. You’re under arrest.”

“No,” Zeph yelled. “That’s a family heirloom.”

Wykner put restraints around Zeph’s wrists.

“This is all a misunderstanding,” Dante said. “That’s my brother’s ring. It’s been in the family for years.”

“Good, then I’m sure you won’t mind explaining that to the owner.”

Owner? Snow stifled a gasp. Zeph and Dante were being arrested over Zeph’s ring—that old-fashioned silver ring, the one she’d told Krispin about, like the one Krispin’s grandfather had made. Dread pooled in her stomach. Had Dante and Zeph stolen it from Krispin?

Zeph clutched his throbbing ribs. “Dante’s telling the truth,” he said through gritted teeth.

Buzzcut pulled him up off the floor with an iron grip. If she put much more pressure on his arm, she’d probably break it. “Shut up.”

Zeph couldn’t let this go. He didn’t want Snow to think he was a thief. Or to lose yet another irreplaceable heirloom from the dragon shifters’ hoard. “That ring’s mine. My grandmother gave it to me. Chief Wykner can’t just take it.”

“Watch me,” Wykner replied. He flourished the ring and slid it into a clear plastic evidence bag. “Congratulations,” he said to his team of cops. “This is a great start. Now let’s see what else we can find. Spread out, officers. We know these boys are dirty. Let’s bring this case home. And boys, hand over your phones. All of them.”

“How many phones do you think we have?” Zeph quipped. He wasn’t about to hand over his phone. His life was on that phone.

“I don’t have time for this nonsense.” Chief Wykner waved a hand toward the office upstairs. “Make sure you leave your cameras on, officers. We want this case clean as a whistle.”

Police traipsed past Wykner up the stairs to search the mezzanine floor. They crashed around. The clatter and thud of cupboards and drawers being emptied echoed through the penthouse. Each thump made Zeph flinch—and every time he did, Wykner’s smile got wider.

Zeph’s wind power swirled through his chest, straining to get out. “You’d better not damage anything you don’t want to pay for.”

“We’ll start with you then, Mr. Smart Alec.” Wykner found Zeph’s phone in less time than it took Zeph to inhale.

Zeph mind-linked with Dante. *“I want to toss him against the wall with a tornado. That’d wipe the smirk off his face.”*

*“I know, but we have to play it as cool as your girlfriend.”* Dante flashed a smile and handed his phone over to Buzzcut. *“Sorry, Ma’am. We don’t want any trouble.”*

Buzzcut rolled her eyes. *“You are trouble,”* she snapped, and stalked upstairs to the mezzanine.

Zeph glanced across to Snow and Red. They were glaring up at Wykner and the cops surrounding them, their fists balled—clearly trying to control their powers. Zeph wanted to say something, but anything he said made things worse. Besides, all the thudding from the office was making it hard to think. *“They’re gonna find the rest of the jewelry.”*

*“Not all of it,”* Dante replied. *“We hid some in the Jeep. Don’t panic. We’ll figure out a way to get our stuff back and save Mom and Dad.”*

Fear clutched Zeph’s chest. How would they save Mom and Dad if they lost everything? *“What if they find the safe and the cash?”*

Dante shrugged. *“I’ll think of something, but we can’t do anything if they arrest us for assault.”*

Buzzcut came back down the stairs and reported to Chief Wykner. *“The team have found more stolen jewelry, just like the source said. And we’ve found the safe. Want us to blow it?”*

Source? Who’d ratted them out? Snow? He’d caught her about to call the cops on them at their party. Had she dobbed them in today? No, she’d been with him every moment.

*“Pull the safe out,”* Chief Wykner said. *“We’ll take it with us. The rest of your squad can stay. Tell them to leave no stone unturned.”*

*“What? No!”* Wind power tugged at Zeph’s chest.

A faint tremor ran through the tiles—a reminder his brother wasn't as chill as he was making out.

“Well, well, well.” Wykner grinned wider than a Cheshire cat. “Looks like we need to get you all properly arrested. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” He put restraints on Dante's wrists, and then moved onto Red.

“Leave Red and Snow out of it,” Dante said. “They've got nothing to do with anything.”

Wykner shrugged. “That'll teach them not to hang around lowlifes like you two. Maybe after this, they'll make better decisions. Now, what was I saying? That's right. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I read you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

Dante raised his eyebrows. “*Not a word from here on in.*”

“*I'm not that stupid,*” Zeph replied.

Chief Wykner turned to Red and Snow. “I'll let you two stand and hand over your phones. Slowly now.”

“I'm sorry, Snow.” Zeph tried to catch her eye as she stood up, but her gaze slid away.

Buzzcut stomped from the office, down the stairs. “You. Shut up. Haven't you said enough?” she snapped.

“Haven't you?” Zeph demanded, refusing to be intimidated.

But then Dante shook his head, so Zeph snapped his mouth shut.

## §

“This is crazy.” Red tried to stifle the fury burning through her. “How can we be under arrest? You didn't find anything on us. We didn't do anything wrong.”

Wykner let Red stand then fastened the plastic restraints tightly around her wrists in front of her. “Do you understand the rights I just read you?”

“Ow!” The ties hurt, pinching her skin. She nodded, her heart sinking into her hiking boots. Snow was always so good at talking her way out of trouble—but she wasn’t saying anything. “Snow?”

“You didn’t find any drugs, did you?” Snow demanded. “Red’s right. You should let us go.”

“All in good time,” Buzzcut said. “We need to have a little chat at the police station. You can help us with our enquiries. Unless you’d like to resist arrest. Your phones, please. Both of you.” She passed Chief Wykner Snow’s backpack and held out her hand.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Red said. “Do you have a legal search warrant?”

“That’s right.” Snow backed her up. “You don’t get to look at our phones, not without a warrant. I know our rights, and I have a friend who’s a lawyer.”

Snow’s lawyer friend was a first year. She was bluffing. They had no way of getting out of this. Red put her head in her plastic-cuffed hands. Could the night get any worse?

They were escorted down the stairs and out onto the street. A small crowd was gathered outside, their eager faces lit up by the flashing lights of the police cars.

Red hid her face as they were perp-walked to police cars, past phones and cameras pointed at them. Worse, a van emblazoned with the Pinevale News logo was parked nearby. The local TV station’s camera roved over Dante and Zeph—whose jaws were locked and faces tight. Gods, with their face tats and leather hoodies, they looked like hardened

criminals in the flashing red and blue lights of the police cars. Red burned with embarrassment as the lens swung to her and Snow.

A wind rose. Flakes of snow gusted around a pretty blonde news anchor, dusting her swirling hair. “There’s a sudden freak snow storm here in downtown Pinevale. We’re witnessing the arrest of two young suspects in a crime ring. We believe they’re dealing in stolen jewelry and possibly drugs,” she shouted into her microphone. “These teens, Dante and Zephyr Draki, were recently expelled from Pinevale High shortly after the arson of their home and the mysterious disappearance of their parents. Apparently, two teenaged girls have been caught up in the boys’ dealings...”

Red nudged Snow. “Pull it together.”

“It’s not all me,” Snow hissed, “but I’ll try.”

Zeph’s hair was whipping in a frantic breeze as the cops shoved him and Dante into a police car. A gust rocked the car, and then the wind died, and the snow stopped.

Red breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mind your head.” Buzzcut pushed Red into another police car as the TV videographer zoomed in.

Snow clambered in beside her. “Mom’s going to kill us.”

Sparks flitted from Red’s hands. The faint stench of burnt upholstery tickled her nostrils. Gods, she could burn the inside of the car to cinders.

“Get a grip. We’ve got to stay in control,” Snow whispered.

Red nodded, but all the control in the world couldn’t stop this disaster.

## Chief Wykner

Wykner escorted Zeph and Dante into the gray police station ahead of Snow and Red.

“I’m so sorry,” Zeph called, turning back to Snow, shaking his head.

“Get moving,” Wykner snapped, marching him down a corridor.

They disappeared around a corner.

Snow kept her head down as Buzzcut led her and Red through the reception area. A sharp-eyed police woman watched from behind the thick glass of the reception cubicle. In the waiting area, an old guy was snoring, his head flung back against his chair. Two teens were playing on their phones. Slumped over in their chairs, a woman and two girls from school stared as she and Red shuffled past.

Snow blushed, trying to hide her embarrassment by pretending she was Detective Hardcastle in *The Case of the Crooked Cop*.

The first thing she noticed were the cameras high on the wall; the next was Buzzcut’s name badge: *Riz Baker*, not quite hidden by the small safe she was carrying.

Snow’s restraints dug into her wrists. Perhaps she could freeze them and shatter them. But then what? “Where are you taking us?” she asked Buzzcut.

Buzzcut ignored her and turned to a young cop. “Hey, you. Put this in evidence lockup on the top floor, would you?” She handed the young officer the safe.

He staggered under the weight, almost dropping it. “Man, that’s heavy.”

Buzzcut shrugged and piled half a dozen-evidence-bags from her pockets on top of the safe. “Once these are secure in the evidence room, get

the safecracker, will you?”

“Yes, sir.” Neck straining, he hefted the safe over to a door near reception, tapped in the code 1151 and traipsed up the stairs. Anyone in the waiting room could have rushed in after him—but no one did.

“Snow,” Red asked, “are you okay?”

Snow nodded.

“No talking,” Buzzcut snapped. She led them out of reception and down a corridor. “You go in here.” She waved Snow into a gray concrete room containing nothing but a steel table, chairs chained to the floor on either side, and three cameras on the ceiling.

The door slammed behind Snow, and she was alone.

Snow sat down, kicking her heels, breathing slowly to calm herself. It didn’t help. Cold shot through her veins. Here, of all places, she had to control her powers. Her stomach grumbled. She remembered the slice of pizza she’d dropped. What a waste—she hadn’t even eaten a bite.

She slumped in her chair, counting the cracks in the gray paint. Anything to stop her mind whirling.

At last the door opened.

Chief Wykner swaggered into the room, hands on his belt buckle. Buzzcut—Riz Baker—was behind him.

“Why am I a suspect?” Snow asked, determined not to be intimidated.

Wykner ignored her question and plonked himself on the other chair, resting his hands on the table. “What were you doing with the Draki boys?”

“Nothing. Eating pizza.” Snow’s stomach rumbled again.

“That’s not what your sister Red told me.” The chief leaned forward, a smirk dancing across his face. “Do you want to come clean?”

“We went for a walk in the woods and came back for pizza.” Snow leaned back and made herself comfortable, like Detective Hardcastle did whenever she was questioned by police. “I think you should let us go. We don’t know anything and you’re wasting everyone’s time.”

“You know,” Buzzcut said. “I think you’re right. We can take those restraints off now.” She pulled out a pair of clippers.

That’d been way too easy, and Wykner was smirking as if he had a whole stack of cards up his sleeve.

Before Buzzcut’s clippers could close around her restraints, a waft of icy air escaped Snow’s hands and the plastic shattered with a loud crack.

Buzzcut flinched.

A frown flickered over Wykner’s brow, then he leaned over the table with a gloating smile on his face. “You and your sister might be in over your heads. You may have seen something that will help us. We’re looking for old-fashioned jewelry like this.” He took out his phone and showed her photos of jewelry carved with runes, similar to Zeph’s ring. “Have you seen anything like this?”

“No. Well, just Zeph’s ring. And you have that.”

“And on your forest walk?” Wykner prompted.

Snow laughed, thinking of all the crime novels she’d read. “We didn’t see any bodies buried in the woods, if that’s what you’re after.”

“Bodies?” Wykner’s eyes narrowed. Buzzcut leaned over the table.

“It was a joke, um, in bad taste.” An icy shiver ran down Snow’s spine. She’d forgotten the twins’ parents were missing. “I didn’t see anything. I’m hungry and tired. It’s been a long day.”

The questions came thick and fast. “Did you notice any disturbed ground?” Wykner barked.

“Were Zeph or Dante acting strange?” Buzzcut snapped.

“Were you in danger at any time?” Wykner asked.

Snow shook her head. “There was nothing.” Just Zeph with his strong arms wrapped around her, his scent of ocean spray dancing around them. Zeph at the top of the stairs guarding the entrance to their office at the party. She had to find out, for once and for all, if these boys were bad. “Did you find any drugs?” Snow blurted.

“Maybe,” Chief Wykner said. “We’re unable to discuss evidence before it goes to trial.”

Buzzcut smiled and pulled a card from her breast pocket. “If you think of something—anything at all—call me. And be careful. Hanging out with those Draki twins is playing with fire.”

Fire? Red was fire, not Dante or Zeph. Snow stifled a snort.

Wykner’s heavy brows drew down. “You don’t understand how serious this is. They’re not only fencing stolen jewelry, but we still don’t know where Zeph and Dante’s parents are. Anything you remember might help us find them.”

Snow shrugged. “I’m sure they’ll turn up,” she lied. If a mage had taken them through a portal, there wasn’t much she could tell the police.

“I’m afraid we’re not holding out much hope for their parents at this stage,” Buzzcut said. “Zeph and Dante are clearly lying about their parents’ location. They may be dead. I’d advise against going hiking in the forest with those boys again.”

“Never mind,” Wykner said with inappropriate cheeriness. “It’s not her concern, because you won’t be seeing either of those delinquents again, will you, Snow?” He reached over the table and patted her hand.

Snow flinched—it was like being zapped with a cattle prod.

An image of Dante and Zeph digging two graves in the woods flashed through her mind, and she shivered, ice seeping through her veins.

She tried to push the image from her mind. It wouldn't budge. The boys' hands were dripping blood.

She shook her head and blinked, but Zeph's bloody hands remained.

"There, there." Wykner grinned triumphantly, patting her hand again.

Zeph and Dante had been acting weirdly when they'd first arrived at the forest. And they did have all that jewelry. And money. Mages, shifters and kidnappings through portals were all probably far-fetched lies.

"Please, step this way," Buzzcut ordered. "I'll escort you to your sister."

"I'm glad you'll stop seeing the Draki boys. Thank you for helping us with our enquiries." Wykner gave her an insidious smile, his eyes never leaving her face as Snow followed Buzzcut into the hall.

Wykner was right: the Draki twins were probably running a stolen jewelry and drug ring. The image of them standing over two graves, dripping blood, haunted her. She'd had a bad feeling about them from the start. She and Red had fallen for their charms—another ruse in a series of lies.

But not any more.

"Please, do stay safe," Wykner warned. "I wouldn't want two lovely girls like you and your sister to go missing, too."

Snow nodded. Thankfully, Chief Wykner was looking out for them.

## §

Red fretted at her restraints. Heating them into a slag of molten plastic probably wasn't the best option. Nor was refusing to answer any of Wykner's questions. Although, maybe if she'd answered, he wouldn't have walked out and left her here.

She hadn't told them anything, and she wasn't going to either—mostly because there was nothing to tell. Yes, the twins had acted a little weird when they'd first arrived in the forest car park, like they were sleuths from one of Snow's novels looking for clues, but acting weird wasn't a criminal offence. Besides, everything made sense now that Dante had explained shifters, mages and his parents' ransom.

The door opened and Snow walked into the room, trailed by the policewoman who'd raided the penthouse. Snow's hand restraints were gone. Perhaps this ordeal was finally over.

"Are you all right, Snow?"

"I'm fine. You?"

But Snow didn't look fine: she was pale, her eyes flitted around the room like she was a hunted rabbit and her hands were shaking.

The policewoman coughed impatiently and Snow stepped aside. "Let's get these off, shall we?" The officer clipped Red's restraints.

"Thank goodness." Red rubbed her wrists. "Does this mean we can go now?"

"You need to call someone to sign you out and take you home."

"What?" The idea of Mom coming here... No, there had to be another way. She turned to Snow and whispered, "What are we going to do? We can't ask Mom."

"I know. I'll call Krispin." Snow reached into her pocket. "Um, Ms. Baker, I'll need my phone."

"Of course. Wait here."

The instant the door closed, Red whispered, "What if you can't get hold of him? We told Mom we were going hiking with Brock and Jena."

"She mustn't find out," Snow said. She sat on the cold metal table and stared at Red with her piercing blue eyes. "This can't happen again. We

have to stay away from the Draki boys.”

“But—” Red started. Kissing Dante in the lake, his hair dripping and the ledge trembling beneath them had been mind blowing. He was the one, she was sure of it. To live without him... Her heart throbbed like a giant bruise. “No way. I like Dante—a lot. I’m not letting go of him.”

“You have to promise me you won’t see him again,” Snow insisted.

It was easy for Snow. She still had Krispin, a man who would jump at her slightest whim. “But Snow, I—I can’t,” Red said. “What about our shifter powers? Why are you saying that?”

“Do you want to be involved with someone dealing stolen jewelry and drugs?”

“They never found any drugs.” What was going on?

“Chief Wykner knows other things we don’t. And that’s not counting arson and their missing parents. They’re bad news.”

“You’re so cold,” Red snapped. “Don’t you have a heart?” She wanted to cling to Dante and never let him go.

“Red...” Snow turned away. She gulped back tears. “If only it wasn’t true... Chief Wykner showed me things. Zeph and Dante are criminals, Red. They’ve done terrible things.”

Red gasped. “What?”

Snow’s bowed shoulders shook. “I can’t. I just can’t bear talking about it. It’s so much worse than I imagined.”

What? Worse than dealing drugs? She didn’t ask—she didn’t want to upset Snow. Red’s fire sputtered and died. A gaping hollow opened inside her. How could they have been so wrong?

She patted Snow’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Snow,” Red forced herself to say. “I won’t see Dante, I promise.” She wrapped her arms around

her sister, every word tearing at her heart. Her chest tightened like a vice. She could hardly breathe.

Snow dabbed at her eyes. “You’re doing the right thing. I don’t want you hurt.”

The policewoman burst in with their phones and backpacks.

Snow took her phone from the woman’s hands and busied herself, texting Krispin. Finally, Snow looked up. “Krispin says it’s no problem at all. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Red nodded, too numb to talk. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t summon a spark of warmth. Her fire had gone out.

## §

Dante’s mind was spinning. What was happening out there? He’d been in this tiny interrogation room for ages. He tried to mind-link with Zeph. Nothing. He couldn’t hear his twin brother. He was boxed in, trapped. He paced the small gray room, fists clenching and unclenching—it only made his plastic restraints dig into his wrists more. It was his job to have a plan, to stay cool. He couldn’t manage either.

The door opened and the hard-as-nails Deputy Riz Baker marched in. “This way.” She pointed to the corridor.

“When can I see Zeph?” Dante asked.

“This way,” she barked, shoving him out into the hall.

Down the far end of the corridor, Red and Snow were being led toward reception by a young cop. That was good. Dante wanted to wave, but his hands were bound behind him.

Red turned, tears trailing down her cheeks. Her emerald eyes were red-rimmed and hollow.

Snow shot him a look that could’ve frozen the Arctic, and threw a protective arm around her sister’s shoulders, as if he was some thug after

her purse. Or her virtue.

“Red.” Dante’s cry was hoarse.

Red shook her head and mouthed, “Sorry.” More tears rolled down her cheeks before she turned away, unable to meet his eyes.

“What have you done to her?” Dante yelled, spinning to the policewoman.

“A better question would be what you were planning to do to them both next.” The cop smirked. “Buried any bodies in the woods lately, boy?”

What a dumb jibe, one not worth answering.

The doors to the police station opened and a guy walked in, and flung his arms around Snow, then hugged Red.

Hey, that was the guy the girls had been dancing with at the cosplay party, the one who’d been talking to their dealers. Dante recognized the fake blond-streaked hair of the guy who managed I.T. at school. What was he doing, hitting on two girls younger than him? “Red!”

Red’s shoulders curved in on themselves at the sound of his voice. She didn’t turn or glance back as the sleazeball wedged himself between Snow and Red, draped his slimy arms around their shoulders and led them outside.

As the doors shut, a waft of sulfur drifted across the reception.

“No!” Dante raced after the girls. “Red, Snow, look out—”

There was a pop. Pain arced through his back. His body spasmed and he fell, electric jolts cramping every muscle. The floor rumbled beneath him as his powers leaked from his body.

Deputy Riz Baker towered over him, her taser aimed at his thighs. “I’ll give you another shot if you try to escape custody again,” she snarled.

Dante sat up, gasping. Knowing it was over. Whatever had happened here tonight had killed the love he’d glimpsed in Red’s emerald

eyes and extinguished the spark of passion between them. Or had it all been a lie? Had Red and Snow—in league with that mage—set them up and betrayed them to the police?

The thought hit him like a kick in the gut.

His mind still reeling, he let the deputy push him into another interrogation room. Wykner was sitting on the opposite side of a metal table, thumbing through a manila folder. The door shut behind Dante.

“What on earth is going on? Where’s Zeph?”

“There’s no need to make a fuss.” Baker put a hand on his shoulder. “Sit down. I’m sure we can sort everything out.”

Dante nodded. “That would be good.” He’d hardly made it into the seat when Baker yanked his arms back—none too gently. With a snip, the restraints cutting into his wrists were gone. Dante sighed. If this was a good cop, bad cop routine, they were short a good cop.

Wykner turned the file around and leafed through photos and sketches of Zeph’s ring and other dragon shifters’ hoard jewelry.

Dante balled his fists, before relaxing them again. He wasn’t going to give anything away.

“You see,” Wykner said conversationally. “We’ve been notified about missing items fitting these descriptions, and now you’ve been identified as the thieves.”

Dante snapped upright. “That’s impossible! The jewelry’s ours.”

Wykner snorted. “You want us to believe that? We found over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in your safe.”

“Antiques are an expensive business. My parents carried a lot of cash.”

“And we have reports of you fencing precious antiques and dealing drugs.”

Dante clenched his jaw. “Whoever told you that, lied.” Had Snow or Red said such things? Surely not Red. In his heart, he knew she’d never betray him. Snow could’ve ratted them out, but if she had, Zeph would be devastated.

Wykner pushed a piece of paper across the table. “We’ve made it easy for you. Sign this statement, admit to the theft, and we’ll ask the judge for leniency—”

Deputy Baker butted in. “Tell us who you’re working for, and we might even drop the charges.”

Wykner smiled. “Go on, make it easy on yourself, Dante. We want what’s best for you.”

Dante glanced at the document.

*I, Dante Draki, admit to fencing stolen goods, the theft of heirloom jewelry, and...*

“I’m not signing anything.” Dante crossed his arms.

“I would, if I were you.” Wykner smiled. “If I have to take this case all the way, I’ll make sure you rot in jail. And we’ll also be pursuing drug charges. I’m sure there’s something hidden in your antique store.”

Was Wykner implying he’d plant evidence? Surely not. Dante stared at the gray walls. He needed to get out of this hellhole, but not by digging himself into more trouble. “*Zeph, if you can hear me. Don’t sign anything.*”

“*I’m not that stupid,*” Zeph replied.

Dante breathed a sigh of relief. “*What are we going to do?*”

Wykner leered. “That’s right, you might as well get comfortable. You can sign, or you can stay here. Admit you stole the jewelry, and we can move on.”

Dante shook his head. If only he could think of a plan that didn’t involve ringing Assiya’s mother. The family lawyer and a member of the

Draki Council, she'd be furious if she found out Dante and Zeph were selling precious artifacts from the dragon shifters' hoard.

Wykner tapped the false confession in front of Dante. "I'll leave this here. I wouldn't wait too long to sign it if I were you."

Dante sighed again. Talking to Wykner was like banging your head against a brick wall. "I'd like to call my lawyer, please."

Deputy Baker raised an eyebrow and walked out.

"Fine," Wykner spat. "You do that then." He stalked off, leaving Dante alone—without a phone.

## §

Zeph kicked the concrete wall. It didn't help, he still felt trapped, his wind power pushing to get loose. What was going on?

It felt like he'd been waiting for hours when Wykner strode in carrying a pink box and brushing a flurry of crumbs off his jacket. "You and your brother are really in trouble now," he muttered. "I can make it easier for you, Zephyr. Deputy Baker, would you release Zephyr's restraints?"

Buzzcut snipped the plastic ties around his wrists.

Zeph gestured at the pink box. "Sorry, did I disturb you from eating your donut?"

Wykner narrowed his eyes, then plastered on a smile. "Not at all," he said. "And for your information, I'm eating bacon, lettuce and tomato focaccia. Very tasty. Want some?" He opened the box and the heady aroma of bacon, herbed bread and tomato wafted out.

Zeph's stomach groaned. "*This is torture.*"

"*What's happening? Flame it, are they hurting you?*" Dante asked. "*Don't tell him anything. He has to let us ring a lawyer, and he knows it.*"

"*I'm not stupid.*" Zeph reached out a hand.

Wykner snapped the box shut. “We need to get to the bottom of this, first. Now, when did you start stealing jewels? Was it after your parents disappeared? Or did you get them out of the way?”

“No,” Zeph said. “The jewels are ours. Dante—”

Wykner’s grin got wider. “Oh, I understand now. It’s good that you’re admitting he stole the jewelry. You know, he’s already thrown you under the bus.”

Dante would never get him into trouble. Draki stuck together. Zeph bunched his hands on his thighs. The aroma of baked bread and bacon was driving him insane. “I did not say that.”

*“What’s happening now?”* Dante asked.

*“You should smell these focaccias. If I get any hungrier, I might tell him whatever he wants.”* Zeph held back a grin.

*“Don’t even joke about it,”* Dante snapped.

*“Gotta do something. I’m going crazy here.”* Zeph turned his attention back to Wykner.

The toad of a man was still talking, “...and so, you’re going to do the sensible thing, aren’t you?”

“I always do the sensible thing,” Zephyr replied.

*“Ask for a lawyer,”* Dante prompted.

“Which is why I want to talk to my lawyer,” Zeph said.

Raised voices echoed outside. “I’ll go see who that is.” Buzzcut opened the door.

Assiya’s mom barged in. “Excuse me, but what have the Draki boys been charged with?”

Buzzcut stood as straight as an arrow, as if she was facing a drill sergeant. “The Chief of Police can help you, ma’am.”

Wykner smiled with his teeth. “The boys are just answering a few harmless questions.”

“So, you’re not charging them. Good. Then we’re out of here, Zeph.” Assiya’s mom turned to the police woman. “Please release Dante Draki. Now.”

Wykner slitted his eyes.

Deputy Baker looked at her boss, clearly wanting him to make the call.

“For goodness sakes, they’re teenagers. Do you really want to battle me in court?” Assiya’s mom snapped.

Wykner shook his head. “No Ma’am. We’re finished with them. They’re now free to leave. Dante’s in the room down the hall. Deputy, would you go and get him?”

Zeph stood slowly, suppressing a grin. Assiya’s mom was a force to be reckoned with. “*Dante, Assiya’s mom’s turned up. We’re going home.*”

“*Awesome news. At least, going home is.*”

“Zeph!” Assiya’s mom snapped. “Stop dawdling.”

“*I don’t know. We might be safer if we stay here a bit longer,*” Zeph mind-linked. “Thank you. I really appreciate—”

Assiya’s mom shook her head. “Not here. Keep your mouth shut and don’t say, or even *think*, anything. Understand?”

Zeph nodded as she whisked him out of the room. Dante joined them in the foyer. No one said a word as they were signed out and hustled into the car. Dante slid into the front passenger seat beside Assiya’s mom.

Assiya was sitting on the backseat, her eyes wide. “What have you two been up to?” she asked.

“Hi.” Zeph got into the car beside her. “Thanks for getting your mom to rescue us.”

“Wasn’t me,” Assiya said. “Someone on the Draki Council saw you guys on TV. I wanted to come along to make sure you were all right. Man, you’re in deep trouble.”

“That’s enough.” Assiya’s mom snapped, starting the engine. She drove out of the car park before she said anything. “What were you two thinking of—selling the hoard? Most of those pieces are magical artifacts. Your family has been tasked with protecting the hoard for generations. The jewelry isn’t yours. And now you’ve got yourselves into trouble with the law.”

Assiya rolled her eyes behind her mom’s back, but her mom kept talking.

“The Draki Council had a truce with mages, and now you’re stomping around, destroying it.”

“Strange truce,” Zeph snapped. “The mages attacked us, stole our guardian stones and kidnapped our parents.”

“That’s enough lip from you, Zephyr. Your parents would be disappointed—”

“That’s right,” Dante interrupted. “Our parents. We have to get them back. We have to save them, because none of you will.”

“You know that’s up to the Draki Council, not two hotheads who’ve barely earned their scales. You’re making everything worse. The council will be hearing about this.”

Zeph shook his head. “What are they going to do? A big fat pile of nothing, like last time?”

Assiya gasped.

Her mother stopped the car and rounded on Zeph. “You’d better start thinking about how to get those jewels back, boys. If you don’t, that mage and the police will be the least of your problems.”

## Betrayal

Red dragged herself up the stairs to their apartment, Snow trailing behind her. She hoped Mom thought they were tucked in bed, but dreaded the worst. Red whispered, “We’ll tell Mom we fell asleep in front of a movie after being tired from hiking.”

“I doubt Mom will buy it,” Snow replied. “But it’s worth a try.”

Before she unlocked the door, she checked her phone. Yikes, 2am—and she’d missed five texts from Mom. Red slipped the key into the lock.

“Quietly,” Snow whispered over her shoulder.

Red nodded and turned the key. The TV was blaring in the lounge, light flickering down the hallway.

“She knows we’re not home or she’d never have the volume up that loud,” Snow breathed in Red’s ear. “Let’s try sneaking to bed anyway.”

Red slipped across the threshold, heart hammering, Snow right behind her. They eased the door shut and tiptoed along the hall.

“Red! Snow! In here at once!” Mom’s tone could strip paint.

Snow shrugged, and they walked into the living room.

Mom glared at them, flinging a hand at the TV screen. A rerun of Pinevale News was playing on YouTube. Mom pressed the remote and the news rolled from the beginning again.

“Two expelled boys? Crime lords? Fencing stolen goods?” Mom stood, jamming a hand on a hip, and stabbed her forefinger at Red. “And I trusted you. ‘Hiking,’ you said, ‘with Jena and Brock.’ A fat pack of lies. You’ve been hanging out with the underworld of Pinevale.” Her lips compressed into a thin white line. “How many times have you been out with those boys, Red?”

Red shrugged uneasily, not meeting Mom’s gaze.

“Answer me now,” Mom snapped.

“A couple.”

“Your eyes are red.” Mom squinted at Red. “Are you two doing drugs? Stealing jewelry to support a habit? Luckily, I have no valuables in the house or they wouldn’t be safe from my own daughters.”

Snow sidled over to Mom and put an arm around her. “It’s okay, Mom. I’ll make sure Red doesn’t do it again.”

What?! Anger seared through Red. Snow had organized the hike—not her. How dare she—

Snow winked at Red over Mom’s shoulder. “I only went along with her for company.”

What was Snow planning? Obviously something. Red was in deep water anyway, so she might as well play along with her sister and figure out what she was up to.

“Mom, I didn’t realize Dante was a criminal when I fell for him.” Her heart twisted as she spoke. She’d fallen hard.

“Dating criminals?” Mom snapped. “Is this how you repay me when I work for you night and day in that awful emergency department, slogging my heart out with drunkards, drug addicts and victims of accidents and abuse. Every day, the blood, the mayhem—just so you two can sneak out and break my heart?”

“Mom,” Snow objected, “I said I only went along to keep Red company. I have a...” Snow bit her lip.

“What is it, darling?” Mom asked.

Man, it was unfair how Mom always believed Snow—but Red would never rat out her sister.

“I have a boyfriend. He’s down below, waiting. Let me show you.” Snow pulled back the living room curtain. What was she up to now? “See?”

said Snow.

Krispin was parked under a street light below, leaning against his candy-apple-red Jag.

“Just a moment, Mom.” Snow sent a quick text. Red craned her head to read it.

*Wave for Mom.*

Krispin looked up and waved, flashing a broad smile that would make any mother’s heart melt. He’d pulled on a sweater and a letterman’s jacket and looked like a wholesome, hard-working boyfriend. Under the streetlights, he looked younger, closer to their age.

“Oh, what a nice boy. Did he bring you home from the police station?”

“Yes, he is nice, Mom. The moment we got into trouble with Red’s boyfriend, I phoned him and he fetched us. He even wanted to come up and meet you.”

“How lovely of him.” Mom’s tone was saccharin.

Red had trouble swallowing.

“The problem is that I haven’t had a chance to see him because I’ve been with Red and her boyfriend, Dante, so often lately.” Snow bit her lip and made puppy eyes at Mom. “Mom, would you mind if I went out on a date with Krispin tomorrow night?”

Mom looked out the window at Krispin, who waved and climbed into his Jag. “Sure you can, darling.”

Red’s blood ran hot. She felt like puking. What was Snow playing at?

Snow caught her eye and winked again.

Mom spun away from the window to face Red. “You’re grounded.”

“Grounded?” What did Mom think she was—a child? She was eighteen for flames’ sake. But now was obviously not the time to negotiate with Mom. Not when she was so irate.

“Give me your phone,” Mom asked. “Unlock it.” Red passed her phone to Mom. Her mother thumbed through the calls and found her last one from Dante. “Look right here. I can see when he called you to organize that hike.”

Nope, that was their lunch date at the Brown Sugar Cafe, but Mom didn’t need to know that. Red gritted her teeth. Enough was enough. “I didn’t even organize it. Snow did.”

“Me?” Snow rolled her eyes. “I’ve liked Krispin for ages. Here, my phone proves it.” Snow opened her photos and showed Mom snaps of Krispin in the library, others she’d downloaded from social media and more of them on their dinner date outside a pretty stone building with turrets.

Mom nodded. “I can see Red led you astray, Snow. Red, you’ve shown very poor judgment.” Mom flipped to Red’s photos.

Thank goodness she had none of her and Dante. Even as she had the thought, Red’s chest twanged. Not even a photo, and he’d been so wonderful. It was so hard to believe he was a criminal. He looked the part, but did criminals bake brownies and make your heart melt? He’d given her a glimpse of her future as a draki shifter. Of course that was impossible, probably more lies.

“Red! What have you done?” Mom whispered hoarsely. The color leached from her face. “You snooped in my drawer.” She thrust Red’s phone at her.

On the display were the photos of Mom’s marriage certificate, the snap of Dad and the pearlescent scales from dad’s costume.

Wait. Pearlescent scales?

Dante hadn't lied. He'd explained their powers. Their heritage. "We know what Dad was. That we're draki shifters, Mom."

Mom's jaw dropped and the color leached from her face. "Get to bed." She jabbed the remote, silencing the blaring TV. Then she stalked from the room and slammed her bedroom door.

§

Mom hammered on Red's bedroom door. Red rolled over and ignored her. A crack of light from the hallway sliced into her room, hitting the closed curtains. Red burrowed down deeper in bed.

"Red, honey." Mom walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. Red didn't turn to face her. Mom rested her hand on Red's shoulder.

Although she wanted to, Red didn't shrug off Mom's touch.

"I'm sorry for getting so angry last night. I've been thinking. Those boys are hardened criminals, and have been fooling a lot of people, so it's no surprise that you were taken in by them." Mom gave a little chuckle. "After all, Dante is extremely good-looking, despite the strange tattoos on his face."

Red rolled over and faced Mom. "As good-looking as Dad?"

Mom inhaled sharply, her breath hissing.

Red didn't feel like sparing Mom's feelings. "Is that how Dad looked when he manifested as a dragon?"

Shock rippled across Mom's face, highlighted by the shaft of light from the hall. "I — I..."

"I know you won't talk about it," Red snapped and rolled over again, showing Mom her back.

There was a long pause.

"You're right. I don't want to talk about it," Mom said. "That world is way too dangerous. I've slogged my whole life so we could leave it

behind us.” Her feet padded across the carpet and the door snicked shut.

Red let out a shuddering sigh, tears escaping her gritty eyes. She pulled her phone out from under the covers, and, for the hundredth time, she texted Dante. The first fifty or so she’d been determined to break up with him, but now she was worried. Was he still stuck in that police station?

*Are you there?*

She flicked to Pinevale News and scrolled through the headlines, but there was nothing apart from a tiny article about two jewel thieves being taken out of police custody by their lawyer in the wee hours of the morning.

At least she knew they were home again. Did Dante have his phone back? Or was he deliberately ignoring her?

Red groaned. She knew what they’d felt had been real. Dante had answered all the questions that had gnawed at her for years—Mom’s silence about Dad, her and Snow’s powers... What he’d said had explained everything.

His velvet lips and green eyes flashed before Red’s eyes.

Another tear stung her cheek. Dante didn’t seem like a thief.

What had Chief Wykner told her sister to change her mind so radically? Whatever it was, it had to be bad.

## The Eagle

Snow rifled through her wardrobe. Nothing. Wall to wall nothing that Krispin hadn't seen before. She tossed her sequined top on the growing pile of clothes. Red had been moping in her room all day, barely speaking to her or Mom. Although Snow felt bad for Red, she couldn't let her sister's funk ruin her chances with Krispin.

Snow had trusted Zeph, really liked him, but he was a bad egg. She had to move on. In time, Red would see things clearly.

"Well, isn't that a fancy car," Mom called from the living room. "I didn't see it properly last night. Are you ready, Snow?"

"Nearly," Snow answered. She dug into the pile and pulled on her ice-blue summer dress and sparkly stiletto sandals, then glanced in the mirror. At least the dress complimented the beautiful pendant Krispin had given her. She burst out of her room and raced for the front door.

Mom raised an eyebrow. "He looks like a nice boy. Now, where are you going again?" she asked, like she hadn't been told half a million times already.

"The Eagle. It's a comedy club." Snow sighed. "And yes, I'll be back before midnight."

Red emerged from her room with bloodshot eyes, dragging her fingers through her tousled hair. "So lame. You should be going out dancing, or hang gliding, or something exciting."

"This is my kind of fun," Snow called over her shoulder. She raced out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Krispin was holding the passenger door of the Jag open, looking as hot as ever. Perhaps he would've rather gone hang gliding, or parasailing, or even surfing at the beach. "Hi, thanks for picking me up."

He smiled, glancing at her dress and necklace. “You look lovely tonight. I was wondering if I should introduce myself to your mother.”

Anything but that. Snow had narrowly escaped being grounded. Mom might change her mind. “It’s all fine.”

Krispin helped her into her seat and walked around the hood, giving Snow time to admire the elegant cut of his dark suit. He jumped into the car. “I’m sure you’ll love The Eagle. Have you been before?”

“No. I’m looking forward to it.” Snow tugged the hem of her dress down her thighs.

The Jag purred to life and surged forward. They cruised through the streets, the lights of downtown flashing past and the blare of music spilling from clubs and bars. Krispin’s ring glinted on his fingers as he turned the steering wheel.

Strange. He was wearing the ring that looked like Zeph’s. No, like the one Zeph had stolen. But if Krispin was wearing his, then what had the police confiscated during their raid? There must be more than one. “That ring’s beautiful work. Your grandfather must’ve been a remarkable man.”

“He was a master jeweler, renowned in his time,” Krispin replied. He stopped the car in a pokey carpark in an unlit alley, and turned to her, his warm brown eyes deep enough to lose herself in. “What about you? Is there anyone interesting in your family?”

Did he mean Red? Why was he always asking about her? “Ah, my family’s not that interesting.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Krispin’s smile was like sunshine.

“I’m not sure. I never knew my father, or his side of the family,” she blurted.

Krispin’s phone beeped. “Good gracious, we’re running late.” He jumped out of the car and opened her door, then held out his arm. His old-

fashioned chivalry was totally adorable.

Snow's heart melted as she took his elbow. "So, who's on at The Eagle, tonight? Do you know?"

"It's a surprise." He winked, walking her along the alley. "Look, here we are."

A battered swivel sign stating *The Eagle Club* pointed to a stairwell in an old stone building. Strange, she'd walked past here many times to meet Jena outside the gym and never noticed that sign. Or the stairwell.

Krispin led her up the stairs. Loud voices echoed off stone walls. An overpowering floral scent mixed with stale alcohol wafted down the stairs. On the first floor, they entered an open door.

The place was a real dive with murky lighting, a tiny bar crammed along the near wall, and a stage by the adjacent wall surrounded by a clutter of tables. Snow was struck by the beauty of the people seated at the tables—their elegant evening wear, the pretty-faced men and gorgeous women. They seemed out of place in a dive like this, among the tropical plants lining the far windows and tacky twinkling lights strung across the ceiling.

A woman flung back her head laughing, light glinting off an old-fashioned pistol strapped to a hip holster on her sequined dress. The handsome dark-haired man seated next to her crossed his legs and leaned back, a finely-honed sword flashing as he moved.

Suddenly Snow's best dancing dress felt dowdy and frumpy. "Um, was I supposed to wear cosplay or an evening gown?"

"Not at all." Krispin smiled.

He led her to the bar, past a man wearing a silver eye patch and an old-fashioned purple frock coat. A muzzled puma prowled beside the man on a leash that reflected the colors of the rainbow. A jagged scar ran along the side of its nose.

Hang on. Snow had seen a similarly-scarred puma at the Draki twins cosplay rave. This one's black coat was dull and sad. The creature turned and stared at Snow piteously, as if begging her to rescue it. Poor thing. An impulse to set the creature free washed over her.

That was ridiculous. Even if she could free it, where would it go? There was nowhere for a puma in their little apartment.

The man's good eye raked over Snow from head to foot, undressing her with his eyes. He grinned.

She shivered. What a creep.

Krispin was already ordering drinks. "A Daiquiri, milady?"

Snow laughed. "No, a lemon, lime and bitters, please."

"Ah, naturally." He leaned over the bar. "A lemon, lime and bitters for the lady, and a gin and tonic for me."

"Will that be all, sir?" the bartender asked.

"Yes." Krispin touched Snow's hand, smiling. A tingle ran through her arm and she felt like she was walking on air. It always felt so good to be around him. "Why don't you find a seat?" he said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"Sure." Snow made her way to the only empty table, right next to the stage—a dangerous walk if the comedian was in the mood to heckle the audience, but the man up on the stage didn't notice her.

Surrounded by writhing smog, he was cradling a mike in one hand and his vape pipe in the other. "...well, they were therianthropes. And you know the thing is, that when you see one, you'll find more. Am I right?"

The crowd raised their glasses.

What was he talking about?

"But what can you do? All hot air and no substance." He took a drag of his vape and puffed it across the stage. Then he waved his hands. "If only

I could get them to turn into mice and run away.”

Snow gasped as the vape-smoke changed into mice and ran off the stage, squeaking. What an amazing trick.

“Eek, eek, eek. That’ll learn them,” the comedian squeaked to roars of laughter.

Snow wasn’t sure what was funny, but she chuckled along with the crowd.

A voice came over the loudspeaker. “Put your hands together for Danny the stand-up magician.” The crowd hooted and stomped as Danny made his way off the stage.

It was a pity she’d missed the beginning of the act. Good comedians built up to a punchline—and she’d really missed the joke. Where was Krispin? He should be over here by now. Snow scanned the bar and spotted Chief Wykner shaking Krispin’s hand then dashing toward the exit. Why was he here?

“And now, here she is. The wonderful, hilarious Miss Pink.”

A gorgeous woman with bright pink hair and amazing green and pink floral tattoos up her arms sauntered up onto the stage to a round of applause.

Krispin made his way through the tables, ducking past a tall woman in a gold ballgown, and slid into the chair next to Snow. He glanced up at the stage. “I hope I haven’t missed anything.” He took her hand and another tingle ran up her arm.

“I’ve always wanted to be in the movies.” Miss Pink cast her soulful hazel eyes over the audience, fluttering her eyelashes to appreciative applause. “But when I turned up for my casting call, the director said I didn’t sound like an elf. So, I told him, ‘Yes, but I listen like one.’” She cupped a hand to her daintily-pointed ear.

A titter ran through the crowd. Snow shifted. Since Krispin had sat down, people were watching them, their gazes sliding away whenever she turned.

Miss Pink continued, “And you know the funniest thing is...”

A familiar-looking guy with a baby face and blue eyes sidled up to Krispin. “Mr. Sparkles, I thought I’d missed you.” He looked Snow up and down. “Most impressive. I thought there was another, too? Do you have a moment?”

With a jolt, Snow recognized him. It was Angelface, one of the guys who’d attacked her and Red in the alley. Frost rimmed the table under Snow’s hands. What was Angelface doing here? And why was he calling Krispin Mr. Sparkles?

“I’ll be back in a moment, Snow,” Krispin got up and sauntered with Angelface through the crowd to a group of guys at the bar.

He was clearly popular. Everyone in the group shook his hand then bumped fists. That wasn’t the only weird thing: these men with their perfect complexions and great physiques were familiar. Snow gasped. They were all in Angelface’s gang.

No, they couldn’t be. She must be mistaken. Snow clutched her purse and walked over.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” Angelface said. “We’re doing our best to recover everything. We know it’s valuable.”

Krispin waved them off. “I must attend to my beautiful date now. Better luck next time.”

That was weird. “What was that about?” Snow asked. “Why is he calling you sir?”

“I’ve helped him out a couple of times.” Krispin smiled, oozing charm. “They’re friends running a business...an online business. When

their computers break down, losing data can be very expensive. Don't worry, I'll sort it out later."

Snow nodded, although he hadn't explained anything.

By the time they reached their seats, Miss Pink was finishing up. "So, that's all, people. I'll be here all week." She blew kisses into the audience.

Half a dozen people stood up and cheered, pretending to catch her kisses. "I love you, Miss Pink!" a fervent fan yelled.

She gave a tiny wave back, an ethereal glow lighting her features. She gracefully, blew more kisses and drifted off the stage as if she really was an elf.

The applause was deafening.

"Time for a music break with the Ladybugs, the best beetles in the world," the announcer said over the speaker, chuckling at his own sad joke.

The crowd groaned. Murmurs broke out as four women in leather warrior princess outfits ran up onto the stage. One sat behind the drums and the others grabbed their instruments. Their music pounded through the bar.

A couple got up and danced. More and more people were moving. Most of them, to the bar.

Krispin held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

"That'd be lovely," Snow said. Everyone whirled and spun like they were from a bygone era. Krispin was right at home. Half way through, he took off his jacket and threw it over his chair.

"Would you like another drink?" Krispin asked when the last beats of the song died away. "All that dancing is making me thirsty."

"I'd love a bottle of lemonade," Snow replied, taking her seat.

"Coming up." He grinned and waved, catching up to the man with the silver eye-patch.

What was Krispin doing talking to a creepy guy like him? Snow looked about for his puma. The creature was in the closest of three cages, right next to the ladies' bathroom, its scarred muzzle pressed up against the bars.

A phone beeped in Krispin's jacket pocket.

"Hey, Krispin?" Snow reached for his jacket. "Your phone."

Krispin didn't hear her. She pulled his jacket off the chair. Three phones tumbled out. Light flashed across a silver phone, like Zeph's. She flipped it over. A Soaring Dragons band sticker was on the back—it was Zeph's phone.

The thought of Zeph was like a fresh breeze, bringing memories of ocean spray. She blinked. Wykner, the chief of police had just been here. Had he confiscated Zeph and Dante's phones to give them to Krispin?

As a detective, she'd failed to notice the clues: the weird handshakes; the gang who'd accosted them, sent by Mr. Sparkles—Krispin.

Krispin was out to get her.

No, surely she was being paranoid.

Krispin's phone's screen lit up with a message from Chief Wykner.  
*Mr. Sparkles, meet me at Bella Magika at midnight.*

Hang on. When they'd been attacked in the alley Angelface had said Mr. Sparkles had sent them—Mr. Sparkles was Krispin. They all called him sir. Was he their ringleader?

Snow's mind whirled. This whole place felt wrong. It was as if she could suddenly see things as they truly were. The guns and pistols were no longer fashion accessories; they were weapons Wykner should have confiscated. And Krispin was nothing more than a crook. A corrupt guy dealing with a corrupt cop and the gang Zeph and Dante were selling the jewelry to. No wonder he had so much money. And Wykner had helped

him. What if the police raid was a set up to get into the Draki house and steal their jewels?

Heart hammering, Snow shoved the boys' phones in her purse and put Krispin's phone back in his coat pocket. She swallowed, feeling shivery—but not the good kind—and sidled out of her seat.

Krispin was standing by the entrance. Worse, Angelface was talking to him, watching her over Krispin's shoulder.

She had to play it cool. She picked up her phone and texted Red. *“Help! Krispin's a crook. Get Dante an—”*

Krispin was making his way across the bar toward her.

Snow pushed send without finishing. She had to get out of here.

Angelface was hovering by the exit, so she headed for the bathroom. Perhaps it had a window. As she wove between the tables, her stiletto skidded on an ice-slick on the floor. She had to get a grip.

The puma called to her as she passed, a chirrup that could barely be heard over the music. It reached a paw through the bars.

“You want to escape, too?” Snow asked. “Of course you do.” Its nearly-human eyes stared at her above the jagged scar on its nose. This was the puma she'd seen at the party—a shifter. No matter the risk, she had to save the big cat. She couldn't leave this puma with the creep with the silver eye patch. She lifted the metal bar holding the cage door, then kept on walking. As she opened the graffitied bathroom door, the puma pushed the cage open and bounded off, a shadow in the gloom.

The bathroom walls, floor, and even the mirrors and windows were covered in bright graffiti. Miss Pink, the comedian, was at the far end of the row of sinks peering through the graffiti at a sliver of mirror, applying lipstick to her perfect lips. Above her was a sash window, big enough to jump out.

“The puma’s loose!” someone yelled. The bar erupted into shouting. Miss Pink was standing right under the window. “Excuse me,” Snow ventured.

Ignoring the commotion and Snow, Miss Pink sipped her drink. She fussed in her purse, and took out a hairbrush, then brushed her hair high above her delicately-pointed ears.

Snow stared. Those pointy ears were real.

Miss Pink scowled at the mirror. “Stop staring, shifter.”

Shifter? The twins were right—she and Red were shifters.

Footsteps thudded toward the bathroom. There wasn’t much time. Desperate to create a diversion, Snow snatched the comedian’s purse and threw it out the bathroom door. Lipstick and makeup rolled across the threshold.

“You nasty cow!” Miss Pink flung her drink at Snow.

Snow threw out a hand and the flying liquid turned to jagged ice.

As Miss Pink scrambled after her makeup, Snow kicked off her sparkly stilettos and jumped onto the sink. The window wouldn’t budge. “No!” Snow gritted her teeth and pulled harder, slipping on the ice-slicked basin.

A spine-chilling snarl echoed through the bathroom.

“More shifter scum,” Miss Pink yelled at the puma, shoving her stage makeup back into her purse.

Snow fumbled along the top sill. There—a cold metal wedge. She pushed it open, trying to quell her heart-stopping panic.

“Snow, my darling!” Krispin called through the doorway, shoving Miss Pink aside.

“Get out of here!” Miss Pink yelled, smacking him in the head with her purse. “This is the ladies’ bathroom. And that’s my purse. Give it

back!” She was tougher than her delicate beauty suggested.

Snow’s heart thundered in her chest as she pulled at the old latch. It gave with a crack. She pushed the creaking window open.

Grappling with Miss Pink in the doorway, Krispin yelled, “Snow! Wait!”

Snow didn’t look back. A growl like a motor mower ripped through the bathroom as she shimmied out the window, tearing her dress. Snow clung to the window ledge, her purse whacking her hip, and her legs dangling in space. Below was a ten-foot foot drop. She gnawed her lip, the salty tang of blood flooding her mouth.

“Snow!” Krispin yelled, barging through the bathroom, the puma leaping after him.

She had no choice. Her heartbeat roaring like an avalanche, Snow let go.

A hand reached out and grabbed hers, jolting her arm in its socket. Her shoulder aching, Snow hung in midair as Krispin leered out the window.

§

Red’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen. A text from Snow. “*Help! Krispin’s a crook. Get Dante an—*”

Contact Dante? Really? After Snow’s performance last night?

It was unlike her sister to text for help.

Red phoned Snow.

No answer...

Her stomach churning, she tried again.

And again.

§

Krispin's hand crushing her wrist, Snow glanced down. She could do this. She had to. Ice surged through her veins. She let her power build, and zapped Krispin's hand.

He screamed and let go.

Snow plummeted through the air. Wind whipped her hair. Without Zeph to cushion her landing, her bare feet hit the asphalt hard, the jolt running through her knees, hips and spine.

Above, Krispin was yelling. A growl, and a thud echoed behind her. Snow didn't stop. Her feet still throbbing, she sprinted across the carpark, to the street as the puma bounded past her onto the main road.

§

Red rang Snow again. This time, someone was panting on the other end of the line—rasping ragged breaths.

“Snow, you okay?”

“Help!”

“Snow! Where are you?”

Red ran to the kitchen and snatched the car keys from the hook.

“I'm going to pick up Snow,” she called out to Mom.

Mom frowned. “Hey! You're grounded, missy.”

“She's stuck. I won't be long,” Red promised.

“If I hear you were anywhere near that Dante boy—”

“Sure, Mom,” Red rushed out the door, still listening to Snow's phone: echoing footsteps, heavy breathing and tooting horns. “Snow? Are you all right? Snow?”

§

Barefoot, Snow pounded along the street aiming for Jena's gym on the next block. If she could cut through the gym, she could leave Krispin behind.

The street was quiet here, only a few restaurants, a bar and a movie theatre

up ahead. A drunken group stumbled out of a restaurant, weaving along the sidewalk toward her.

Snow ran faster, dodging past the crowd, and almost crashed into a couple strolling arm in arm. Her phone buzzed in her purse. She grabbed at it, fumbled, and picked it up. “Help—”

An engine revved. Brakes screeched. Footsteps pounded the sidewalk behind her.

She had to get out of here, find somewhere to hide. Snow dropped the phone back into her bag and risked glancing back. Krispin was twenty yards away, a snarl on his face, his Jag on the curb behind him.

Ahead, a movie theatre was emptying out. She had to run faster. Mix with the crowd. Breathing heavily, she sprinted for the throng, and pushed her way past a guy insisting to his friends that he was, “Bond, James Bond.”

Caught in the press of people, Snow almost missed Jena’s late-night gym. Legs burning, she ran up the stairs into the gym and pulled out her phone to call Red.

The door opened. Krispin burst through and flung out a hand. Blue flame sizzled over Snow’s head and hit the weight rack, bursting into a shower of sparks.

She ducked and ran past a row of exercycles and treadmills. A security guard barreled toward her. She sidestepped the woman and pushed through the double doors to the emergency exit. Snow leaped outside onto the metal landing, the diamond grating biting into her aching feet.

“Get back here,” the security guard yelled.

“May I help? I can retrieve her.” Krispin’s charming voice floated on the evening air.

“Don’t let him out!” Snow pelted down the rickety metal fire escape.

Krispin touched the guard's arm and she stood aside. He raced down the steps, the clatter of his tread pounding through Snow's temples.

Snow vaulted from the bottom of the fire escape onto the street. Her feet were throbbing. She panted, each breath searing her lungs like ice shards.

She kept running, half hobbling. She'd never make it to Dante and Zeph's without being caught. But home was too far. It was hard to think. She raced past buildings. Most places were shut for the night.

Footsteps echoed behind her, closing in.

Snarls sliced through the night. Behind her, people screamed.

Snow didn't glance back. Her breath came in short gasps. Her chest ached, air sawing in and out of her lungs. Her feet felt as if she was running on shards. 'Keep moving,' she told herself, heart thundering as Krispin's footsteps neared.

Krispin crashed into her, pushing her up against a wall. The concrete bit into her back. Streaked with sweat, his handsome face was contorted into an ugly grimace. "Got you," he sneered.

## §

Honking the horn of her banged-up old Honda, Red pulled up outside Draki Antiques with a screech of tires and a jolt. The car was straddling the pavement, but she didn't care. She had to help Snow. The Draki twins—criminals or not—were her only hope.

She raced to the door and pounded her fists on the wood. "Zeph! Dante!"

"Zeph!" Dante hollered from upstairs.

It felt like she was waiting forever. She checked her phone again. Still nothing from Snow. Her sister might've dropped her phone. Or worse. Red fought back tears.

“Hold on,” Dante called. Footsteps thudded down the stairs and he pushed the door open. His hair was mussed. His intense jade eyes burned through her.

§

Krispin pinned Snow’s hands against the rough brick above her head. Power sizzled through his fingers, running down her arms.

That tingle she’d always felt when he touched her was mage power. Snow struggled, but couldn’t get loose.

“You can’t get away that easily, my darling,” Krispin purred. “I have great things in store for you and your sister.”

Snow yanked on the storm of ice surging in her veins.

Hang on, what was she thinking? He looked so beautiful. So sweet. This was the lovely guy who’d taken her to Bella Magika and given her a pretty necklace. It was her beloved Krispin.

Snow smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

“I knew you’d see reason, darling.” His grin was like sunshine coming out from behind a cloud. He touched the teardrop on her necklace with his fingertip. It glowed, warming her skin deliciously. “With your powers and the power in these trinkets, we could work together to make the world a better place.”

Snow’s head swam. “A better place? That sounds wonderful.”

He flashed her a brilliant smile. “Your sister could work with us too, but more of that later, darling.”

“You mean Red?”

“Yes. Red. We have access to more powerful trinkets if she’d like some too.”

What a generous man.

Screams rang out. There was a flash of black. The puma charged up behind Krispin. It snarled, hackles raised.

Krispin spun, releasing her hands.

Snow, no longer dazzled by his magic, stomped on his foot and blasted a wave of ice at him. She sprinted off, turned up a side street, and almost ran into a crowd of people standing outside the velvet ropes of The Enchanted Phoenix. Catchy music pumped out the door.

On the other side of the crowd, she spied Angelface and the creepy man with the silver eye patch. They grinned, nudged each other and threaded their way through the crowd.

Snow glanced back as Krispin came around the corner, a smirk plastered over his face.

She barged into the throng. Krispin shouldered his way through the crowd after her.

Silver Eye laughed, pushing past a Goth with blue hair. Angelface shoved his way out toward the street so she couldn't escape.

Snow leaped over the velvet ropes barring the entrance. A security guard who was almost as wide as the doorway jumped in her way. Determined not to stop, she smacked into him.

He grabbed her arms. "You seem to be in a hurry," he shouted over the throbbing music.

"Yeah." Snow pointed past through the throng at Krispin, Angelface and Silver Eye. "That jerk and his crazy friends are stalking me."

The huge guard let go of her. "Get inside and stay safe." He cracked his knuckles, and plowed through the crowd toward Krispin. "Right, then."

Krispin put his hand up, fingers outstretched. A spark flickered from his fingers, then he lowered his hand and shrugged. "See you soon, kid," he

called to Snow, still smirking. He pulled out his phone and messaged someone, his smirk growing.

Was he calling his buddy, Chief Wykner? Snow regretted not taking Krispin's phone. Except she wasn't a thief. A break-in artist—but not a thief. That was a line she wouldn't cross.

Snow ran to the bathroom, but all the windows were barred. She returned to the bar and pulled her phone out of her bag. The music was too loud to talk, so she texted Red. "*Help. I'm at The Enchanted Phoenix. Please come.*"

§

Zeph rolled off the couch. Someone was banging up a storm downstairs. As Dante crashed down the stairs, Zeph mind-linked. "*What's up?*"

"*Zeph, it's Red,*" Dante answered.

"*And Snow?*" He'd bought a new phone, and remembered her number. A fat lot of good it'd done him—she hadn't answered any of his calls since they'd left the police station. And from what Dante had said, that smooth-looking dude from their party had taken the sisters home with Red looking devastated and Snow as icy as a blizzard.

Zeph raced down the stairs.

"*Can't see her,*" Dante replied.

Red's voice was frantic. Her eyes, panicked. "Snow went to The Eagle with Krispin, but now I think he's chasing her."

"Krispin?" Dante echoed.

"Yeah, the hot I.T. guy from school. We've got to go." Red ran back to her Honda without waiting. She stopped and glanced down at her phone.

Zeph barged past Dante. "Quick. We have to save Snow."

"Hold on," Dante grabbed Zeph's arm. "*That I.T. guy is a mage.*"

Zeph yanked his arm out of Dante's grip. "Hurry, Dante! She said The Eagle!" He mind-linked. "*You know what happens at The Eagle. It's a mage hangout. Snow's in their lair.*"

"Take a deep breath. Panicking won't save her," Dante told him. "*What if Red and Snow and that mage are setting a trap?*"

Wind buffeted Zeph's chest like a hurricane bent on destruction. He gave up trying to curb the power swirling around him. "I don't care."

Red checked her phone, then yelled, "Now she's at *The Enchanted Phoenix*. If you're coming, follow me." She jumped into her car.

"*Wait!*" Dante ordered.

Dante was always using the older-by-a-minute twin thing. Always stopping to plan. Not today. "We're coming," Zeph yelled. There was no way he was going to abandon Snow.

But Dante was right. While *The Enchanted Phoenix* was a haunt for shifters, Feron and Assiya had scented mages there recently. A great place for a trap.

## The Enchanted Phoenix

A text arrived from Red. *We're here.*

Snow strolled to the exit, but the security guard folded his arms, blocking her. "I'm sorry, you need to stay inside," he said. "I won't let you out there with that psycho and his gang prowling after you."

Gang—if the security guard knew the truth it would blow him away.

"Thank you." Snow waved her phone. "My sister's arrived now."

Zeph, Dante and Red rocked through the crowd, over the velvet ropes and walked up to the security guard.

Zeph's eyes locked with hers. The panic on his face clutched at her heart. He ignored the security guard, his lanky legs closing the gap between them. He pulled her into his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder. "Oh, gods, Snow. If anything had happened to you..."

Only then, did Snow let herself collapse, sinking against him, her breath shuddering out of her. "I'm all right. But they're catching shifters, keeping them in cages. I found your phone and Dante's." She passed Dante and Zeph their phones. "And you said your car was stolen. What make was it?"

"Hey, hey, none of that now. Let's get you back to the apartment where you'll be safe, and sort out a plan." Zeph wrapped an arm around her waist and walked her to the security guard. "Thank you for taking care of her," he said.

Red took her hand and Dante flanked Red. Together they strode out to the street. Except for the faint tang of sulfur, there was no sign of the mages. The sidewalks were full of rowdy, drunken party-goers staggering home. Flashing neon lights reflected off the traffic zipping past. A typical night in town.

Dante palmed his Jeep keys. “Red, do you want to ride with me?”

Red met Snow’s eyes. “No Dante, I’ll ride with my sister and Zeph. We’ll meet you at the antique store.”

Dante squeezed Red’s hand. “Stay close behind the Jeep. I don’t want anyone attacking you out of the blue. And if you see a black Harley-Davidson, put your foot on the gas.”

“Will do.” Red unlocked the Honda and got into the driver’s seat.

Zeph and Snow slid into the back, his arm still tightly around her. His ocean-green eyes were concerned. “Did they hurt you?” he murmured.

Snow gnawed her lip. “I’m okay. He tried, but I managed to evade him. It was a close call. The chief of police, what’s his name—Wykner?—texted Krispin and they’re working together. They’re meeting up at Bella Magika. Somehow Wykner tricked me into not trusting you.”

Zeph frowned. “If Wykner and the police are working with the mages, we’re in a lot more danger than we thought,” Zeph said. “Don’t worry about anything now. You’re safe with us.”

Snow snuggled into Zeph’s side, cocooned in his embrace. Peace stole over her. He was right—he was the safest haven in this madness. “I’m sorry I misjudged you.”

“Don’t worry about anything.” He kissed her hair. “Take it easy until we get back to the shop. I promise we’ll get this sorted. No one attacks my girl and gets away with it.”

My girl. A warm glow spread through Snow.

Red hit the gas and they followed Dante through the streets of Pinevale.

## §

As they headed up the stairs to Draki Antiques, Zeph cradled Snow, his wind powers surging in his chest, battering at his rib cage, dying to get free.

He tamped them down.

Her shoulders were bowed and she kept nibbling her lip. Frail, like a dried leaf—as if she'd blow away in the slightest breeze. He was afraid that if he let out a single ounce of wind power, she'd float away from him forever.

“I can't believe I fell for him,” she said. “How stupid.”

Fell for him? What was that all about? Zeph waited. It was better to discuss everything together—better four heads than two.

They reached the landing and Dante unlocked the door, and ushered Red, Zeph and Snow over the threshold.

“What do you mean?” Zeph asked. He steered her through the antiques, behind the screen to a couch, and sat down, his arm still around her. “What were you doing at that club? How did the mages find you?”

Red sat beside her sister and nudged her. “Zeph cares about you. He can take the truth.”

Snow's eyes slid away.

Whatever the truth was, it must be pretty dire for Snow to be so tied up in knots. He squeezed her shoulder. “You can trust me.” He let a tendril of warm breeze dance around her.

Her ice-blue eyes met his, hesitant. Scared. “I was on a date with him.”

Her words knocked the wind from Zeph's chest and left a gaping hollow.

## §

Disappointment flashed across Zeph's face.

Something in Snow's chest crumpled. No—she'd hurt him.

A moment later, Zeph flashed a smile. “We all make mistakes,” he whispered, brushing his lips against her hair. “It's okay. That won't stop me

caring about you. Besides, you said he was working with Wykner—that they were meeting at this Bella Magika place? If we’re going to confront them we need to know everything, so don’t hold back.”

Snow swallowed. “I, ah, took some selfies of my first date with him at Bella Magika. Maybe we should look at those.” Showing Zeph glowing photos of her and Krispin was the last thing Snow wanted, but if it helped...

“So you went on more than one date with a mage?” Zeph arched an eyebrow.

“Only two. And I didn’t know he was a mage until tonight.”

Dante walked into the living area with an ancient leather-bound book broader than him. He set it on the table and brushed off the dusty cover, which was emblazoned with a golden phoenix. “I haven’t tried this spell book yet. Are either of you good at Latin?”

Red outed Snow immediately. “She is.”

They got off the couch and went to join Dante at the table.

Dante opened the cracked brown leather cover. The yellowed pages were covered in dark floral scrawl and strange diagrams. “There’s got to be something in here somewhere. It’s the last of the old mage tomes upstairs.”

Red peered over Dante’s shoulder at a sketch. “Fae really exist, huh? And they even have pointy ears. What a thing.” She shook her head.

“Dante, I’m sorry.”

Dante squeezed her hand. “I understand. It’s a lot to take in at once. With the police against us, things must’ve looked pretty bad.”

“It’s my fault. I convinced her,” Snow muttered, biting her lip. “What are we looking for?”

Dante flipped the pages. “We need to discover how to reverse that ancient mage’s anti-shifting spell.”

Zeph yanked a laptop off the kitchen counter and set it up on the table. “And how to travel through portals, in case that mage reappears.” He hooked the laptop up to the projector they’d used at the party. “We have to find our parents. What’s your password, Dante?”

“Ah, I just changed that recently...” Dante’s dark skin flushed. “HotRed000.”

Red sniggered, sparks flitting from her fingers.

Snow unlocked her phone and passed it to Zeph. There was something personal about him having access to her life, but Snow trusted him. What had she been thinking yesterday? She’d let Wykner influence her too strongly. She tried to remember what he’d said, but her memories of the station were vague and blurry.

Zeph transferred the selfies of Snow and Krispin onto Dante’s laptop and projected them onto the wall. Her face was lit up like a Christmas tree next to Krispin’s, candles winking in the windows of the turret behind them.

“This is nothing like the light show Dante rigged for our cosplay rave,” Zeph said, “but at least one of the subjects is twice as beautiful as any of Dante’s animation homework projects.” He grinned at Snow.

She wanted to crawl under the table. Krispin was a creep and she’d never even seen it. Seeing them both smiling in ultra-bigger-than-life size made her nauseous. And that Zeph had to see it, too, was unbearable. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

Red’s eyes boggled at Dante admiringly. “You designed all those cool pictures for the rave? They were awesome!”

“Uh, yeah.” Dante shrugged and flipped another page, his eyes glued to the book.

“Whoa,” said Zeph. “What’s that?” He pointed at the selfie projected onto the wall. “Hang on, let me zoom in.”

Peeking around the corner of the mansion’s turret was something that glinted red in the light of Snow’s flash.

“It’s Krispin’s Jag.”

“No, that’s our car. It was stolen when we were at the Bond movie with you,” Dante exclaimed.

“What?” Snow’s throat was tight. “He told me he’d taken it in for repairs, that’s why he picked me up on his motorbike that night.”

“What color was his bike?” Zeph’s voice was strangled.

“Black. A big old one, you know, like the type bikers use.”

“Sounds like our Harley,” Dante said. “This guy is definitely connected to that mage. And Krispin stole our car.”

Zeph touched the necklace Krispin had given her. “Did he give you this?”

She nodded, swallowing. “After we went to the movies, we found him broken down on the side of the road in his Jag. I helped change his tire, so he gave me this necklace. He said his grandfather was a jeweler.”

Zeph touched the pendant, his fingers skimming her skin, sending a thrill through Snow. “Dante told me this is the Starglow Sapphire from the dragon shifters’ hoard. It’s really valuable. It was in the boot of our Jag when it was stolen.”

Snow gulped, horrified. “I’m sorry.” She fumbled around for the clasp. “I didn’t mean to. I’m not a thief—”

“No, I want you to have it.” Zeph took her hands and kissed them. “It matches your eyes.” He lowered his voice to whisper so only she could hear. “You’re more beautiful and precious than any sapphire.”

Heat rushed to Snow's cheeks, but she met his emerald gaze squarely. "So are you."

At the other end of the table, Dante let out a low whistle. "Snow, come over here. What does this mean?"

Zeph and Snow walked around the table to the dusty old book. The right page showed a hand-drawn sketch of a half-frozen shape-shifter—with a man's upper body and head, and lower puma limbs and a tail. It was like a creature out of a myth or a fairy tale.

Just like the puma she'd freed. Shifters were real. She'd been a fool to trust Wykner. And, like Krispin, he'd wielded some sort of power over her.

Next to the shifter were a mage and two pointy-eared Fae, one dressed in breeches and the other in an old-fashioned flowing gown, each holding crystals.

"Guardian stones," Dante whispered. "Zeph, what do you think?"

"They're guardian stones, for sure. They look like the ones that mage stole from us."

Red stabbed her finger at a heading over the page. "What does that say, Snow?"

Snow squinted at the smooth strokes and flowery tails on the letters.

*Dracones et bestias liberate.*

"Free the dragons and the beasts." She pointed at the next line. "And here it says: Harness the dragons and the beasts." She read the rest of the page. "I think it only works if you have the guardian stones."

Red frowned at the opposite page and pointed to a rope around a draki's neck. "What are those things?"

Dante answered. "Titanium cables. None of us can use our shifter powers if we're touching titanium." He turned to Snow, green eyes intense.

“Do you know how to get to that place?” He waved a hand at the selfie.  
“Looks like it’s surrounded by trees.”

“Bella Magika? Yeah, we drove past it to go hiking the other day,”  
Snow answered. “I can’t believe I trusted that dude.”

Zeph placed a gentle hand on Snow’s arm. “It’s not your fault,  
Snow. He’s obviously a powerful mage, and connected to the ancient mage  
who flamed us. He could be working for the old guy. By dating him, you  
may know exactly what we need to help us rescue Mom and Dad.” His  
earnest eyes saw right into Snow’s soul. A gentle breeze ruffled her hair.

Snow sighed. “I guess, like Detective Hardcastle says, it’s all a  
matter of perspective.”

Red rolled her eyes. “This is not a novel.”

“No,” replied Snow. “But we can learn things from novels.” Just  
like she’d learned about lock-picking from Hardcastle and applied those  
skills at the local skating rink so she could sneak in after hours. “I think we  
should investigate the scene of the crime.”

“Not more detective mumbo-jumbo,” Red groaned. “Even if it does  
sound like a good idea.”

Dante grinned. “I agree. Let’s go.” He grabbed the Jeep keys.

“Let’s all stay together this time.” Zeph squeezed Snow’s hand and  
whispered, “Now that I’ve got you back, I’m not letting go. Together or not  
at all.”

“Amen to that,” Dante said.

## Dead End

It was nearly midnight by the time the Jeep purred up the winding driveway to Bella Magika. Snow hadn't remembered the road being so rutted, the trees so overgrown and unkempt because she'd been so swept up in the whirlwind of Krispin's magic spell. She shook her head as Dante negotiated a pothole, branches clawing the sides of the Jeep. Maybe the driveway had seemed broader because they'd been on a motorbike. Snow shivered. To think she'd had her arms around that awful mage. What a creep.

Zeph slid an arm around her. "Are you okay?"

She frowned. "I don't know. Things look different to last week. I remember everything being more well-tended..." She gestured at the darkness around them. "But now..."

The Jeep's headlights swept up the drive, lighting up the wrought-iron gates. No, that couldn't be right. The gates were rusty, hanging open. The lampposts looked as if they hadn't burned in years.

Dante plowed through the gateway and passed wild tangled grass as high as her chest. She shook her head. Nothing made sense.

"What is it?" Zeph asked.

"It's so different, older, messy."

"He probably glamored things to fool you," Zeph said. "Don't worry, you're not the first person to be taken in by a mage."

Snow took comfort in Zeph's warm breeze dancing around them.

As Dante spun the Jeep around and parked off the road among the trees, the headlights illuminated the ruins of an old broken-down mansion with cracked marble stairs leading to a weather-worn wooden door with rusty latches. Only half of one of the turrets was standing, the rest a ruin of rubble at the base.

“I don’t understand. This place was thriving last week, with flickering chandeliers and beautiful oil paintings on the walls...” From the look on Zeph’s face, the twins were doing that telepathy thing again. “What is it?” Snow asked, her voice coming out sharp.

Dante climbed out and reached into the Jeep, flicking on the inside light. He rummaged in the glove box, murmuring to Red.

Zeph took Snow’s hand and helped her out of the vehicle. “The world is about to get a little stranger, Snow,” he said. “We told you the mage disappeared through a portal. Can you explain exactly what happened when you came here with Krispin—everything you saw and did? That might help us get to the bottom of this.”

Snow bit her lip. “Well, we came up the driveway. There was beautiful shimmering gold light from those lamps by the gate. Then we came around the corner and passed manicured flower beds, and lamps twinkling in the trees.” She gestured helplessly at the wilderness around them. “I think we have the wrong place.”

“Hang on,” Dante barked. “Describe the light by the gate again.”

Snow shrugged. “I don’t know. It was golden light, okay?”

“Did you feel anything when you went through?” he asked.

Snow’s cheeks burned. “It’s hard to describe. I felt a weird tingle as we passed through the gate both times—on the way in, and out. I thought I was excited about being with Krispin, but now it seems rather strange.” Gods, how mortifying. Snow felt the blood drain from her face. “The same tingle I felt whenever Krispin touched me.”

Zeph squeezed her hand. “Snow, he was a mage. It’s not your fault. They can wind you around their little fingers. Anything else?”

Ice slithered through Snow’s veins. “No.” Her answer came out as the barest whisper. She felt small, insignificant and powerless.

Dante straightened and slammed his hand on the roof of the Jeep. “I think that mage took you through a portal, back in time to when this mansion was still standing. Think. Was there anything modern about the place?”

The faucet fittings, the lighting, the furniture—it had all been like a historical movie—even the waitress’ costume. “I think you’re right. It was like stepping back in time.”

“Wait. Was there anything he used to activate the portal?” Red asked Snow.

Snow shook her head then stopped mid-shake. “He had a remote in a ring on his finger.”

“What did it look like?” Zeph asked.

“That’s easy.” Snow gestured at his finger. “It was similar to yours.”

“Many of the artifacts from the dragon shifters’ hoard have magical properties,” said Dante. “If Zeph’s ring looks similar, we should be able to use it to go after him.”

Zeph slapped his forehead. “Except my ring was confiscated by the police.”

“Then I’ll break in and get it back,” Snow said.

“What? Break into the police station?” Dante shook his head. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“It’s night time, so they’ll be far too busy with drunks and disorderly behavior to worry about us,” Snow said. “I’ve got this.”

“Remember Snow,” Zeph growled, taking her hand. “Together or not at all.”

Snow nodded. “We just need something to distract them.”

“Distract them?” Red grinned beside Dante. “I know how to make sure they’re distracted.”

## Evidence

Dante parked around the corner from the police station and everyone got out of the Jeep. Snow took a deep breath and grasped Zeph's warm hand.

"Ready?" Red asked.

"Give us two minutes," Snow replied. "Are you sure you can distract them for long enough?"

"I was born to put on a show." Red winked. Dante gave a thumbs up. Red leaned against the side of the building, and Dante placed his hands on either side of her head and angled his body toward her, leaning in for a kiss.

"Trust him to get the fun job." Zeph stared at Snow's lips.

"Good luck," Snow whispered to her sister as she and Zeph walked off.

"Shouldn't they be wishing *us* luck?" Zeph muttered. "We're the ones breaking into the police station."

"I guess," Snow said. Their plan definitely wasn't failsafe. "I wish we had more time for planning, but we don't, so let's go." She and Zeph strode to the front entrance. "Cameras, Zeph."

Zeph nodded. His hair ruffled as his wind power shot up to the security cameras at the front of the building. They whipped from side to side, pointing up into the sky, wires trailing. Snow chased the wind up with a blast of frost. With any luck, those cameras were not only pointing in the wrong direction, they were literally frozen.

"Bit showy," Snow muttered to Zeph as they strode through the station doors into the reception.

There were all sorts of people slumped in chairs: from drunkards to a group of teen delinquents, and a bearded old man in ratty jeans muttering

under his breath that he'd been waiting for Billy for far too long. No one was paying any attention to her and Zeph.

The officer on duty banged her keyboard and swore into her headset.

"I think I've got the hang of it now." Zeph whispered, turning his palm up. A faint breeze stirred the reception camera cables, and wires flicked loose.

Snow shot a blast of cold at them, just to be sure.

Across the reception was the door that led to the stairs and the evidence room at the top of the building where the junior officer had taken their stuff.

"What are you two doing here?" The receptionist snapped at Zeph. "If you're waiting for someone, you need to sign in." She wasn't paying much attention, still bashing on her keyboard and frowning at the computer.

Zeph strode up. "Hi, we've come to see Chief Wykner. There's something he should know."

Thankfully, Snow knew the Chief was meeting Krispin at Bella Magika right now. She glanced at her phone. Maybe asking Red for two minutes had been too long.

"Oh, okay." The officer waved them over to the chairs. "Chief Wykner has stepped out, but one of the other officers will see you in a moment."

Finally, Red's screams ricocheted through the reception. An impressive start. The receptionist glanced at the entrance.

"How dare you!" Red's yell was only slightly muffled by the walls of the police station.

"How dare I what?" Dante shouted so loudly, the windows rattled.

Snow sidled toward the stairs as a couple of teens got up out of their seats and took their phones out, moving to the entrance to film the

argument.

A cop belted down the stairs, through the door and brushed right past her. “Can you tell me what’s going on?” he yelled to the officer on reception.

“The cameras are glitching. Why don’t you go and arrest them?” she asked. “I would, but I’m on desk duty.”

“Arrest them? For yelling? Not with everyone videoing.”

Another scream rocked through the building. Snow cringed. Red was overdoing it, but it was working. The room erupted into chaos, people racing to the doors to get a better look.

Snow nodded to Zeph. He stood behind her, shielding her from the receptionist, while she punched in the code: 1151. Heart in her mouth, Snow cracked open the door and peered up the stairs. Empty. She tapped Zeph on the shoulder and they dashed through the door, closing it fast.

Zeph flipped his hands up and sent a gust of wind, dislodging the camera. Jade eyes twinkling, he grinned at her. She knew how he felt. The rush was amazing. They ran up the stairs, two at a time, pulling on the pink disposable gloves they’d picked up at the store on the way.

At the top of the stairs, Zeph called, “This way.” He ran to a door labelled *Evidence Room*.

Snow pulled out her pocket knife and glanced around. Red’s screeching wasn’t as loud from in here, but her sister was still going for it. If Snow was any judge, Red was enjoying herself. Still, it made Snow’s stomach clench.

“I love you so much, and you get me arrested?” Red thundered. “How dare you!”

Dante yelled back. “How could you accuse me of such a thing? It’s the cops’ fault, not mine. I told you they made a mistake. Calm down—”

“Are you telling me I have a temper? *Really?*”

“What? No! That’s not what I meant.”

A cop called, “Someone back me up.”

Snow was trying not to listen. Red and Dante’s charade was mortifying enough—even if they’d all agreed it was necessary. Snow gritted her teeth. The last tumbler of the cylinder lock clicked. She tried the handle. They were in.

Zeph breezed past her, hands ready, his eyes sweeping the huge gray, windowless room with floor-to-ceiling shelving and labeled cubby holes. “No cameras,” he hissed.

Snow closed the door and jammed a chair under the handle.

“Our stuff must be in here, somewhere.” Zeph darted around the room, examining the shelves. He was right to hurry. Red’s brazen show wouldn’t hold people’s attention for longer than a few minutes—at least not without getting her arrested. Zeph ran his finger down the shelves to “D” and pulled down two boxes. *Draki, Zephyr and Draki, Dante*. “Nothing. Just paperwork.”

“Take it anyway,” Snow advised. He nodded and emptied the papers into his backpack.

“Keep looking. What are those over there?” Zeph pointed to large gray metal cubes the same color as the walls.

“Phew. Lock boxes,” Snow said. The locks were keypads. “That’ll be where they’re keeping your valuables.” She hoped. Surely something expensive like jewelry would be locked up—if Wykner hadn’t given Krispin the jewelry along with Dante and Zeph’s phones.

Snow rifled through her thief’s kit for an extra bobby pin while Zeph searched the labels on the safeboxes.

“How will you crack the code?” Zeph asked.

“I won’t. I’ll need to open the keypad panel and use my pocket knife as an override key on the lock behind it.”

“Here,” Zeph said. “The card on this lockbox says ‘*Draki—Zephyr and Dante. Safe contents.*’ That’ll be the ransom money we’ve been saving to get our parents back.”

“I’ll get your money back, you look for the jewelry.” Snow bit her lip.

Cheering and yelling drifted up from outside. Red and Dante’s show must be coming to an end.

“That’s enough. Move along, or you’ll be arrested,” a brassy voice thundered. “In three, two...”

There wasn’t much time. Snow’s hands shook.

Zeph reached his arm down the side of the lockbox. “Is this what you need? It looks like an override key.” He handed her a key. Those cops are so stupid. Imagine taping a key to the side of the cabinet.”

“Brilliant work.” She slid the keypad to the side and used the key on the lock behind it. The door sprang open, revealing thick wads of cash neatly stacked in plastic bags.

“That’s the ransom money from our safe.” Zeph shoveled the money into his bag while Snow scanned the rows of lockboxes methodically. Finally, she found one labeled, ‘*Draki—Zephyr and Dante. Evidence. Stolen Goods.*’ She searched for a key, feeling around the outside.

Nothing. She’d have to open this one. She slid the keypad aside and pushed her pocket knife into the override lock. Within an instant, it was slick with ice. She swallowed and took a deep breath.

“You got it?” Zeph asked. “We’re running out of time.”

“Yup, it’s coming,” Snow lied, wrestling with the lock. “Leave me the bag and go and find a window we can jump out of.” With her feet still

throbbing from jumping out of The Eagle, it wasn't her first choice, but Zeph was right about the lack of time. There was no way they'd get past reception now.

"Roger that." Zephyr sped out of the room in a gust of wind, boxes tumbling in his wake.

"Be careful," Snow muttered. "Oh, never mind." She fumbled with the lock. This wasn't working. Her hands were shaking, her power swirling out of control.

Feet clunked up the stairs.

They'd run out of time. Desperate, and out of options, Snow slid the keypad back and tried punching in the code from the door downstairs: 1151. The lock sprang open, revealing a treasure trove of beautiful jewelry: necklaces studded with sparkling emeralds; bracelets encrusted with diamonds; ruby and emerald rings inscribed with runes; sapphires and diamonds on chains; earrings; necklaces; and more. Snow hurriedly shoved them into the bag.

She shouldered the pack. Flames, it was heavy.

Oops. She almost forgot her pocket knife. She snatched it out of the lock and ran to the door. Whoever was coming up the stairs had stopped.

"Hey, is there someone up there?" a male officer called. "I thought I saw—what on earth?"

"Just me," Zeph said from the corridor.

Snow cracked open the evidence room door. What was Zeph doing, chatting with an officer?

Zeph raised an eyebrow. "This way," he said. "I need to show you something."

The officer followed. "Hey, who are you again?"

Snow's heart thundered.

“FBI,” Zeph said. “We’ve got this station under review.”

“What?” the cop spluttered.

“For a start, your security procedures...” Zeph shoved the man into a meeting room and slammed the door. “..are trash.” He held the handle as the officer bashed on the other side. A gust of wind blasted through the corridor. “Quick, Snow, ice it shut.”

Heart thrumming, Snow raced over and poured her ice power onto the door until a block of ice a foot thick sealed the entrance.

Zeph pulled her away, taking the heavy pack from her shoulder. “We’re done. Come on.” They raced around the corner to an open window, staring out over the two-story drop.

“Aren’t you supposed to make an ice staircase or something?” he asked.

The door crashed open, ice shards spraying the hall and tinkling down the stairwell.

Snow didn’t have time to roll her eyes. “Jump!”

Instinctively they held hands, and leaped, wind gusting around them. Snow turned to Zeph. He was so beautiful with his hair swirling in freefall—like an angel. He pulled her tight, wrapping his arms around her. And though she was buffeted by the wind and falling fast, she felt safe. They landed in a final gust, on a cushion of wind, a block away from the police station.

Red and Dante were waiting in the Jeep, the engine running, like they knew exactly where Zeph would land.

Of course, the twins had telepathy.

Red swung the car door open.

“Do you have everything?” Dante demanded as they clambered in.  
“All of it?”

“We got the lot,” Snow said. “Now, go!”

Snow’s heart faltered. They were going back to Bella Magika to rescue Zeph and Dante’s parents from an ancient, powerful mage. This was the place where she’d had her date with Krispin. He had something to do with all this. Nausea churned in her stomach. She clenched her fists together and tried to keep her ice power in check as her panic grew.

## Return to Bella Magika

Red looked over the back of the passenger seat, still flushed from the awesome argument she'd had with Dante. "Did anybody see you?"

"Um..." Snow said.

"So that would be a yes?"

"Hold on." Dante accelerated, the speed of the vehicle knocking them back in their seats.

"Don't speed," Snow said, her safety belt clicking. "We don't want to give anyone a reason to arrest us." She was as cool and collected as ever.

Red could hardly believe that her neatness freak of a little sister had actually raided a police station and was still as cool as a Frosty Blue. Who knew what could happen next.

"We got everything," Snow said. "All the money, jewelry and police documents. They have nothing left."

Zeph held out a hand encased in a pink glove. "What are we going to do with these?"

Snow frowned. "The detective novels don't mention that. We'd better destroy them."

"Easily fixed." Red eased a flicker of fire to her fingertips. "Tell me what you want to go up in smoke."

"Maybe not while Dante's driving," Zephyr said.

He was probably right. Red had worked to control her powers for years, but the Jeep probably wasn't the best place to test them. As Dante left the city outskirts and headed for the hills, Red held the gloves out the window. Flames burst from her fingers, setting them on fire. Flaming scraps of stinking latex flew out of her hand as Dante took a corner.

A police car flew toward them, its siren screaming. It shot past.

Leaning back over her seat, Red glanced out the rear window. With a screech of brakes, the car spun and zoomed after them. “Oh no!”

“Oh dear me, there’s a police car following us,” Snow grinned, like it was nothing.

“Red, I don’t suppose you could—?” Dante grimaced and shook his head. “Nah, dumb idea.”

“You’re right. I’m not fireballing a police car.” Red folded her arms. “No way. I might kill someone.”

“Ice is so treacherous at night.” As cool as a freezer drawer, Snow opened her backseat window and pointed her hand at the road behind them. Newly-formed ice glinted under the sweep of the cop car’s headlights.

The police car skidded and spun.

“Zeph, could you kindly blow them somewhere safe?” Snow asked.

“Could I ever!” Zeph barely waited for his window to wind down before sticking out a hand. He blew the police car out of its spin—into a ditch on the side of the road. The siren stuttered and stopped.

Chief Wykner jumped out and pulled out his revolver. Bullets peppered the trees on the side of the road as Dante swerved around a corner.

“Do you think he’ll call for back up?” Dante asked.

“What?” Snow said, pale. “And admit a couple of kids stole records from their lockup and they lost control of a police car for no reason?”

Red swallowed. “They’re really going to hate us now.”

“Welcome to our club,” Dante muttered, staring ahead. He was going fast now, the pines whipping past, while Zeph scrabbled through the jewels in the pack. “I’m sorry to drag you both into this.”

“Don’t be,” Red said. Every minute with Dante was amazing.

“Ah, here it is.” Zeph pulled out his old silver ring as they turned into the narrow gravel driveway, headlights sweeping through the tangled

trees. “So, what do I need to do with this ring?”

“Wait,” Snow said. “Rub the ring as we get to the gate. In three, two, one...now.” They were almost upon the old rusty gates.

Zeph rubbed the ring. Nothing happened. “Maybe it’s not the right —”

Shimmering golden light bathed the gates. Red gasped. They were no longer rusty and bent. Shiny new iron gleamed in the glow from flaming lanterns on the lampposts on either side.

Red’s jaw dropped. “This is amazing.”

The gates slid open and Dante drove through. As they sped through the wall of golden light, her flame power surged and a tingle ran through her body.

Around the corner, a sweeping lawn and flower beds were highlighted by twinkling brass lamps.

Zeph pointed at the pretty mansion with the two turrets. Brass lanterns twinkled at the front door. “If you think Mom and Dad are in there, why are we going so slowly?” Zeph asked.

“Stealth.” Dante turned the vehicle around and pulled in under the trees. “Also, now we’re facing home for a quick getaway.”

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Zeph bristled while Dante stashed the Jeep key on top of the front tire. Every second wasted was a second they weren’t saving Mom and Dad. “You ready?”

“Wait a moment... There, done.” Dante straightened. “Now, if we get separated, any one of us can retrieve the key and get away. If anything happens to Zeph and me, contact Assiya’s mom on the Draki Council.”

Zeph got out his phone and texted the girls. “I’ve texted you her number. Come on, let’s go.”

The twins and sisters skirted the edge of the forest before cutting across the garden to the back of the house. They ducked low and made a beeline toward a plain green door under the eaves.

Zeph got there first, and turned the doorknob. Blast, it was locked. He shook his head.

“I’ll need a little light,” Snow whispered, pulling out her Swiss army knife.

Red flicked her fingers, her flames illuminating the lock. “Your hex key won’t work on that.”

“Hmmm.” Snow pulled out an extra big extension on her Swiss army knife. “Never thought I’d be using this. Totally old school.” A sweet frown played on her face as she worked. All Zeph wanted to do was grab her in his arms and take her away from this place, but his parents were in danger and Snow was no fragile snowflake—she was a blizzard.

Snow pushed the door open and they crept inside the kitchen, startling a woman in an old-fashioned lace-up bodice, ruffled sleeves and full skirts. Her ringlets bobbed near the beeswax candle she was carrying. She dropped the candle and raised her arms. “You!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Snow said. “I forgot—”

In a burst of sulfur, a blue fireball erupted from the woman’s hands.

Daggers of ice shot from Snow’s hands, hissing into the fireball. The mage’s flame built, turning the ice to water, spraying the room and dousing the candle.

Zeph’s chest constricted. His power surging, he leaped forward, flinging wind. His gust blew the woman backward and she knocked her head on a cupboard.

Snow had an angry red welt on her wrist.

“Snow! Are you all right?” Zeph cradled her wrist in his hands.

“I’m fine.” Snow dragged her fingers over the welt, and tiny ice crystals formed on the surface of her reddened skin. “See? All good.”

Red rushed over to the woman and rolled her onto her side, placing her in the recovery position.

“She was the waitress that served us,” Snow said. “I hope she’s going to be all right.”

Zeph checked the woman’s pulse. “She should be fine.”

“Flame it,” Dante said. “We should have questioned her.”

“Too late now.” When it came to Snow, Zeph wasn’t taking risks. “Come on, let’s look for our parents. Snow, you’ve been here before. Where do you suggest we try first?”

Snow shrugged. “Maybe one of the turrets?”

## Dungeon

Dante led the way, sneaking from the kitchen to a spiral staircase, Red, Zeph and Snow tagging along behind him.

“Shh. Do you hear that?” Zeph stopped, tilting his head.

“Come on.” Dante wasn’t going to hang around and get caught. He climbed the wooden stairs, heart in his mouth.

“Wait,” Snow said. “What’s this on the wall?” She picked up a shiny strand of metal.

Zeph plucked it from her fingers and examined it. “It looks like a strand of titanium cable.”

Dante’s palms slicked. Mom and Dad had to be here. The titanium rope proved it. He and the others crept past a landing, the rest of the way up the stairs. At the top, Dante stopped at a closed wooden door and listened. Nothing. Only his heart beating double speed.

He turned to the others and mouthed. “Three. Two. One. Go.”

They burst in, hands out, ready to blast an enemy. There was no one there, just a shelf of books, a table, and a gryphon statuette on top of a dais at the far end of the room. He sighed. “Dead end.”

“Wait.” Snow pulled books out of the bookcase.

Zeph and Red prodded the stones in the walls, looking for hidden room.

Dante’s attention was drawn to the gryphon. It was the size of a teacup and exquisitely made. A small chest was grasped in its talons. His earth powers surged—this was valuable. Dante pocketed it. “Find anything?” he asked Snow, hoping against hope.

Snow sighed. “I thought I’d find a secret tunnel. Come on, let’s search the rest of the house.” Snow raced to the door, Zeph close behind

her.

“Good try.” Red said.

Dante grabbed Red’s hand and they dashed from the room.

“Maybe we should go back to where Snow found the titanium strand,” Zeph suggested as they jogged down the stairs.

Dante pulled at the sconces on the way down and felt along the grouting. He couldn’t give up, although the search for his parents was like banging his head against a stone wall—a wall that wouldn’t budge.

They searched down the whole staircase, feeling for hidden catches, testing the wooden planks on each stair.

“There’s nothing here. Maybe we’re looking for the wrong thing,” Red said. “A mage might have a different way to get in.” She pointed above their heads. “Look.” Up high, the corner of the stone ceiling was covered in soot.

“A fireball?” Dante beamed. “You can do one of those, Red. Stand back everyone.” He ushered Snow and Zeph up a few stairs.

Red unleashed her fire power, arms stretched above her. A ball of roiling fire shot from her fingers, illuminating her hair, her creamy skin. By the draki gods, she was beautiful. The fireball hit the sooty patch on the ceiling and immediately extinguished. The stones in the wall at the bottom of the circular stair graunched. A crack appeared and the wall swung open, revealing a pitch-black tunnel.

“Snow, you were right,” Red said. “There is a secret tunnel. All those mystery novels paid off. Detective Hardcastle would be proud of us.”

Snow beamed. “We couldn’t have done it without you, Red.” She went to step through, but Zeph pulled her back.

Zeph was so protective of Snow. Dante didn’t blame him. He felt the same way about Red, even though the girls were powerful.

Dante took Red's hand in his. Everything felt so much brighter when she was close. Warmer. Together, they sneaked through the gap and down the winding stairs, Snow and Zeph close on their heels. The wall swung closed behind them, plunging them into darkness. The smell of mold and the constant drip of water clogged Dante's senses. He pulled out his phone. Zeph and Snow did too. The light from their screens reflected off the slime-encrusted stone. Unlit torches sat in sconces lining the walls on either side. Red flung a hand out and the torches burst into flame.

"Way to go," Dante said, pocketing his phone. Lit by flame, the highlights in Red's hair glinted. Gods, she was striking. He had to focus, save their parents, so Dante resisted the urge to kiss her, rolled his shoulders, and raced down the stairs ahead of the others. He rounded a corner. And stopped. "Quick! Douse the lights!" he hissed to Zeph.

A blast of Zeph's icy wind shot through the stairwell, blowing out the torches.

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As Zeph extinguished the torches, Snow's hand grew icy, then the temperature in the stairwell plummeted. He snatched his hand out of Snow's, and shook his aching fingers. Something was drastically wrong.

*"What is it, Dante?"* Zeph mind-linked.

A scream sliced through the dark.

Zeph inhaled a sharp breath of icy air. His blood ran cold. "That's Mom," he hissed and bolted toward the corner and fell on an ice slick.

Snow hauled him to his feet and pulled him close. "You idiot. I don't want you hurt," she hissed in his ear. "Like you said earlier tonight, 'Together, or not at all.'"

Dante appeared and dragged them back along the corridor. They huddled against the stone wall. "An ancient mage is torturing Mom and

Dad. Believe me, you don't want to witness it."

"I say we storm in and blast him to pieces," Red whispered.

A deep moan echoed up the stairs making the hairs on Zeph's arms stand on end.

Dante paled. "That's Dad."

It'd have to be bad to make Dad moan like that. A hurricane roiled inside Zeph. "We have to do something," he hissed. "I can't cower around a corner while Mom and Dad suffer."

"We need a plan," Dante hissed back in the dark.

"No we don't. We need action." Zeph hurtled around the corner, Snow hard on his heels.

His parents were lying on a stone floor in an open cell, their limbs tied with titanium. The ancient wrinkled mage was standing over them, hands outstretched. Bolts of blue light zapped Dad, sparks flying. He screamed and writhed on the floor, his body bucking and twisting. The mage spun, flinging electric-blue bolts at Mom. Her body spasmed and her head struck the floor, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"You fools, selling the dragon shifters' hoard right into my hands. I knew you'd fall for my ransom note," the mage gloated. "But now I need the rest of the hoard or your parents will die."

Another bolt flew from his hand, hitting Mom's belly.

Zeph sprang, wind gusting from him, blasting the mage backward into the stone wall. "Leave my parents alone," he roared.

"Tell me," the mage bellowed. "Where is the rest of the dragon shifters' hoard?"

A spear of ice whizzed past Zeph and shattered against the wall by the mage's head. Snow's hair whipped around her in Zeph's storm as she pelted the mage with hailstones that clattered against the floor and wall.

The mage thrust a ball of roiling blue flame at Snow. Her hailstones dissolved into puddles on the stone.

Oh gods! “No!” Zeph screamed, diving at Snow. He tackled her. They hit the stone—hard. A wave of blistering heat blasted over them and torched the corridor wall, blackening the stone.

§

As Zeph pulled Snow to her feet, the mage’s wrinkles dissolved, and his skin morphed until his complexion was tanned and smooth. His long gray hair shrank, shortening and turning brown with blazing sun streaks. He flashed a dazzling smile. “So nice of you to visit again, Snow.”

Snow gaped. Her stomach hollowed. “Krispin?”

“He was glamored and none of us saw through it.” Zeph muttered.

Ew yuck. “I can’t believe I nearly kissed that creep.”

“Come with me,” the mage said, his ‘Krispin’ smile flawless, “and you and your sister can have riches and power without end.”

“No thanks.” Snow slid her hand into Zeph’s. “I know where I belong.”

The mage blasted hot blue flames at them. Snow and Zeph ducked, flame charring the stone.

Then Krispin’s face morphed back into the wrinkly ancient mage.

He rubbed his ring and a shimmering oval of golden light appeared. Blue light shot from his fingers at Zeph’s parents’ legs. They twitched, then jumped to their feet. Wrapping their titanium ropes in his fists, the ancient mage jumped through the portal, yanking Zeph’s Mom and Dad after him.

“No!” Zeph screamed.

Before Snow realized what was happening, Zeph had rubbed his own ring. She clung to his hand, and she and Zeph were swallowed by

shimmering golden light. A jolt flew through her—and the dungeons, Dante and Red were gone.

## Rumbled

“Zeph!” Dante yelled. He raced to the shimmering light, determined to follow Zeph and Snow through the portal.

He leaped, but the golden light shrunk and the portal snapped shut. He flew through the empty air and stumbled across the rough stones.

“No!” Dante bellowed. Zeph was gone. His limbs trembled. His power thundered in his belly. Mom. Dad. Zeph. His family had been torn apart, his parents tortured before his eyes.

They were all gone. In the clutches of that evil monster.

And there was nothing he could do.

He’d failed his family.

And he’d failed Red—her sister was gone too.

A shudder ran through him and the ground beneath his feet shook.

Let it shake.

“Dante!” Red shouted, tugging his hand. “Dante!”

His eyes blurred. He needed to hold on, for her sake. But his power surged, rumbling through him like an avalanche and ricocheting through the dungeon.

§

Snow was gone. Stuck with that evil mage in who-knew-when, who-knew-where. A strangled cry broke from Red’s throat. Fire burned in her belly, demanding to be let out.

Dante squeezed her hand. It fed her powers—making them burn stronger. She couldn’t let go of him. Not now, when he needed her. When she needed him.

He turned his tear-streaked face to her. “We can’t follow them.” The floor shuddered, a rumble running through the stones beneath their feet. The

poor guy—his legs were trembling, his body shaking.

Red swallowed her pain. He'd lost so much more than her: his home; his twin brother; and his parents. "They'll find a way home," she said, trying to comfort Dante and convince herself. "Snow's clever, she'll find a way."

Her words rang hollow. The devastation and naked fear on Dante's face said it all: he was terrified Snow and his family wouldn't survive.

A chunk of masonry crashed to the floor. "Dante!" Red yelled, yanking him toward the winding stair.

He stumbled along at her side, still radiating power as they made it to the stairwell. "Zeph!" he shouted.

As if Zeph could hear him. "Hurry," Red yelled over the rock crumbling and crashing around them.

They belted up the stairs. Rocks fell like bombs. The rumble of shaking masonry echoed through the stairwell.

"Rein your power in," she cried.

"I have!" His panic-stricken face was pale. "It's too late!"

They rounded a corner. The ground floor was only a few stairs away, now. The secret door was a pile of rubble. They dashed through the gap, clambering over the debris. A stone plummeted, right over Dante's head. Red shot a fireball and blasted it into fragments that peppered them, biting their skin.

Behind them, rocks thundered down. Dust rose round them. They leaped onto the landing, the turret floor skittering and swaying beneath their feet.

Fleeing through the kitchen, Red ignored the chaos behind them, holding tight to Dante's hand. The woman Zeph had knocked unconscious was nowhere to be seen.

They raced outside into the sunset, amid falling stone, and jumped over a flower bed onto the manicured lawn. Red spun. With an eerie creak, and a deafening grind of stone, the top half of the turret tumbled to the ground in an avalanche of crashing stone and shingles.

The mansion almost looked like the ruin they'd seen when they'd first arrived.

The rumbling finally stopped. Dante collapsed on the grass. "I've failed you. I've failed Zeph. I've failed everyone."

"No." Red wiped a tear from his cheek. "Have faith in Zeph. And Snow. And in yourself."

"No, Red, I lost control. I nearly killed us."

She knelt next to him. His jade eyes met hers.

"It's okay. We're alive. Unharmmed."

"If only I'd had a ring, I could've followed Mom and Dad instead of Zeph and Snow going after them." Dante sat up and pulled a statuette of a gryphon out of his pocket. "I didn't think to bring the jewelry from the car. I've only got this."

"What's that?" Red asked.

Dante shrugged and turned it over in his hands. "My powers responded to it, so it felt important. See how exquisite the craftsmanship is? Look at this little chest. He pried the chest from the gryphon's grip and flipped the lid open. Inside lay two crystals. Dante's eyebrows shot up and his jaw dropped.

He picked up the crystals.

Light blazed from his fingers.

§

Heat seared Dante's hands as the crystals grew until they were as big as silver dollars.

“By the draki gods!” His powers stirred in his belly as relief rushed through him. Dante thrust guardian stones toward Red. “Look! Our guardian stones.”

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Wow! How did you make them bigger?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “This is their usual size. They must’ve been enchanted by the mage to fit in that tiny chest, maybe glamored so I didn’t recognize them. Do you know what this means?”

Red nodded, beaming. “You can use the spell from that book to undo the enchantment on shapeshifters. Leberto...um, liberato... Argh, I’ve forgotten how it goes.” She groaned. “If only Snow was here—she’s the scholar.”

“I’m happy you’re here,” Dante said. “I lost control. I probably would’ve been buried under that rubble without you.”

“Anytime you need saving, give me a call.” Red tilted her head, her fiery mane tumbling over her shoulders. Even streaked with dust and with chips of stone in her hair, she was beautiful. “Liberate Dracones... Liberate the dragons.” She frowned. “No, that’s not right. Dante, I can’t remember it all.”

“You’re amazing. Thanks for reminding me.” Dante grinned. “Liberate the dragons and the shapeshifters.” Would this work? He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, focused his powers and clutched the guardian stones.

“Dracones et bestias liberate.” A tingle ran through him.

## Flight

A golden glimmer rippled across Dante's face.

Red gasped, her fire powers surging through her veins like hot lava. He was beautiful, his face covered in golden scales. "Dante, the spell—it's broken. We did it."

Dante grinned and threw off his shirt. Golden scales rippled across his abs, chest and torso.

"How do I shift?" She tugged on her power. Nothing happened.

"Let your power surge to the surface, but instead of releasing it, let it swell until you feel as if your skin can't contain it. Then relax."

Red stared, fascinated, as his shoulders broadened and his chest filled out. Oh, flaming gods, he was so hot, she was going to combust. "You're gorgeous."

Dante gently placed his taloned hands on her shoulders. Slits appeared in his back and gossamer wings unfurled, stretching out on either side of him. He gave her a radiant smile as his face morphed, his nose elongating into a snout, his eyebrows forming handsome eye ridges. His jade eyes grew vertical slits. He nudged her cheek with his snout and spun. Spines burst from his skin, protruding from his back and a tail sprouted, ripping his jeans. His flanks were broad and powerful.

In his dragon form he was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. As beautiful as when he was human.

Flames burned through Red's veins. Gods, she wanted to fly, to soar with him over the forest and hunt down that mage.

Red let go. Her power ripped through her in a stream of hot lava. She was a living flame, a volcano about to blow. Instead of channeling her

power out through her hands, she held it below her skin, her body running hot. Her skin stretched and her nerves pinged.

Red scales rippled over her hands, her arms. And wings burst from her back, her shirt ripping to shreds. She gasped and instinctively covered her chest, but Dante just laughed, because she no longer had breasts, just a solid wall of red scales that glimmered in the dusky pink sunset.

Her face ached and stretched, cartilage crunching, as her nose reformed into a snout. Her fingers throbbed as talons sprang from them. And her jeans fell into the grass in tatters.

*“You did it.”* His velvety voice purred through her mind.

*“We have telepathy?”*

*“All shifters do. Those with close bonds can share thoughts.”*

Red opened her mouth to speak. A roar burst from her maw, followed by a gust of flame.

Dante ducked, laughing in her mind. *“And that’s why we don’t speak as draki! Mind-link, it’s much easier.”*

His joy washed over her. She could feel everything he was feeling. His concern for Zeph, his grief at losing his parents and the warm blanket of his love cocooning her.

Something unfurled inside her chest. *“That’s how you feel about me? I had no idea.”*

*“None?”* One of his jade draki eyes winked.

*“Well, maybe a little. After all, I feel the same way about you.”*

He flapped his giant golden wings and tensed his magnificent haunches, springing into the air. *“Come on, Red, let’s fly together.”*

Red released the coiled tension in her hind legs, springing, and soared above the ruins, her wingtip grazing Dante’s as they speared high

above the ruined turret of Bella Magika, high above the gardens and the glimmering lampposts in the dark carpet of forest.

*“How will we find Snow and Zeph?”* Red asked, spiraling up on a thermal.

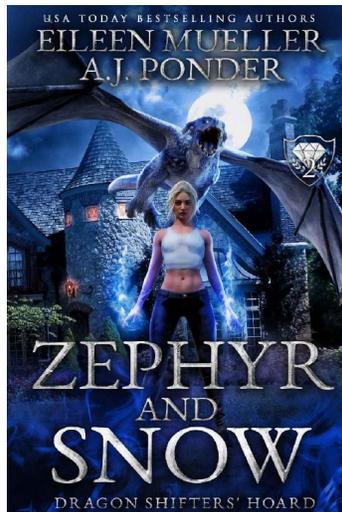
Dante swooped beneath her, then rolled and shot up above her. *“We’ll find them and my parents. We already broke the spell. We can do this too.”*

Red roared, flame gusting into the sky and followed Dante up toward stars twinkling on a backdrop of dark satin.

Dante’s velvety voice soared through her. *“Together we can do anything.”*

Onward they flew, wings nearly touching and hearts soaring, toward the snow tipped ranges and the distant lake glimmering in the sunset.

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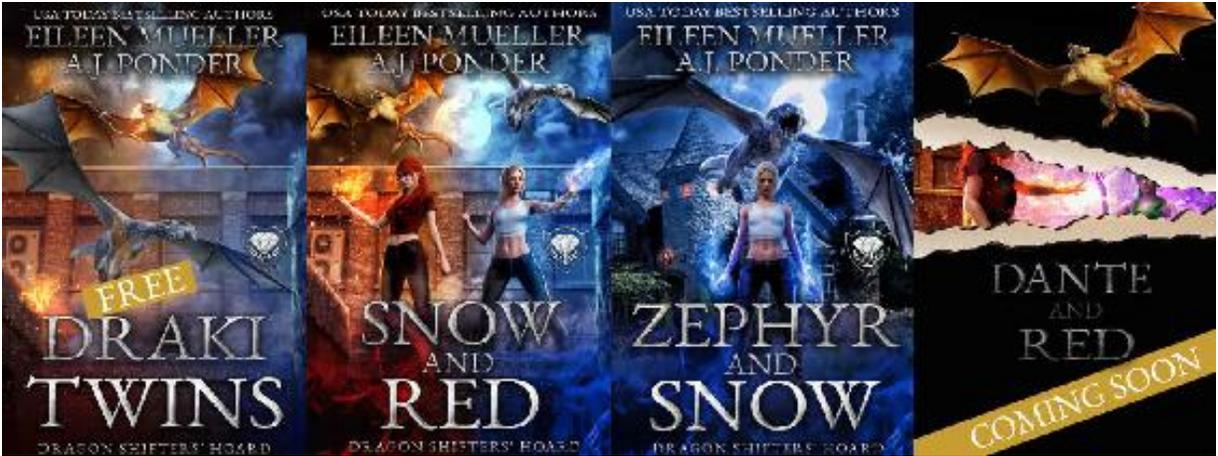


### [Zephyr and Snow](#)

**Trapped in the past and fighting to survive, Zeph and Snow discover a deadly truth. A truth that threatens to destroy everyone they love. Hopefully, before Snow is burned at the stake as a witch.**

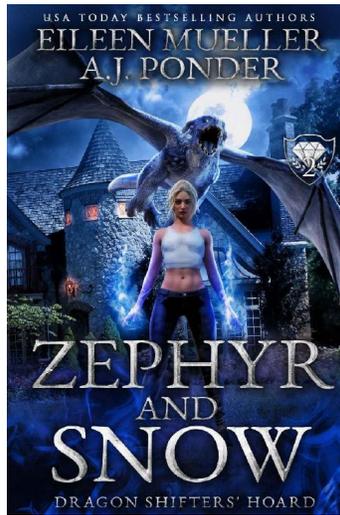
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## Zephyr and Snow, Dragon Shifters Hoard book 2



### [Zephyr and Snow](#)

## Landing

In a blinding flash of light, Zeph landed on his knees and rolled into a pile of Fall leaves. There was a thud as Snow sprawled next to him, a flurry of orange and yellow lifting on the breeze and fluttering into her long blonde hair. Still in her pretty ice-blue sequined dress and old sneakers, she looked cute with leaves strewn through her hair. She tilted her head and glanced at the chill sun in the azure sky. “Where are we?”

“And *when* are we?” Zephyr replied. “Moments ago, it was midnight in a dungeon.” The turreted mansion they’d been in was nowhere in sight. The mage’s portal could have taken them anywhere and any-when.

He jumped to his feet and reached down to grasp her hand. “More importantly, where are my parents?” Zeph waved his free hand. A flurry of leaves swirled around them. Flame it, he was losing control. He reigned in his wind power, coiling it tight in his belly.

Snow scrambled to her feet, grinning cheekily. “That one’s easy,” she said. “Your parents are with Krispin.”

If Krispin was even that stinking mage’s real name. Everything else about him had been fake, including the glamor he’d woven to appear like some young surfer dude when he was actually a crusty ancient mage. Just the thought of him hitting on Snow made Zeph’s stomach churn.

By the draki gods, Krispin would pay for kidnapping their folks when Zeph and his twin brother Dante caught up with him. Although he was desperate to find Mom and Dad, Zeph couldn’t help smiling at Snow flicking the autumn leaves from her hair. “And where do you think Krispin’s gone?” he asked.

Her sapphire eyes darted to the leaf litter. “Through there. Look.”

There was a visible trail where the leaves had been disturbed, as if someone had dragged something heavy through the half-clad beeches. Or two somethings—Mom and Dad.

Zeph swallowed hard and took Snow’s cool hand in his. “Come on. We’ve got to find them.”

They raced through the trees. “They can’t be far from here,” she puffed.

“Unless he’s taken them through another portal,” Zeph panted.

“From what you’ve said, portal travel seems to be one of Krispin’s specialties.”

“True.” The mage had first appeared in the hills above Pinevale, not far from the turreted mansion where he’d hidden their parents, although it’d been back in the present. He’d burst out of the trees on a Harley Davidson and blasted him and Dante with mage flame before leaping through a portal to their home and making off with their parents. The scum-sucking mage had burned their home to the ground. Zeph and Dante had been lucky to get out alive.

And lucky to meet Snow and Red downtown when the two sisters been attacked in an alley—by the very gang Zeph and Dante had been selling jewels to in order to raise the million bucks ransom the mage had demanded.

Zeph squeezed Snow’s hand a little tighter as they raced through the leaf litter among the dense grove of evergreens and golden beeches. The trees thinned and they burst onto a manicured lawn edged with pretty flower gardens.

Snow gasped and yanked his arm, stopping them in their tracks.

“What happened? Look.”

Beyond the lawn was a familiar stone building—but part of the mansion they’d just escaped from had been destroyed. Snow pointed at the ruin of the turret they’d explored a few moments ago in whatever time they’d been in. The tower was a wreck of stone and masonry, dust scattered over the surrounding lawns, the roof and the remaining turret. Among the debris, glass shards gleamed in the mid-morning sun.

By the flaming dragon gods. “What in draki’s name happened here?”

Snow sniffed the air. “This is very fresh,” she said. “But I don’t get it. There’s no sign of explosives. No sign of a storm.”

The moment she spoke, Zeph knew. As an earth draki shifter, his twin’s powers were literally earth-shattering. But this? “Dante.” Zeph shook his head. “What if he lost control and destroyed the tower? Gods, I hope they got out alive.” Zeph bolted toward the ruins.

“No, Zeph!” Snow cried.

He skidded to a stop, his skate shoes leaving muddy tracks on the lawn. “What?”

“Don’t charge in. It might be a trap.”

True. Dante was always accusing him of leaping before he looked. Wind drakis were known for being impulsive. But he'd never been as reckless as his brother had just been. Never destroyed something like that. The turret they'd been in moments ago was nothing but a crumbled ruin.

Beyond the pebble-strewn track that led to the mansion, a horse whickered in a field. Another answered from an old-fashioned stable. "Well, we know where we are, and we're obviously still stuck back in time. Although exactly when is a mystery."

"I wonder if the Jeep is still here," Snow answered, turning to gaze back through the trees where they'd parked it out of sight.

Zeph was about to suggest they look, when an engine roared to life—a familiar engine.

He and Dante's candy-apple red Jaguar convertible burst from behind the pile of rubble. Krispin was at the wheel of their stolen car, and Zephyr's parents were in the back seat with gags over their mouths. Through the window, titanium ropes glinted. That flaming mage had bound them with titanium which stopped them from accessing their powers.

Adrenaline shot through Zeph. He raced onto the track and waved his arms, releasing the power coiled in his belly. A surge of energy flew through his hands. Wind funneled from his fingertips and buffeted the car, but the Jag kept coming.

Krispin's ugly wrinkly grimace filled the driver's side of the windscreen.

Snow shot out her hands. An icy blast rocketed past Zeph. The windscreen crusted over with icicles. Zeph aimed a gust of wind at the icy glass. It shattered, spraying ice particles and glass fragments over the car's hood and the track.

Zeph leaped in front of the oncoming car, his shoes crunching through shards, and threw his hands up. His wind rocked the Jag, but it kept coming, the engine giving a gutsy roar as Krispin gunned the gas.

A bolt of Krispin's green mage flame shot at Zeph. He dived to the track and rolled. The mage flame sizzled into a tree trunk, charring the bark. The stench of burned sap and smoke singed the air. Krispin swerved, the car aiming right for Zeph. Flames! He was so dead.

Another blast of cold hit Zeph. His face stung, his skin pebbling with frost as an icy sheen covered the dirt track. Krispin's car hit Snow's ice slick, the tires screeching, the car sliding sideways in a flash of candy-apple red. Glass shards sprayed, stinging Zeph's cheeks.

The engine's growls slamming through his head, Zephyr scrambled, shoes and hands slipping on ice as he tried to grip the surface. He rolled and flung up his hands. There was a flash of Krispin leering, Zephyr's parents' faces frozen in horror, then a bolt of energy shuddered through Zeph. Wind

ripped from his core and out of his hands, slamming into the car. The convertible spun on the ice, the rear fender heading straight for him.

## Flight

Red flexed her ruby wings and soared after Dante, his gold scales flashing in the last rays of sunset. She caught a thermal and floated gently upwards, her ruby wings glinting above the sparsely-forested hillsides.

Surely, Snow and Zephyr were out here, somewhere. She searched the ground with its sparsely-forested hillsides, and the sky, straining to see through the pink-tinged clouds scudding overhead.

Dante roared, his jade eyes shining. *“In human form, you’re beautiful, but as a draki, you’re breathtaking.”*

Red turned her head. *“I never thought in my wildest dreams that my fire powers meant I could become a dragon,”* she replied via mind-speech.

*“A draki,”* Dante corrected.

*“Yes, a draki.”* A purr built in her throat as she flexed her wings. “I can’t believe this amazing landscape—the forest is so thin from up here. Look, there are lots of farmlets tucked among the trees. It was so different when we drove through the hills to get here.”

*“In our time, this terrain is more heavily wooded.”*

Unease rippled through her. *“How far in the past are we?”*

Dante sent her a mental shrug. *“Some time with no cars or planes. The lady in Bella Magika’s kitchen was in an old-fashioned dress, but I don’t know period costumes that well. Give me piece of furniture and I’m your man, though.”*

Of course he was. His parents owned Draki Antiques.

Thin spindles of smoke rose from intermittent clearings and sparsely wooded hillsides. There was no highway leading high into the hills, just a dirt track. As they flew over a mountain meadow, horses shied and ran for the cover of some tall willows at the edge of a pond.

*“They’re scared of us,”* Red said.

*“Wouldn’t you be, with an apex predator roaming the sky above you?”* Dante cured lip to bare his fangs in a cute draki grin.

*“I guess not, now that I breathe fire.”* She laughed. *“I wish I knew where Snow and Zeph were.”*

*“Same here.”* Dante’s sigh echoed though her mind. *“Now we’ve broken the anti-shifting spell on the guardian stones, I was hoping we’d see them soaring through the skies—or if they’re still in human form, running through the woods near Bella Magika. I’ve kept an eye out, but I haven’t seen anything.”*

*“Krispin’s portal must’ve taken them to another time, maybe even another place. We have to find them, and your parents before it’s too late.”*

Red tilted her wings, lifting on the breeze and angled closer to him, her ruby scales flashing blood red as the sun slipped toward the horizon. If Snow and Zeph weren't here, where were they? *"We're not stuck in time, are we?"*

*"We might not be."*

A vision of the jewelry in the pack in the back of the Jeep—the artifacts from the Dragon Shifters' Hoard Snow and Zeph had retrieved from the police evidence lockers—slipped from Dante's head into hers. He focused on a silver ring, similar to the one Zeph had used to open the portal at the gates of Bella Magika

Red seized Dante's vision. *"Yes. Let's grab that other ring and get back through the gate. If we've no chance of finding them here, we should get home quickly so we can use the Internet and technology to help us find them."*

*"I agree."* Dante spiraled down, his golden wings glinting as Red followed him. *"Watch out for archers. We have no idea when we are and who's around."* They landed on the grass near the crumbled turret and stalked into the of the copse where they'd stowed their clothes.

*"Don't shift yet."* Dante grasped Red's shirt in his talons. The tattered fabric fluttered in the breeze. He threw his own shirt to Red, his lips

curling back from his fangs in a draki grin. *“Yours is still shredded from before.”*

Red’s heart skipped. *“How do I shift back?”*

*“Reel in your powers and remember what it felt like to be human. If you have any trouble, I’m right here.”*

He stalked off into the trees clutching his jeans and jacket in his talons, his wings brushing the branches. With a flick of his tail, the golden draki disappeared into the trees.

Red took a deep breath and tugged at her powers. Skin pinging and cartilage cracking, she pulling her fire power down through her skin and into her chest. She felt so heavy, her draki wings and limbs dragging. She gasped for breath, a puff of flame spurting from her maw. A brief shot of pain rippled through her as her back spasmed and her wings furled and folded into cavities alongside her spine. Her draki limbs shrank into human legs and arms. *“Flames, that hurts.”* Face twitching, she stood and pulled on Dante’s shirt and the rest of her clothes while her powerful draki jaws retracted into human features. Was something wrong with her eyes? No, it was only tears blurring her vision burning their way down her cheeks.

“Dante!”

“I’ll be right there,” Dante called. “Are you all right?”

“I am now,” Red called, relieved as Dante ran out of the forest. He wrapped her in his arms. Embers flared in her belly as he cradled her gently. The warmth spread through her in a soft glow. She inhaled his scent

Dante tenderly cupped his hand under her chin and brushed her tears away with his fingers. His brow tugged into a slight frown. “It’s hardest the first time.” He kissed her hair. “It’ll get easier the more you shift.”

“Soaring through the sky with you was amazing.” The embers burned steadily in Red’s core. “I’d love to shift right now and fly with you again.” But Mom would never forgive her if she lost her sister. “But we have to find Snow and Zeph.”

“We do,” he said, his dark eyes flicking between her eyes and her mouth. “But first...” His full lips brushed hers, and the embers inside Red burst into flame.

Continue your exciting dragon shifter adventure with [Zephyr and Snow](#).

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## Acknowledgments

We (Eileen Mueller & A.J. Ponder) would like to thank our readers for the fun joyride we've had writing Snow and Red. We've been encouraged by emails, messages and cool social media posts about Snow, Red, Dante and Zephyr. We love your enthusiasm for the Dragon Shifters' Hoard and hope you'll continue to follow our dragon shifters in their quest to save the citizens of Pinevale, in [Snow and Zephyr](#) and [Dante and Red's](#) adventures.

**Did you name a character in this book?** We'd like to thank our readers for naming characters in Snow and Red. Coty named Hazel, Snow and Red's mother. Carol Sue Breckenridge named Riz Baker, the female policewoman with a buzzcut. Guy F Worley named Brock, one of Snow's school friends at Pinevale Mall. Alicia Love named Jena, another of Snow's school friends at Pinevale Mall. Sandre' Moore named Black Oak, a shifter neighborhood and suburb of Pinevale. Jasmine Breeden named Rosewood Park in Pinevale. Susan named the Starglow Sapphire, a precious a magical artefact. Thanks for the cool names. We love involving our readers in our adventures!

The Brown Sugar Café is named after the Brown Sugar café in Taihape, New Zealand, a lovely little spot to stop and enjoy fine food in quirky surroundings. And yes, Eileen and A.J. have been there together, although it is a three-hour drive from where they live. Taihape is a tiny town, also known as 'Gumboot City' due to their annual gumboot throwing competition held on the main road, New Zealand's State Highway One! Where else in the world would you close the state highway and reroute traffic via the backroads so the locals can throw their farming boots down the road in the hope of setting a new record?

We'd like to thank our families, fellow authors, and our editor, Charlotte Kieft for their support. Our beta readers, Ash Paki, Karen Brookes and Peter Friend have been fantastic, and our proof-reader Kevin Berry excels at his work. Thank you all for shaping our adventures. Thank you to everyone who has brainstormed with us, encouraged us and helped us soar on draki wings as we flew toward the finishing line on this project.

Enjoy the Dragon Shifters' Hoard! If you'd like to hang out with Eileen or A. J., feel free to join [Eileen's Facebook group](#), where A.J. also often lurks!

## About the Authors

### *About Eileen*



Eileen Mueller is a USA Today-bestselling and multiple-award-winning author of heart-pounding fantasy novels that will keep you turning the page. Dive into her worlds, full of magic, love, adventure and dragons! Eileen lives in New Zealand, in a cave with her dragonets. She writes action-packed tales for young adults, children and everyone who loves adventure.

Visit her website for [Eileen's FREE books](#) and new releases, follow Eileen on [Amazon](#) and [BookBub](#) and become a Rider of Fire in her [Facebook group](#)!

### *About A.J.*



USA Today bestselling author A.J. Ponder has a head full of monsters, and recklessly spills them out onto the written page. Beware dragons, dreadbeasts, taniwha, and small children—all are equally dangerous, and capable of treading on your heart—or tearing it, still beating, from your chest.

You can find A.J. at [ponderbooks.com](http://ponderbooks.com) or [join A.J.'s mailing list](#) to discover new releases and secret stories. Follow A.J. on [BookBub](#).

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