

# DRAGON LOVE

By

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

\*\*\*This book contains a “Sneak Peek” of another book by Eileen Sheehan at the end of this story.

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# PROLOGUE

## *The Inner Earth Kingdom of Manthella*

It had arrived. The day he'd been dreading was upon him. He could hear the whispers of onlookers lining the long passageway as he strode forth with his head held high. He refused to look at them for fear they might recognize the emotions he struggled to hide behind a stoic expression.

For want of volunteers, there'd been a lottery drawing and he'd lost. It was as simple as that. Now, he had to say good-bye to his home and loved ones for an indeterminable amount of time. Possibly forever.

His patriotic side kept reminding him that it was for the good of all that he goes on this mission. It may be for the good of his people, but, every so often, his self-serving side crept to the forefront and dissected the situation in hopes of coming up with reasons good enough to justify the fact that he was risking his life. It was his opinion that there were other ways of accomplishing what needed to be done without sending a single soul on a mission such as this.

From where he stood, it didn't seem beneficial to send him to earth's surface to confer with the surface-human leaders. He could see nothing but heartache and loss coming his way from such a venture. After all, he was no diplomat with a savvy tongue. He was military; trained to solve problems head on and with force, if necessary. Yet, here he was, on his way to do his best to communicate with the surface people to reason with them about their abuse of the planet's resources and the repercussions from it that they all stood to suffer.

He'd argued that the mission would be better served if the lottery was amongst the scientists and engineers instead of the military, but to no avail. King Edgar worried about the ability his scientists and engineers would have in

dealing with the aggressive nature they'd witnessed in humans. Not to mention the perils of passing through the land of the meta-naturals. He was convinced that it was a job for someone with military training. Preferably, someone who'd proven himself worthy of a high station. After years of arduous active duty, Tristan was just that person. King Edgar was so pleased when the lottery was drawn that Tristan couldn't help wondering if it was rigged.

"You have had three months to prepare for your mission, Tristan," bellowed King Edgar's deep voice from the throne he'd positioned at such a high elevation as to allow him to look down upon the room instead of just a subject. "I assume that was sufficient."

Tristan knelt before his king with his head bowed low. Three months was certainly not enough time for him to learn the scientific gargle being tossed at him from all directions. Nowhere near enough; but he couldn't and wouldn't admit that to his king and all the onlookers. So, with an air of confidence that he didn't feel, he said, "It was, your majesty."

"Good." The king leaned against the back of his throne with a satisfied smile. "Let us get you into the vessel and on your way."

"Wait!" shouted the all too familiar voice of Myriana. His chest contracted with guilt at the pain and loss that her tone so clearly displayed. "I must say good-bye. You cannot deny me that, father."

With brows knitted together in deep displeasure, King Edgar reminded his daughter that he could do as he pleased. Myriana stood proud and tall as she struggled to free herself from the restraints two guards had on her while she boldly locked eyes with her father. After a moment of intense silence, he motioned for his guards to release her.

"Be quick about it," he grumbled. "The vessel is ready to go and is using up fuel as we speak. The amount of energy needed to get him safely to the

earth's surface has been calculated. If he runs out before he reaches it and is stuck in the land of the meta-naturals, we will have you to blame."

Since Tristan visited this land on more than one military assignment, he knew very well the risks that awaited him there. Avoiding being stranded in such a place was top on his list.

"It is not fair," Myriana whispered as she wrapped him in a tight hug.

"I will be back soon," he whispered. "You will see."

"If you are not back in thirty sun rotations, I am coming for you," she said firmly.

"I will be back," he said with conviction.

"The humans are so dangerous," she whimpered as she hugged him close. "I cannot stand the thought of losing you."

"I will be back," he said once more as he gently untangled her arms from around his neck and pushed her far enough away to be able to look into her amber eyes. "Now, say good-bye and let me go before the fuel supply is compromised."

Tears flowed down her cheeks as she kissed his lips and vowed, once again, that, if he didn't return within the time allotted, she would come for him. He gave her one last hug and, with his head held high and his back straight, walked toward the vessel. When he reached the entrance, he turned to look at her. With a wan smile and a tiny wave, he disappeared into the long, cigar shaped shuttle that would take him to the earth's surface; a place he'd never been nor had the desire to go to.

He settled himself into the control seat as the door closed behind him and stared at the panel of complicated equipment. He was at the mercy of the engineers who operated everything remotely. Of course, he was required to understand how to manually maneuver the shuttle on the off chance something



went awry, and he'd have to take over. With such superior engineers at the helm, the odds of that happening were next to nil.

He settled into the seat and buckled up just in time before centrifugal force pinned him in place as the shuttle took off at an unimaginable speed.

With nothing to do but wait, he allowed his mind to wander. He thought about the times he'd gone on missions to help bring order amongst the meta-naturals in middle earth. He pulled back the sleeve of his one piece traveling suit to view the scar that was a never-ending reminder of the battle that almost ended him. If it hadn't been for Myriana, it very well may have. She was a tough warrior who he was always happy to fight beside.

He regretted letting things get as far as they had between them. It started out innocently enough. He was grateful to her for leading her troops in infiltrating the prison that held him and his comrades under the harshest of conditions. So, he expressed it by offering his gratitude, friendship, and loyalty. What he hadn't offered, but what she clearly assumed was part of the menu, was his love. By the time he realized her feelings for him, he had no idea how to break it to her that he didn't reciprocate them. Like a coward, he held his feelings to himself and did what was necessary to avoid being intimate with her; which would only raise her expectations even higher.

He would have thought that after several years of the cat and mouse game he played, she would have become frustrated with things and moved on, but she held firm to her illusion of love and he, in turn, remained the coward who would tell her no different.

He couldn't explain why he didn't love Myriana. She was beautiful, fit, strong, a solid leader, and the daughter of his king. What's not to love? Yet, something deep inside of him resisted not just love with her, but love with anyone. It was as if he was saving himself for someone. But, who?

He saw her in his dreams sometimes. The vision was never clear, but it was enough for him to get glimpses of her waist length copper hair, petite frame, and creamy skin. Copper hair was unheard of among his people, so he couldn't imagine where she was from. The petite frame was also an anomaly. His people tended to be tall and strong boned. As for her creamy complexion, well, his people were ruddier with their looks, but creamy skin wasn't unthinkable. He guessed he'd meet her when he ventured into other parts of inner-earth. Perhaps during one of the peace festivals that were held between participating kingdoms. That would explain the difference in body makeup and coloring.

The unexpected jolt as the shuttle came to an abrupt halt ripped him from his thoughts. Had he not been seat belted in, he'd have been tossed from the chair. He quickly worked the controls to allow him to get an idea of what was happening.

"Tristan," said a controller over the intercom, "are you alright?"

"What's going on?" he asked.

"We're looking into it," the voice replied. "Your fuel supply is still intact. We believe there is something blocking you."

"It was an abrupt stop," Tristan grumbled. "Have I reached the surface?"

"From what we can tell, you are still subterranean, but close," the intercom said.

"Close does not count," Tristan mumbled. His dark eyes grew even darker with aggression as he asked, "Am I in meta-natural territory?"

After a long silence, the controller said, "We are not certain, but it is possible."

# ONE

Chloe heaved a sigh as she leaned into the mirror with lipstick in hand. She'd been summoned to Marcus' office. She assumed he'd taken objection to the report she'd submitted the day before. He'd expected her to close the case by now and she had. She'd met the deadline, but not the expectations. She just hadn't come up with the evidence he expected, or possibly even needed.

It was a tough case that left her feeling depleted and disappointed. She didn't like falling short on the expectations placed upon her. It rarely happened; which was a good thing, since she beat herself up so much for her own failures, there was no need for Marcus to utter a word. He would, of course. In fact, she was certain he'd utter a slew of words before he was done.

She smoothed the lipstick she'd applied with her fingertips and placed the cap back on the tube. Shoving it into her cosmetic case and then the case into her handbag, she squared her shoulders. She grabbed a wide tooth comb from a pocket inside of her handbag and dragged it through her thick, waist length locks before returning it to its proper place. Taking one last look at her appearance, she filled her lungs with fortifying air, exhaled slowly, and exited the ladies room.

"Whoa there," her coworker, Jim, said when she practically collided with him. He grabbed her upper arms to steady her. "Where's the fire?"

"I've been summoned," she replied as she peered around his tall, dreamy frame as best she could toward Marcus' closed door.

"Good or bad?" he asked.

"I came up empty handed with the Lewis case," she mumbled.

"So, bad," he said with a nod. Brushing a stray hair from her temple in an absent-minded gesture that gave her chills of delight, he lightly patted her shoulder and stepped aside for her to continue. "Stay strong."

“Take a good look,” she said as she walked passed him with her shapely hips swaying in an exaggerated manner, while doing her best to camouflage her reaction to his touch. “I might not have much of this ass left when he’s done chewing on it.”

She clung to Jim’s light-hearted chuckle as she gave a light tap on the office door with her knuckles.

Marcus’ rich voice didn’t keep her waiting as it beckoned her to enter.

“Before you say anything,” she said as she boldly strode to the chair opposite his desk and sat down, “I swear that I turned over every stone I could with this case. The man is clean. His wife’s just paranoid.”

“She’s threatening to withhold our fee,” Marcus grumbled from somewhere near his Adam’s Apple.

“She can’t do that,” Chloe bellowed. “I worked my ass off for weeks on this case.”

Her boss waved his hand in a silencing gesture as he leaned back into his executive office chair. The movement accentuated the overly large stomach he’d acquired on his once fit -and rather sexy- physique, since he’d taken to sitting behind his desk instead of actively working in the field. His thick black brows knitted together over his rich hazel, deep-set eyes and his thin, perfectly straight lips pursed beneath his well-trimmed salt and pepper -mostly pepper- mustache. “I’ll get her to pay up once she calms down and regains her dignity. She was made to feel silly by your report. That’s not why you’re here.”

“Really?” Chloe said with obvious surprise.

Marcus Drury reached into the chaos on his desk and produced a manila envelope. His generous gut pressed against the edge of the desk as he leaned forward with his arm outstretched. Chloe took the envelope and pulled out its contents.

“A new case?” she said with surprise and delight.

Marcus sat back again. "You're here to work, aren't you?"

"I thought for sure you'd send me on my way after I came up empty," she murmured as she scanned the papers in her hand.

"You can't make a man into a cheater just because his wife wants it to be so," Marcus said. "At least, we can't. We're not that kind of agency."

"I don't understand why she even accused the man. From what I observed, Anthony Lewis is damn near a saint," Chloe said with a snicker.

"I did a little investigating myself," he admitted. When Chloe looked startled, he added, "Not much. Just enough to get the gist of her motive."

"Which is?" she asked with genuine curiosity, since it never occurred to her to even look for the client's motive for investigating her husband, other than the fact that she thought he was cheating on her.

"The woman's got a lover and is looking for an excuse to divorce," he said with amusement. "I guess she can't believe anyone could be faithful, since it's not in her makeup. This is her third husband. Each marriage ended with her divorcing the guy on grounds of infidelity and making off with a tidy settlement."

"Do you think they were actually cheating?" Chloe asked with interest. "I mean, this husband wasn't. Do you think she set them up?"

"Possibly," Marcus replied thoughtfully. "I didn't dig that deep." He reached for his pipe and packed it with the aromatic tobacco that he pulled out of a bag he had sitting amongst the debris on his desk and lit it. Chloe savored the aroma of the cherry flavored tobacco as smoke billowed around his face. "I've got enough to force her to pay up. That's all I care about."

Suddenly satisfied that she'd done her best and no longer needed to feel guilty for failing, she turned her attention to the new case being presented to her.

“This is a missing person’s case,” she said with surprise. “Isn’t that Jim’s department?”

“This case requires a female’s touch and Jim looks like shit in a skirt,” Marcus said with look and tone so serious, it belied the humor in his remark.

“I’m not following you,” Chloe said, choosing not to expound on the skirt comment.

“You may have to step outside the box on this one and get close to the guy,” he said with a flat, but commanding tone.

“How close?” Chloe asked warily.

“Close,” he said flatly.

“I’m not a hooker,” she spat with disgust as she slammed the files onto the desktop and stood up.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Marcus said with raised hands. “No one’s asking you to hop into bed with the guy. Just get close enough to get him to open up to you.”

“I’ve only observed from a distance so far,” she said warily. “I’m not a skilled conversationalist.”

“Are you kidding me? Are you sure you’re a girl? In my entire forty-eight years on this earth, I’ve never encountered a woman at a loss for words,” he said with frustration. “Okay. I’m assigning Jim to the case as well,” Marcus sighed as he motioned for her to leave with his hands. “He can coach you on conversing.”

The last thing she heard as she closed the office door behind her was, “With double the detectives on the case, I expect it to be completed in half the time.”

## TWO

Chloe eyed Jim's tall, lean figure as it strode with a deep-rooted confidence into the coffee shop. He had the build of a sleek athlete which he maintained with regular visits to the gym. His sun-kissed hair feathered over the cutest little ears she'd ever laid eyes on. His bright blue eyes danced merrily beneath dirty blonde brows that had been lightened by the sun. His aquiline nose rested perfectly in the center of his face, stopping just above a slender mustache that he'd just started to grow. Even though it looked as if it was broken a few times over the years, his nose didn't detract from his good looks. As she surveyed the reactions of a few female patrons in the coffee shop, she realized she wasn't the only one who thought so.

Perfectly straight and recently whitened teeth gleamed against his newly acquired Hawaiian tan as he smiled at a few people that he recognized as they patiently waited in line to order. When he spotted her sitting at a table in the corner, she raised the cup of coffee she'd taken the liberty of ordering for him and he nodded his approval.

"I'll bet you miss Hawaii," Chloe said as he sat opposite her at the table and accepted the coffee she offered.

"That's an odd comment," he said as he opened the lid and took a sip of the steaming caramel-colored liquid. "I've been back for a few months now."

"Has it really been that long?" she asked with surprise as she tried to cover up the fact that she was so nervous around him that she was at a loss for what to say. "I guess I got lost in time."

"It's not good to get so involved with your cases," he warned. Then, with a smile that practically turned her legs to jelly, he added, "You'll learn as you go along."

After a brief- and what she thought was an uncomfortable- silence, he said. "I understand we'll be working together on this next case. That's a first."

Her face reddened. "I need lessons in casual conversing."

He did his best to hide his amusement, as he choked -just a little- on his coffee. "It went down the wrong pipe," he lied.

Chloe could feel her face burning with humiliation under Jim's silent, blue eyed inspection. In the best of circumstances, she found it difficult to remain calm when he looked at her; really looked at her. She could only imagine what thoughts rolled around inside that handsome head of his about her upon hearing she didn't know how to hold a decent conversation. Country hick? Uneducated moron? Mentally challenged? At the very least, he had to be questioning how she managed to land an internship at one of the most prestigious private detective agencies in the city.

"You have very pretty eyes," Jim said in a matter-of-fact way that detracted from the complement. "They're an odd sort of green." Her eyes darted nervously under his inspection. "They're like a mix of green and hazel. They're weird, but they go good with that copper hair of yours."

"Thanks... I guess," she said as she brought her coffee cup to her lips.

"The boss thinks the guy responsible for the missing girls is a womanizer. If that's the case, we're going to have to do something about your look before you try to get close to him," Jim mused. "Truthfully, I was surprised he gave the case to you instead of Janice. She wouldn't need as much of a touch up."

"What's wrong with my look?" Chloe asked defensively.

She'd been jealous of sexy Janice since her first day at the agency when she witnessed Jim hovering over her chest enjoying her exposed decoupage that was described as delectable on more than one occasion by more than one male.



To be openly told that she didn't compare with the woman was out and out painful.

"You look like an innocent little girl instead of a sexy, hot woman just ripe for the taking," he explained. "Innocent little girls repel womanizers. They have marriage and babies written all over them."

"You know this, how?" she asked, still on the defensive. "Are you admitting to being a womanizer?"

He shrugged and grinned that grin that hooked her every time. "I'm a man, sweetheart. That's enough."

"What do I need to change?" she asked warily.

"Your hair for one," he said.

"I'm not cutting it," she grumbled with forceful determination as she took a thick lock in her hand and caressed it.

"You could ditch the hair band. There are ways to wear it that don't look so much like high school," he mused, seemingly ignoring her defensive mannerism. "I have a friend who owns a salon. We can ask him to figure out a style that won't compromise your length."

Satisfied, she leaned forward and asked him what else he felt needed to be changed about her. After all, she'd mooned over him since she'd started her internship almost a year ago and not once had he given her a second look. Discovering this about her appearance and what men like him wanted -and she said like him because he, too, was reportedly a notorious womanizer, but with looks like his it was to be expected - she could do something about it and possibly get that date with him that she'd been longing for. Just one night in his arms and she'd die a happy woman.

"Your clothes," he said. "They suit the high school innocence look, but they won't do for this case."

“Is there anything about me that’s okay as is?” she said in a hurtful tone.

He looked at her for a moment and smiled sympathetically. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that I know what’s needed to get Antoh to give you the time of day. I’m sure you’re just as eager to score this case as quickly as possible and earn points with the boss as I am. I’m just trying to help. You’re hiding your beauty behind that look. I just want to help you bring it out.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” she asked hopefully.

He opened his mouth to say something and then shut it, as if thinking better of it. After a moment, he reached over and laid his hand on hers. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think you’re very beautiful.”

“How could I take that the wrong way?” she asked with hope that he was trying to tell her something; such as he liked her after all.

He sat back and shrugged. “Most girls hear a man say they’re beautiful and they immediately think he’s got the hots for them. Here’s a surprise for you... A man can appreciate a woman’s beauty for no other reason that the fact that she’s easy on the eye.”

“I’m not like most girls,” she assured him in a soft tone while struggling to hide her disappointment.

“Good,” he replied with a satisfied grin. After tipping his cup back to get the last drop of coffee from it he added, “Let’s get you to that salon and then we’ll hit the stores. Complements of Drury Private Investigators.”

“Right now?” she asked as she watched him stand.

“The sooner we get you presentable, the sooner we can crack this case,” he said as he headed for the door.

She did her best to disguise the pain and disappointment his words caused as she followed him out the door while she silently chastised herself. She’d placed Jim on a pedestal based on his good looks without considering the

fact that he could be a real ass. She had no one to blame but herself for the way things turned out. It was a lesson well learned.