

RITA STRADLING

Fenchgirl

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Cover by Rita Stradling.

This novel is for my mother, because she always selflessly gave me her ear to cry into and her shoulders to stand upon.

This novel is also for my father for bringing to life the works of JRR Tolkien, Douglas Adams and Jane Austen for me; it made an impression.

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A Note From the Author

Fenchgirl

An excerpt from The History of the Dracons, a Human Perspective Version II, by E. Frasier (banned from the public school system).

“The children of dragons, known as the dracons, came from the unnatural joining of two beings that should have, by their very nature, been forever separated.

Dragons and humans were never meant to meet. They were natural opposites and balancing counterparts. Where humans were creatures considered devoid of magic, dragons were magic. Where dragons were immortal and infertile, mortal humans prolonged their genetic existence through their fertility. Where humankind's numbers ever multiplied, the dragons' numbers only dwindled through the ages of their existence, until the time that dragons discovered that human women were not solely fertile to their own species.

Natural barriers should have kept the species from crossing. Dragons, creatures of fire, could not cross into the bitter cold of the world's surface and humans, creatures of water, could not dig deep enough to find, nor survive, the heat of the dragons' world.

Simply put, if humankind had not polluted their world it would have remained too cold for dragonkind. However, humans had an industrial revolution and then turned to and survived on industry with no thought to its multiplying waste. They changed the chemical

makeup of their world heating the air and creating weakness in the very crust that kept the dragons in an impenetrable penitentiary wall. As the world's outer layer thinned, volcanoes broke through from the deep, creating pathways of fire.

The first immortal who successfully crossed through a fire-portal found that he could only endure a day outside the world's crust before he weakened. However, the dragon also discovered that it only took an hour to morph his body to that of a human male, only a scratch of his claws or a nip of his teeth to infect humans with his own brand of magic and little effort to find a human female willing to carry his young.

Nine months later, the first dracon was born, extracted from his dead mother's womb.

Nearly one-hundred years after the industrial revolution began, the human queen and king of Anglo were deposed and Anglo was declared a draconic monarchy. Three hundred years later, draconic monarchies controlled eighty-five percent of the world's governments.”

Chapter One

The vampire looked me up and down. A cloud of cigarette smoke blew out of her mouth and curled around her like a sickly opaque aura. "Sweetheart, you are begging to die," she said.

I had known she was going to give me trouble as the vampire had been shooting me disapproving glances since I came to stand behind her in line for the Midnight Club.

The Midnight Club sat somewhat apart from its neighbors, looking as harmless as any shady nightclub in a run-down area could. The building had only one adornment, a small sign that read 'Midnight' in thickly printed white letters.

Its sleazy neighbors, a long line of buildings promising instant cash for your cherished possessions, blood or unnecessary body parts, had all closed up for the night. Metal bars gritted through every visible window on the street and the windows themselves rattled their disapproval of the techno music pumping through the air. Even if all their windows shattered, I doubted whether the meanest pawn shop owners would dream of complaining. The Midnight Club was the kind of place that people just vanished into.

I knew that.

The citizens of Mabi knew that.

Yet the line outside the Midnight Club was threatening to circle the block. That line, I now stood in and had been standing in for the last fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes I did not have.

Most people could not tell the difference between a human, vampire, werewolf, witch, or dracon until they revealed themselves with something pretty obvious. I had identified what type of infection every creature in this line had within the first three minutes of standing in it. It was easy to identify them if you knew which signs to look for. For instance, werewolves revealed themselves in their posture, vampires in their complexion and skin quality, and almost every creature revealed themselves in the look in their eyes, if you were brave enough to meet their gaze. Not only did I know that the lady standing in front of me in the line was a vampire, I could tell that she had only been undead for a couple of years.

When the vampire noticed that I was looking at her, she shook her head. "What are you... twelve? Little girl, go home." The line finally moved forward and when she caught up to the others, she glanced back, raising her eyebrows.

The costume I wore was about as far from my standard fare of school uniform and high tops as you could get. There were more boots than skirt covering my legs. The overdone black bustier halter top contrasted with my makeup-free face and managed to

accentuate my childish features showing I was trying to look older.

I walked straight up to her, stepping in close enough that she would know I wasn't afraid of her. "I'm twenty two," I lied in a quiet voice; the lie was obvious, I could not pass for a day older than my real age, sixteen even if I dyed my hair gray and painted on wrinkles. "Why don't you mind your own business?" I stared directly into her eyes, refusing to look away first.

She smiled too widely at me, exposing her long sharp canines. "Usually I feel sorry for lamb-chops like you, but you seem desperate for the dinner table. Don't let me get in your way." She spun away.

The line picked up pace, and the vampire only had the chance to shoot me a couple scathing glances before she was in and it was my turn to hand my ID to the bouncer. I reached into my purse for my High School student ID which I had taped a hundred dollar bill under and handed it to the vamp. He glanced at me, my ID, then handed it back, less the money.

Even though it wasn't my money, it hurt.

I stepped in front of the werewolves and vampires unloading personal arsenals into plastic bins and went directly to the short line leading to the security detectors. I unloaded nothing.

I touched the blue charm bracelet around my wrist, I had already known it was there, but feeling the small smooth blue charm

calmed me. I held my breath and stepped through the detector.

The bored looking troll at the monitor said, "Human, no weapons."

With unhurried steps I made my way further into the club. The deeper I went the louder the techno grew. The music sunk into me, my blood, my breaths, all in line with the beat. The neon lights that flashed over the club made me feel like I was inside an arcade machine.

I pushed through the bodies feeling the range from room-temperature vamps, to fever hot were-animals and the witches and humans somewhere in between. I moved all the way to the front where a vampire DJ moved one lightning quick hand on his turntable while dancing on the stage.

I glanced at my watch, twenty-three minutes, three behind schedule.

I scanned the crowd and caught up my three minute delay automatically as I spotted the club's manager, Mr. Rustom Barns. Honestly, he was hard to miss, a three hundred pound giant ascending the stage. He was also a man-eating were-tiger or so I was told.

I ran off a quick text to my uncle Bobby: '*all is well*' and then started dancing.

The dancing was short lived though as the music cut off abruptly and the vampire DJ threw one of his discs straight into the audience. "You're going to kick me off stage! I invented techno!" he shouted into the microphone before diving at the crowd. In half

a second, security took him down. The vamp yelled the entire way as they escorted him out.

Freaking vampires.

Not looking the least bit bothered by the vampire's very public tantrum the were-tiger grabbed the microphone and purred in his low raspy voice, "We have a special guest band for you tonight. Let me introduce you to: The Prowlers." The were-tiger lifted the entire DJ stand off the stage; discs fell and shattered all around him.

Two werewolves and two dracons took the stage.

I blinked up at the stage, confused.

Then, I immediately checked my arm for my charm bracelet which was still there.

When wearing my charm bracelet, my powers were supposed to be gone; I should have experienced people as a human would and my senses should have been just like a human's were. I should not have been able to see the power that came off these dracons; however, I still saw a distinct aura of power around each of them.

After the tiger returned once to bring on a drum-set, the werewolves started howling, and then the full group started playing a Celti-punk song.

What in all the human hells?

I grabbed out my phone to shoot off a text to Bobby: *there's a werewolf and dracon punk band?*

It's a school night, I received back, translation: get out of there.

No. Way.

I sent: *I did my homework*

He did not send anything for a long minute, then: *Twenty minutes.*

Me: *Thirty five.*

Him: *Thirty or I'm coming in there to get you.*

I swallowed and then slipped my phone back in my pocket. For a moment my heart dropped to sizzle in my stomach acid when I thought I had lost track of the were-tiger, until I found him to the side of the stage leaning and surveying the crowd.

Focusing on the music while keeping him in my peripheral vision I started dancing again. The upbeat music was all too easy to move to and when the guitarist switched out his guitar for a fiddle, I almost broke character laughing. What did this band think this place was: a concert hall? This was a sleazy dance club for the infected.

I had never seen the dracons that were on stage before, not that I met every dracon that came to the island; the Mabiian Island chain was one of the biggest tourist destinations for dracons in the world. There was nothing extremely ostentatious about their clothing and I would have labeled them as just average-wealthy if I had not noticed their shoes. Both wore drake serpent leather shoes, shoes that probably were worth more than the average "rich" dracon's entire hoard. Drake serpent leather wasn't too obvious from snake leather, but my grandfather had a money clip

made from drake serpent leather which he kept locked away and showed me once; that particular sheen only came from leather imported from the dragon kingdoms.

Most dragons were rich, but these two were obviously 'rent out the resort' rather than the 'hotel suite' type of tourists.

The singer was shaggier, less polished than the fiddle player, but when I took a closer look, he was unkempt in a manner that appeared like stylists designed his 'look' to be that way.

The dragon burning through his fiddle strings was startlingly different in appearance than his companion. The only colors in his features were his dark brown eyes and lips the faintest shade of pink. His skin, long pulled-back hair, eyebrows, everything else was a pale ivory. His face was chiseled and not the least bit delicate, the lines were broad and sharp. His looks were startling, striking, and at the same time cold and almost terrifying.

There was something seriously familiar about him as though I had seen him before; yet I knew that if I had seen that dragon before, I would have remembered it. I saw an immense amount of power around him, much more than around the scruffy singer, much more than I should have seen even if I wasn't wearing my charm bracelet. The power around him crackled like my grandfather's soul did when he was exercising a lot of his power.

Although seeing power around a dragon despite having my charm on was unusual, it

wasn't completely unheard of for me; there was one dragon I had already been able to see power around when wearing my charm bracelet, my grandfather; he was a half-dragon and a seriously powerful one.

Something about this guy on the stage, his power, the whole situation felt wrong, all wrong.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I almost jumped as a giant hand landed on my shoulder.

I spun to look up into the yellow cat eyes of the excited were-tiger. "Can I see your ID?" He asked, his voice a purr.

I did not need to fake my terror, I was already freaked out and the were-tiger's expression said one thing: *dinner*.

"Um," I said, "I misplaced my ID somewhere, sorry."

"You're underage," he said, a statement.

I bit my lip and looked up at him pleadingly. "I can explain."

"We do not accept underage patrons. You need to come with me to see the owner; he'll be the one to decide whether or not to call the police." The grip he had on my shoulder made sure I was going to see the owner.

"Hey, hey you!" the main singer's accented voice called into the microphone. The entire crowd quieted and several people looked back at me. I glanced around, then up, to realize that the main singer of the band had been speaking to the were-tiger and me.

"Hey, don't take her out; she's the prettiest human in here," he said with a little

accented-lilt to his words. He wasn't looking at me whatsoever, just at the tiger.

He was trying to save me. How he had heard my conversation with the were-tiger over the crowd, I have no idea.

"None of us up here are of age," he continued. "We'll take her on the stage; we'll make sure she won't drink anything." He reached down, smiling jovially.

The distraction caused the fiddle player, who was crouched down, trading his fiddle for a guitar, to glance up and look straight at me. I almost reeled back, the power that dracon emitted, it was like a punch to my senses, even dampened as mine were. I really should not be able to sense him like this with my charm bracelet on.

He was huge, not a giant like the tiger, but nearly. He met my gaze, his brow furrowed and his eyes widened, just a little, so little I could have imagined it, and for a second it looked like he had recognized me or something about me.

"This is over," he said in a low voice as if that was the final word. "Take that human out and wait for her parents to come pick her up." He gave me an irritated-looking glare, as if I had interrupted their performance on purpose, and then broke his gaze from mine. To his friend, he said, "Let's get back to playing."

The were-tiger's hand clenched on my shoulder and to my surprise, he growled, "Yes sir, of course." Rustom Barns headed to the

front of the club rather than the back, dragging me along with him.

I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket. This was not going to happen. "But I don't want to go home!" I shouted at Mr. Barns when we were far enough from the stage as the musicians started up again.

He growled from where he stood beside me, but said no response.

I glanced at my watch, I still had fifteen minutes.

When we were almost at the main entrance, I took in a deep breath and did something really stupid. I stomped on the were-tigers foot with my stiletto boot and sprinted to the back of the club, by sprint I meant: dodged between vampires, ducked under the arms of some uproarious witches and then ran full out the last distance toward the closed door that led to the back offices. When I reached the closed door, I deliberately turned away, as if lost.

Before I moved two feet from the door, big meaty fingers wrapped around the back of my neck and squeezed. Rustom Barns' other hand shot past me and threw open the closed door. He shoved me down the hall toward the offices.

I glanced back, rubbing the back of my neck and immediately realized how much I screwed up. The were-tiger's teeth elongated, his bones moved under his skin, and he became more feline than human. I broke the first and

most essential rule of dealing with weres: never run from them, if you run, you're prey.

As his fingernails elongated, I realized, I wasn't going to make it to the club owner. My uncle Bobby could probably take the were-tiger, my uncle Glacier definitely could. Me? Nope.

I had about three seconds before he pounced; I used them to reach down to my boot for my contingency plan.

"Rustom, stop," the voice was soft but commanding, almost as commanding as the fiddle player's had been.

Rustom, who had been, literally, squatting to pounce, stood and straightened slowly, his claws and teeth retracted. But his cat-eyes stared, memorizing me, so filled with hatred I knew that I just screwed up bad, bad, bad as I could have possibly done.

"Is she underage?" the vampire asked. I knew he stood directly behind me, though I had not worked up the guts to turn away from Rustom. Cold fingers wrapped around my arm.

I turned but did not look up at the vampire's face and when he began to tug on my arm, I followed meekly.

"Guard the door," the vampire said to Rustom as he pulled me out of the hall into his office which I did not realize we were three feet from. The door clicked behind me.

Out of the fire pit, into the volcano...

I paused to compose myself while glancing around at the spacious sleek room; everything in it had a glassy, sterile look.

The vampire kept his gaze on me as he circled to the other side of a possession-free black shiny desk. "I have to apologize for my manager's rough treatment of you; he takes underage drinking very seriously."

"I did not have a sip of alcohol," I said standing up straight to look up and meet the vampire's gaze. He looked so young; it was creepy, knowing that a century old sociopath looked out from that cherubic boy-next-door teenage face.

He took me in too, hungrily. I did not need my powers or to touch him to know how he felt, I did dress for him tonight.

I crossed to the desk. "Please, don't call the police," I whispered, pleading.

"I don't break the law lightly." He narrowed his eyes on me. "What will you do for me?" he asked. After a hundred years of doing this, he could not have come up with a better line?

I reached out to touch his hand making him smile. Creep. His hand wasn't exactly cold, just cool and inhuman feeling.

"This," I whispered, reaching up I unclasped my dampener.

I could tell the moment he registered who I was, but it was too late; I had a good grip on his hand and forced my power to dive into his soul.

Souls have layers, like onions, but the first few layers of his soul, of any soul, aren't actually the true soul. Like a needle, I immediately drove my power deep through all

the layers and uncoiled only enough true soul to keep his body paralyzed, but no more.

Immediately, I retreated back three layers, and sorted through his surface emotions, the first layer of disposable surface emotions that were constantly used and shed.

"Wait!" he shouted, in other circumstances even the weakest vampire or were-animal could crush me with a little bit of their inhuman strength, however, it did not take too much soul to paralyze a person's body and I had drawn enough.

I had not drawn enough to paralyze his mouth though; unfortunately, I had been told not to do that.

He started pleading, "I'll pay him, just stop!"

With my power, I started drawing on the little pockets of happiness I found within his impermanent layers and his happiness trickled into me. When I had collected it all, there wasn't much, I pulled it into me and burrowed deeper. I delved into the next layer, his deeper emotions. Like a damn breaking, the joy filtered into me and went from a trickle to a torrent.

Unfortunately, though I pulled his emotions into me, I could not digest them or any other person's emotions, they just filled me up like a balloon. I had back-up to help me with that.

With a flick, I opened the ring I wore on my finger, my grandfather's ring, and fed Samuel's emotions through me and into it. The

ring was a portal that only emotions could pass through and it consumed the emotions greedily.

"It's not about payouts this time, Samuel Brooke. This is about revenue," I said, reciting the script I memorized. "There have been too many highly publicized deaths at your night club. Seven girls died here in seven months. For the first time in ten years, my grandfather's human Mabi resorts are at eighty percent capacity."

My power examined his soul, picking and choosing, and then dragging every positive emotion from it, like a rake against his soul.

I went off script and whispered, "Is this how you killed them, Samuel? Was I next?"

I had seen the crime-scene photos; my grandfather always included the nasty details so I used my power without remorse. It never worked.

The flare of fear that passed through the vampire might as well be his response, 'well yes, you were.'

After a hundred years and the supernatural upgrade that he received from being infected, the waste of space had more soul than he ever deserved.

I raised my other hand to his forehead, and broke into the next layer, the emotional-memories, the final layer before the true soul. This was the part I hated the most, sorting through his memories, having them play in my head, living through his emotions.

However, in his memories I found a lack of emotion, emptiness. He only felt satisfied when he was taking power, stealing innocence then throwing the remains to his pet tiger.

"I want to die," he moaned.

"You won't. My grandfather respects your business sense; he's not ready to dispose of you. You will serve him faithfully." I fed a little of his own joy back into him. "Setting stacks of bills into my grandfather's palm will be the only thing that ever brings you joy." I feed a little more of his happiness back in, training his deeper emotions to follow my commands. "If another girl dies and my grandfather suspects you ever even glanced at her, he won't send me, he'll send one of my uncles."

Samuel's gaze met mine and I saw terror there, of me, of my uncles, it flowed through him thick and viscous, but it was nothing to the feeling of hatred he had for me.

And like every other time that I've delivered this message to the dangerous men and women in my grandfather's employment, I knew this was just one more way that my grandfather owned me, and would always own me. The only thing that would ever keep me safe from his enemies or even the people who worked for him was his protection.

With a concentrated effort I gave Samuel the coil of his true soul that I had held within me back to him. I stepped away as I lost control of his body.

I always gave every drop of the true soul back.

He slumped onto his desk.

"I'm texting my uncles, Glacier and Bobby, that we're finished with our chat," I fastened the charm bracelet dampener back on my wrist. "They're probably getting worried. Bobby is ready to slice his way through your club in about..." I glanced at my watch, "...thirty seven seconds. Tell your tiger to escort me safely to my uncles, they're waiting out front. Or they'll both come in."

Without hesitating, Samuel Brooke called in his tiger and I was escorted out.

Chapter Two

I fought the urge to sit on the curb of my driveway as I waited. Glacier was late. Well, he wasn't actually late but for the first time ever my uncle Glacier wasn't ridiculously early to drive me to school.

I looked back over my shoulder at my mother's 'ocean-view' mansion. The *mansion monstrosity*, as I liked to think of it, was by far the most luxurious house I had ever lived in. It was two stories, almost entirely made up of windows with an eastern-flare to its tiered roofs; it stretched out along a cliff overlooking one of the popular west-side beaches. When neighbors or people who we did not know came over, my mother claimed she had it built after my father died.

This was a lie.

The house was a rental and we could not even afford it. Not a single eastern-style end-table in there belonged to us.

Finally, the silver minivan pulled into the driveway that led up to where I waited. When the van stopped and the door slid open I was shocked to find my uncle Bobby in the car with Glacier. This was another first.

"Happy Friday, Dakota," Bobby said as he scooted over in the back seat.

Though I usually sat in the front seat, I crawled in next to him, pushing my backpack under the seat and sliding the van door shut.

"*Happy Friday Bobby...*" I said suppressing a groan, "What are you doing here?"

He swung his arm around my shoulders. Bobby's soul was even larger and warmer than he was, and Bobby's body-builder body always seemed to take up the majority of the room, whether he was in the bench seat of a minivan or in an indoor shopping mall.

I settled onto the seat and let the tendrils of his bright soul brush against my own.

When I did not wear my charm bracelet, my power dampener, I saw souls. Beyond being able to gage someone's level of power, it was actually a pretty useless part of my 'aspect.' Seeing someone's soul was the equivalent of 'seeing' someone's personality, too abstract and complex to give me much of any readable information. Just because I could see a person's soul, did not always mean I could tell what emotion that person was feeling. Sometimes it was obvious, if the person had an emotion so extreme that it overtook the whole surface-area of their soul. I might see, for example, it sparking with anger or lighting up with amusement or buckling into itself with grief.

However, if I wanted to get an accurate read on a person's emotions, that was their surface, deeper or memory emotions, I always had to touch the person and dive into them with my power.

It was hard to explain really, even now I had a hell of a time explaining it to my

grandfather who immediately saw the practical application for my abnormal ‘aspect.’

What I told him was that I saw a second body made of light—though that was not exactly it, more like colored mist—wreathing the person. Human’s souls were a little smaller, less dense than those who were born with or infected by dragon blood. The more magic a person had in their blood, the denser, larger, and, often times, overpowering their soul was.

"Who pissed in your corn flakes?" Bobby said to me, chuckling. "I thought you'd be happy to see me." His massive bulk easily took up two thirds of the bench seat even after he scooted over.

Looking at Bobby you automatically thought ‘biker’ he had it all: the girth, sloppily greased back hair and a concealed weapon bulge on his back, all he was missing was his usual leather jacket, his big gleaming motorcycle and one of his biker mamas to ride off into the sunset with.

Him- in the minivan- it just wasn’t right.

"I am happy to see you," I said, yawning. "I need coffee. Lots of coffee."

I did not sleep last night. Even after releasing all the emotions that I had drained into my grandfather’s ring, I still had that vampire’s emotional-memories stuck in my head. They slided their way through my thoughts, foreign and wrong. What really kept me up was when I remembered feeling what gave that waste-of-space joy-energy, and that

the residue of those acts had passed through me.

The thought that I could somehow still have tiny remnants of that creep in me gave me shudders now, or it could be Glacier's sub-zero air-conditioning.

"Can you turn down the freezer?" I asked.

Bobby squeezed my arm and gave me a warning look.

I glanced forward to my other uncle. And, not for the first time, I realized I was completely oblivious to Glacier.

Bobby's presence was just so... big, sometimes it over-shadowed everyone else around. But just glancing Glacier's way, I knew that he was pissed off.

His appearance, as always, was impeccable; his black hair was glued back into little dark comb lines leading from his temple to the perfect line at his nape. His dark blue suit was pressed to the point that it looked unnatural and I knew that poor suit lived under constant threat of being burned if it dared to snag or brush against a fleck of dirt.

You could never tell from my uncle Glacier's expression or tone what he felt yet my uncle Glacier was an emotional-broadcaster. I could read his feelings like he wrote them out for me in a live journal. He was actually one of the only broadcaster's I had ever come across.

"He is not happy." Glacier said. He did not need to clarify who he was talking about; by

'he' Glacier meant the big 'he', the 'he' of all of our lives, my grandfather.

"What did I do now?" I asked a little defensively.

"If I have to tell you, you don't deserve to be on my team." Glacier's voice did not ever change, not in pace or cadence, not from the happiest statements to the bleakest. However, it was chill from his soul, not the air conditioner that gave me shivers.

"I'm sorry Glacier. I'll never do it again."

"What is the fourth rule?"

I shifted, uncomfortable that after five years of working for my grandfather under Glacier's lead, he was again reviewing basics. Swallowing any retort, I said, "If any change that has not been taken into consideration while preparing for the job occurs then immediately abort and regroup."

Bobby sighed and squeezed my shoulder, "She reported, I told her to keep going."

If possible, Glacier's temperature lowered.

"Bobby," Glacier said in the exact voice I would use to tell a very irritating person to 'shut up'. "The only thing you're proving is you're incompetent back-up. Dakota knows her orders."

"Bobby told me to—"

Bobby pinched my arm really hard.

"Friggin' hells," I hissed under my breath, I slugged Bobby back but because of the angle it did not have much power behind it.

Glacier stared at us in the review mirror for longer than I thought was really safe while driving. "Dakota, you're doing reconnaissance and back up for Deagan only—"

"You're demoting me to a grunt?" I said, shocked.

"It is a temporary demotion; you will only be a collector for three months."

"Three months!" I want to cry. "Grunt work and back up for Deagan? That's what? Like five hundred a job? And why Deagan?"

"He's your brother," Glacier said.

"*Half*-brother and he's a no-talent ass clown," I said.

Bobby chuckled. "Yeah he is."

I can't keep the pleading out of my voice this time. "Why can't I work with you, or Bobby? I'm a soldier, I've earned it."

My half-brother Deagan was a grunt through and through—the official term was 'collector;' basically, the job of a glorified bill collector, and Deagan *loved* his work.

"Bobby is suspended and I need someone reliable at my back, not a *soldier* who decides to follow the rules at her convenience."

I gave Bobby an apologetic look. I got him suspended? And what would have happened if he had admitted he told me to 'abort'? I would be much more than re-assigned. I turned to Glacier and said, "I'm sorry, okay?"

I knew I had very little time before we arrived at my school and I wanted to make my case. The real reason I did not abort wouldn't

melt his heart—pun not intended— but my unique aspects and ability to talk myself out of trouble was why I was the first girl in the history of our family allowed to be a soldier. Well, I might also be the only girl who ever wanted to be a soldier- also lovingly referred to as a henchman.

Hey, it was better than being a grunt or worse yet, a wife.

I spouted off the first lie I could come up with, "I know I broke the fourth rule, but I was doing it hoping to put in practice your recent lesson on quick thinking and improvisation in evasion in hostile situations. Rustom had already spotted me--"

Glacier did not even let me finish. "Three months shadowing someone who follows the rules to the letter will be good for you."

"And by 'good,' he means boring as all the human hells." Bobby said, mussing up my hair.

Glacier chose to ignore the comment and threw back a bag.

Opening the bag I stared in at the real reason I did not abort.

Bobby reached in and grabbed a stack of bills. "Give me some of that," he said.

Grabbing the bills back and smacking his head, I zipped closed the bag.

Glacier sighed and his soul lost some of its chill. "Do you want me to deposit your money into your college account?"

I glanced at Bobby, and without me needing to ask, he said, "I'm going to the bank, I'll do it." He took the money, and leaned down as if he was setting it down, but stuffed it into my backpack instead.

"I'll pick you up at three thirty today; *he* wants to take you to the shooting range," Glacier said.

"Today?" I said, swallowing down the nervousness and excitement that flashed through me every time my grandfather took time out of his schedule to spend time with me. This presented a little bit of a problem since I had an essential errand to run. "Wait, doesn't grandfather have a *very important* guest coming tonight?"

I knew exactly who was coming tonight. That was what the whole family had been preparing for for weeks. I knew way more than I wanted to about the famous half-dragon Braiden McCormick, Celti in origin, but now lived in New Anglo. He was leader of the Celti-New Anglo Dracon Union, the inheritor of the VDWFH insurance corporation and all the riches of— one of those Mainland New Anglo states. And he was buying a vacation mansion on the base of the Volcano, and coming with a full entourage.

There was also a lot of talk of him having connections to two of the four high dragon Rexes, the high dragon kings, which I guess was a big deal. Braiden McCormick had been just about all my family talked about. I was

already a little tired of Braiden, and the poor dracon had not arrived yet.

"Braiden and his entourage arrived Wednesday," Bobby said.

Even with the meaningful stare Bobby was leveling on me it still took me a minute to catch up.

"Not...that Celti-punk band?"

"Yep," Bobby said, giving me a sympathetic pat on my shoulder.

"By all the dragons," I said throwing my head back. "No wonder grandfather is pissed at me! Why in all the kingdoms would they go to the Midnight Club to perform?"

I had not even considered it could be my grandfather's very important guest on the stage. What was wrong with me? I saw their ridiculous shoes and the way Rustom kicked that techno vampire DJ they usually featured off stage for them, a random Celti werewolf punk band that showed up and felt like playing. And Rustom obeyed that fiddle-player-guy without a twitch of his eye.

But that guy wasn't Braiden, he spoke with a New Anglo accent, he must be just one of Braiden's entourage.

It all made perfect sense now, why the dragons had so much power, that Celti-sounding lead singer must be Braiden, the only living son of one of the dragon lesser-kings. He was the son of *the* wolf dragon, Ferris, who started the werewolf infection with a single bite. Actually as far as humans were concerned,

Ferris was one of the most famous dragons in the world.

Braiden Mc-freaking-Cormick.

"I'm a freaking idiot," I said as the minivan's tires bumped over the cobblestone drive that led up to my school.

"Not an idiot, but not displaying the cognitive ability I expect from you when on assignment," Glacier said. He parked in his usual spot, a long distance away from the front of my school, to avoid drawing attention.

"Translation," Bobby said, "you're an idiot."

"Thanks a lot." I said. I leaned into him, "What is that scent you're wearing? Ode de old man?"

Bobby just turned forty, he was having aging issues; stupid in my opinion, because he looked younger than some of the seniors in my school. "Get out of here," he said, good naturedly pushing me toward the van door.

"Have a good day at school Dakota," Glacier said and, as he did every morning, he added, "don't forget your dampener."

Before I exited the van, I again extinguished my powers by wrapping the bracelet around my wrist. And as I did every day, I wondered if wearing it was worth the emptiness, the void I endured daily, just to attend an all-human school.

The hill Mabi Academy perched on had long ago been a golf course which had been forgotten and allowed to overgrow. But the golf course had one feature that the board of

trusties found too attractive to resist when choosing a location for their all-human academy: it was surrounded on all sides with moving water. A natural source of moving water encircling an area was about as strong a ward against creatures with fire in their blood as you get.

It wasn't moving water alone that hurt the infected and dragons; we could remain in moving water for about twenty minutes without feeling any serious effect, otherwise we would be a rather stinky bunch. There was something about an unbroken circle, a moat, of moving water around a small enough space, known as a 'water ward' that kept us out better than any wall could.

We were all pleasantly surprised—if not shocked—when the charm my father had bought from an east-side island witch had allowed me to cross water wards. My father had been living as a human for years with it, crossing water wards, but it had not worked for any other dragon than my father, until me.

When it worked for me, my uncle Bobby tested to see if the charm had changed after my father's death; he braved the nausea, held the charm in his hand and tried to cross the water ward at Mabi Academy at night. The moment he stepped onto the bridge, he was knocked back and knocked out and an electronic ear piercing alarm sounded throughout the school. Glacier and I had to throw him into the van and we fled the scene as if an angry mob was chasing us.

My dampener was some sort of water charm, I knew that, and for an unknown reason only I, my younger sisters and my mother could touch the dampener without immediately feeling nauseous. My older sister Clara, who had the same mother, but not the same father as the rest of us, could lift my dampener, however, after holding it for thirty seconds she was so nauseous she had to drop it.

When I neared the front of the parking lot of my school, I heard someone call out, "Morning, sleepy-head."

I turned to see Mele Alana kicking off from her poor little sedan, the car shuddered, forced to play rap music this early in the morning. Mele dropped her cigarette and stomped the cherry out with her patent-leather shoe.

Missy, who had been, what looked like, talking without taking breaths at Mele paused to look at me. "Oh, hi, Dakota," she said, ever peppy.

"Missy here is telling me all about how Todd Anderson cheated on Kerry Morgan with two co-eds at a college party last night, at once," Mele said dryly, raising her eyebrows.

"If you don't quit smoking, I'm going to kill you." I said. "I'm not kidding; who do you think will end up having to pay for your emphysema?"

"You're in a good mood. Love you, too." Mele said. She wore the same uniform Missy and I did; burgundy and white plaid knee-length skirt and a white polo, but her big chest

made the outfit look ‘sexy-school-girl’. Whereas my uniform made my close to pre-pubescent body just looked even more childish.

Missy nervously giggled, sounding unsure.

I looked back to make sure that Glacier left. “Wanna jump ship?” I asked as we walked toward the bridge that crossed the water ward into the Academy.

“You’re serious? School hasn’t even started. And, I think Cotton-Head already spotted me.” Mele said, referring to our vice-principle.

I looked to see Cotton-Head herself standing in front of our fortress like school; her expression always reminded me of the vultures from the Mabiian Zoo. Her cotton-ball hair caught the light as her gaze combed the lot.

Mabi Academy was an uncomfortable mix between resort and fortress. The tall wall that encircled the campus was clear as glass, not impeding the view, however, it wasn’t glass; glass wasn’t tank-proof. Once a stoned senior drove right through the small river water ward and crashed into the wall in his SUV, or so the story went, and the SUV bounced off, literally.

Inside the wall was a clear view of the crowds of teenagers, funneling into the cement block classrooms. The architecture and the fact that the school could not be more visible from the highway, shouted a clear message to any infected or dracon passing: ‘look at our children, you can’t have them.’

At Mabi Academy anyone was admitted, they just had to be human, or in my case, be able to fake being human.

I rocked back on my high tops. “I need to caffeinate. And if I have to run track right now I’ll probably eat-dirt and look like Mrs. Seed after a bender for the rest of the day.”

Missy looked around like our teacher Mrs. Seed could possibly have overheard me

She pouted at me. “I can’t miss first period,” she said, oblivious to the fact I did not invite her.

“Yeah, okay.” Mele said, changing course. “Missy, go distract cotton-head.”

“Will you get me a white mocha if I do?” Missy asked.

“No,” Mele and I said, simultaneously, as we walked back and climbed into the front seats of Mele’s car.

Half-way to ‘Volcanic Coffee,’ our favorite coffee shop, I made Mele pull off into a residential street. I grabbed the bag out of my backpack.

“Why are we stopping? Whose house is this?” Mele said, obviously annoyed.

“My landlord,” I said, counting out stacks of money onto my lap.

“If I did not know that you loved me, I would be pissed that you’re using me for my car. Holy-shit! How much money is that?”

“Twenty five thousand,” I said, distractedly. I stuffed four thousand back into my backpack and put it on her lap, “Watch this for me.”

Even though I hid the strangest, scariest parts of my life from her, I know it was only because we were best friends that she did not point out how screwed up the ‘normal’ side of my life was. All she said was, “This is the kind of shit that makes me seriously hate your mom.”

My landlord opened the door before I even knocked on his small but comfortably cozy one story. He sighed; I could tell from his expression how uncomfortable the man was to see me. He wasn’t that old, maybe early forties, but deep stress wrinkles creased his forehead above his eyebrows “I was hoping to speak to your mother.” He said, “I did not want to have to leave the note, or call the police. I just...”

I handed him the folder. “It’s okay, Mr. Peterson, I understand. Here, three months’ rent, in cash. My mom says she’s sorry, she can be a bit scattered. Now, could you um, un-evict us?”

He holds the bag far from him, as if it might get him dirty. “The back-rent is five months, and this month is already due.”

“That’s impossible, she said—”

“It’s not only possible; I can prove it, young lady,” he said, defensively.

My eyes stung, my stomach plummeted and I blinked rapidly. How could it be five months unpaid rent plus this month?

“Um, okay.” I said, “My mom can get the other twenty one thousand, I’m sure, but it might take a couple days. Please, could you give us one week?”

I would make the money, somehow.
“Just don’t call the police again for a week, please?” I reiterated.

“This whole thing makes me really uncomfortable,” he said, leaning against the doorjamb and not quite meeting my eyes. “I hate doing this; I’m really not a bad man. I know your mother has five kids and no husband; I was worried when I rented the house to her in the first place. I only rented that house out when the bank threatened to foreclose. And now, I still have to make the payments myself- plus rent out this unit. I just can’t do it.” The message was- he was a good man, at the end of his rope, guilty because he thought my mom could not make her rent payments... if only he knew the truth.

“I have four thousand in the car,” the thought of giving him the rest of the money made me want to curl up on his doorstep and cry- knowing that if I did not pay the electric and water we might live in the dark with no showers as of next Wednesday, but hungry and dirty was better than homeless. “My mother has money,” I lied, knowing she was broke again, but I followed the statement with the truth, “You see, my grandfather is actually the one who pays for our rent, he’s our co-signer...”

“I called your co-signer—“

My lungs and stomach clenched- and I was about to run. My mom had to go into hiding...

Unaware of my panic, my landlord continued, “but after an hour and a half on hold, I hung up. I’ll try again.”

“Please, no.” I whispered the words to keep the desperation out of my voice. “Let me give you the four thousand now, just give me a week I’ll make— I mean get you the money.”

He turned to me, and I realized in my moment of panic I just gave away... everything. Wow I was an idiot. He just stared for a long time then asked, “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“You look younger.”

“I know.”

“You’re name is what, Danielle?”

“Dakota.”

“Dakota, keep your college tuition. If you talk to your grandfather and get him to pay the back rent and this months’ rent by Friday, I won’t evict your family. You should be worried about long-division, not rent.” He held the cash back to me.

I stepped back, backing toward Mele’s car. “That money is from my grandfather, not me, I promise. I’ll talk to him after school. Thank you!” I said, opening the car door before he could object again. “See you in a week.”

Before turning onto the main road Mele handed me my backpack, overflowing with cash, and said, “Coffee is on me.”

We ended up walking into second period with five coffees, since Juliette texted that she told our physical education teacher that we had women issues and had to run to the store, getting us excused from the absence. She threatened us with ‘divorce’ if we did not get her a double iced latte. And you could not get Juliette anything without getting her identical twin Ophelia the same. You know those kids that threw a fit if they did not get a present at their sibling’s birthday party? Ophelia was like that, except she was sixteen.

The fifth coffee was an unabashed bribe. “One hundred percent Koka, whole milk and one raw sugar,” I said to Mr. Gallagher as I held out the paper cup.

His lips pursed but he accepted the cup with a world-weary, “You girls.”

“Tell me I’m a genius,” Juliette said, as Mele handed her and Ophelia their coffees from a tray.

“Maybe I would if the excuse wasn’t so awkward,” Mele said. “Now coach thinks I had leakage problems or something.”

“Please,” Ophelia said, “I’m drinking here.”

“You’re welcome,” Juliette said.

The soft glow of the touch screen desks lit up sporadically across the classroom as I slipped between rows to my desk. Maneuvering into my seat, I took my first sip of my mocha and it was pure milky heaven.

I took out the stylus for my digital desk and found my favorite one was broken and thus I had to use my old janky one.

Clearing his throat, Mr. Gallagher called our attention to the front where he was busy writing: ‘Dracon Monarchy and Dominion on New Anglo’s Government Today. *What does this mean for you?*’

Turning around to face us, he pushed his glasses up his nose and surveyed us. Mr. Gallagher always had a harried, unkempt look about him; he was probably in his late thirties. He appeared to be the kind of guy able to recite the original New Anglo constitutions verbatim, while still needing his wife to remind him to put his shoes on each morning. He said, “I’m opening this up to discussion. Let’s hear what you think.”

A halfhearted hand rose in the first row.

“Travis,” Mr. Gallagher said.

“Wait Mr. G, I’m confused, isn’t this supposed to be a history class?” Travis said, with his affected wave-rider drawl.

As my broken stylus bounced off of Travis’s head I was rewarded with a satisfying, “Ouch, what gives bra?”

Mr. Gallagher either did not see or pointedly ignored my stylus. He said, “You bring up a point that helps me tie this discussion topic into the big picture Travis—thank you. The reason we study history, guys, is to?—*understand current events.*” He wrote the last part across the board as he said it. “Now, we always focus on the negatives of

having a Dracon king and having the dracons outnumbering humans and holding the highest positions in New Anglo government—for obvious reasons. Can anyone think of any positives?”

Ophelia raised her hand. “There are dracon law-enforcers who can actually prevent Vampires from killing people,” she said when called on.

“Yeah, maybe on the Mainland,” Travis said.

“Thank you Ophelia,” Mr. Gallagher said while writing: ‘legislation protecting humans and enforcement of laws restricting all supernatural creatures.’ “Great. Yes, people always forget that these supernatural creatures existed before the dracons completely dominated the government—dragons were the cause of these creatures, it is true, but dracons also are the only creatures strong enough to keep vampires and other nastier infected in check. In some European and Eastern countries where humans still control their governments, humans are killed by vampires frequently and often with no repercussions. Great, anything else?”

As other students around the classroom continued the discussion, my gaze wandered to the cement block walls. The inset lights and sharp lines must have been an attempt at industrial elegance, whereas they just made it feel like we were having class in a cinder-block.

My thoughts kept catching on the enormity of my problem. Three month’s rent

was twenty-one thousand and after I pay bills and buy food, I would only have fifteen hundred left of the four thousand in my bag. So, I had to make nineteen and a half thousand.

Back-up and reconnaissance work for Deagan would pay five hundred dollars a job; so I needed to do... thirty nine jobs in the next seven days. There was no possible way...

And yes, my grandfather was like a quadrillionaire so we would get another place to stay if we were evicted from this one. But eviction wouldn't just be 'eviction' for my family. My grandfather gave my mother the rent money plus living expenses. My best guess was he gave her about twelve to fifteen thousand a month. She told him that she paid all our bills, I heard her say this; if we were evicted he would realize that my mother took all of the money instead.

All of it.

She did not even pay for our groceries, I did.

My mother wasn't even married to his son anymore, barely family in his eyes. Her only value in the family to him was her ability to care for his granddaughters.

My grandfather was not known for his compassion toward humans who in anyway harm the family; and if he found out, I had a pretty good idea about what my grandfather would do to my mother.

"Dakota Kekoa, you usually have something to contribute," Mr. Gallagher said,

waking me from my ruminating. “Anything you would like to share?”

I scanned the digital board in the front of the classroom, there were new comments on the board but it did not look like they had changed topic.

I cleared my throat and smiled at Mr. Gallagher before answering, “Because of the population restrictions in so many countries, resources are no longer scarce?”

“Petroleum and Vervaris for everyone. Great,” Mr. Gallagher said, “Though it is important to note that world-wide there are only population restrictions on humans. Okay, anyone else have anything to add?”

“Mr. G—” Travis said, interrupting Mr. Gallagher from writing my comment on the board. “I’m feeling morally composed by this conversation, like dragons kill people every day- and you’re saying it’s a good thing?”

“It’s morally compromised not composed, dumb ass,” Mele said. “And Mr. G isn’t saying it’s a good thing, he’s just asking us for unbiased opinions. Seriously, don’t raise your hand if you don’t know what’s going on.”

“Mele,” Mr. Gallagher said in an even tone, “I am perfectly able to regulate my own classroom without the use of swearing. And Travis, I apologize; I brought up this topic knowing that it was controversial. Why don’t we move on to the negatives of living in a dragon controlled government?”

“Can I answer? I’ve had my hand up for ‘like’ five minutes?” Juliette said. “I agree with

Travis that there are no upsides. The only reason that there is ‘protective legislation’ is because humans make dragons so rich because they tax humans so much.”

“Very good, Juliette.” He paused with one finger up and then said, “Money. Can anyone name another reason that it is in the dragon government’s best interest to keep humans alive? Yes, Alana.”

Alana, whose dyed black hair, choker necklace and black lipstick screamed ‘I wanna be vamp food,’ said in a dramatic voice, “Infected and dragon women can’t have babies. Only dragon boys and human girls can have more dragons. They’re keeping us alive to be their baby factories.”

“Great,” Mr. Gallagher said, his enthusiasm making the statement even more awful. He scrawled across the board, ‘for breeding.’

“That’s not true,” I said, before I thought better of it.

The whole class and Mr. Gallagher turned to me. I’m so off my game today I did the one thing I’ve been trying so hard to avoid for years, calling attention to the fact that I know anything I should not about dragons.

“...the part about only humans being able to have dragons,” I said, uncertainly, “I’m actually not sure if this is true but I just heard that dragon women with only a little bit of dragon blood, like one-eighth, or something, can...breed...with other dragons.”

“Interesting, Dakota, I did not know that.” But thankfully Mr. Gallagher did not delve into my comment and continued with, “So why do humans have so many more rights in the State of Mabi than humans in Mainland New Anglo? What has kept the Mabi state-government predominantly human?”

“Keanu’s dad,” a jock in the back row said and then shouted, “yeah, Keanu.”

Mele elbowed me and winked.

“I was thinking more: big picture, thank you Michael...”

“He’s Auli’s dad too,” Ophelia hissed at the jock.

Yes, Auli and Keanu Hale. Just hearing their names quickened my heart’s pace. Keanu, also known as ‘one of the gods’ or simply as ‘god’ by the female population of Mabi Academy, was our high school quarterback along with being one of two professionally sponsored wave-riders currently enrolled; the other was his best friend Hunter Bryant. Keanu and his sister Auli, who was in my year, were the sole reason I attended Mabi Academy, and proving to be my toughest assignments ever.

Chapter Three

The school cafeteria had no assigned seats but the ‘rules of seating’ were something every high school student knew and lived by or else were humiliated by.

Because, and only because, Auli was the fifth member to our little dysfunctional clique, we were allowed to sit at the five outside picnic benches that the most popular juniors and seniors held their dominion over. We sat at the fifth table, we were sophomores, even if Auli was the little sister of a god, oh sorry, I meant Keanu.

Auli sat on our usual painted metal picnic table in front of a plate of what looked like lettuce and just lettuce.

What, too many calories in a cherry tomato?

She ignored her leaves and us, talking to some junior boys I did not know, until we stopped to set down our food-laden trays. My tray held three courses, fries for an appetizer, chicken-quesadilla for the main course and chocolate pudding for dessert.

Ophelia rushed to take the seat across from Auli. She was welcome to it, the only reason I would want to sit within five feet of Auli was to make her smell my fries.

"Honua's coming our way," Mele said to me as we sat.

I looked up to see that the freshman I tutored was dodging her way through all the popular juniors and seniors, likely to talk to me.

Ophelia looked over her shoulder at Honua then turned to me. "There's your charity project, Dakota," she said the statement to me but looked at Auli with a poorly suppressed grin.

Auli turned to me and said overly sweetly, "How do you stay so perfect Dakota?"

"I eat delicious snacks. Auli, do you want my pudding? I have way too much." I said as I pushed my tray toward her, "and don't hate because I'm a nicer person than you are, ladies."

"Yeah, Ophelia. Since when are you so catty?" Juliette shot at her sister, sounding seriously irritated.

Ophelia looked to Auli in a not so disguised plea for back-up. When Auli just smirked, Ophelia said, her voice a bit whiney, "Come on. You know Honua is creepy; who is born without ears?"

"So Ophelia, are you saying Dakota, probably the only person in our school who knows sign language, should not tutor Honua because her tragic birth defect... creeps you out? And why don't you yell it when the girl is right there." Mele said in a voice that had been known to make senior jock-stars want to curl up and cry.

Instead of quitting when she was behind, Ophelia barreled on in a pouty tone,

"Come on, it's not like she can hear me, she doesn't have ears."

"She reads lips," I said, annunciating each word, "She just needs to see your mouth." I stood up to intercept Honua before she could reach our table.

As I turned away I overheard Auli say to Mele, "Remember when we went to that riding camp and..." her words drifted off as I walked away but I heard Mele's uproarious laughter.

Honua met me smiling. She was one of the only people in the school who looked younger than I did; her platinum hair and alabaster skin made her look like a living doll. She was beautiful, stunning even, but most people after they knew could not get past the two tiny uneven ridges of skin which were all she had for ears.

"I have bad news," I said and signed at the same time, actually disappointed, "I can't tutor you after school, a family thing came up."

"That's ok, I don't really need it," she said, her voice loud, the tone was that of someone who had never heard their own voice. Her hands moved rapidly as she signed the next part, "And you only tutor me so you can stare at Keanu."

My mouth dropped open indignantly. "Not true," I signed back.

She grinned mischievously and signed, "If eyes could make babies, you two would have little eyeballs running around right now."

I signed, “Okay, okay, I might have signed up for tutoring because he signed up for tutoring, yeah.”

I said the rest, “But that’s not why I continued for the past year, and you know it. You’re one of the, maybe, five people I can stand to be around for more than ten minutes at this school.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but the smile creeping across her face told me that she knew I was telling the truth. Her eyebrows rose in an ‘oh-la-la’ gesture, and she said, “I heard something about you.”

“That I’m awesome, I know, it’s been going around. I can’t do anything about it.” I responded nudging her.

“No,” she signed, good naturedly rolling her eyes again, “That you went to the Midnight Club last night.”

I was completely broadsided, so petrified the breath inside of me evaporated and I could not form any of the questions and denials that I needed to. Not that being recognized on one of my jobs wasn’t always a risk, but it was the freaks like Alana that I was afraid would be hanging around the places my grandfather sent me into. Not Honua. And I would swear that I did not see anyone I knew last night and I scanned for it, I always do.

I just managed to shake my head at her when Keanu himself came up and slung his arm around Honua. He said, “Hello ladies,” And grinned at me. If I had trouble breathing before...

Honua grinned up at him. She said in her too-loud voice, “Hey, do you know CPR? I think Dakota is turning blue.”

He looked me over, gods save me. “You ok?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I managed.

Keanu Hale made Honua look even tinier, he probably had more than a foot on her and his muscular physic was twice her willowy frame. He looked like he belonged in a mural as an ancient Mabiian god risen from the sea to conquer maidens’ hearts, one at a time. That conquering hearts one-at a-time part was true.

His smile made the insanity of my life just float away for a second and I smiled back. “How are you, Keanu?” I said, my voice a little high pitched.

“Good,” he said, “Did Auli invite you to the party we’re having this weekend?”

I peered back at Auli who was animatedly talking to the girls, probably taking this opportunity while I was away from the table to invite everyone to said party. “Not yet,” I said.

“I’d love it if you could go,” he said.

Oh wow.

“I don’t know,” I said, regaining a little bit of the coy flirtatiousness that usually came so easily to me, “last time I went to a party at your house, I was the only one who showed up in a bikini.”

“No,” he said narrowing his eyes, “As I remembered everyone was in suits and half the party ended up in the pool.” He winked and

said, “And even though I thought you were way too young for me then, I remember thinking you looked great.”

I could not keep the goofy grin off my face as I said, “Thank you.”

I did not correct his false memory, because the real one was bad, like worst teen moments bad. The real story was this: I was in seventh grade and I had been in at the kindergarten-through-eighth-grade side of Mabi Academy for about three months and making no headway with becoming best buddies with Auli. I had, at first, thought that this would be an in-and-out job, like all the rest. Make friends with Auli, get what I needed, then go back to my old school and training with Glacier. No such luck. Auli wouldn't so much as lend me a spare pencil in an exam, let alone let me paint her toe nails at an all-girl slumber party.

The job was my first big one, and it was really big, one hundred thousand dollars for reconnaissance only — but I would have done it for free. And I was failing. When Auli and the twins came up to me in between classes I thought I had finally caught my break.

Auli had grinned and said, “Hey,” she then clearly overacted a confused expression, “Dakota, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like pool parties?” Ophelia asked, giggling.

“Sure.” I said.

“My brother is in high school and he’s having a Yule pool party at our house,” Auli said, “Would you like to come?”

To my credit, I played it cool, just said, “Sure, love to,” and inserted her name and address into my phone.

If I lived in a mansion, the house the Hales lived in was unclassifiable. Their property took up probably half of the countryside around Kapu town. My grandfather’s collected intelligence had told me the water wards on the Hale estate were three times stronger than the school wards. Still, wearing only my charm bracelet and a green bikini, I crossed the bridge just before the wall circling their estate and the two bridges over the water wards inside their estate without a problem.

Auli had answered the door wearing a red strappy dress; she released cold indoor air on the warm day and gave me the happiest grin I had ever seen on her, before and after that day. “I’m so glad you made it,” she said, opening the door just wide enough so I could squeeze past her. When I was fully in, she closed it, turned around and yelled, “The entertainment is here!”

I should have known the moment she opened the door wearing a dress, or when the cold air hit me, she wouldn’t have turned the air conditioning on for a pool party, but walking in I had been so awed by the enormity of the space. I did not connect the dots until I looked down to probably about two hundred of

my peers drinking punch and wearing suits and cocktail dresses.

There was a moment where everything could have been very different; I could have been a joke, a social outcast, as I was sure Auli had gleefully plotted. My grandfather might have un-enrolled me, moved us, given up on me being a soldier, given me to my aunt to train with my sister to be a dracon-wife, in other words a baby making slave.

But Auli's then best friend Mele, who I had not said two words to at that point, stripped off her cocktail dress and standing in her bra and underwear screamed, "Yeah, pool party!" Then she threw her dress into some guy's face, ran through the living room and out of the big glass doors into their courtyard. I, with most of the party, followed her out to see Mele pushing party guests into the pool.

To this day, it was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me.

In the end, most of the party ended up missing essential articles of clothing, Mele and I became friends while trying our first sips of vodka, and I was never invited to the Hale estate again.

Until now.

Keanu smiled, patiently waiting for my answer. Honua still wrapped in Keanu's muscular arm, made a comical face at me, obviously entertained rather than annoyed at being left out of our conversation, she signed to me, "I have no idea what you guys are talking about."

Of course she did not, Keanu was facing me, and she could only read my lips and my half of the conversation. “Sorry,” I signed.

Keanu said, “Oh, right,” and then pivoted so Honua could see his face. “Do you want to go to a party at my house on Saturday, Honua?” He did not talk weird or slowly to her like even the people who weren’t making fun of her did.

Saturday? Saturday! This was my big break-through, the opportunity I had been waiting for a year and a half, and it was the same day we were holding a formal reception welcoming Braiden-freaking-McCormick!

I had an overwhelming urge to throw a full-blown, kicking and screaming, throw myself to the ground, tantrum. I called upon my years of training and gritted my teeth together.

And to make matters worse, like tears pricking my eyes-worse, Honua, my little social misfit friend who had probably never been invited to a party in her life beamed up and said, “I can probably go, but only if I can get a ride with you, Dakota.”

My voice was small when I answered her, “I can’t go. I have a family thing.”

She smiled and signed, “That is okay.” But, I could see the disappointment on her face. It was probably the first time she had been invited out by a boy, let alone the school’s resident ‘god.’

Maybe there was some way that I could arrange a ride for her; but then I would be leaving her alone with the social-buzzards.

“I’ll drive you,” Keanu said, “I’ll drive you home too, I don’t have to drink.”

It was a terrible idea, high-school parties were probably more dangerous than receptions at the Dracon High Court, the only way she would have anything that resembled fun was if I could watch out for her. But the beaming smile that lit across Honua’s face stopped me from saying anything more.

Before running off, Honua gave her info to Keanu and said, “Text only.” Then she signed to me that she had to get to the cafeteria before everything worth eating was gone.

“Let me give you my number too,” I said, before thinking how weird and forward it sounded. But for once, I did not mean it that way, and I explained, “In case you need me. She’s really important to me.”

His ever present smile disappeared and Keanu was completely serious when he said to me, “I won’t let her leave my sight. And yeah, I would love your number.”

I gave it to him and he programmed it into his phone.

“Actually,” he said, smiling sheepishly, “I’m really disappointed you can’t go. Don’t think I’m a stalker or anything, but, part of the reason I’m throwing a party is I want to get to know you outside of school.”

Oh. My. Gods.

Literally.

Maybe I should just throw in the towel and join his horde of fan-girls who spend their days live-messaging about who he's maybe dating, who he's talking to, everything he says, and writing hashtags on everything #keanuisagod.

Yeah, right.

But his words did cause something inside me to stir so intensely that just to make it stop, I said, "That's odd, that's exactly what all the other girls told me you said to them." I softened the verbal-jab with a smile.

"No they did not," he said, returning my smile and stepping in closer. "And now I have your number so I can call you anytime I want: five in the morning, in the middle of class... lots of possibilities."

"Give me that." I said, reaching out to grab his phone.

He raised his phone out of my reach. "I don't think so."

"What are you guys talking about?" a voice said directly behind me. It was a mark of how much Keanu was claiming all my attention that Auli surprised me by coming up from behind. Honestly, if I did not have my dampener on it would probably be painful to be this close to her; it only took one look to know that loathing shot out of her every pore all aimed directly at me.

Completely oblivious to Auli's hatred, Keanu said, "Hey Shorty. I was just talking to your friend here."

“Yeah, we’re just best friends,” she said, toneless.

“Hey,” Keanu said, “I have an idea, Auli, Hunter and I are going out to Big Beach tonight, to watch the sunset and see if we can spot any dolphins. Do you want to come with us, Dakota?”

Auli turned to me, her expression clearly said, ‘accept and die.’

“I would love to.” Then I raised my eyebrows to Auli and said, “Do you want to put my address in your phone too, Keanu?”

“I know where you live,” Auli said then swung her long silky black hair over her shoulder as she stalked back to our table.

“Great.” Keanu said.

I put my hand to my face and said, “Sorry, I just remembered, I have to ask Honua something. I’ll... I’ll see you later.”

I rushed back to our table without waiting for a good bye, but glanced over as I gathered up my backpack. Keanu was still standing there, his friends already gathering around, but he was looking at me, smiling.

“Hello?” Mele said. “What just happened? Sit down and tell me now.”

“Can’t, I have to run,” I shot over my shoulder. “I’ll tell you seventh period, I swear.”

“You better!” She shouted as I walked as fast as I could without losing all dignity.

I could not find Honua though and I realized: I had no idea where she ate lunch, or who with. I roamed the halls for ten minutes until the lunch bell rang and scanned the

crowds as people swarmed past into classrooms. And as the seconds ticked away, I realized the seriousness of the situation I was in, my cover could very well have been blown.

If Honua found out about the Midnight Club from someone, anyone, at school, it would be huge news. If Auli even caught wind of the possibility, it would all be over. She would have her father force the school board to throw me out of school faster than rotten fruit, and with less care.

As the second bell rang, when there were only a couple people left in the halls, I finally spotted Honua as she was completely across the courtyard. I shouted her name, and then mentally kicked myself for how stupid that was. By the time I crossed the grassy yard, she was in the class, out of my reach.

I stood at an angle in the open door, just able to see her powering up her desk.

Hesitating only a minute, I waved to get her attention, but her gaze was fixed on the screen and her hands flying across the touch screen. Screw it, getting detention for being late was the least of my worries, I jumped up and down waving.

Not only did I get Honua's attention, I had the attention of half the class. Honua stuck her head forward, wrinkled her brow, and looked on the verge of laughter.

I signed, "How many people know about the Club."

She glanced around and pulled one hand under her desk, with her fingers she spelled out, “J-U-S-T M-E.”

I quickly followed with, “Who told you?”
“M-Y B-R-O-T-H-E-R.”

Brother? What? How could I not know Honua had a brother? Now that I thought about it, I knew absolutely nothing about Honua’s family.

A blonde woman with glasses stuck her head out, obviously the teacher, and said “Can I help you?”

“Thanks, No.” I said, walking away before she could write me up or something. As long as the world wasn’t about to crash down any more than it already had today, I could wait for my answers.

Chapter Four

“Guess who Auli tried to set me up with after you ran out at lunch?” Mele said as we walked among the fleeing hordes of students toward her little blue car. She lifted her lighter, a fake-gem encrusted monstrosity, to her obligatory after school cigarette; two sparks ignited and died before a small flame appeared. She inhaled slowly, obviously not going to just answer what I assumed was a rhetorical question.

“Who?” I supplied.

“Keanu.” she said, smoke pouring out of her smile. “Supposedly we’re perfect for each other; though oddly enough when I was in eighth grade and bat-shit crazy over him, I wasn’t good enough for him, hmmm.”

“What did you tell her?” I asked, for an instant worrying that I would have to compete with the only best friend I’ve ever had, over a boy. I did not think I could do it, even if it was a job.

“I told her that you can’t stop love. I don’t think it made her very happy, she pretty much packed up and left after that. So, I figured out why she hates you so much,” she said, pausing by her car.

Swinging my head to look at the back of the lot, I found the minivan. How did Glacier always get that spot? I turned back to Mele and

said, “Wow, don’t worry about sugar-coating it or anything...”

“I won’t. You’re welcome. Yeah, I’m pretty sure the only reason she would want me to be with her brother, as opposed to you, is because I’m more Mabiian than you are. Her dad is all into that shit, you know?”

Possibly, it never occurred to me, Auli was always talking about her lineage and how she was a direct descendant from the Mabiian royalty, before the Mabi island chain was annexed by New Anglo. Looking at Keanu, I could believe that the Hale’s had some royal blood.

But yet, that explanation did not quite fit. She’s never shown any derision towards the twins, and they were one-hundred percent blonde hair, blue eyed, Anglo-descendants.

Even though Mele was entirely Mabiian, I appeared just as Mabiian as she did. We both had brownish-black hair, a dark tan complexion and a distinctly Mabiian tilt to our eyes. Also, the last name I chose for myself after my father died, Kekoa, was my grandmother’s last name and completely Mabiian. Furthermore, I had never told Auli that I was only one-quarter Mabiian, so how would she know?

I backed up to show Glacier that I was coming and I said, “I always assumed that she’s just rabid from malnutrition. The girl needs to eat a hamburger. Love you, have to run.”

I did not run. My philosophy being that unless a person is in clothes specifically

designed for running, or there's a big boar chasing them, they'll look ridiculous doing it. But I walked briskly, pretending to not see the hands that waved at me or hear Missy yell my name as I rushed to jump in beside the stoic part-dragon in his minivan.

"I know, I know," I rushed to say. "Please don't tell me, I should have been prompt and ready. Okay. But, eighty percent of my day was so terrible and nothing you can say could make me feel worse."

My fingers shook with anticipation as I unlatched the little metal clip to my charm and slid the bracelet off stuffing it into my pocket. Every day before my charm left my skin there was an instant that I was sure my aspect would be gone forever; truly I would rather lose any other sense than seeing souls, sensing the ever present emotional currents that buzzed off of every living thing. I had two aspects, but if I had to pick, there would be no question that I would choose seeing and being able to touch souls.

Slumping in the tan leather seat, I inhaled deeply. "Why does your car always smell like pine?" I asked, peeking in his glove compartment, "I have never seen an air freshener in here, but it always smells like an artificial Yule-tide tree."

"Why just eighty percent?" Glacier said. Tendrils of his soul spread toward me, sparking with amusement. But under the amusement was a deep emotion that was pushing out into his surface emotions, he was concerned, really

concerned, so much so that my skin started itching.

To cover how fidgety I was feeling, I started searching in the center divider sure that I would find a car air-freshener slipped between his registration and the ‘permit to have charm upgrades’ on the van.

He grabbed my hand, pulled it away from his important papers, and said, “The air fresheners are in the air conditioning vents. Now, tell me what good came of your day?”

“The vents, huh? Who would have guessed.” Stilling the smile that attempted to pull up the corners of my mouth, I said, “Keanu Hale asked me to go on a date with him.”

“Tell grandfather,” Glacier said, “How close are you to infiltrating the Hale compound?”

“I was invited to their house Saturday...” I said barely concealing my groan.

“That’s not—“

“I know,” I said, not needing or wanting to hear it. “But he invited me out tonight too, so, we’ll see.”

Glacier pulled off in front of a small crowded beach park, and turned to me. He was nervous, on anyone else I would have expected fidgeting, it was absolutely terrifying. Glacier was never nervous.

“What is going on?” I demanded.

Glacier’s face never changed, not a twitch, but his anxious emotions intensified. For some reason, he had always been easy for me to read.

He ignored my question. “Where and when is he taking you tonight?”

“Big Beach look-out at six thirty.”

“A beach?” he asked.

I could sense the objection coming so I quickly said, “A look-out.”

He looked at the van’s canvas roof. “That is on the south side, it’s across the island. Two hours total driving, stops, and two hours for socializing, estimated time of return would be at the earliest ten at night. You can’t go to his house that late, you would have little chance to slip away from his attention. Eighteen year old males can be single minded when they see an opportunity for...you know...”

Screwing up my face did not work in preventing my laugh from slipping out, and I interrupted what he was saying. He seemed grateful in response since coming from Glacier, that was like giving me the ‘boys only want one thing’ speech.

“You need to go, I will come up with a reason for you to request a second date and be in touch after father returns you home,” he said.

For some reason though, I thought for the first time ever, I was better equipped than Glacier to plan this assignment.

I stepped out into the sweltering day, shut the minivan door and spun to climb directly into the back seat of the next parked car, a black luxury sedan. I once told my grandfather how cliché his mob-boss car was,

especially with the tinted windows. He did not say a thing and grinned just a little.

“My darling girl,” my grandfather said as soon as I crawled in beside him. Like always, the power of his soul rang my head like a bell.

The density of my grandfather’s soul always struck my senses like the shock of stepping into the sunshine after spending an hour in a dark classroom. However, like the sun, the intensity of my grandfather’s presence was so familiar that I attuned to it after a minute.

My grandfather stayed quiet, letting me adjust completely as his driver steered us out of the parking lot.

“Hey, Grandfather,” I said as I pulled away to look at him. My grandfather looked maybe forty tops, which in a half-dragon showed how truly old he was. He had the impossible beauty made up of fine chiseled aristocratic features that all high ranking half-dragons seemed to be blessed with. Born among the first dracons, he barely had an inch on me, tall for his time, but shorter than most women now. He looked exhausted; it was subtle, just a slight droop in his eyelids. By showing any weakness, even that slight, he told me both that he trusted me and that I was safe with him.

Something was going on. Glacier did not get overwhelmed with concern for me, he was always confident that any situation I could stumble into, he could cut me out of. And my

grandfather was never exhausted enough to show it, never.

My hand reached for my grandfather's arm but I set it back down in my lap. Not that I would ever ask him if something was bothering him; to him, showing concern would be me saying, 'I am not just assuming that you have everything under control'.

"Oh," he said, "I want to return your ring. I reformed the emotion-portal. You gave me a little buzz last night; it lasted almost half an hour."

"Half an hour?" I said, snorting, "I did not sleep and I only had the emotions pass through me on the way to you. I wish I could digest it all like you can, it just, stays in me." I slipped my ring back to its usual home on my index finger.

"Yes, it is unfortunate, your limitation. That is why I renewed the portal," he said. "The portal only works for twenty or so uses."

"Thanks," I said. "But if Glacier has his way, I won't be able to use it or anything else for three months."

"Do not rekindle my anger at your disobedience," he said. "I have given the punishment to Glacier to dole out, and he has chosen to coddle you. If a soldier followed his ideas rather than his orders when I was your age, he was flogged."

"If you flogged me," I said, smiling and settling into his arm, "At least I wouldn't be able to wear that hideous halter dress my mom is forcing me to wear Saturday. I'm going to

look ridiculous on the stage; I should wear a suit like the other soldiers.”

His voice was toneless, matter of fact, as he said, “The plan has changed; you will be presented with your sisters.”

The fear that blasted through me was primal, growing from the deepest strongest fear I’ve ever had in me, clustering in my chest. The black interior of the car seemed to squeeze in. My grandfather was setting me aside; this must have been what Glacier was worried about.

How did everything go so wrong from one tiny mistake, one tiny happenstance? If that band had been any other random band, the chances were slim that the entertainment itinerary of the Midnight Club would have ever been brought to my grandfather’s attention. Stepping out of line would have probably earned me a slap on the wrist from Glacier, rather than being tossed to the proverbial curb. I had always taken my grandfather’s favoritism for granted, become overconfident, and now I was going to pay for it.

My grandfather examined me with his coal black eyes, obviously sensing my fear. Like me, my grandfather could sense the emotions that people threw into the air and feed on them, digest them, especially fear. His emotional vampirism was one of his very useful and often used aspects. He could not, however, go beyond what people unwittingly threw off into the air, could not see nor dive into the soul as I could.

He said, "Those dresses better look as if they are made of starlight. Your mother finagled another ten thousand dollars for you and your sisters' wardrobe for the next two weeks."

Grandfather looked at me with the sharp intellect that even his exhaustion could not dull. "I indulge your mother, but only because I love you. I am growing tired of being taken for a fool by her."

"I need her." I managed, through the cords of fear that tightened around my chest.

"You lie," he said with absolute certainty. Then he sighed, "What am I going to do with my children? You lie for your mother, Bobby lies for you, yet perhaps it is only inevitable as I was sired by a dragon of trickery."

"Probably," I said.

He laughed, and squeezed my shoulder; as his thumb touched my skin I felt the fear I was probably filling up the car with seeping out of me and into the pad of his thumb.

He rarely did this to me, but I knew it was giving me a taste of my own proverbial medicine. My aspect, at least partially, came from this exact ability of his. We were made from the same blueprint, though, unlike him, I could not keep the emotions. For some reason, my aspect had also morphed into something much more than I should have inherited. In this one way, I was more powerful than my grandfather. Unless I sent it to him, he was limited to feeding only off the strongest

emotions people dumped out of them, whereas I had the potential to consume the entirety of a person's soul.

By the time the driver turned off the main road, a warm numbness had replaced the ice cold fear and my panic had abated enough for me to remember that I had something, something that could redeem me at least a little. "I was invited to hang out with both the Hales at six thirty today."

"At their home?" He asked.

"No," I said, disappointed.

"That is still good," My grandfather said with a smile, "You can finally use your abilities to uncoil and manipulate their emotions. I would suggest you work on the boy, he seems to be the more susceptible of the two."

The car stopped, as did my mind, the gears just halting.

My grandfather must have read something in my expression because he said. "I know you usually refuse to use your aspect on humans and I understand why you have reservations, however, this time you will have to overcome them. You will take off your dampener when you are alone with the boy and change his feelings so that he is in love with you."

"Grandfather," I said, clearing my throat, "Planting emotions is a lot harder than pulling them. I know it worked when we practiced but you have so much more soul than Keanu. I don't know if that's even possible with a human."

“It’s very possible. You will have to use finesse. Every other time you’ve uncoiled a soul will only count as practice for what you will have to do, it is within your ability. All you need to do is delve into his deeper emotions and pull emotions from some areas, say his love for wave-riding and plant it instead as an emotion in his memories of you. It is not so different from steering obedience or fear; it will just take more subtlety and artistry. He will seek you out afterward and you can fine-tune it when you are more comfortable and do it in small increments.” It wasn’t a request, it was an order. My grandfather’s stern face showed he would accept nothing but acquiescence.

I nodded.

What could I say to him? ‘No grandfather, I might damage your enemy’s son and I kind-of want him to fall in love with me all on his own.’ Somehow I did not think it would go over well. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure that was what I really wanted; I just knew whatever I wanted from Keanu, I wanted it to be authentically from him and real.

“Soon the vengeance we have waited so long for will be realized,” My grandfather said.

I inhaled deeply and then nodded again, this time meaning it.

The image of me, eleven years old, drenched in blood, begging my grandfather to make me a soldier rose in my mind. I had trained these past five years for this mission; it was what I’ve lived for. Maybe my grandfather

was right to put me aside; I did not deserve to be a soldier.

My grandfather pulled out a gleaming gold paint-ball rifle and said, "I have mine, where is yours?"

In the front pocket of my back pack, I opened an unzipped compartment and found my little coin purse. When the purse was closed it let off absolutely no magic. That is how the little eastern-print purse had made it possible for me to slip my guns through every type of security. Closed, I could even carry the purse through water-wards; however, I could not use it to get to my guns as its magic would not work past the water-ward line.

"You use this portal into the Dragon Kingdoms too lightly," my grandfather said, scolding me as he took it from me. "Portals are a hungry magic, if you put your hand into it for more than thirty seconds, it will pull you through. I prefer you open it only if your life is at risk."

Portal-making was my grandfather's most lucrative aspect. Mostly he opened small portals for dragons looking to communicate with the dragon kingdoms. It was a very, very rare aspect for a dragon and none of his children inherited it.

Honestly, I am glad I did not inherit that aspect even if it would make me rich. My grandfather could only make portals through fire and could only connect to places of fire; as there was fire in his blood, in all dragons' blood, that was what he usually used. That was

why the inside of my little purse was red, which was just all kinds of gross.

If I did pass entirely through one of his portals, as I am a creature with fire in my blood, I could survive, whereas a human who only has water in their blood would die instantly. However, if I did pass through I would be stuck in the dragon kingdoms, no thank you.

My grandfather's hand opened and yanked out Incident, my handgun Contingency's little brother, without my seeing him move. He released the round in the chamber and replaced the clip before handing back over my little paint-ball gun.

The driver parked us in front at the shooting range that my grandfather had built for me in a field that had previously been on a sugar cane plantation. He had bought it as soon as I had inherited my second, smaller aspect, my sniper's aim. He had left most of the property as a productive and functional cane field, only clearing out the central area to put in a maze of small buildings that my grandfather loved to have switched around on me.

Leaning over to open my door, he told me, "One minute until I shoot. I'll make twenty doppelgangers this time."

"I'll shoot you in half that! Loser buys pizza!" I said, jumping out of the car into a full sprint.

Chapter Five

“He’s here!” my youngest sister, Stacy, lisped out, pulling her face off my window and leaving an impression of her nose and forehead behind. Stacy was playing my self-appointed look-out, more excited about my date than I was.

“Finally,” I said.

The silver truck ripping up our driveway appeared bleary through the pane, either my window was really dirty or I was exhausted.

“Do me one more favor?” I asked Stacy. “Make sure the coast is clear for me?”

Stacy, who was ten, looked so excited her pigtails were threatening to stand on end. “Yeah, I’ll do a really good job!” she said.

She ran off before I maneuvered off my bed. There was only one person I was avoiding, my mother. When I had arrived home, I was stuffed with the pizza I had purchased and I was covered in multi-colored paint.

A second after I closed the front door, my mother rushed into the spacious wood-walled foyer of our stolen mansion. The house smelled like lemon and bleach, probably my older sister Clara’s doing.

Mom had a shuffle walk, her platform shoes wearing in the well defined scuffed lines on the hardwood.

Having five dracon babies was hard on my mother, even diluted as our dracon blood

was. She was once a staggering beauty, that's how she attracted Lorien, Deagan and Clara's birth-father's attention; but as she often reminds us, "every baby added five pounds and five wrinkles." But my guess was that the gin added even more than that. Sometimes I thought the only remnant of her past unsurpassed beauty was reflected in how devotedly she groomed and dressed herself.

"Sweetheart, you're home!" she said, tilting her head and slightly pouting out her lower lip. "You must be exhausted." Her large brown eyes, full dimpled cheeks and fifty thousand dollar smile were so familiar; I wanted so much to be comforted.

"Yeah," I said, gently setting down my bag to avoid getting paint on it. "But I can't pass out, I have another assignment tonight."

Would that be the last time I said that? I felt... what was beyond disheartened? Everything was shattering.

"Oh, baby," she said, "Do you want me to fix you something?"

"Yeah," I said, and to my horror, there were suppressed tears in my voice. Rubbing at my eyes, I wondered why I suddenly did want her to fix me something so much; I wanted her to fix me anything. "Can I have some tea?"

"Yeah love, come on into the kitchen."

Careful not to touch anything, I followed her, the weight on my shoulders amazingly feeling less with my mother fixing me tea; and I almost reeled back when I saw a werewolf in her human form sitting at a barstool at our

counter. Her two piece suit and folder screamed professional, as clearly as her double-soul clued me that deep in her was a moderately strong she-werewolf; not an alpha, but far from an omega.

I stopped dead as I saw what covered the counter, cloth samples.

No. Just no.

My mother's smile grew and locked on her face as she bustled around the kitchen pretending she knew where everything was. The house was all windows and wood, the light from the western windows made me squint in the afternoon sun as I watched her. She mumbled something about maids moving the kettle from its usual spot.

I resisted the urge to show her where we kept it.

"This is the daughter that I was telling you about, Gina," my mother said, finally finding the kettle and filling it at the tap; she forgot to switch on the filter. She looked over at me with a weighty glance. "Did you remember to go by the bank on the way home angel?"

For a moment, what she was saying did not compute, and when it did the hot tears feeling returned. But I would not cry. She knew I was getting paid today, and she already spent the money. And, I did not have it.

Gina swiveled in the barstool to give me a tight smile; her voice was low, raspy. "Yes, we've been expecting you." The look she pointed my way was professional and detached.

I locked my gaze with my mother's, saying, "They wouldn't let me withdraw at the teller, since my name isn't on your account."

Her words were spoken through a tense smile, "How much did they let you get out?"

"Fifteen hundred," I said. Then, because my lie sounded so stupid I added, "It was the ATM limit. I'll go get it."

"No honey, you're exhausted, I'll get it." And she was shuffling to the foyer before I could stop her. She returned a minute later with the remainder of my money. "Gina, I can only pay you close to four thousand now. Could I reserve the date for that?"

Gina had no touch of sympathy in her voice, "We could do this Stephanie one of two ways: you can pay in full now and receive a ten percent discount, reducing your budget of twenty-five thousand to twenty-two thousand five hundred or you could pay a nonrefundable deposit of twenty percent then the remainder in full on the morning of the event, but you will not receive the discount."

"Great, I'll do the second," my mother said. She handed over my cash and pulled out her checkbook. "Can I write a check for the remainder of the deposit?"

I walked out, the tap water tea completely unappetizing.

When my older sister Clara appeared at the top of the stairs, her in-human beauty seemed to shine down on me. She rushed down and embraced me completely ignoring the paint on every inch of me. "Hey goofy girl, how

was your day?” My sister’s soul was like morning sunshine, as warm and pure as a sunrise.

I had to fight myself from pushing her off of me.

The grocery money I had promised her was gone, and my belly was full of pizza. The worst part was the cash was still in the house, still within my reach, and I was too pathetic to take it from Gina’s grasp.

“I have to shower,” I grumbled, shrugging off her embrace and dodging Stacy as she ran for me.

After the shower, I locked myself and Stacy, when she wouldn’t stop knocking, in my room which had been enough to keep my mom from barging in.

My luck did not hold when I descended the stairs, busy trying to redo the clasp on my dampener charm bracelet, I looked up to find my mother leaning against the front door.

“It doesn’t look like an assignment to me,” she said.

“It is.” I did not really feel the need to explain myself so I reached for the doorknob willing to push her aside if I had to.

Her hand took the bracelet I had not managed to put on, and she clasped it around my arm, and did not take her hand away.

“Sweetheart, I know that you are angry at me but you need to understand, what I do, I do for all of us. I am only ever thinking of our family.”

It took all of my energy to tolerate her touch I was so angry with her, knowing if I

knocked her hand away, I would more than likely use too much force. “Mom,” I said, “Let go of my hand or I can’t make you any money.” Right before I opened the door I said, “Oh yeah, it’ll be one hell of a party with no electricity.”

I did not wait for a response, just ran up the driveway and climbed into the bed of the pick-up where Keanu was reclining and settled in next to him. The outside of the truck was dirty but the bed was spotless.

“Hey beautiful,” Keanu said smiling. Then he asked, “Does your mom care you’re back here?”

He nodded toward my mom as she was still standing in the doorway, arms crossed and gaze disapproving.

“It doesn’t matter.” I said.

“Alright,” he said, tapping the back window of the truck with his knuckles. As we drove away my mother just stood there, watching.

The truth was: I was positive that my mother hated that I was lying in the bed of a truck with a boy, but she would never object.

The first time I came home with a split lip from a job, some stupid little girl part of me really wanted to believe that my mother would throw a fit and demand I stop. She had taken one look at my face and then turned and poured herself a glass of vodka with shaking hands. It was actually really stupid that I was disappointed in her reaction because even at

twelve I would not have stopped or wanted her to get in my way.

I still want her to demand I stop at times though, usually after I get punched in the stomach or a knife is pressed to my throat.

I feel that way right now.

As far as assignments go, I could not have asked for this one to turn out better. Alone with Keanu for the entire ride there, it was exactly what my grandfather wanted.

The charm bracelet suddenly felt very heavy, very solid around my wrist.

I turned to Keanu and caught him unabashedly checking me out. He met my gaze, looking like I caught him at something he did not feel the least bit guilty about.

“I like your...” He raised his eyebrows, “pants.” His mischievous smile said my jeans were the least of what he liked.

“Well, I like your...” I examined him thoroughly. Keanu looked completely different and yet exactly the same in street clothes. His clothes were never what drew my focus to him, but he looked so approachable in board-shorts and a t-shirt. I finally went with saying, “shoes.”

“I think they just call them sandals,” he said, swinging his arm around me. It seemed so natural a gesture for him. I had already observed that Keanu was a very physical person, always mock-fighting, hugging or wrestling the people lucky enough to grab his attention.

I touched my bracelet; the ridges of the charms jagged and rough on my fingers. The bottom line, I told myself, is that my grandfather gave me an order. If I disobeyed a direct order from my grandfather and he found out about it, I would end up begging to be only 'kicked to the curb'.

"What is that?" Keanu said, because my fiddling had drawn his attention to the charm bracelet.

"Just an old bracelet I wear." I held out my wrist so he could see it.

His fingers played along the little charms. For some reason, whether it was exhaustion or I was just past my capacity for lies for the day I told Keanu a little of the truth. "My dad was a lawyer when I was little. He used to take me everywhere with him, he called me his mini-legal because I would doodle all over his important papers. Every time he left on a business trip, I used to have panic attacks. So he would order a charm online from where he was going and I would hold it when I felt an attack coming on."

"Isn't that backwards? Don't people usually buy the charms while they're at the monuments?" He asked as he gave me a sympathetic smile and still played with my bracelet. His fingers paused at the clasp. "May I?"

"Yes," I said, after a long pause.

His fingers deftly unclasped the little metal clasp and he lifted the chain to see it

better. “Did it work? Did your panic attacks stop?”

Keanu’s soul immediately washed around me. His soul was absolutely unique, if I had enough energy to muster amazement, I would feel it. If other people had light waves streaming from them, his soul would be pure liquid, water, like a gentle playful ocean pooling around him and me. His outer emotions were cerulean, warm and rocking me in gentle waves. Remembering that he had asked me a question, I said, “No, I still have them.” I curled in closer to Keanu.

Placing my hand on his arm I probed the first surface emotion layer of his soul, just brushing against it, not pulling anything into me or pushing anything into him. I delved just a little deeper, trying to read his surface emotions...and everything went black.

“Wake up sleepy girl.” An arm squeezed around me.

I looked around, my gaze not quite bringing my surroundings into focus, completely at a loss for where I was. The only two other times I had woken up in unfamiliar surroundings, it had been because I had passed out from blood loss; I half-registered that I should be panicking, but for some reason I could not.

Looking up into Keanu’s face, everything came back. I was wrapped in Keanu’s arms, flying down a highway in a silver metal truck-bed. Thankfully I did not lash out and attack, which should have been my first

reaction. I could almost see the cooling soothing waves that spread from Keanu and seeped into me. If he was a 'bad-guy'- I would have been screwed. My first thought was, 'he's not human.'—yet that was impossible. His father was the leader of the shoot non-humans on sight club.'

I knew better than most.

Keanu was just exceptional, his soul abnormal, plain and simple.

I checked his shoulder, my pillow, for any sign of drool, that would be just great; but he was dry. "I'm sorry," I said, knowing I should be embarrassed, "I guess I'm tired."

"Don't apologize," he said smiling, "watching you sleep was actually nice."

"That's not creepy," I said with a groggy smile.

He grinned wider.

Seriously, I was supposed to be wrapping him around my proverbial little finger; so-far just touching his soul knocked me out, on top of that I seemed to be seconds from swooning. And I realized, as the truck slowed down and pulled off onto a small paved road leading to a bustling parking lot, I had an hour to complete my mission, and slept through the whole thing.

Bad, really bad. My only possible way to redeem myself was to ensure that we're alone on the ride home. I reached out with my power, testing the liquid waves that made up his soul; I did not dare delve again, suddenly almost

certain that if I did I would get knocked out again.

I settled next to him, my arm touching his, knowing that if I looked at him, I could not complete my task. Manipulating emotions was much more complicated than depleting emotions from someone's first three layers of their soul. Draining an emotion is a lot like pulling a plug; whereas what my grandfather wanted me to do was more like scooping out a handful of emotion and then gently pouring it into a different memory.

That was exactly what trying to pull just a surface emotion from Keanu felt like, scooping water from his soul and having it immediately slip right through my fingers. He did not even blink but I felt something, as though I was fading even after trying only twice with no success.

I released my connection to his soul as the truck lurched into a parking stall.

Showing no sign that he had any awareness of my intrusion, Keanu squeezed my shoulder. He said, "We'll just make the sunset."

"Yeah," I said, seeing double. I blinked rapidly. Was it possible to have natural internal water-wards? Could they be broken? What would happen if I tried to break them?

Something here was—more. I did not even know how to explain it, but every time I advanced a step in this assignment, if it could even be called an assignment at this point, I just obtained a better view of how far I had to go. Would my grandfather at least leave me this

when he took everything else away? Or would my failure today shoot in the last nail in my coffin.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Keanu said as his fingers gently lifted my wrist. He smiled as he wrapped my charm around my hand and refastened the clasp.

My dizziness immediately vanished. “Thank you,” I whispered. I touched the one charm my dad did not give me, the water charm, and stared at Keanu.

Hunter Bryant popped out of his truck and asked, “Bumpy ride bra?”

Hunter was a guy I knew by reputation only, but what a reputation. He had a face to launch a thousand waveboards. If Keanu was a god, Hunter was the human that tempted all the goddesses. A blond haired, blue eyed tempter, rake, anyway you wanted to put it. The difference between him and his best friend was Hunter paraded it; just looking at him, standing next to the truck-bed, shirtless and stretching, screamed ‘feast your eyes ladies’. Okay so I guess I did, I’m only human, right?

Well, human enough.

“Could not have been better,” Keanu said. He offered his hand and I took it, not because I needed help getting down from the truck but because of the message it sent to Auli, who had just emerged wearing a poorly disguised scowl.

“Aren’t we going to the lookout?” I asked.

“You don’t like the ocean?” Auli asked as she stepped up beside me.

“I like the ocean, of course,” I said, heading for the path to the ocean beside Keanu.

“Hey there friend,” Auli said with a scorching smile. Being near her was like standing on a dormant volcano, it looked safe but right beneath the surface, beneath your feet, was coursing rivers of lava. If she wasn’t who she was I would swear that the girl was a dragon. And some part of me, perhaps my intuition, was sure that Auli’s soul would be as strong and fortified as her brother’s, but my guess was that if I took my charm off the water of her soul would be boiling.

While Hunter and Keanu talked about something I knew and cared little about, wave-riding, Auli ended up standing next to me as we took the path down to the beach.

“Are you going to play volleyball again this year?” I asked her. Joining our school’s volleyball team in the spring session the year before had been another scheme I had to make Auli my friend, it failed.

“Yes,” she said curtly. “Are you?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Are you sure you want to put yourself through another year?” she asked as if I wasn’t the second best player on the team, after her, but still.

“Definitely,” I smiled, “I’m hoping to play middle more next year.” Yeah, she usually played middle hitter.

“Everyone can dream,” she said.

“Some dreams come true,” I said, and then I pointedly looked over at Keanu.

I knew from her scowl that I was just shooting myself in the foot but I really could not help myself.

Thankfully the walk to the beach was short.

Big beach was just the way it sounded, big. It stretched in a long arch into the horizon, people scattered throughout. The sun glared at us from a still blue sky, but it threatened any minute to dive for Kabikabi, our nearest island neighbor that was deserted except for a few massive estates.

Several feet from where a yellow life guard hut perched, an aged old sign read: ‘Swim at your own risk.’ It listed the various dangers: shore break, rip tides and sharks. Below that, was a sign that read: ‘this beach is for human use only, no dracon or infected, please.’

Well, at least they said please. It was only a suggestion, they did not ward the beach, I’m not really sure it was possible to ward a beach. While the ocean was a big moving body of water, a water ward only worked with a fixed perimeter and the ocean was anything but fixed. Most dracons and infected kept their distance from the ocean regardless. A long enough time spent in the ocean would eventually kill a dracon or infected. Swimming in such a giant mass of moving water immediately weakened us.

The moment our group stepped out onto the white sand, Hunter ran past us, scooped up and sprinted off with Auli. From the way her mouth sucker-fished onto his neck I decided I could rule out Mele's theory, I am by far more Mabiian than Hunter and Auli seemed to have no problem with him.

"Oh, I don't want to see that," Keanu said, turning away and facing the ocean.

"Turn-around is fair play," I said, then stood on my tiptoes intending to kiss his cheek but I wasn't tall enough so kissed more his jawline.

The smile he turned on me was so radiant that I was literally stupefied for a second. He said, "You are absolutely right." In one quick move he scooped me into his arms and charged for the ocean.

"Wait, wait! I'm wearing my swimsuit *under* my clothes," I squealed, actually completely terrified. "Let me down!"

Running full out for the small shore breaking waves he carried me kicking and at some point laughing hysterically. I knew it was too late when I tasted the salty spray from the waves, then we were both plunged underwater. Only for a second but since I was laughing, I had to spit out ocean water.

The water rushed out and so did we; I had to start swimming to stay above the water. Keanu surfaced next to me, popped up, kissed me hard and fast on the lips, and then dove under.

“Hey!” I said indignantly to no one, but I was smiling. The water was clear enough that I could see Keanu, but when I grabbed for him he swam away quick and surfaced out of my reach. My stomach clenched as my mind screamed the same thought I had in the truck: ‘he’s not human’. He was too natural in the water, too fluid; my guess was that his soul would merge perfectly into the cerulean ocean.

Even though I could not really sense any bad effects from being in the ocean, thank goodness I had my dampener on. I started swimming for the shore.

He had to be human, didn’t he?

The water rushed back for a wave and I rode the small swell to the shore. Keanu was close behind me, and he wrapped me in his arms before I could wiggle out of my jeans, his hands wrapped around my hips.

When I looked at Keanu an unintelligible mess of emotions traveled from my head directly into my stomach. If you could believe it, the person whose emotions were the most difficult to read were... my own. I knew, irony, that merciless ass struck again.

Glacier’s voice seemed to scream in my head, ‘rule one: always stay in control of your target. If you lose power and cannot regain it within a minute, abort immediately.’ I haven’t had the power since I took off my charm. But, I did not want to abort. I did not even want to take off my bracelet and try to manipulate his soul again.

If there was a tally, all the points would be scrawled after Keanu's name, none after mine. I wasn't even naïve enough to believe I was making more than a fleeting impression on him, a pretty underclassman that a god like Keanu rolled around on the beach once with. The saddest part was that I wanted to make an impression on him; I had wanted to make an impression on him for a while now without leaning on my aspect.

As his lips descended, I closed my eyes to submit to my assignment's ultimate failure. His lips just brushed mine, giving me the faintest taste of salt from the ocean, then he yanked away from me abruptly.

"Whoa, what was that?" he said.

I opened my eyes to see Keanu raise his hand to where a trickle of blood was running down the side of his forehead. At my concerned expression he said, "I think something hit me."

Then he dodged, moving me back as a small white object hurtled where he had just been.

We both spun around to see two men and a woman approaching. One of the men flicked his wrist and a small shell came hurdling at us.

I knocked the shell out of the way, though it would have missed me anyway and turned to the jerks that were pestering us. Sheer terror gripped me. I recognized the men, how could this happen twice in a row? This assignment was over. I did not need Bobby to tell me this time, it was time to abort and fast.

I said, "Let's go." But when I yanked at the arm Keanu still had wrapped around me, he did not even seem to notice.

Braiden McCormick, his platinum haired friend, and a stunning dracon woman were closing the distance down the beach. The platinum haired man reached down, selected another shell and flicked it at us. Even though it was shooting straight for Keanu he pivoted me behind him and took the hit.

"I'm not looking for trouble, bra," Keanu said, now bleeding from two places I could see, his arm and head. "You win. Just leave me and my girl alone."

I stepped out from behind Keanu because I did not cower, ever.

"What the hells?" I heard the yell from behind us, and glancing back saw Hunter running up to join us with Auli close behind.

Braiden McCormick smiled; he looked as friendly and harmless as a giant panting dog. He said with the same accent I heard in the club, "No worries, friend." He smacked the most recent shell out of the blond man's hand. "My buddy, Vern, here just has a poor sense of humor."

And a stupid name. Vern?

Last time I checked that was a name only fit for great-aunts and grandmas.

Vern turned, again sighting me with his dark eyes. He looked me up and down taking in my sandy, soaked disheveled self. When he raised his eyes back to mine his look was so

disapproving and haughty, my jaw clenched of its own accord.

When Vern spoke, it was clearly just to me, “Hello *his* girl,” he smirked, like the idea that I was ‘Keanu’s girl’ was funny to him. “Go away now and let us talk. I’ll talk to you later.”

Screw this. I did not care if I should have aborted a while back; this jerk visited *my* island and thought he could kick me out of two places in as many days. I did not think so; I had taken just about as much as I could stand from this jerk.

Before Keanu could stop me, I walked around him and stepped right up to the three dragons. I immediately endured the punch of their combined power, what a group, boy. Even with my dampener on, I staggered for a moment.

Once I regained my breath I said directly into the platinum haired man’s face, with a voice low enough for only him to hear me, “This is a human beach, dracon, you are not welcome.”

This close I could tell that at least two of them were half-dragons if not all of them. The girl could be Braiden’s sister, I remembered hearing that he had a couple.

If I could, I would tell them that they were spitting on my grandfather’s hospitality by trespassing and picking fights with humans, but I obviously could not say that.

My grandfather was the one who advocated for ‘human’s only’ beaches and forbade infected from entering them.

Half my grandfather's revenue came from his human-only resorts and the humans came to the island specifically for the human-only beaches. His dracon and vampire resort guests vacationed here for the active volcanoes on the other islands and the famous dormant volcano on Mabi. It was this very fragile segregation of his various resort patrons that kept gramps, rich, rich, rich; bottom-line, it would be bad for business.

Not to mention, if the wrong people, like Keanu and Auli's dad, found out about this infraction of the fragile truce that humans and dracons shared on Mabi could snap, this would also be bad for business.

Vern stared down his perfect nose at me, probably deciding whether or not to crush me with a swat. I bet he could, too. He said, "I told you to go; I'll find you later."

My immediate urge was to do just that and go, go somewhere he could not find me later. I suppressed my fear, knowing that depending on which aspects these dracons had inherited it was very possible one or all of them could sense it. I wished I could manipulate my own emotions, but the best I could do was pretend.

I said, "You first."

A big warm arm wrapped around me, pulling me back into what I assumed was Keanu's wide body, right as Hunter ran up, arms flapping and shouting, "You wanna scrap, bra?"

What happened next happened too fast for me to stop it. Hunter's lean muscled arm swung at Vern's chin. The woman dragon stepped in the way and with seemingly no effort she pushed Hunter's arm, which knocked him off balance; as he stumbled she backhanded him. Hunter flew up; he was airborne for way longer than a human should be. He came down with only one arm braced to break his fall, and that is exactly what it did, break, with a sickening snapping sound.

Auli screamed and ran for Hunter. Keanu tried to pull me toward Hunter but when I did not budge he stayed and tried to maneuver in front of me.

"Hunter?" he shouted, over his shoulder, "Auli, call dad."

"Go help him," I said, pushing Keanu toward his friend. He walked two steps toward Hunter but stayed within my reach.

Never again would I ever believe my situation could not get any worse. In moments my companions and the thirty or so humans around us were going to realize that these three people were absolutely not human. I needed to crowd control, fast.

I shouted, "I thought people trained in martial arts are not supposed to attack people who aren't trained? You're obviously some sort of trained fighter; you should not have attacked him. Why don't you get out of here before we call the police!" As far as explanations went, it was weaker than peanut-brittle, Hunter attacked Vern and we all saw it, but the

majority of people will accept the first simple explanation given to them.

Let's hope.

The dragons weren't leaving. Of the three, Braiden McCormick was the only one who looked concerned and stepped toward Hunter.

I stopped him by saying, "Please leave, before this gets out of hand."

He turned to me and said, "We are so sorry. Yeah we'll leave. Let me give you my information so I can pay the hospital bill."

"No!" I said emphatically. The last thing I wanted was for these adversaries to find out any more about each other. "Please, just take your friends and go," I whispered the next part, "And stay out of the human-only zones."

The hypocrisy of my words was not lost on me.

Braiden gave me an apologetic grimace and started to pull his companions away; by the looks of it the girl went willingly, Vern did not. He just stood there, his dark eyes aiming at me like the barrels of two rifles while his friend ineffectually pulled at his shoulder.

I gritted my teeth and stared right back, trying not to think about how quickly he could kill me and how little it would matter to him. It was about as effective as staring down a meteor. I wasn't scared.

Yeah, sure I wasn't.

Whatever point he had been planning to make with his flying sea shells had not been made. In my experience, half-dragons were too

dragon to do anything senselessly. Pure dragons always had a point, some hoped-for result.

“Soon,” Vern said to me. He broke our eye contact by turning and walking away with his companions.

Soon. That was... terrifying. I swallowed an exhalation he might have heard.

I turned from the man I had been so fixed on to Keanu. Though he was still close enough to scoop me up and ferry me away to safety, he was looking at his sister. She was on her cell phone.

Hunter still lay on the sand; his face was white. I walked to him slowly, Keanu close beside me, making sure I did not kick up any sand.

Hunter said, “I’m okay brother, no worries, just an arm. Might be doing one-armed push-ups on my board for a while.”

“Don’t move, Hunter,” I said.

“Duh!” Auli said, spitting the word at me. “The ambulance is on their way. And the police, Keanu, go stop them! They should be arrested.” She pointed down the beach at the dragons, who were almost to the other parking lot.

“You’re kidding right?” I said to Auli, “Those people are psycho. Keanu is already bleeding from the head.”

“They aren’t people, stupid,” Auli said, her voice cold.

“You don’t think they were werewolves or something do you?” I said, hoping to plant that idea.

“Or something,” she said, rolling her eyes. “If they were arrested maybe they’d—”

“Be quiet, Auli.” Keanu said; it was a command. “Did you call dad?”

She nodded.

“Then that is the end of it,” he said.

To my shock, Auli just shut up. I had no urge to break the tense quiet that fell among us until the ambulance came. There was nothing that I could say, Keanu and Auli knew that the group weren’t human, probably most of the beach did.

When the ambulance did come they all but forced Keanu to ride with them. He objected but the cut on his head wouldn’t stop bleeding. I told him I would be fine and he finally agreed to leave me with Auli.

The assignment was already dead in the water.

My best estimation of the lasting impression I was able to make on Keanu was as the girl who was too stupid to listen to him when we were attacked by dracons.

When Auli insisted that I should ride in the bed of Hunter’s truck as to not mess up his upholstery with my wet clothes, I told her I would find my own ride home. She did not argue and just waited for me to grab my phone and wallet from where I stashed it in the truck. She peeled out quickly as though to avoid the possibility of my changing my mind.

Bobby rode up on his motorcycle thirty minutes later when my clothes were mostly dry, stiff and itchy, but I did not care.

“Just call me your ferry-man,” he said when he halted beside me, “I keep finding you up shit creek.”

“I’m not sure there is any way of coming back from this one, Bobby.” I was serious, but to lighten the mood, I looked down at my clothes, and said, “Look, I already went under.”

“That’s probably the worst way I can think of to go.” He smiled, “Wow, your little charm you have sure does work. Now I’m going to brag to everyone that *my* niece goes swimming in the ocean for fun. Climb on.” Bobby handed me the helmet he brought for me.

“You could not have teleported us out?” I said.

“Nearest spot is five miles up at Kapii Beach,” he said. “Climb on. And go ahead and cry the jacket is waterproof.” Bobby, as always, saw my unshed tears heavy in my eyes.

I wasn’t far enough gone to cry, not yet.