

Renegade Dragon (Sneak Peek)

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Chapter One

His scaled golden skin ablaze with a prickly sensation, Niko Drakon snorted furiously and jerked at the chains holding him hostage in the lair beneath his great manor house. Forced into a mating heat by a massive injection of synthesized lust root, he raged within the fortified bunker and wished for a female dragon to ease his pain and hunger. In his shifted form, he was much too dangerous to be unleashed. He had to stay here, safe underground, until sunrise.

Silently, he acknowledged the nine nights of discomfort he would suffer were a small price to pay for his betrayal of Madoc and Ivy. His motives had been honest, but he had broken a promise to his dear friend Reynard that no other dragon would ever be forced to endure what he had once been tormented with under the vicious hands of the Knights of St. George. Niko had made certain the dose he had given Mad and Ivy was small and less likely to cause erratic and violent behavior, but it had been wrong nonetheless.

Stretching his aching neck, Niko exhaled with a shuddery growl. His reptilian eyes watered, and his heart raced like a hummingbird's. Whatever the cost he now paid in physical torment was worth the knowledge that Ivy was safer. Forever mated to Mad, she had a powerful partner to protect her. She also had her new mate's tribe to back her up when trouble came.

As precious as she was with that psychic matchmaking gift of hers, she needed all the guards she could get. Niko still couldn't believe what he had seen last night. Had that really been Caius facing them on the battlefield? Or was it simply some strange reincarnation of the man who had sworn vengeance and death to all dragons two thousand years earlier? Perhaps a descendant who favored him and had inherited his bloodlust?

He didn't have the answers, but he planned to get them. In the last year, the attacks on their kind had been increasing again. The Knights were growing bolder too. They had attacked Cora on an open highway just miles from Stig's home. They had

attempted to kill Avani and Griff in Mad's house and destroyed the place in the process. He and Ignatius had faked a gas explosion to quell any human curiosity and dissuade any poking around in their business.

Niko feared the darkest magic of all might be at play. As a gifted alchemist, he had encountered forces like this in the past but it had been many years. It never ended well for anyone involved.

A snap of energy burned his neck. He lifted his head and held his breath. Eyes closed, he listened intently. The layers of wards he had placed around his home had been strengthened after the Knights' incursion and the bloodshed on his front lawn. A momentary weakening when the gates had opened to admit Mad and Ivy onto the property had been all those murderous bastards had needed to break through them. Only dragon blood could pass through them now.

Someone probed at the edges of his property. It was a woman. Her feminine pulse of energy called to him. He followed her movements and realized she wasn't very adept at breaking wards. In fact, he began to wonder if she even knew of their existence. She seemed more concerned with scaling his gates at their easiest, shortest spot than with finding the weakest layer in the magical protections.

When she put her hands to the gates, she encountered the slightest resistance but no pain. She wasn't stopped by the wards but they didn't admit her very easily. His dragon rejoiced upon the discovery that this female who had trespassed upon his land was like him. It was obvious by the resistance she had encountered that more human blood flowed through her veins than dragon. Was she like Stig's mate Cora?

As swiftly as a cat climbing a tree, she scaled the gate and hopped down on the other side. He tracked her movements across his property. When she reached the house, she entered through a side door after expertly picking a lock. Was she a burglar? Did she intend to rob him?

Her close presence inflamed him with desire. He stamped his feet and jerked at his chains. Her scent finally reached him, and he growled, the rough, low sound rumbling through him and into the very ground beneath his feet. Could she feel him? Did she know that she wasn't alone and that something very dangerous and very scary lurked in the darkness?

Room by room, she searched the house. She seemed to have a purpose, but what? When she entered his lab and lingered there, he thought perhaps she had come to steal one of his potions, experimental pharmaceuticals or research. Whatever she saw in the lab, she found it rather interesting because she spent more time there than any of the other rooms she had investigated.

Eventually she moved out of the lab—and out into the courtyard. He tensed with worry. Would she try to touch the ancient and mysterious fruit tree his family had guarded since the time of the Odyssey? The golden apples were rumored to grant the gifts of the gods of Mt. Olympus. Knowledge. Prophecy. Bravery. Inhuman strength. Immortality. He didn't know which apple held which gift but they were all listed in the ancient scrolls as possibilities.

The woman walked a slow circle around the tree. His heartbeat did quite the opposite, speeding up to a wild pitch that stole his breath. If she touched even one apple, the tremulous control his human half held over his dragon would snap. The oath he had sworn to protect the apples from all mortals demanded that he hunt her down—and snap her neck.

When her small, delicate hands brushed the leaves of the tree, Niko felt her fingertips on his own skin. She ran her curious hands along the branches and rubbed the waxy leaves between her fingers. When she finally touched one of the apples, he snarled a warning she couldn't possibly hear. She plucked one of the golden fruits, and he furiously jerked on his chains.

Put it back, he silently willed. Don't bite it.

But she didn't take his unspoken advice. She brought the apple dangerously close to her mouth and inhaled the sweet, ripe scent of it. Her tongue flicked at the shiny peel as if to test the fruit. As if in slow motion, she pressed her teeth against the apple. With a snapping crunch, she took a bite of the apple...and sealed her fate.

Though the forced mating heat had rendered him beastly and a slave to his dragon's needs, the woman's theft of the apple pushed him right over the edge. An uncontrollable urge to catch and kill her gripped him. The human center of his thought process crumbled. Now only the primal, animalistic side of him mattered.

Gathering a mouthful of the venomous acid his breed were known for, he spat the sizzling stuff on the chains attached to his left wrist. The fluid splattered on the ancient

metal enhanced with sigils and symbols of alchemy. Designed by his own hand, the metal links would only give way to his acid.

One by one, he broke the chains keeping him prisoner beneath his home. He flexed his wings twice and then bent them tight against his back. With thunderous kicks, he battered the door with the foot. His thick, sharp talons gouged the metal. He finally succeeded in kicking the door right off the hinges. It slammed into the ground with a ferocious clatter.

Niko bent down and squeezed through the human-sized opening. His heavy dragon body crunched the door as he strode over it. Picking up speed, he ran down the dimly lit hall and up the staircase to the hidden door that sat behind a bookcase in his library. His too-large body made moving through his home a chore. His wings clipped walls and his talons clawed up the fine rugs. It was little matter. Those things could be fixed or replaced, but the apple that had been eaten? No, there was no fixing that.

With a vicious snarl, he stormed out of the house and into the muggy night. His heightened senses picked up the faint scent of approaching rain. The clouds hummed with electric energy. Soon the rumble of thunder would peal in the dark night. His beast yearned for the warm splash of a late spring rain on his golden hide, but the bloodlust raging through him would only be cooled by the taste of that thief's red lifeblood spilling over his fangs.

His wings cracked the glass panes of the French doors. A shower of tinkling bits hit the flagstones. The clatter broke through whatever spell the apple had woven on the burglar. Gasping, she nearly choked on the mouthful of fruit and gulped it down. He could hear her swallowing. The wind kicked up between them and the scent of her, a seductively spicy and sweet smell, wound around him and invaded his nostrils.

Suddenly a different sort of lust gripped him. The woman still hidden by the shadows of the tree chunked the only weapon she had—the apple core—and ran like hell. He easily dodged the flying chunk of fruit. The predator in him delighted at the idea of a chase. With a wild snarl, he flapped his wings and sprang high into the air.

She could run—but she wouldn't get far.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

Eris Jones had seen some scary things in her twenty-four years of life but that *thing*? No, not even the pimps and drug dealers who had ravaged her childhood neighborhood and threatened her every time she walked to and from school had scared her as much as that...that...dragon?

No. Dragons aren't real. Dragons are myth and fantasy.

Her feet pounded the slick flagstones. She didn't dare look back to see if *it* was gaining on her. When she reached a burbling fountain, she hopped onto the flat ledge of the circular perimeter and raced along it. The soles of her sneakers squeaked on the wet marble, and she narrowly avoided a nasty tumble.

She hit the pavers running and rushed toward the wide open lawn. A tree line called to her. If she could get into the woods there, she might have a fighting chance to escape that...dragon.

No. It's not real. It's a hallucination. The apple had to be filled with toxins. Her scientifically trained mind would accept no other conclusion. Because what she had seen with her two eyes wasn't possible.

Lungs burning and sides aching, she ate up the dewy grass with long strides. She was suddenly very glad for all those charity races she ran with her best friend Ivy. A flood of memories assailed her. All those early mornings she had cursed Ivy's loud alarm and her cheerful, chirping as they headed out to train for the half marathons she was always signing them up for? Eris wanted to hug her now.

Ivy, where the hell are you?

That morning she had woken up to find the most cryptic voicemail. Ivy's sweet voice had cut out three or four times during the message, but Eris had heard enough. Her lost friend said she was safe, but there was something in her tone that set Eris' teeth on edge. After disappearing during their Spring Break trip, Ivy suddenly reappeared a month later with a phone call and nothing more?

Something wasn't right. Eris had called in a favor from an ex to track the cell phone call. When she discovered it had originated only a few hours from their apartment near the university, she had thrown together an overnight bag, grabbed her emergency envelopes of cash, her pistol and called upon the skills she hadn't used in years to help her save her friend.

Except she hadn't saved Ivy. She hadn't even found her best friend. She had discovered a strange mansion housing a lab that rivaled the even most advanced research and development department of the multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical firm where she had recently interned. Something very odd was brewing in there. The mishmash of chemicals, biological agents and herbs and plants was too weird. She hadn't ever seen a setup like it.

And that apple tree! She would never admit it but she had sworn it was singing to her, drawing her in closer and closer with a melody that she couldn't ignore. The apples had smelled so very good. Hungry from her day of traveling and the nervous stomach that wouldn't allow her to eat, she hadn't been strong enough to fight the impulse to steal one of the glittering golden fruits.

It had been so delicious. Ripe, sweet and juicy, the sweet taste of it had burst upon her taste buds. For a brief moment, her tongue had gone numb. A flowing heat ran down her throat and into her chest. It blossomed behind her heart and spread low into her belly. She had grown curiously aware of the building storm and the promise of lightning. The very tips of her toes had buzzed with energy.

Then that *thing* had burst out of the mansion and shocked her near to death. Now the *thwack* of heavy wings snapping in the night air seemed so intensely real. She tried to convince herself it was just a big bird of some sort and the apple's toxins, the same ones that had numbed her tongue, playing tricks on her mind. She wasn't succeeding.

A wicked snarl erupted in the night. A chill raced down her spine. The sight of a fast approaching hedge she hadn't been able to see in the darkness frustrated her. Every bit the street kid who had learned to escape tricky situations, she vaulted over the hedge like a hurdler. When she hit the grass, her feet slipped and she stumbled forward. She clawed at the grass, desperate to get back upright, and finally succeeded on shoving against the ground.

A blast of air slammed into her and something hard snapped against her shoulder. She tumbled forward and ended up flat on her belly for a moment. Gasping for air, she instinctively covered the back of her neck. Was it a wing that had clipped her?

Rather awkwardly, she managed to stand and run again but that thing swooped down and grabbed hold of her thin black jacket. Fabric shredded as her feet came up off

the ground. Like a field mouse in the clutches of a great big hawk, she shrieked with terror and frantically twisted her hips. She wasn't a very big woman and that winged beast was so much bigger and stronger, but she wasn't going to give up so easily.

She reached up and swatted at the clawed foot that had gripped her jacket and shirt. Digging her short nails into its foot didn't work. The skin felt hot and hard...and scaly. She cried out in horror and balled up her small fist, slamming it into the reptilian foot. When that didn't work, she grabbed one of the talons and jerked it roughly, determined to yank the damned thing out if necessary.

The dragon roared and let go of her. Her belly swooped as she plummeted to the ground. It had carried her high into the night sky before she had dared to hurt it. Now she squeezed her eyes shut as the quickly advancing ground threatened to break her legs or maybe even her neck. Would that be a sweeter, easier death than the bloody, violent one she had been imagining?

With a grunt and a strangled cry, Eris stopped falling. The beast sank its claws into the fabric of her jacket and shirt and halted her wild descent. Though she was thin and light, her weight was still too much for her clothing to bear. The cloth started to tear, and she felt her arms slipping out of the clothing. A moment later, she screamed as that evil beast tossed her in the air. She did a wicked somersault and squeezed her eyes shut. Did this thing want to play with his food first?

Two steely arms closed around her waist. With an *oomph* of discomfort, she stopped falling and spinning. The creature held her tight to its blazing hot and rough skinned body. Sour puffs of hot air blasted her neck every time it breathed. She shuddered with revulsion. What would happen now? Bloody and brutal visions tormented her.

Refusing to die like this and low enough to the ground that she was certain she could survive a fall, Eris fought like hell. She kicked, twisted and smacked at the beast. It was so big and powerful that all her fighting was futile but she couldn't stop. Grabbing hold of the thick, corded forearms of the creature, she tugged hard.

And then she felt the strangest thing. The skin beneath her palms began to grow incredibly hot. Just as quickly, the texture changed. It wasn't hard, reptilian hide beneath her hands but something softer and more familiar—human skin.

The dragon made a strange sound and snorted loudly. She cringed as the acrid scent of the air from its lungs breezed across her face. The beast began to descend quickly. The flap of its wings sounded different now. Their pace was almost panicked, as if he feared falling too.

She rocked her weight and then did something truly brutal. She sank her teeth into the vulnerable skin of his arm and bit down until she tasted the coppery burst of blood on her tongue. The beast roared with pain and let go of her. When Eris hit the ground, all the air was knocked out of her lungs. Her rattled brain didn't send the right signals to her legs and arms. *Get up! Go!*

Her fingers slipped on the dewy grass. Sobbing with fear, she finally clambered to her feet. She took four steps before the beast smacked her with its wing. Flung to the ground, she wrapped her hands along the back of her neck. Would it try to bite her now? Flay her open with those vile talons?

Clawed hands gripped her shoulders and roughly flipped her onto her back. She lifted both legs and donkey kicked the dragon right in the stomach. It snorted violently and knocked her legs out of the way. Like a true predator, it dropped down on top of her, its knees on either side of her hips and its hands planted on either side of her head. She pushed against his chest, and the creature made a strange noise. It jerked back as if her touch had burned him.

Finding enough courage to really look at it, Eris gasped. A pair of glowing amber reptilian eyes stared right back at her. Golden wings streaked with red and green blocked out the silvery clouds and the inky black sky above. Instead of inspiring fear, the image before her filled her with the most incredible sense of awe. This thing, this mythical beast, was something fantastic to behold.

The creature lowered its snout and brushed it along her cheek and neck. He inhaled deeply and shuddered. A chilling growl escaped its throat. Terrified that it found her smell enticing, she pressed both hands to the beast's chest and shoved hard, praying he wouldn't next take a bite to see if she was as tasty as she apparently smelled.

With a gruff groan, the beast stiffened and reared back until it looked her in the eyes. The scaled hide under her hands began to change again. Her jaw slackened. Stupefied, she watched the dragon transform right before her eyes. Was she hallucinating? Was the toxin from the apple finally wearing off?

The great golden beast lost its wings and reptilian skin. Those amber eyes with slivered pupils shifted to a normal round shape. Dark hair tumbled around bronzed shoulders. The scales gave way to long swaths of tattooed symbols covering the body of...a man.

It wasn't a dragon at all.

It was a man.