

Wicked Dark Dragon (Sneak Peek)

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Chapter One

One night of sleep.

Ian Madoc silently bargained with the universe to give him one single night of uninterrupted sleep. Sliding into bed, he flopped onto his back and draped his arm over his tired eyes. His head pounded, and his joints ached. Mouth dry, he reached for the glass of water on the bedside table and drained it in four long gulps. That should have been enough to tide him over until morning, but his parched tongue demanded more.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Mad shoved out of bed and trudged into the bathroom. He filled the glass with cold water from the tap and drank it straight down before refilling it and carrying it back to the bedside table. As he crawled between the sheets, his stomach growled angrily. He reacted with disbelief at the insatiable hunger that assailed him. For dinner, he had eaten half a damned cow! How in the world could he be hungry all ready?

Rolling onto his stomach, Mad tried to make sense of all the strange symptoms he'd been experiencing. The hunger and thirst he could attribute to the heavy work schedule at the gym he owned with his cousin Griffin. Business was booming, and he was spending more time training clients and engaged in heavy physical labor. The head and muscle aches he chalked up to stress, but the spiked increase in his libido? That one had him concerned. Lately, all he could think about was sex.

He had almost considered that he was about to go into heat, but he was two years too early for a heat phase so it definitely wasn't that. The uncontrollable urge to mate came upon dragon shifters like himself every three years until they found their other half. Like most dragons sworn to the Brotherhood of the Green Hide, Mad had chosen to remain unmated and to commit his life to the cause of defending their kind against the murderous Knights. Only Stig Wyvern had broken that pact so far, choosing to keep his mostly human mate Cora. Of course, with his Griff locked away with the Naga shifter Avani Monroe during a shared mating phase, there might be another Brother adding his name to that list.

Perhaps it had something to do with the bizarre and unsettling dreams he had been sharing with a faceless female presence. Somehow, some way, this woman had managed to worm her way into his mind while he slept. The dreams started differently every night, but she was always there. He couldn't see her face, but he could smell her. Some mornings he woke up with her tempting scent clinging to his nostrils, teasing him of something that was always just out of reach. Twenty-one nights of dreams, and he was no closer to knowing her identity than when they had first started.

The gnawing hunger, the unquenchable thirst, the chill that followed him everywhere—they all meant something, but what?

Burying his face in his pillow, Mad closed his eyes and tried to ignore his hollow stomach. The moment his eyelids shuttered, he experienced the strongest tug toward sleep. He hadn't known exhaustion like this in years, not since the war with the Knights of St. George had been at one of its peaks.

In recent months, the attacks from that human shadow group hell-bent on eradicating all dragons had been in an upswing. Mad feared a full-blown war was

inevitable. After a lull of nearly a century, the Knights seemed to have regrouped and strengthened. The attack like the one that had nearly killed Stig and his new mate Cora were meant to provoke a response—and that was exactly what they were going to get if they continued to push. Unfortunately, any response by the Brotherhood would be one that would lead to heavy casualties on both sides.

A lulling hum dragged him away from his troubled thoughts. Mad surrendered to the warm current dragging him down into the deepest, murkiest waters of sleep. Like every night for the past three weeks, he found himself walking the bustling streets of a Mexican seaside town. Mariachis played for the tourists while young boys hawked small packs of gum. The scents and sounds of the busy *mercado* were so vividly real. If he reached out and took one of the *aguas frescas* for sale, he would have been able to taste the sweetness of the watermelon and feel the icy chill against his tongue.

The scene morphed, and darkness settled over him. The rich trill of trumpets faded and was replaced by the thumping bass of a dance beat. Now he was in a night club, one of the big, glitzy nightspots that catered to the moneyed college crowd that descended every spring.

But his vantage point was all wrong as he weaved through the thick, pulsing crowd. He was down low and at risk of being crushed by all the bodies jamming the dance floor. Someone jostled him, and he stumbled backward and only barely managed to catch his balance and avoid a nasty spill.

Looking up into the face of the red-haired man who had slammed into him, Mad realized he wasn't watching the revelry from above as he had every night before this. He was *in* the body of the dreamer and sharing this bizarre sleep state with him. He was in

her body, the nameless, faceless presence who owned this world where he now trespassed.

And she was small. Judging by the height difference between her and the man who had nearly knocked her over, the woman was barely an inch or two above five feet. Despite her tiny stature, she didn't take any shit off the man who had whacked her with his bigger body. When he slid closer in a provocative manner, she put up both hands and shoved hard. Shaking her head, she sidestepped the taller man's grabby hands and continued her hazardous trek across the packed dance floor.

A desperate urge to protect this tiny sprite of a woman blazed within him. It was a sensation he could no longer deny. Since the first dream they had shared, he had been unable to shake this growing need within him. He wanted to know her. He wanted to see her smile and hear her laugh. More than anything, he wanted to be the one holding her hand and guiding her through the crowd, using his bigger, stronger frame to shield her from all others.

Despite playing down the dreams to his cousin and best friend Griffin, Mad grudgingly acknowledged that this was no simple case of psychic energy siphoning. This was so much more complicated and dangerous. A word he never dared imagine he would ever claim floated in the back of his mind. While he wanted to insist that it was impossible that this unknown woman was *that word*, he couldn't deny the feeling clenching his gut.

She entered a room at the rear of the club. A bathroom, he quickly realized, as women chatted and primped at the sinks. She entered an empty stall and locked it. Worried this dream was about to get awkward, he experienced a wave of relief when she

leaned back against the stall door and closed her eyes. Suddenly, he could hear her thoughts.

Leave. Leave and stay far away.

A cold sensation crept along his spine. His stomach pitched, and his chest tightened. He wanted to get out of her body and out of the bathroom as quickly as possible, but he was anchored in her mind. The other women in the bathroom weren't as tightly moored. One by one, they drifted out of the bathroom.

Confused, Mad tried to figure out if what he was experiencing was truly a dream or a memory. If it was a memory, if this was a snapshot of a real moment, had she really cleared an entire room with a single thought? Was this woman more than human?

She exited the stall and crossed to the entrance. She locked it from the inside and then marched to the closest mirror. He expected to finally catch a glimpse of her face but the mirror's surface looked smoky and smudged. Despite being totally alone in the bathroom, he sensed a dark, evil presence lurking just out of sight. A cold, unsettling sensation crawled along his skin.

With shaking hands, she flipped the clasp on her small black purse and retrieved a tube of lipstick. She dropped the lid into the sink and twisted the base. Using the flirty pink shade like a pencil, she started to write on the mirror.

My name is Ivy Morales.

I have been missing for three weeks.

I am like you.

I need your help.

Save me.

As Mad read the message she scrawled on the mirror, he experienced a rough and painful shoving sensation that squeezed the air out of his lungs. The mirror's reflection began to clear, the murky foggiess fading, and suddenly he saw himself standing behind a petite black-haired beauty in a shiny purple dress. Their gazes locked in the mirror. Her striking eyes, one the color of coffee and the other a vibrant shade of reptilian gold with crimson flecks, told the entire story.

She wasn't human. She wasn't dragon. She was both.

She held up her hand, lifting it just over her shoulder, and silently asked him to take it. He grasped her smaller hand, her fingers thin and delicate, and marveled at the electric zing that arced along his skin. Gripping his hand, she spun toward him and stepped in close. The air rushed from his lungs when he peered down at her. His heart did a wild flip, and he swallowed hard.

Ivy. Her name ricocheted around in his mind. Something about this young woman with dark hair and pouty lips was so familiar. The faintest tickle of a thought teased him but he couldn't drag it forth. Entranced by her oddly-hued eyes, he held his breath when her fingertip traced the edge of his jaw and his bottom lip. She was too short to reach any higher, even in her heels. He cupped her face in one big hand, silently urging her to stay perfectly still so he could study her features. No answer came to him.

In a club so packed with humans, he shouldn't have been so incredibly aware of the scent of one single half-dragon girl. There were too many perfumes, colognes and all of that alcohol mixing with the smell of sweat and pheromones to mask the familiar earthen smell of a dragon. Yet he had no trouble at all picking out the notes of lavender and sandalwood clinging to her.

The urge to breathe in her unique scent gripped him. He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, drawing in the smell of her and holding it in his lungs until every last cell was saturated. He watched tiny bumps blossom on Ivy's skin as he brushed the tip of his nose along the curve of her neck. She gripped his shirt and rose on tiptoes to press against him, molding her nubile form to his hard chest.

Something inside him snapped. For weeks, he had been a mere spectator in these dreams. Now he wanted to participate. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he hauled her right up off the floor and deposited her on the edge of the sink. Ivy gasped at his display of strength. Her eyelids shuttered briefly. When they parted again, both eyes had shifted to that golden color and her pupils were long slits. He didn't have to glance at his reflection to know that his were now the same red shade as the scales of his inner beast.

She slid her hands along his arms and shoulders and clasped either side of his neck. He dipped down and teased his nose against hers before brushing their lips together with the barest whisper of contact. Mad tangled his fingers in those long, dark waves and tilted her head back. Her excited breaths sent a quiver of anticipation through his chest. She trembled against him, and the feel of her smaller body shaking like that did wild things to his heart.

Finally, he captured her soft, pouty lips. What began as a gentle, chaste kiss quickly morphed into something far more dangerous. He traced the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue, silently seeking entrance, and then delved between them when she whimpered with uncertainty. The dream was so damned real he could taste the sweetness of pineapple juice and the bite of tequila clinging to her lips.

Wanting more of her, *needing* more of her, Mad cradled the back of her head and took the lead, embracing that dominant side of him that had always enjoyed being in

control. Sliding his hand along her thigh, he slipped his fingers under her skirt and trailed them along her silky skin. Ivy made a needful, excited noise that rippled through his chest and traveled straight to his cock. Showing some boldness tempered with hesitation, she hesitantly wrapped those short legs of hers around his waist and rocked against him.

The corners of his mouth lifted with a pleased smile that interrupted their wild kisses. She shyly grinned up at him, the pink stain coloring her cheeks telling him that she wasn't nearly as experienced as she pretended to be. The allure of innocence had never been one that he had understood...until Ivy.

Overwhelmed by the primal call to mate that her scent and taste evoked, Mad surged against her, making sure to let the hard ridge of his trapped erection rub right between the vee of her thighs. She gasped, and her shuddery breaths buffeted his jaw. More than anything in the world, he wanted to be buried deep inside his sweet Ivy. He wanted to feel her nails clawing at his back and her slick, hot sheath clenching his shaft as they came together.

His sweet Ivy?

The possessive thought gripped him and just wouldn't let go. This young woman who had invaded his dreams intrigued him. He wanted to know her. He *needed* to know everything about her. Where had she come from? Where was she going? Was he going there with her? What made her laugh? What made her cry? What did she want out of life?

Desperate to get those answers, Mad attempted to wrest control of the dream from Ivy by calling forth the gifts of his dragon but awakening his inner beast had a bizarre effect. Everything around them pulsed. The lights dimmed for a few seconds and

then brightened to an almost blinding whiteness. As if alive, the walls throbbed, the peeling paint bubbling and dripping with a strange black fluid. The floor shifted beneath his feet, and he fell forward against Ivy. He curved a protective hand along the back of her head, shielding her from the mirror, and pulled her in tight against his chest.

"I see you, Welshman." A slithery, hissing voice shattered their sensual moment. He glanced around, searching for the origin, but he couldn't find it. The room darkened and seemed to be growing smaller and smaller.

"Look at me." Ivy jerked on the front of his shirt. The panicked expression twisting her beautiful face hit him in the gut. He started to reassure her that he would take care of her, but she stopped him before he could form even one single word. Her fingertips were cold as ice when they touched his lips. As the dream world she had created disintegrated, so did the brightness in her eyes and the color in her cheeks. Pale with dark circles under her eyes and lips cracked with dehydration, she pleadingly stared up at him. "Save me?"

He clasped her thin wrist and swore a vow. "I will save you, Ivy."

"Hurry. I can't hold on much longer. She's going to break me—and then I won't be able to protect you or the other dragons." She tugged her wrist free and placed her palm against his chest. Her very touch branded him, and he inhaled sharply as the blistering pain scorched his skin. Catching him by surprise, she lifted her other hand and slapped him right across the face. Despite her small stature and weakness, she walloped him as hard as Griff ever had. He didn't think his seven-foot-tall cousin had ever knocked his block off with quite like Ivy. "Wake up!"

Bolting upright in bed, Madoc clutched his burning chest and sucked in a ragged breath. Sweat sluiced down his skin, soaking his sheets and cooling his overheated body.

He touched his stinging face and winced. If he had had any doubts about the veracity of the dream, the bruise forming on his cheek and the pain over his heart convinced him it was real.

On legs as shaky as a newborn colt's, he clambered out of bed but only managed two steps before he dropped to his knees. Sapped of energy, he used the nearest piece of furniture to haul himself upright. It finally occurred to him that his ravenous hunger and thirst and this relentless tiredness he had been experiencing were because Ivy had been draining him to survive. Wherever she was being held, she was being deprived of food and water and deliberately weakened.

And it enraged him.

Fueled by his anger, Mad left his bedroom and headed downstairs. He kept a hand on the wall to maintain his balance and avoid a nasty fall. When he hit the living room, he dropped down on his couch and reached for the laptop he had been using a few hours earlier to research dreams. The moment the screen awakened, he typed in the name she had written on the mirror but his fingers slowed as he hit the last few keys.

"Ivy." His whisper sounded so harsh in the stillness of his home. Blood pounded in his head as he suddenly realized who this mysterious dream girl was. "*Her*."

Memories from years ago, during a time when the blood feud between dragons and Knights had been fomented to a fever pitch, blitzed Mad. Ivy looked so familiar to him because she favored her mother Phoebe, a dragon female from the ancient Niko Drakon's tribe.

Impetuous. Wasn't that how Niko had described his kin?

Batting away the ugly memories that thoughts of Phoebe and her ill-fated love affair with none other than a Knight of St. George spurred, Mad finished typing in Ivy's

full name and searched for any information on her. As he scanned the results, he touched the crook of his arm and thought of the blood he had given Niko for that potion. Niko had explained that dragon blood from a male belonging to a rival tribe would cancel out the Knight blood in her until she became of age and would make her impossible to track.

At the time, Ignatius had feared the baby might have inherited the gift of prophecy so common in females of that particular Knight family. Mad hadn't given a second thought to donating his blood. He had sworn his life to the Brotherhood, and if Ignatius asked him to bleed for the cause, he would happily slice open his wrist.

It appeared the potion had worked. Clearly, Ivy had been able to grow up unbothered and off the radar of the Knights of St. George. She had gone off to college before the Knights had tracked her down and taken her captive. There was no doubt in his mind that it had to be them who held her now. That creepy fucking voice that had shattered the dream and called him Welshman had to belong to their Seer. The Knights saw some potential use in Ivy, no doubt as a weapon against the dragons.

The real question? Why was she reaching out to him? Niko was her kin and her tribal leader. Her bond with Niko should have been the strongest and the easiest to exploit. Family ties were always the most powerful for dragons until they found their mates.

Mate.

He swallowed hard. While he wanted to immediately discount that possibility, Mad couldn't ignore the facts before him. It wasn't at all uncommon for mates to find each other in dreams. Considering the scarcity of their species these days, there were

often long distances between tribal compounds. With their sensitivity to psychic energy, dragon shifters had no trouble communicating on that level.

But that blood he had given Niko... What if it had screwed up things in a way the alchemist had never intended? What if Ivy was now tied to him because of the potion and not because they were true mates? Was their bond *real*? Would it last? Or was this simply a side-effect of Niko's elixir?

No one really understood how dragon mates came to be. In the old days, they had been called star mates or soul bonds. Even with all the science available to them now, no one could say with any certainty how it worked or even why. It just did. There was a moment of recognition, a spark, and there was no going back once that link was awakened.

Closing his eyes, he ran his fingers along his lips. God, he could still taste and feel her. The urge to save Ivy, to bring her to his home, nurse her back to health, pamper and protect her forever overwhelmed him. Heat rolled low in his belly as he remembered those soft sighs and the slight whimpers she had issued as he had claimed her mouth. The desire to find her and mate her and forever mark her as *his* was too strong to fight.

Embracing that overpowering sensation, he hoped it would aid his search for Ivy. Her ominous warning that she couldn't hold on much longer and that more than just his life was at stake spurred him onward. He discovered a social media blitz from a young woman named Eris Jones who appeared to be Ivy's best friend at college. He skimmed the flyer and collected the necessary details. The pair had been celebrating Spring Break at a popular Mexican resort when Ivy had gone missing at a club, probably the same one she had shown him in his dreams.

The rest of his search turned up even more troubling news. Ivy's parents had been killed in a house fire nearly a year earlier. At first glance, it seemed like nothing more than a tragic accident, but Mad had a bad feeling the Knights had been involved. He wasn't fully aware of the details of the cloaking magic Niko had worked on Ivy and her adoptive parents Susie and Miguel Morales, but it was possible that their deaths had allowed the Knights to break that magic and get to their daughter.

To my mate.

His chest tightened, and he reached up to rub his sternum in the hopes of easing the ache gripping his heart. When he touched his chest, Mad hissed and yanked back his hand. He glanced down at his bare skin and spotted the red, raw patches there. Remembering the way Ivy's fingertips had burned him just seconds before she had smacked him, he jumped off the couch and rushed into the closest bathroom. He shielded his eyes from the bright glare of the light and waited for them to adjust before he glanced at his reflection in the mirror.

Pride welled up inside him and caused him to grin. His brilliant sprite of a mate had scorched him with the location of the place she was being held. His Spanish was rusty, but he still remembered the word for prison and recognized the name of the Mexican state of Veracruz.

Armed with her location, Mad rushed upstairs and threw open the door of his closet. As he hastily jammed his legs into a pair of jeans, he considered whether or not he should contact Griffin. His cousin was locked away in an underground lair with a female dragon belonging to a rather unique line of Naga shifters. Just days into their synced heat phase, the pair was giving off a powerful scent that would make them easy

targets for the Knights to track. He couldn't risk alerting Griffin and drawing his cousin out of that lair. He was safe there with Avani..

He thought about contacting Ignatius or Niko for backup but he hesitated. If Ivy was mistaken about her location or if the Knights holding her had managed to confuse or infiltrate her thoughts, he could be leading the two men into a trap. Until he was absolutely certain she was there, he had to exercise caution.

Throwing some clothes and supplies into an overnight bag, he rubbed his hand across the throbbing marks on his chest. Whatever it took, he would find Ivy. No matter what the cost, he would save his mate.