

Chapter One

Aftermath, Answers & Dealing with Dragons

Friday, May 24—Evening into Night

The storm that had begun during the Bloom & Moon Festival still raged over sea and land. Wind shoved water against the rocky cliff while rain pelted the churning sea. The crash of waves was deafening, and the scent of brine strong. Seraphina Blackthorn, hands gripping the wall of roots that formed a living fence, leaned over to search the ocean below. Without warning, the hedge surged upward, adding a foot to its height.

Startled, she stumbled back. “Stop,” she ordered. “I’m not going to jump,” she admonished the Rootwall. *Unlike some people*, she thought as she swiped an arm over her rain-streaked face, which gave little relief as her clothing was completely soaked.

The fence quickly resumed its normal position and allowed Sera to peer into the grayness below. *Nothing*. Her gaze lifted to study the sullen, stormy sky. Rain plastered her hair to her face. Impatiently, she shoved it away from her eyes, frustrated she couldn’t find what she searched for—proof she hadn’t lost her mind.

“Where are you, Ryker?” Her voice shook. The reclusive writer had just scared five years off her life when he’d jumped from the cliff—and when he’d reappeared, rising into the storm clouds as a dragon, her world had cracked wide open.

His actions were the final straw in a long list of shocks and surprises, so yeah, she had a few words to say to him. She rolled her tense shoulders. Well, more than a few! Yet beneath the

anger lurked something colder. What if she'd done something—caused him to jump? Her hand closed around the Oathstone amulet she wore. It felt warm. Her skin ... or heat from within?

What did you do to me?

His cry of pain echoed in her mind. Heat. Shock. The look on his face when the stone had burned his chest. Something whispered that her power carried a cost she didn't yet understand. Lightning forked far out over the water, and for a heartbeat, she thought she saw wings in the storm.

Dragons.

In Havenwood Cove.

Once again, the impossible proved to be very possible and real. So as soon as he landed in his dragon-shifting body, she was ready. "Better get back here, Ryker Stormrider!" she shouted into the wind. "We need to talk. Now!" She was angry, and Ryker would bear the brunt of it.

The sudden absence of rain made her blink. Glancing up, her veil sight—her gift for seeing what wasn't there—revealed a shield, like an invisible umbrella, arching over her. Elyndor, Ryker's friend, a slender and graceful figure, joined her at the Rootwall. His faintly luminescent skin, slick with rain, gave him an ethereal glow. "Thank you. Obviously, you are not a dragon shifter."

At least one of her renters had his feet on the ground; otherwise, she might have thought she'd truly gone crazy. Not only was Ryker a shifter, but his brothers and sister were as well. Each of them had followed Ryker off the cliff as humans and then soared into the heavens as dragons.

Elyn bowed his head, his white-blond hair pulled back to hang down his back in a long braid. His almond-shaped eyes met her gaze. "No, Guardian. I am Faekin."

Sera winced at his use of her formal title. “Sera,” she corrected. Droplets of water from her hair dripped down the side of her face. “Right now, I’m a forty-year-old woman who is about to lose her mind.” *Forty, free, and flustered.*

“As you wish,” he said as he inclined his head respectfully.

Sera bit her lower lip and let out a long huff of air. “My father is also Faekin, which makes me one as well—or so everyone keeps telling me.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Faekin. A witch. And a Guardian.”

Smiling gently, Elyn nodded. “Our ancestors, mine and yours, came from the old world. Faekin is a title reserved for old lineages.”

Resuming her watch on the skies, Sera still couldn’t believe all the changes in her life. A week ago, she’d received her final divorce paperwork, and her biggest concern had been finding a new job in some other town besides Boston. Now she was more than merely human, and Havenwood Cove’s last best hope.

Guardian of the Moondragon.

She shook her head. It sounded cool and important, but unlike role-playing games, the consequences were real. Lives were at stake, but from whom or what, she still didn’t know. When she’d agreed to accept the role of Guardian—a Blackthorn legacy—she’d believed her task was to keep a hidden portal, sealed generations ago, from reopening. She’d been wrong. The magical loom in her yarn shop changed everything with one word woven in golden threads:

Sacrifice.

Her task was now to destroy not just the portal, but the world on the other side. A gust of wind rocked her on her heels, and her grip tightened on the wall. *Great.* How was she supposed to do that when no one knew the location of the portal?

By itself, the word *sacrifice* didn't frighten her. After all, people made sacrifices every day, like drinking a sinful cup of hot cocoa made by her best friend and accepting that the extra calories would land on her hips and butt. Or sacrificing some of her time to help others, which was worthwhile. But to condemn an entire world to save this one? That level of sacrifice became not just impossible, but unimaginable. And unacceptable.

A Guardian protected lives, not destroyed worlds. Yet if she did nothing, she condemned Havenwood Cove—and all who called the magical town home—to possible slavery, as in the past, or death in retribution for sealing the portal. And possibly all of Earth. The rumble of thunder overhead followed a flash of light.

She tightened her fingers around one of the flowering roots that made up the Rootwall, which followed the edge of the cliff. "I won't do it," she whispered. "I can't."

She couldn't see the path yet, but with the storm raging not just around her, but within her, she vowed to find another way. She refused to destroy an entire world just because a magical loom had told her she must do so.

Staring unseeing out to sea, she wondered how her life had gotten twisted so completely in so short a time. On her fortieth birthday, her marriage had ended, and she'd gained her freedom, found her magic, and accepted her destiny, one she barely understood. Her grandmother's gift—a leather journal that pulsed with life—had written a single question in gold: *Do you accept?*

The moment she'd written the words, *I accept*, she'd become the seventh Guardian of the Moondragon and had left Boston and everything familiar behind for a town that lived and breathed magic. The hows and whys were still overwhelming, but she couldn't go there. Not tonight.

Elyn tapped her on the shoulder. “You should return home, Sera. I don’t know how long the Stormriders will stay out. I’m not sure what set Ryker off tonight, but when he gets ... this, he’s usually gone all night.”

Sera shivered and ignored the worry reflected in his silvery eyes. “I’m staying. Do you know how crazy this is, Elyn? Dragon shifters?” Crazy yet real.

He chuckled. “*Thyroni*.” The guttural, foreign word rumbled in his throat like distant thunder.

Sera’s head whipped around. “What?”

He spread his hands wide. “Ryker, his brothers, and sister are *Thyroni*—*people of the dragon realm*.”

She rolled her eyes. “*Thyroni*. Of course there’s a word for it,” she muttered. “Thyroni from the world of Thyron. Makes perfect sense.”

“Sera ...”

Sera held up her hand. “Sorry, Elyn. It’s been a hard day.”

Bending down, he picked up a rock and tossed it from one hand to the other. “Understood.” He fisted his hand around the rock and leaned against the Rootwall, his attention on her, not the sea or storm. “Liana told us about your loom’s message.”

Shivering, in part from the chilly wind, and because the message burned in her mind, Sera wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s wrong. It has to be wrong,” she whispered.

Elyn strode toward the stone benches arranged in a circle a short distance from the edge of the cliff. In the center, he waved his hands over the stone medallion set into the ground, and blue and green flames danced to life. “Come. If you’re going to stay out here all night, you might as well get warm.”

Sera joined him at the fire and held her hands over the flames, grateful for its warmth. With another graceful wave of his hands, the shield Elyn had created reformed above their heads, turning the sound of rain into a soft patter of air. Her brows rose as she studied the fire. No wood. No fuel. Just flames born of magic. The sound steadied her heartbeat and calmed the storm inside her.

The warmth seeped into her, chasing the chill from her bones until she stopped shivering. “Tell me, Elyn, is destroying another world the answer? Isn’t there another way?”

Elyn sat on one of the rune-inscribed benches. “I do not know, Sera. None of us do.” He met her searching gaze with his own. “But I will tell you this: Ryker bears the mark of *Drakon, the Ancient*. The Stormrider family is old blood, just like the Blackthorns. Ryker now holds the title of DragonMaster—the High Sentinel of the Thyroni.”

He paused. “And you, Seraphina Blackthorn, are Guardian of the Moondragon. The fact that the two of you hold these titles is not insignificant.”

Sera closed her eyes. Though she might wish otherwise, it was a fact she could not deny or change. She’d made her choice the moment she’d penned the words, “I accept” in the old journal. It didn’t matter that she hadn’t known what she was signing up for; complaining or whining about it was useless. Like it or not, she owned her title. And her role in saving Havenwood Cove from an ancient enemy.

But that didn’t mean she had to roll over and take the punches without fighting back. And she was in a fighting mood.

She. Was. Royally. Pissed.

So many secrets, so many things kept from her, so many changes to her life. And right now, she needed to vent her anger and frustration. Luckily for her—and not so lucky for Ryker of the Stormriders, the world-famous bestselling author who rented her grandmother’s cottage.

Tag! You’re it! she silently challenged as she faced the sea, searching the skies.

Her thoughts continued to rival the storm she watched. She’d learned to live with her ex’s lies and betrayal, but the other lies—the ones surrounding her childhood, her father, her entire past—those still burned.

Above all, the most pressing question circling her mind was how she was supposed to save the town she’d fallen in love with from an unknown evil from another world? And there she stopped. She refused to think about what came next or what she’d been told to do. It was unthinkable. So here she was, the seventh Guardian, a witch with Faekin blood, focused on the dark skies, searching for dragons because she couldn’t bear the true horror of what lay ahead.

Unbidden came the thought: What if Ryker never came back?

“You’d better return, Ryker. I can’t do this by myself,” she whispered into the night. She vowed she’d wait all night for him to return if that was what it took.

She ran her hands through her wet hair. Even now, the memory of wings against the lightning slashing the sky made her doubt what she’d seen. But as she’d learned here in Havenwood Cove, the impossible wasn’t just possible. It was reality.

Thunder rolled again. The sound echoed across the cliffs—and miles away, another roar answered, followed by a fury of storm that cracked the air.



The world split open inside him when he jumped off the cliff—fire in his veins, thunder in his bones. Wings—impossible, searing—ripped free as he plunged from the cliffs into the storm.

When his wings unfurled, the heavens answered—lightning slashing the clouds, thunder roaring like another beast. The air burned with ozone and salt.

The ocean rose to claim him, black waves clawing upward, the salt stinging his eyes, but the dragon carried him higher, higher, until the wind screamed through his chest. Pain lanced through every muscle. His skin throbbed where Sera's stone had burned him; the brand searing as though her mark carved itself into his soul. He tried to fight it. Tried to cling to the man he had been.

What did you do to me? No answer came. Only the voice that was not his own, ancient and relentless.

We are one. You cannot escape what you are.

Drawing back his head, he let his anger fly, the roar tearing across the coastline, half-human anguish, half-dragon fury. He banked against the storm winds, desperate to out-fly the agony, desperate to silence the voice that whispered destiny into his bones. He flew into the storm, became it, adding flame to the cracking bolts of lightning spreading across the clouds like spiderwebs.

Surrounding him, his brothers and sister gave him the space he desperately needed. Time blurred—minutes, hours, he couldn't tell—as the storm raged and the night bled deeper around him. He arched through the sky, into the clouds and down toward the sea, his emotions churning as wildly as the waves below. When the faint glow of dawn lit the clouds, exhaustion dragged at his wings, muscles trembling, every beat a battle. He'd pushed too far—both man and dragon fraying at the edges. He reluctantly circled back toward Havenwood Cove, heart heavy as the tide.

Below, the town slept, unaware of the monster above their rooftops. Unaware of the man unraveling in the sky. And then he saw her. On the stone bench next to the cliff, a tiny figure curled beside Elyn, a shield above them to protect her from the elements. The brightness of her red-gold hair called to him. *She waited.* As if she had believed he would return.

His chest tightened until it nearly shattered. He wanted to land. To tell her everything. To let her chase away the darkness.

Saoirse. The anguish and longing in the voice in his head tightened his gut.

No, she is not yours, he responded silently. Though exhausted, the beast that was his dragon shifted restlessly within him, warning, not yet. Not safe—for her, for him. And so he circled once, a shadow stirring the air above her, before the clouds swallowed him again. He left her waiting, and the emptiness of that choice hollowed him more than the night.