

Chapter Two

Of Sleepless Nights, Silent Skies & Not Talking About It
Saturday, May 25—Dawn on the Cliff

Enough, Ryker. Time to return.

Eldrak's command pierced the pain and confusion raging through Ryker as the first gray of dawn brushed the horizon. *No!* he mentally roared. He wasn't ready to return to his vulnerable human form and face whatever change Sera's stone had wrought.

Eldrak flew close, forcing him to bank. Ryker tried to resist, but exhaustion beat at him. He couldn't even find the energy to roar and spit fire into the heavens. He felt his brothers: Eldrak on one side and Dreki on the other, herding him toward the cliff where he'd jumped. Where Sera waited. He wanted to resent them, but exhaustion robbed him of his will.

His sister, Liana, flew below him. *You are not alone, Ryker. We are with you.*

For a fleeting moment, he considered using what energy remained to soar until his wings gave out. He didn't understand the magic that had somehow given his dragon tattoo life. Even now, in his dragon form, he felt its heart beating. Awareness prickled beneath his scales, as though something watched from within.

Foreign thoughts and emotions crowded his mind—sadness and despair mingling with the joy of both life and flight. Beneath it all lurked the sensation of an intruder stirring a surge of anger that felt like betrayal.

And images that weren't his. Like a movie on fast-forward, the sights and noise made him dizzy. He wanted to deny the stark truth: Somehow, Drakon—his ancestor—now occupied his body and mind.

Though the light of dawn sliced through the thinning cloud cover, exposing what he was, Ryker wasn't ready to return to the cliff and face the truth. Or Sera, for it was her enchanted stone that had somehow awakened the beast within the beast. What if he couldn't control his emotions, his fury and resentment? Raw emotion had driven him over the cliff—into the safety of his dragon, where he was free to let go. He wasn't sure if he could maintain control around Sera. Somehow, they were linked.

A pull tightened low in his chest whenever he thought of her. In his dreams and in his thoughts. At the festival, he'd sensed her need for him. He'd responded automatically. That awareness of her, awake or asleep, scared him. Flying close to the surging waves, salt sprayed him, burning throat and eyes.

Nothing will be gained by dying, Grandson. Too much is at stake. You are needed. She needs you.

And that, Ryker admitted, terrified him. Flying above the ocean, wings aching, mind warring—dragon instincts against his human heart—Ryker headed back to the cliff and to the woman he feared might demand more of him than he was ready to give.



The sudden silence of birds welcoming the new day—and a change in the air—woke Sera. Disoriented, she pitched forward and would have fallen off the stone bench had Elyn not steadied her.

“Easy, Guardian. They’re back.” With a wave of his hand, the flames he’d created to keep them warm disappeared.

A downdraft of air sent strands of golden-red hair into her eyes. Scooping her hair back, she tipped her head up and sucked in her breath at the sight of wings sweeping toward her. The air smelled different—earthier and warmer. Her jaw dropped as she watched a white dragon soar toward her, wings back, talons stretching forward. As soon as it cleared the Rootwall, it blurred into a white mist as it shifted, leaving Liana to land gracefully on her feet.

Tall and willowy, she joined Sera and Elyn. “I am sorry I did not tell you the truth earlier, Guardian,” she said, inclining her head respectfully.

Sera resisted the urge to rub her forehead where a headache brewed. She grimaced instead, disbelief giving way to a reluctant spark of wonder. Of all the secrets she’d imagined, this hadn’t been one of them. “I *knew* you were more, but I don’t think I’d have believed you if you’d told me you were a dragon shifter, or Thyroni.”

Liana acknowledged her with a gentle nod. “Still, you deserved the truth. We gave you a fright, and for that, I am truly sorry.”

Sera pushed aside her anger and resentment. Secrets. Didn’t most people have them? Had her grandmother known dragons were real—that they’d returned to Havenwood Cove? It boggled her mind. Mixed in with her emotions lay a seed of fascination she wanted to explore.

She had questions. So many questions, but now wasn’t the time. Focus on the now, she ordered herself, and the most important issue at hand was the mysterious author, who wasn’t so mysterious anymore. “Where’s Ryker?” Sera demanded. The hours had dulled some of her anger, but not all of it.

Liana lifted her head, her dark braid swinging down her back as she stared out over the sea. “They are coming.” Her eyes held questions, but like Sera, she held them back. Instead, she stood silently beside Elyn.

No sooner had she spoken than a large, dark dragon with blazing golden eyes appeared at the edge of the cliff. Whereas Liana had dropped from the sky, this dragon rose from the sea to meet the cliff. Shifting above the cliff edge, Dreki dropped to the ground. Wearing all black, the youngest of the brothers joined them. He offered a deep bow. “Guardian,” he murmured before joining his sister and Elyn to one side of Sera.

For several long, terse minutes, no one moved. Even the waves below the cliff seemed to still, their thunder muted. Sera felt as though she were in a dream, the world almost fading.

A hard shake of her shoulder jerked her back to full awareness. “Breathe, Guardian,” Elyn commanded as he shifted his position to be close.

Realizing she’d been holding her breath, Sera let the air rush out of her lungs in a loud whoosh and drew in several steady breaths until the world stopped tilting.

Elyn stood on one side and Liana on the other, like two bookends. Both were taller than her own modest five-foot-four. A bubble of hysteria rose within her, but she pushed it down, drawing strength from their quiet vigilance as she forced her breathing to steady.

“Call him, Sera. Call him in. He’s dangerously exhausted.”

Her gaze shot to Elyn’s worried expression. “What?”

“The two of you are connected. He’ll come if you call.”

Sera had her doubts about whether he’d listen to her. “He may not wish to speak to me,” she said, remembering the fury in his voice when he demanded to know what she’d done to him.

And she didn't know, but she recalled hearing a voice in her head when her Oathstone burned him.

I, Drakon, claim Ryker of the Stormriders.

She didn't understand where that voice had come from or why it had sent Ryker running as though for his life. Drakon was the past. Drakon, along with her ancestor Saoirse, had been lovers and somehow, tied to the portal and her quest.

Elyn nodded. "I'm sure he does not, but he will come."

"Fine. It's way past my bedtime." Sera drew herself up. She was tired, mentally exhausted, and more afraid than she'd ever been in her life. And she felt alone. Lost and alone, she had to admit Elyn was right. Somehow, she and Ryker shared this quest, or whatever one wanted to call it. So, she tipped her head back.

"Ryker Stormrider," she shouted. "You get back here! We have things to discuss!"

Beside her, Elyn coughed to hide his amusement. "Come, Li." He backed a few steps away.

Raising her brows, drawing on her earlier anger, Sera curled her lip. "Afraid?" she asked sarcastically.

Elyn grinned boyishly. "You bet. I value my life, Guardian," he admitted. He and Liana moved to join Dreki in the shadows behind her.

Sera clasped her hands behind her back. Shoulders back, chin up, she waited. To her relief and amazement, Ryker answered her summons with a deep and furious roar that reverberated deep within her chest.

Her knees trembled when two dragons swooped down out of the clouds. She sucked in her breath. With wings broad as a small plane, the deep forest-green dragon dropped from the clouds, and a heartbeat later Ryker's eldest brother, Eldrak, touched down among them.

Sera focused on Ryker. When he cleared the Rootwall, she gasped at the magnificent blue-green dragon, his scales shimmering with hints of lavender beneath the pastel dawn. *He was enormous—nearly the length of a bus and easily twenty feet at the shoulder—yet he landed with surprising grace. Instead of shifting, he remained in dragon form, taking up most of the cliff.*

But it was his eyes that had her awestruck. They were a brilliant fire-blue, just like his human eyes, and the exact shade of blue she'd seen in the cave wall in her dream. The dragon before her stood still: head up, wings folded tight against its body, and tail curled around its feet, the tip tapping the ground like Willow's when she was agitated.

The sheer size of Ryker in dragon form, not to mention the fact he truly was a dragon, should have scared the wits out of her, but surprisingly, she wasn't afraid. She walked forward and stared up at him, so tall and out of reach. His body heaved with exhaustion, and at that moment, her anger faded. This wasn't just about her and hurt feelings or betrayals. It went far deeper.

"Ryker." Just one word whispered. Time stood still as the two of them stared at one another. Sera wanted to memorize this moment. Dragons. Of all the things she could have imagined, learning they were real was not one of them. She'd known he was different as her veil sight could see ... something—but a dragon never crossed her mind.

Hands on hips, she tipped her head to one side. "Well, at least you're not a troll," she announced loudly.

Muffled laughter came from the group behind them. Ryker swung his head around and growled low in his throat. Shaking his head, Elyn took charge. "We'll return to the cottage."

As soon as she and Ryker were alone, Sera stepped back. "Shift back, Ryker," she ordered. "You're giving me a crick in my neck."

She held her breath, wondering if he'd change and stay or take off again rather than speak with her. But in the blink of an eye, the dragon blurred—and Ryker stood several feet from her, tall enough she had to tip her chin up to meet his eyes. He looked as exhausted and mentally spent as she felt. Dark stubble shadowed his haggard face, and his eyes—a blue so dark they appeared nearly black—were haunted. He wore no shirt, and his chest bore the mark from where her Oathstone had burned him. The skin looked healed but for a pinkish scar in the artifact's shape.

Neither spoke. The wind swept over them and around them, and branches and leaves in the trees swayed and rustled. Sera shivered as she tried to regain her righteous anger, but it had faded. “I was so angry, Ryker,” she admitted softly. “You frightened me when you jumped off the cliff.”

Silently, Ryker strode past her. Instead of leaving as she'd feared, he dropped wearily onto one of the stone benches as though he could not bear his own weight a moment longer. “That was not my intention, Guardian.”

Sera sat across from him. “Why?” she asked. “Why did you jump?” *What did you do to me?* His voice, filled with pain and anguish, continued to haunt her. “Tell me, please, Ryker. Somehow, I burned you, and I know that hurt—but enough to make you jump off the cliff?”

He shook his head and stared at his hands. “Not the burn, but what happened when your stone touched me. It—it changed me, and I lost control.”

“I don't understand. It didn't cause you to become a dragon?”

His laugh was bitter. “No, I am what I am. But my dragon reacts to strong emotion—and when he demands release, I can't always stop myself from becoming.”

“Becoming?” she echoed. “You mean shifting?”

He nodded, jaw tightening, and said no more.

“Okay, I guess I can understand. So, it wasn’t just the pain, was it?”

“No.” Ryker threaded his hands through his hair. His tormented gaze held hers. “You heard the voice.”

Sera drew her brows together and tilted her head to one side. “I heard Drakon’s voice, but how can that be? He’s gone.”

“Not anymore.” Ryker held out his hand. “The stone, if you please.”

Sera clutched it beneath her shirt. “I don’t want you hurt again.”

He looked disgusted. “It won’t. It did what it was meant to do. Please?”

Hesitating, Sera removed the amber stone and held it out. Ryker, just as hesitant, as though not sure of his own words, took the stone by the silver chain. Slowly, he lowered it to his palm, then breathed a sigh of relief.

He shook his head in disbelief. “Drakon’s blood lives within, trapped in the amber. Contact with me brought him back. He now lives within me.”

A vessel. A living relic. Shocked, Sera stared at the Oathstone. “It’s not a charm or piece of jewelry. It’s a container. The night Syrus gave it to me, I thought I’d felt a heartbeat, but I figured that was just my imagination.” If she hadn’t heard the voice, she wouldn’t have believed Ryker. But she had. “That doesn’t explain what happened. How could his blood go from encased in amber into you? Magic, obviously but ...”

Ryker handed the Oathstone back to her. “The men in my family are born with a small birthmark. A dragon scale. The DragonMaster bears the tattoo of a dragon’s head. It symbolizes his position as High Sentinel, the ultimate authority among my people. When he dies, the tattoo claims the next in line, usually the first born within the family—within my family.”

“You?”

His hands gripped his knees. “I was not in line. It should have gone to my father. Or Eldrak. Instead, I woke up one morning with the cursed symbol of leadership.” He rubbed his shoulder.

Sera replaced the Oathstone beneath her shirt, sighed, and leaned forward, her fingers gripping the edge of the stone bench on either side of her thighs as though to anchor her to the spot. “And I am the Guardian of the Moondragon, a legacy passed down through my family line.”

Getting to his feet, Ryker stared out toward the sea, his hands on his hips. “There is more. Somehow the contact with your stone changed my tattoo. It now lives. Drakon lives. His heart beats within me.”

Unsure of what he meant, Sera chewed her lower lip. Finally, she admitted, “I don’t understand.”

He turned slightly, showing her his shoulder, where a full dragon, not just a head, shimmered. Under her shocked gaze, the dragon shifted from shoulder to chest, growing. Its tail wrapped around his waist, and the eyes, the same unnatural blue as Ryker’s, flared to life.

“Oh.” She scooted back, her fingers digging into her thighs. “Oh,” she repeated. She didn’t know what to say. Or think. The bizarre evening had turned surreal.

Ryker moved toward her. He held out his hand. “I will show you.”

Hesitating, then deciding she had to trust him, Sera stood and placed her fingertips on his palm. Immediately, the voice she’d heard before filled her mind.

Greetings, Guardian. You and the High Sentinel must do what my true love and I could not. You must destroy the enemy—or they will come and destroy you and all you love.

Sera jerked her hand away and stumbled back. Ryker reached out to steady her, but Sera shook her head as she fell back onto the bench. Her fingers covered her mouth. Hearing the gravelly voice of Drakon in her head, confirming the message of the loom in her shop, left her stunned. “Ryker! No! I can’t. We can’t destroy an entire world.” She sent him a pleading look.

Ryker met her horrified gaze. “Drakon has shown me images of Thyron, and Earth before he and Saoirse sealed the portal. If we don’t destroy them, they will come, as they came before.” His shoulders hunched as though a great burden weighed him down.

Shaking her head, Sera whispered, “There must be another way. The portal has been sealed for a long time, right? Maybe we can arrange talks—peace talks.” Her mind raced. “Of course, that means we need to find the portal and figure out how to open it.” She jumped to her feet and smacked a fist into her palm. “Yes, this makes sense,” she mused. “We will find a solution for both worlds.”

Ryker shook his head, his eyes as haunted as hers. “Sera, I don’t like this any more than you do, but you and I, whether we are willing or not, are responsible for this world. We can’t risk opening the portal. We can’t trust the Thyroni High Council.”

She set her jaw. Not like this. Not without trying. “Then we buy time. Learn from Drakon how he and Saoirse sealed the portal, and we seal it again.”

“They sacrificed their lives to seal the portal.” Sera swallowed hard. Would she be willing to do the same? She pressed a hand to her stomach and, closing her eyes, decided that if repeating the past saved two worlds, then yes, she would.

She opened her eyes and stared at Ryker’s chest, but the dragon tattoo had returned to his shoulder. “We ask Drakon how.”

Ryker shook his head. “The circumstances are not the same, and those involved are gone. It wasn’t just words on paper.”

“But Ryker, Thyron must be a populated world, which means there are innocent lives at stake. Many people here came from that world. We can’t condemn them. We have to find another solution.”

“Sera—”

She slashed the air with her hand. “No. No more. I can’t handle anymore.” Her head felt like it would burst. She stepped around Ryker. She wanted the comfort of her home. Her cat. And a normal life, which she knew she’d never have again.

Fear mingled with despair, but before she stepped into the shadowed gardens, now washed in the pale light of dawn, she turned back to Ryker and jabbed a finger into his chest. “For scaring the life out of me,” she added tightly, “you owe me a ride.”

With that, she pivoted and walked toward the house without looking back. She didn’t hurry. She didn’t falter. Bone-tired, she made her way home. Her head throbbed. She needed sleep, but she would not let him see her unravel.